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A Foray into the Camp: Human and Ecological Liberation in Contemporary Queer Conversion Therapy Literature

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A Foray into the Camp: Human and Ecological Liberation in Contemporary Queer Conversion
Therapy Literature

An Honors Paper for the Department of English
By Mitchel Jurasek

Bowdoin College, 2021

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This project is dedicated to my mom, Amy.

Thank you for teaching me how to sound-out complicated words,
this skill has been especially helpful when reading Deleuze.

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- I -

Conversion Therapy Camps and the Biopolitical: An Introduction

Over the last decade, conversion therapy camps have been brought to the American public's attention through an increase in their representation in literature and film. This is not to say that conversion therapy camps are a new apparatus of bodily and spiritual control over humans; rather, it indicates a turn towards recognizing these spaces and the harm they cause. Conversion therapy's long history throughout the world has always been tied to political and religious ecosystems, every culture that disapproved of homosexuality — not every culture in general — has sought some way to convert people who presented as such into primarily heterosexual humans. However, as cultures have predominantly shifted in the West to view such endeavors as harmful to human health, resulting in fewer accessible and clinically-approved psychiatrists and psychologists who will perform conversion therapy, the pockets of anti-homosexual groups across the world have increasingly looked towards religious institutions to find this “treatment.”¹ In a modern climate where such therapies are taboo and often not offered by clinics, a homosexual person can no longer be simply be checked into a mental institution, hospital, or visit a licensed psychiatrist to find this treatment. Even with this decrease in the supply and accessibility of such therapies, many religious groups that view homosexuality as needing to be changed remain committed to finding avenues for such transformation — even if deemed impossible by scientists. From this demand for conversion therapy, different groups,

¹ Although in recent history, and in fact as far back as Freud's refusal to give conversion therapy in a letter to a worried mother, conversion therapy has been increasingly labeled as not-effective in clinical psychiatry and psychological circles, these therapies were not officially deemed “potentially harmful” by the American Psychological Association until 2009 (Waidzunus 10).

mostly religiously-affiliated, have created and supported institutions that do not employ licensed professionals and use disproven sexual orientation conversion methods “treat” homosexuals. Dr. Douglas Haldeman, a psychologist and expert on conversion therapy, explained to *Teen Vogue* that “because conversion therapy has become more and more frowned upon by mainstream culture, churches have resorted to creating largely clandestine facilities, known as camps, to administer therapy to members of their community” (Lassman). So while the contemporary foundations of conversion therapy can be found in the medical field, Christian radical groups ensured the practice continued after the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973. In many cases, the locations for such practices are rural settings that have been labeled as conversion therapy *camps* — places that resemble summer children’s camps or retreats that offer conversion therapy services.

As broader public recognition of the harm these camps cause have been published and broadcasted in media, creating and aiding social and political movements across the U.S. and the world, the canon of literature that presents experiences at these camps has also grown. However, because the literature that focuses on these camps is still being written by authors and survivors, it cannot possibly account for the myriad of experiences that conversion therapy camps inflict. What does come about from these few examples of conversion therapy camps is a starting point, a place where we can begin to understand the complex place they hold in western society. As such, this project focuses on two contemporary primary texts which supply different examples of conversion therapy camps: *How to Survive a Summer* by Nick White and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily Danforth. These texts set conversion therapy camps in a type of Americana summer camp: a rural setting tucked away in the wilderness. Even with this similarity of setting, these texts have important differences. The protagonists of the novels are both

gendered the same as the author who wrote them, meaning the two novels focus on different genders. White's novel follows a boy who goes to a conversion camp for boys, while Danforth's story is about a girl who attends a multi-gendered camp. By choosing these texts, this project supplies a general understanding of the biopolitical apparatus that is conversion therapy camps and instigates discussion within biopolitical theory that explicitly includes queer people's oppression in contemporary camps.

For those who study biopolitics, the obvious question that arises from an exploration of conversion therapy camps is what their relationship to 'camp theory' is. In other words, how does this form of camp function? While it may seem difficult at first to conceptualize a conversion therapy camp in the same theoretical field in which concentration camps form the foundation, these camps fit—and even expand—the definitions of spaces of exception where humans partake in what Claudio Minca calls a “spatial biopolitical technology” (74). Although the camps in these primary texts sometimes reside outside of the direct view of society, they are not fully removed from people's gaze. *How to Survive a Summer* takes place in a well-known area of Mississippi and its camp is advertised by the administrators. Similarly, the camp in Danforth's novel is well known in the rural Montana community and advertised through churches—the social glue of these communities. If anything, “the overall normalization of ‘the camp geographies’ into and by the banal spatialities of vacationing,” as Minca observes when lying on a beach in Croatia, verifies Giorgio Agamben's claim that camps are the *nomos* of our time: they are everywhere and normalized (75). The question of the exact function of the conversion therapy camp, a question Minca himself asks generally of camps by pondering what is experimented with and produced in these spaces, can be answered by the mere advertisement conversion therapy camps aim to sell people on: turning queer bodies into cis-gendered,

heterosexual people. Minca writes that camps remain “part of a set of broader political technologies, aimed at controlling mobility and ‘governing life’ through coercion and direct or indirect violent means. These are often presented as a necessary form of social prophylaxis, that is, interventions fundamentally concerning the health, the security/safety and in some cases even the ‘improvement’ of the social and political body of the nation” (76). So what do conversion therapy camps mean to govern, how do they accomplish or attempt to accomplish this process, and how does this ‘intervention’ act to ensure the safety, security, and potential improvement of the social and political arms of a society?

Conversion therapy camps are a radicalized extension of even the most liberal parts of a society, because even coastal, liberal elites have histories of neglecting people whose identities are outside the normative. Furthermore, when these pillars of liberalism do accept the non-normative, it is only to place them within other controlled boxes of “LGBTQ”—which I call the queer alphabet in this project. This construction, while less radical than the conversion therapy camp, serves to eliminate the non-normative by creating other identities that are approved of by the normative to place people into. These camps function for a similar, albeit more extreme, purpose: purifying society of queerness.

Conversion therapy camps often justify their abuse of children through the guise of cleansing a ‘disease’. They use the rhetorical power of AIDS to persuade camp attendees that queerness is an epidemic—an argument that was once espoused by coastal, liberal elites. AIDS was largely ignored by the coastal elites during the height of the epidemic and even used in liberal spaces to shame gay men. The contemporary texts in my project show that conversion therapy camps build on this ethos of shame that was used in liberal spheres to further the biopolitical camp’s agenda. In both of my primary texts, the AIDS epidemic and the suffering

experienced by so many queer people, is weaponized into a fear tactic that, in the eyes of camp administrators, proves that queerness causes disease, and by extension, is a disease itself. “I want to show you how your story could end, how it most certainly *will* end, should you carry on down the path you are on [...] I want you to know the truth, and this is the truth about sin, the only truth that matters,” Mother Maude, a camp administrator in *How to Survive a Summer*, tells her campers while showing them photos of men in New York on the brink of death due to AIDS. This type of treatment and mental manipulation enforces an already clear picture in the boys’ heads of what it means to be queer: unnatural, expendable, and disease-ridden. Was it not President Ronald Reagan, leader of the most powerful country in the world, who watched 89,343 people die of aids—primarily gay men—and did nothing? Walter Odets, in an article for *Lit Hub* on the Reagan administration’s handling of the AIDS epidemic, writes: “more than 300,000 would be dead before the epidemic came under better control seven years later. Stigma had triumphed, and the death toll of young gay men was the fruit of its labor” (2019). This sentiment of wanting to convert as a result of societal disgust with queerness is present in both of my primary texts, though the protagonist in *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* shows more resistance to this trope. In that novel, Cameron does not necessarily want to change into anything. However, it should be noted that the cis-gendered boys who attend camp with her do want to change. Speculation on why specifically boys want to change their identity could range from the statistically more impactful effect of AIDS on men to the power of toxic masculinity. Cameron’s ambivalence towards changing her identity is unique and important but does not refute the general trend towards attendees wanting to convert themselves into the heterosexual, normative citizen (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2020 and Ing 2019). This want

is the result of a type of indoctrination that begins well before the physical time spent at a camp and extends far after it.

Although Minca acknowledges that the camp has never disappeared, certain forms of the camp have been ignored by broader society. In the case of camps for queer people, it is the heteronormative cis-gendered society that has failed to acknowledge the atrocities happening in these spaces. For queer people, there has always been an ever-present fear of the camp. Before conversion therapy camps existed, queer people in America were sent to prison to be tortured, reformed, or killed. Relics of this era still exist; they survive in the contemporary existence of ‘Gay panic’ laws in the United States. These laws allow for the murder of queer people if a heterosexual person claims they felt threatened by their queerness (The National LGBT Bar Association 2020). It is because of this type of stressful existence within an unaccepting society that for queer people, the camp bleeds into everyday life and can exist before and after spending time at a physical camp. Minca writes that today is a “time when the camp, as a spatial political technology, may be virtually found everywhere. It is a time when ‘camp thinking’ may have become, albeit in new forms, pervasive in the fields of politics and culture” (76). I concur with Minca that this ‘camp thinking’ is pervasive in contemporary society but argue that it is especially effective at policing and indoctrinating queer people because in many cases they are given hope for change. It is this hope that separates queerness from other forms of oppression, and it is an effective biopolitical tool used by the camp. Queer people are told that they can change themselves if they follow a certain procedure: if they pray enough, if they attend a camp, if they renounce their old self. In most cases, queer people are told by their own family that they must change, something that separates them from other forms of oppression because oftentimes the familial unit experiences the same form of oppression. However, as Foucault would note, the

queer camp never actually fulfills this promise of changing its inmates to the normative because of its need to maintain power. To actually change the people the camp has power over would mean that those people would transition to a position outside the camp's control, and the existence of a camp requires bodies to control. This is why, in both of the primary texts for this project, members of the camp who 'complete' the conversion or who are resisting their own queer identities end up working at the camp in administrative roles. Essentially, the campers never actually leave.

The ever-present existence of being just outside the camp in queer people's lives does not mean that the heteronormative society becomes a camp for all residing individuals, rather it means that individuals are 'between camps.' Conversion therapy camps epitomize the potential biopolitical precarity of queer people in America, even in liberal spaces, by showing an example of one of the most radical treatments towards the non-normative body. Minca describes this sort of liminal existence through his analysis of Paul Gilroy's scholarship:

The nation-state is all too often still presented and conceived as a sort of 'camp', an orderly field of people and culture to be cultivated, controlled, protected and preserved in order to avoid contamination and corruption. But the camp is the experimental laboratory where life has been and continues to be inscribed into order [...] And this is precisely why many of us are constantly located 'between camps', and are consequently subject to the biopolitical imperative that in the camp finds its theoretical and material origin and justification. (78)

Here, Minca explains that all people who reside in modern societies exist 'between camps.' People can be sent to a camp at any time if the biopolitical machine determines that they are the newest form of human body to be targeted for intervention. I agree with this assessment but

argue that queer people exist closer to camps and targeted oppression. The space between a queer person and a camp is significantly smaller than such a space is for a heterosexual cis-gendered person—a non-normative body is closer to the camp than the normative one. Queerness is usually an asterisk on a person's physical identity because, unlike the color of skin or general physical characteristics of ethnicity, queerness does not have to look any certain way. As such, this fear of identification, the asterisk becoming a physical identifier, displays itself in the queer community through the process of 'coming out,' men asking for 'Masc 4 Masc' on online dating apps, and other variations (Levine 2019). Many queer men avoid the prospect of being labeled a *faggot*, *sissy*, or *queer* by the dominant heterosexual male. Again, the unique quality of queer people's families not experiencing this specific form of fear of queer camps because the family is not queer, creates an even more complex and scary landscape to navigate alone.

The effects of conversion therapy camps will not be fully realized by writers and scholars for some time. However, from the work that is already published and circulating among mainstream audiences we can start to understand the ways this specific form of camp tries to accomplish biopolitical goals. This conversation is the first step towards creating a new archive of knowledge within the existing libraries of biopolitical theory and queer theory. To start, this task requires the acknowledgment of camps' current presence, that is in accordance with how Minca describes the normalization of camps into vacation spaces and in direct view of society, the acknowledgment that conversion therapy camps are prevalent within North America, act as spatial biopolitical technologies, and are a normative aspect of the cultural and physical landscape which can be ignored by other parts of society—the heteronormative cis-gendered 'norm'. Second, an analysis of the invented reasoning by oppressors for the validation of these camps is necessary. In conversion therapy camps' case, these are created to cleanse society of

potentially disruptive and disease-ridden non-normative, queer bodies. Last, this project must recognize the unique qualities of conversion camps, one being that these biopolitical technologies seek to *transform* queer bodies into the heterosexual cis-gendered norm. The availability of these new texts that consider the experience of conversion therapy camps allows for the opportunity to explore the nuances of conversion camps and improve the scope of both biopolitical and queer theory. In fact, these works may even offer insight that can help contemporary queer youth navigate a world that, despite all the recent progress made for queer people, seems hell-bent on either transforming them into something they are not or purging the world of *their kind* of human.

- II -

The Prospects of Ecological Thinking: A Growing Introduction

While the ability to have agency within a camp is diminished for the queer youth in the two novels explored by this project, it is not fully destroyed. In both of the works I explore, the protagonists engage in what can only be described as mutual liberation between queer people and the ecologies they exist in. In each of the novels chosen for this project, there are two main ecologies that I chose to explore: lakes and forests. While I do focus specifically on these two areas, I should note that these are flexible categories. In using “lakes” I mostly refer to the contemporary understanding of a physical lake, but this term may also be more broadly interpreted as where water and liquid can be found in the text. Similarly, when I use “forests” I do usually intend to refer to a wooded area, but I also mean to stretch this term to include pasture, garden, and other forms of collective plant growth. I doubt such room for nuance will come as a surprise for a reader because of my embrace of queer theory, which argues for flexible, perhaps even rhizomatic, labels. In fact, it is arguably impossible to write on the mutual liberation of queer humans and the ecologies they exist in without such flexibility of the terms “human,” “forest,” and “lake.” I am not arguing that this mutual liberation has equitable results, only that it exists. In both *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *How to Survive a Summer*, the protagonists are much more liberated by the novel by the end than the ecologies they exist in. However, this is an almost unavoidable prospect given that the protagonists are singular people and ecologies are part of an ever-growing cohort of living and non-living things. These ecologies are not one but *many*. As such, it is impossible for a singular person to fully liberate entire ecologies from the collective oppressions that partially grow from within. Nonetheless, the queer

youth do attempt—and are somewhat successful—in helping further the liberation of the ecologies they exist in.

It is here, at the crossroad between the queer youth that the new novels I examine include and their surrounding ecologies that I find that part of power in resisting and overcoming the camp lies. Just as the biopolitical camp reinforces the normative of the society that creates it, the concepts of “nature” and what is “natural” are instigated by the same society. Timothy Morton explains this concept in his book *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* by showing that what we view as “nature” is a purely manufactured idea. The very term “nature” others what humans, what we ourselves, are a part of. It suggests that the world outside our body or the human-political is something completely unrelated to us. Interestingly, as the narratives of conversion therapy camps have become increasingly available over the last decade, so has the information that shows just how connected humans are to this other “nature.” On a broad, huge, scale humans are starting to understand that perhaps we are not other than “nature” but rather part of a growing, complex system: an ecology.

The children in the novels explored by this project begin to understand this new notion that they are part of an ever-changing and interconnected ecology. As a result, they also begin to learn that they, themselves, are ever-changing beings, beings who are *becoming*. It’s for this reason that I often turn to the useful ideas of *becoming* and *rhizomes* of the theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Not only does their theory of *rhizomes* (a theoretical idea based on a part and function of plants) apply to queer youth due to the fact that these children are sponges for their environments, but ecologies are understood through the connections they have to beings and non-beings. If a *rhizome* is to be understood as a place of collecting and giving—which leads to action within a *becoming*—then the queer youth in these novels about conversion therapy

camps are intimately connected to the environmental surroundings we so often *other* by calling them “nature” because they explore their own identities through their experience with these environments.

The idea of combining self-discovery with ecological thought is not a new concept. Samia Rahimtoola and Angela Hume’s “Introduction: Queering Ecopoetics” provided me a useful guide for exploring this very idea. And it is from their work, which partly functioned as a sort of annotated bibliography for me, that I found many of the theorists used in this project. Scholars such as Greta Gaard, Michael Marder, and Luce Irigaray are important to this work because they successfully argue for the benefits—and urgency—of humans adopting a more ecological view of the world and themselves. For Marder and Irigaray, humans must begin to clear a “path toward a new way of being or behaving, which the current state of our environment, of all living beings, and of our human becoming urgently requires” (XI). Even with this prior work done on the need for ecological thinking in human life, what is essential to this project, and what is definitive about my research, is the understanding that queer youth may use this type of thought to their benefit while under the biopolitical control of conversion therapy camps. However, to understand the full complexity of such modern thinking is to remember that indigenous peoples have had complex identities and relationships to environments before the white protagonists in these novels. For this, Joshua Whitehead’s work on indigenous inclusions in youth literature has been immensely helpful in showing the work that still needs to be done by authors, their characters, and readers. Whitehead’s scrutiny of the queer colonizer who uses both indigenous culture and land to their own benefit — and excludes indigenous people from the liberation they gain — gives light to pressing issues these works need to address and shows how they come up short in fully liberating ecologies. Nonetheless, even with their deficiencies,

through an ecological understanding of themselves and their surroundings, the characters in the novels I examine are able to learn that they are not a part of some *other* type of human. Rather, they are human and a part of a broader ecology that values their diversity. They learn that through the appreciation of diversity of identities, complex systems such as the one humans exist in not only survive but thrive. Through this rhizomatic change, this *becoming* they undergo, the queer youth in these novels offer examples for current and future people to find mutual liberation with the ecologies we exist in.

- III -

A Note: A Blossom

As I ruminate on this project in this introduction, after I have completed its two chapters, I cannot shake the peculiar feeling that this work is unfinished. However, I am comforted by the theorists I turn to, as a general trend in each of their own writings is that nothing is ever finished. In the Deleuzian sense, everything is constantly *becoming*. This being noted, I still am compelled to address the gaps in the scope of this project. There are certainly many theoretical fields that demand more attention by the texts I explore. These include such important disciplines as psychoanalysis and Marxism—but are in no means limited to them. Again, though, I find comfort in the theories I do choose to entertain here, as plant thinking implies room for growth. By leaving some things yet to be explored, I not only am able to give my full attention—and whatever energy I am able to offer—to foraging for knowledge in my chosen texts, but I also leave that space for growth, for further *becoming*.

Chapter One

Returning to the Forest: An Analysis of “The Neck” and Queer Bodies in Nick White’s

How to Survive a Summer

The first novel I analyze in this project presents an excellent literary representation of an Americana summer camp which is changed, just slightly, by a dominant heteronormative society to function as a conversion therapy camp. *How to Survive a Summer* follows the life of Will, a boy from a small town in the Mississippi Delta. His father is a Southern Baptist pastor, so his life is predominantly ruled by the strict norms formed by the church and the community he grew up in. This is a place where church is attended every Sunday without fail, where sex out of wedlock is forbidden, and where the only sexuality recognized by the community is heterosexuality. However, the strict upbringing Will’s father enforces is often momentarily lifted by his mother. She comes from an even more rural and poor part of Mississippi. From her more rugged childhood, the mother offsets the austere parenting of Will’s father with fantastical stories of an enchanted place called the Neck, a no man’s land of forest untouched by civilized society. She even endorses Will’s more feminine tendencies, at one point placing a tiara on his head. However, his bliss with his mother is tragically short-lived as she dies when he is young. Left to the care of his single father, Will struggles to adhere to the lifestyle set out for him and grows increasingly hateful towards his own sexual interests and romantic feelings. This self-loathing propels Will into a place where the seeds of self-liberation are sown.

Will’s father learns of Will’s homosexual feeling when he catches his son penetrating himself in the church with a candlestick. Will’s frustration with his own sexuality exposes itself

in this scene with his almost blatant attempt at being caught in the act. It is as if he wants to be caught so that someone can fix him. Indeed Will's father does try to change his son's sexuality by sending him to Camp Levi, a conversion therapy camp set in the same space the mother calls "the Neck." Run by his aunt and uncle, called Mother Maude and Father Drake at the camp, Camp Levi attempts to transform the attending boys from homosexuals to heterosexuals by recalibrating their brains and bodies to what it deems "natural." In the case of this camp, what is "natural" is a complex mixture of Christian and heteronormative capitalist beliefs. For the administrators, it is not necessarily correct to view the human body as "natural" because it must be kept secret and not explored; it is correct to view a pristine, not industrialized forest as "natural"; homosexuality is never "natural." For the purposes of this analysis, I denote the paradoxical form of "natural" used by the counselors with quotation marks. For my own analysis, I reject the terms "natural" and "nature" and instead turn to more tangible examples of ecological spaces, like forests and lakes. This departure allows me, as the scholar Timothy Morton notes in his book *Ecology Without Nature*, to avoid a monolithic view of ecologies. By using specific terms in recognition of specific places, I hope to more fully show the complexity of these spaces. While "Nature" and what is "natural" try to imply that all ecologies are a specific *other* that exists in all places, I argue that this total othering is harmful to our understanding of the spaces in which we live. In the novel, Will ponders the perplexing ways these words are deployed by the administrators and it is partly his contemplation of their use of the word that drives him to see that the camp is not a morally defensible space and its attempts to change the boys' sexualities will always be futile. Although this is not an immediate realization, it parallels the metamorphosis of Will's understanding of the Neck in that he struggles with the question of what is "natural" at the same time that this forest space is present in his life. Placing

these two critical narratives in parallel, White's novel reveals that the beginning of the process of both human and environmental liberation requires a rhizomatic, ecological understanding.

This chapter unfolds in three sections and a conclusion. The three sections correspond to three separate instances in Will's life when the space called the Neck is of importance to major changes in his life and his understanding of it. The first section addresses the legends of the Neck Will was told by his mother. These form a foundation for him not only for life outside of the church and heteronormative-capitalist society but also the beginning for what he understands the world to be. I focus on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias in this section as, especially in the early presentations of the Neck, the space aptly fits this concept. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are useful for this section as it is the start of an analysis that will watch the space of the Neck and characters change. Their theories on *becoming* and rhizomes prove effective for conveying how the ecologies of the spaces Will finds himself in affect the understanding of his life and the process of living it—his *becoming*. As with rhizomes, Will, the space of the Neck, and other characters and places are connected in a multitude of ways that alter and impact each other's existence. The second section of this chapter analyzes Will's time at Camp Levi. This is a complex time where Will starts to see and acknowledge the structural cracks in a Christian and heteronormative capitalist society—the paradoxical places where the ideas and rules of these institutions just don't work. I pair this analysis with the work of Giorgio Agamben and his predecessor Hannah Arendt because their texts on camp theory are important for understanding how this camp in *How to Survive a Summer* functions and, eventually, meets its demise. The third and last section in this chapter looks at Will's return to the space of the Neck years later in an attempt to deal with the lasting effects of Camp Levi and his own internalized homophobia. Here Luce Irigaray's and Michael Marder's philosophical reflections on being outdoors can aid

our understanding of what Will undergoes by returning to the forest. This three-part analysis offers insight into the complicated place conversion therapy camps have in biopolitical theories of camps, these camps' paradoxical relationship with what qualifies as "natural" in society, and its power in a Christian and heteronormative-capitalist world.

The Seeds of Liberation: Legends of the Neck

Before Will's time at Camp Levi and his subsequent return to the Neck years later to work through his trauma, his mother tells him legends she learned about the space as a child and the supposed history of why it exists in its current form. The land known as the Neck is curious partly because its borders go only so far as the gap that is formed between two counties. "The Neck was in the Mississippi hill country and thick with trees. The geography was so different from the Delta that it might as well have been on another world. A nowhere land in between two counties, lousy for crops because of all the flooding from the Big Black River. 'Bad for growing,' my mother said, 'but good for mischief'," Will explains (White 39). The Neck is not only described as a luscious landscape filled with varying growth but as an entirely different world. The Neck in this book, or more broadly forest space, denotes the formation of life unhindered by human interference. This place acts as what Michel Foucault would call a *heterotopia*. For Foucault, heterotopias are worlds within worlds, spaces that both reflect and disturb what lies outside of them. The Neck fits this description because it is an example of what the landscape in the Delta would look like before industrialization, yet it is exactly what the people of the Delta do not want in land. The Neck is full of life and untamed by the industrial complex which would hope to use it to profit in the agriculture business. The irony of what Will's mother says in this passage cannot go unnoticed. She says that the land is bad for

growing, which is obviously not the case because it is simultaneously filled with trees and other native plants. Foucault contrasts heterotopias with utopias—the idealized, fake constructions made by societies. “[Heterotopias] are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect,” he writes (Foucault 3). The Neck furthermore fits the theoretical frame of heterotopias because it is where mischief is done. It is a world where acts that would not be allowed in the outside are permissible, yet it still resides in that outside world, meaning the outside does, in a nuanced way, permit these things.

While Will’s mother grew up in the Neck, and his knowledge of it is heavily influenced by her, his understanding of this place is not from his mother’s real childhood but from the fantastical stories she told him. “The women in the woods, the moonshiners, the lost mother—these were the stories of the Neck I knew by heart. But she kept her own story, which included a girlhood in the Neck, mostly to herself,” Will explains (White 40). According to his mother, most “decent people” stayed away from the Neck, only *wild* people, like herself, ventured into the forest (White 40).² The Neck, in the “gap” between two counties, becomes identified as a wild place through the stories about vagabonds and runaways that are set there. In this way, this space undergoes a sort of physical and conceptual *becoming*, as Deleuze and Guattari would note. There must have been a time when the Neck’s lush greenery was not atypical in its area, when counties were not formed, and the Big Black River did not yet have an English name. Over time, this space was changed by settlers. The river was named, the farmland was taken around it, and people came to understand it as inhospitable for growing crops. Eventually, as Will’s mother

² *Wilderness* or *wild*, as first used in the US in Mary Rowlandson’s autobiographical account of her encounter with native Americans in the late 1600s, has a history of denoting a space outside of culture, a place not yet conquered for industrial means. Wild people, for Rowlandson, were Native Americans and were to be avoided because they did not follow a Western European life structure.

explains, some people moved into the area and capitalized on its wild attributes, seeing a world of freedom, and in doing so perpetuated tales of mischief that kept other people outside. In short, the Neck was not always a heterotopia, it became one both from physical changes and oral storytelling. “My mother freely admitted that most of her understanding of the Neck came from hearsay or gossip,” Will recounts in the novel (White 59). Without Will and his mother’s gossip, perceptions, and conceptualizations, the Neck does not exist. It is through legends that Will and his mother manifest the Neck and, as a result, exist both within and outside of this peculiar place. As their conception of it expands and legends change, the Neck is *becoming*. Just as Deleuze and Guattari understand the book as a rhizome, a constantly connecting and becoming space, so too can legends—the oral form of a book—be viewed in a rhizomatic lens. “The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos. A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented,” they write (Deleuze and Guattari, 6). If one regards the book as a historical invention that carries on a task once performed solely through verbal storytelling, then it seems to follow that oral stories can be seen as a rhizome in the same way a book can. In fact, verbal stories offer an even more rhizomatic experience due to the conviviality through which they are shared. Through the conviviality Will and his mother have with this space, they both affect and are the effects of the rhizomatic conception of the Neck.

The most prominent legends told of this heterotopic place involve women and, specifically, a group of evasive women who embody a type of feminism similar to that of the legends of the Amazons in Greek mythology. The women are just beyond the reach of the rest of the world, only open to being found when they want and on their own terms. They leave the normative world to merge with the perceived rebelliousness of the Neck. In doing so, they

become part of the Neck and the Neck subsequently becomes part of them. A prominent reason for the representation of the Neck as mischievous comes from these women prostituting themselves. “The genius behind their business was mobility. They never stayed put in the same place longer than two nights, circling back to previous locations. [...] They hid their tracks so well some even claimed they weren’t really women at all but spirits. ‘Or witches,’ my mother said, frowning,” Will recounts (White 52). While some could argue that the prostitution of their bodies commodifies the female form for the pleasure of men, White seems to argue that “pleasure” is not necessarily what the men get out of venturing into the Neck to seek these women.

The author attempts to support this point by having the women dominate the men by holding knives to their throats as they have sex. In the novel, Will explains that when the men “wanted more than the women were willing to give. [They] came back from the Neck wide-eyed and bleeding, missing an ear, or limping, or sporting a blade in their bellies” (White 52). White tries to lead the reader believe that the commodification of these women’s bodies is mostly on their own terms. Even if there is a historical theme of women’s bodies being taken advantage of by men, this is not what White chooses to focus on. He intends for this passage to show the women possessing a form of radical ownership of their bodies through this extreme form of dominatrix prostitution, creating a symbiotic relationship with the Neck where they keep men out who would perhaps want to industrialize it. Law enforcement and men do not dare try to “tame” the women or exploit them and, thus, do not tamper with or exploit the Neck’s environment. However, this book is written by a man and the main protagonist is a man. So these stories of the women of the Neck, the myth of idealized women who show their agency through sex but are not actually central in the plot, serves to act as a spectacle for the male gaze rather than liberate

women within the novel. While the preservation caused by the connection of the women with the broader ecology of the space creates a safe haven for indigenous plants and animals to thrive, White's willful imagining of women having a form of radical prostitution that attempts to neutralize a reader's worry about gender oppression and ecological impacts still upholds both an oppressive view of women's bodies and the myth that women have no part in the industrialization of environments.

The most influential story that Will is told by his mom is about "the mother." This legend is set "long after the women and the moonshiners left" according to Will's mom (White 66). The woman, a mother to three children and wife to an abusive husband, grew depressed after giving birth to her third child. To help, she went on long walks in the Neck while her abusive husband worked the gas station he owned. On these walks, the Neck would replenish her enough to where she could come back home to her trapped monotony and continue to care for her children. "Long walks, by themselves, did nothing to abate the unnamable grieving in her heart, but she found the Neck reviving [...]. The mother always returned home in time to make supper for her family, but the father didn't approve of her leaving. He didn't understand her need to be alone, to go off gallivanting through the woods like some half-cocked boy explorer," Will explains (White 66). The mother's ability to connect with the Neck, and the respite she feels from confiding in it, is reflective of the shared existence both the Neck and the mother have. Just as the earth is exploited and trapped by a normative society controlled by men, so too is the mother, a feminized being, exploited and under the control of a man. There is an obvious dichotomy between a father who manages a gas station, a symbol of the cause of climate change, and a mother who is "revived" by walking through the woods. This dichotomy presents itself with the husband not understanding the mother as her knowledge of the Neck surmounts that which

seemed possible. “When their mother returned, she came back with amazing stories of the tribe of women who had lived there [...] When the children asked the mother how she came to know the stories, she told them the land kept a better record of events than humans and paper ever did,” Will’s mother tells him (White 67). The husband’s disgust with the mother’s walks, her independence with, closeness to, and knowledge of the forest, leads him to eventually pack up the children and leave while she is out walking. Although it is sad that the mother’s children are taken away from her, this, again, showcases the symbiotic relationship of the Neck and women in these legends. The mother gains insight and regains strength by venturing into the Neck and, in doing so, not only adds to the mystery of the space which keeps people at bay but also leads her husband to leave, shutting down the gas station—though this liberation comes at a price. To liberate the Neck’s ecology the mother must sacrifice her children, evidence of a larger problem wherein singular people’s actions do not result in immediate structural change and often come at a steep price on the individual level. It is this same issue that Will faces when he finds himself in the Neck.

Camp Levi: Queer Oppression and Resistance in the Neck

The Neck that Will is sent to after being found in the church penetrating himself by his father is different from the Neck in the tales from his childhood. The creation of a camp within the forest changes the physical attributes of the space. Camp Levi is made up of a few falling-apart buildings hidden deep within the Neck in a clearing. It is a place that is both part of the Neck and different from it—cleared of its lush greenery and life. The camp is a heterotopia within a heterotopia, an abstraction within an abstraction. It is both a reflection of society and trying to be a reflection of the natural surroundings, as its goal is to turn the boys “natural” by the

standards of the administrators who run it. In making all the campers at Camp Levi ~~are all~~ boys, Whitehead interestingly sets up a division between the feminized forest that Will has come to understand from the stories of his youth and the boys who now are to be “converted” in its shadow. After these boys arrive at the Neck, they only walk *through* this forest to the buildings that will house them for the duration of their stay — keeping the feminized landscape in view but not explored. The activities at Camp Levi take place in these falling-down structures within the forest and the clearing that surrounds them. The forest is never used or admired by the administrators. To them, the Neck is there to shield their acts against these children from the rest of society, to offer a secluded space to facilitate the conversion from homosexual to heterosexual. The only natural element of the camp’s activities is the use of Lake John. This lake, named after John the Baptist, is used by the camp administrators, Father Drake and Mother Maude, to baptize the boys of their sins on the first day. While it may at first seem that Father Drake and Mother Maude are taking advantage of a pristine lake in this ritual, it becomes apparent that the Lake is not natural at all but rather polluted and filled with imported parasites.

They never told us the mix of possible pollutants and sewage runoff and microscopic parasites in Lake John that made our skin rebel against us. We had our own name for it: *the itch*. The day after our first dip into the lake, Sparse and Christopher reported a burning sensation on their skin. Like a sunburn, Christopher said, only deeper. Discolorations streaked across Sparse’s back and belly and thighs, and he worried he might get keloids. For me, sores had cropped up on my fair skin soon after I’d gotten out, scabbing over by morning. The itchiest parts were along my scrotum and the rim of my anus [...] As I saw it, our orientation by the lake was nothing less than a forging of a holy

covenant with the Lord. Now my groin ached so badly I sat with my legs spread out, as if I were airing myself out. *Good*, I thought. *Pain was progress*. (White 251-253)

The cruel brilliance of Father Drake and Mother Maude is shown through their ability to trick the boys into believing the lake was “natural”, a part of God, and it was punishing them for their homosexuality. The ironic truth is that pollutants, the runoffs of capitalism and human artifice, are really what punishes the boys. The punishment is meant to mend not only previous transgressions but future ones, too. It leaves the boys with a terrible rash and sores all over their bodies. “It’s how they’ll keep us horny queens from fucking each other. They want to make it so we don’t even want us to touch ourselves when we go to piss,” Sparse says to the other boys (White 253). The lake, characterized as a symbol of God’s punishment, is made to be a type of policing force, typical in camp settings, stopping the boys from any future wrongdoings that could be categorized as not “natural”—not straight. The administrators force the boys to jump into the lake, submerge themselves in God’s “natural” punishment. However, this ritual performed by the administrators evokes the ignorance of their belief that the boys are not natural. The lake is not a source of an all-knowing and judgmental, “natural” deity that decides whether the boys are “natural” because the lake itself is polluted.

Although there is no direct approval of this method to ‘correct’ the boys, Will explains that *all* methods are approved by the parents. The parents will do anything to have the boys fit their idea of what a “natural” man is: a cis-gendered, heterosexual man. “I believed nobody cared one way or the other about the legality of our situation. Our parents cared less about the means so long as the ends were delivered,” Will describes (White 253). The “ends” to which he refers is the transformation into ‘normalized’ heterosexuals. To get to these desired goals, administrators employ various torture mechanisms, like a Sweat Shack, a small enclosed space on the ground

were the boys are sent to endure the sweltering heat and lie in the dirt. The administrators also force the boys to beat each other for the pleasure of Father Drake, who watches and laughs. Convincing the boys that they are unnatural helps in reducing them to *bare life*, a life without any regard for quality of life. Reducing humans to *bare life* is common in camps. Although this term is often used by Giorgio Agamben, it has a much longer history and his predecessor, Hannah Arendt, aptly provides an explanation for the transformation of man into this type of being. She writes: “It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man” (Arendt 93). However, this act of reducing the boys to a form of *bare life* to transform them into a heterosexual man sets conversion camps apart from the camps Agamben and Arendt typically write about. The goal of this camp is not necessarily to kill the boys, or exploit labor from them, but rather to turn them into another kind of man. *Conversion therapy camps function by reducing people from homosexual beings to bare life and then into heterosexual beings*. In this case, *bare life* acts not as a destination but as a sort of layover on a longer journey to a heterosexual life.

The ways in which the administrators of the camp try to impose heterosexuality into the boys during this time of *bare life* cover up what makes them cis-gendered men, again exposing the irony of their tactics. Will explains how all counselors and campers were forced to wear baggy clothes, so as to hide their bodies from each other and themselves. “Both counselors were young and attractive. Their athletic bodies were obscured on purpose, I figured in their oversize yellow T-shirts and baggy khaki shorts, their hems hanging, like ours did, below their kneecaps,” he recounts (White 255). The boys are taught both consciously and through subconscious methods that bodies are to be shunned, that the natural human form is to be avoided. “Larry bemoaned the weakness of the flesh,” Will explains (White 255-256). Partly because of the boy’s

dip in the lake, and the subsequent struggles with the effects of the pollutants on their bodies, this message sinks in. During the lesson in which Larry speaks against ‘flesh,’ Will and Rumil, one of the campers, brush knees against each other. This small contact is enough to make both boys excited. “Rumil’s knee tapped against mine again, and this time a sore on his leg aligned perfectly with a sore on mine. Like this, we held position; we pressed them together, a quick kiss of wounds. A sharp searing pain radiated from my groin as my penis thickened,” Will remembers (White 256). This pain leads to Will asking to be excused to the bathroom, where he tries to calm his erection. When he returns to the group, knowing he has done something homosexual—‘unnatural’—he moves to the other side of the group away from Rumil. When asked by another camper, Christopher, if he is okay, Will replies: “Of course not [...] And that’s good” (White 257). It is not so much physical boundaries that prevent Will from expressing his true self and enjoying the contact with Rumil but rather the mental boundaries Camp Levi has instilled in his mind. Of course, these mental boundaries are reinforced by the physical boundaries, in this case via the sores on his penis that give him pain during an erection, but these mental boundaries about physical touch work in tandem with the boys’ belief that they do not have rights at the Camp as well—that they deserve to be reduced to *bare life*. The camp, in this sense, goes much farther than its physical bounds and proves how valuable a weapon mental control is.

To convince the boys that they must become a certain type of man, Mother Maude carefully picks apart their history and everything they knew before Camp Levi. Through this, she chooses what to keep and what to discard from their past; she rewrites their lives and makes them trust this revision by using fear tactics. It’s through this that she convinces Will that the stories his mother told him are wrong. “I started copying out my mother’s stories of the Neck,

but then I remembered Mother Maude's version, so I wrote what she told me," he describes (White 265). While Mother Maude cleanses Will of his mother's stories, she also reinforces the ideal man that Will's father wants him to be: Rooster. This is the nickname Will's father gives him, and through his time at the camp he convinces himself that he needs to become the ideal man, he needs to become Rooster. "I want to be Rooster—I *will* be Rooster," he says (White 272). However, like the lake, a rooster is not necessarily natural as it is a domesticated bird. This rewiring of his brain is typical of the camp, made evident by the fact that the counselors "compared [their] brains to computers" (White 267). This reprogramming must happen to get rid of the virus of homosexuality. After this virus has been cleaned from their computer brains and with the boys in the *bare life* state, they can be reprogrammed into heterosexual men. Again, here the mental is reinforced by the physical, as Mother Maude shows the boys photos of gay men dying of the AIDS virus. "The picture showed an emaciated face, the eyes staring listlessly at a spot just above our heads," Will recounts (White 258). Mother Maude shows that this reprogramming must be done to save their souls *and* their lives. However, this metaphorical use of computers as a reference to the boys' minds does not fit the conception Camp Levi is trying to adhere to: one that reinforces how "natural" heterosexuality is. To be reprogrammed is to accept that you are made of artificial parts. It suggests, as the counselors do, that you are a computer—a cyborg.

Interestingly it is also through some of the punishments at the camp that Will starts to see the cracks in the camp's supposed transformational power. After he is caught by Father Drake staring at Rumil's stomach and the small line of hair that trails from his belly button to his shorts, Will is taken to the Sweat Shack—the small enclosed space at the camp which is used to torture the campers by locking them inside during the sweltering heat and making them sweat out their

impurities and sins. Once Will arrives at the Sweat Shack with Father Drake, the administrator forces himself on him. “I had no time to brace for it, his wide mouth on mine, a moist sponge pressing onto my lips,” Will remembers (White 291). Although it is not explicitly written into the story, it is hinted that Father Drake proceeds to rape Will, as the passage ends with Father Drake telling him not to move and Will passing out. After he comes to, Will is shoved into the Sweat Shack and left to contemplate his sins, only he does not do this. Instead, he starts to understand how every attempt to make him “natural” is futile because the very administrator who determines what is “natural” does not fit his own definition. By remembering a long-forgot childhood friend who moved away, Will projects himself into her life and finds hope. This revelation allows Will to envision a better reality while in the Sweat Shack. In the novel he explains:

Soon, I dripped, my sweat pooling around my belly. In the heat, my wounds seemed to expand and ooze. I imagined poison, my body expelling all those toxins I’d absorbed in Lake John. I turned on my back, and more critters scuttled by my ears. [...] Never flicking away whatever insect twitched on my skin. [...] Suzette came to mind. I’d not seen her in two years, not since she had gone away. I conjured a life for her in Memphis. [...] She goes for a walk by the river [...] She wonders where [I am] and imagines a thousand possibilities, all of them ungenerous, so she tries again, and this time she dreams [me] into a school like hers. She dreams [me] with people who are funny and kind. She dreams [me] into a happy life, and then she flings this dream into the Mississippi River, hoping it floats on down to [me]. (White 292-293)

Will’s new belief that the administrators’ idea of what is “natural” is wrong is validated by the ground soaking up the polluted toxins from his body. This river-forest world helps heal him, not

hurt him. Furthermore, Will discovers that the camp is not as cut off from the world as the administrators wish him to believe. The Neck is lush because it is in the river basin of the Big Black River, which connects to the Mississippi, which runs through nearly half of the United States. Through this understanding, he starts to conceptualize places beyond his torturous existence at Camp Levi. However, this new understanding of the forest world is thought of as only a feminine, caring one—connected specifically to a girl and facilitating only the healing of Will, not a revolutionary rejection of the camp.

While Will's brief reconciliation with himself does bring about a turn in his experience at Camp Levi, it does not fully liberate him from the camp mindset and he quickly falls back into both his role as an attendee at the camp and an arm of its biopolitical policing. When Dale, one of the campers, tells Will that he and the other boys have a plan to escape from the camp and head to Orlando, Florida where Dale has a liberal grandmother, Will decides to expose their plot to the camp administrators.³ "My decision to tell on them was an easy one [...] I understood this decision was perhaps my last chance to prove, once and for all, my commitment to the process," Will describes (White 297). However, Will's honesty does not help him and instead leads towards further torture from the camp. Along with almost being raped by Father Drake again when he comes to his tent at night to tell him of the escape plan, the administrators use his willingness to expose the plot against him. Father Drake wakes the boys up the next day with the fireworks they were going to use as a distraction and tells the other boys of Will's confession to him, thereby both foiling the escape plan and undermining Will's work towards being a man.

³ It is interesting the author chooses Orlando, Florida as a place the boys believe they will be safe as it was also the site of a massive shooting in a gay nightclub in 2016, a year before *How to Survive a Summer* was published. At the time of the shooting, it was the deadliest mass shooting in American history, killing 50 and injuring 58 people. This tragic incident is an example of how queer people are constantly living between camps. Even liberal areas are, in reality, just a ticking time bomb for violence against queer people.

The reason the administrators choose to punish the boys for dedication to the camp lies in their ability to control their subjects by reducing them to something less than men. They need the boys to be in this less-than-man position—a *bare life* existence—or they lose their power along with their own place in the biopolitical hierarchy they exist in. As Giorgio Agamben writes in the closing lines of his chapter “The Politicization of Life”: “The absolute capacity of the subjects’ bodies to be killed forms the new political body of the West” (151). While the administrators are not “the West,” they represent—with their beliefs of heterosexuality’s supremacy to homosexuality—an extension of it. As such, the boys cannot be allowed to escape the camp through physical means or actual transformation into what the camp wants them to be as it would mean that the administrators would not have bodies to control. The biopolitical machine that is the camp needs human life to control and reduce to *bare life* in order to exist. Allowing for the successful transformation of these boys into the heterosexual, even if that were possible, would mean the camp has fulfilled what makes it a necessity and does not need to exist any longer.

Father Drake further punishes Will by deciding to allow the other campers to attack him and take revenge for telling the administrators of their plot to escape. He believes that Will’s inability to keep the other boys’ secret is reflective of a homosexual man. “The more you punish him, the less I will punish you,” he says to the boys (White 303). They rush at Will and he flees towards the other side of the lake, where he asks Mother Maude for help. Instead of helping, she holds him down as the boys catch up and start to attack him. “I know, my lamb, but this is the only way,” she says to Will after he begs her to make them stop (White 305). This shows, once again, the failure of the administrators to have clear logic in the way they run the camp. For them, following the rules is necessary to transforming into a heterosexual man but also following those rules shows evidence of a homosexual man. Like an animal that needs to be taught to keep

within a fence but still must exist as an animal, Will must be given a lesson on his biopolitical life as well. Only this lesson backfires on Mother Maude and Father Drake, as Dale switches his anger from Will to them and decides to tackle Father Drake. Dale punches him and they struggle for a knife that is on the ground. In the commotion of their wrestling, Dale is stabbed in the stomach. The administrators do nothing to help Dale, and instead, Mother Maude rushes to Father Drake, who was hurt in the fight. The campers force Mother Maude to give them the keys to an RV and they rush to a hospital, where Will must be physically pulled away from Dale. “As they carried Dale away. [The nurse] held me down, my puny nothing body convulsing in her arms, wild,” Will remembers (White 310). As if he were an animal escaping a cage, Will has escaped the camp and is now a wild boy in the hospital. Father Drake’s plan to further constrain him has not worked. In fact, instead of making the boys hate each other, they end up becoming connected through their struggle and loss. Although bloodied by Dale’s wound and eventual death, this loss helps them break through the physical barriers of the camp and escape to a hospital where they are treated with care. The camp undermines itself in this story due to the administrators’ paradoxical effort to validate the function of the camp and contain the boys there indefinitely.

Back Again: Returning to the Neck

Years later, while Will is completing a graduate degree in film studies, he returns to the Neck. However, he does not come back to the place of his trauma on his own accord, but rather because he has learned of a horror movie being made loosely based on Camp Levi. The film is directed by Sparse, one of his fellow campers who used his experience at the camp for profit. In the movie a gay man murders teenagers staying at a lake in the woods by stabbing them while

wearing a barbie mask. While the exact meanings behind the artistic choices of the movie are not explained in the novel by Will, the murderous, mask-wearing gay man who stabs children is reflective of Father Drake, a man who hid that he was gay and killed Dale with a knife. Because of this new movie, the Neck takes on a new stage in its *becoming*. At first, the Neck is fictional, born from the legends Will was told. Then it is physical while Will spends time there at Camp Levi. Now, the Neck, with its portrayal in film, takes on the status of fiction once more. It again manages to have an unusually close relationship with—and knowledge of—Will. The Neck's portrayal in film demonstrates, in blatant form, its ability to follow him even after he leaves the camp. In doing so, the camp extends its life beyond Will's original time there, as this film triggers his unresolved trauma from the camp. This results in Will feeling the need to finally put an end to the camp's power over him. So he travels back to the Neck, leaving all of his friends and a romantic interest behind to drive hundreds of miles for days to get to this remote location in the Mississippi Delta.

Unfortunately, when Will shows up, he finds Father Drake has been released from prison and is squatting in the abandoned cabins that once made-up Camp Levi. The fact that this man is still referred to in Will's mind as *Father* Drake, a name he gave to himself at the camp, is evidence of the lasting impact the camp has had on Will. When Will sees Father Drake, though, he is not alone. A young boy named Cake, who the book suggests is his significant other, is at his side. Will is terrified by the discovery of these two men. "By the time I finished my screaming, they held all the power," he recounts (White 325). It is not just the mental power Father Drake has over Will due to his time at the camp that paralyzes him; it is also that he and Cake actually force Will to stay and talk with them by holding Will at gunpoint. "[Father Drake] reached inside the driver's side and pulled out the keys from the ignition," Will explains (White 315). Beyond

the implications of just taking Will's car keys, he is trapped by Father Drake and Cake because he fears the gun Cake has in his hand. However, Will's description of the gun exposes that the power Father Drake and Cake have over him is all a façade:

The boy, shaking, pulled a pistol from the back of his jeans, which he aimed directly at my skull. [...] Cake shifted his fingers around the gun, revealing there wasn't any trigger. Only a metal rim, smooth and polished. The more I looked, the more I understood. The metal was too shiny for gun-metal, and it looked, in fact, more like plastic (White 315-316).

Father Drake is now old and Cake is a teen boy, so Will's effort to escape could not be thwarted by these two unless they had something that gave them an advantage. By using a toy gun, they hope to make Will believe he is trapped, that he cannot leave their sight. Much like how Camp Levi uses mental boundaries to keep the campers in the Neck, Father Drake and Cake try to trick Will into thinking there is no escape. But Will notices that the gun is not real and then uses this knowledge to free himself by tackling Father Drake and running into the forest. The fake gun resembles the façade of Camp Levi that kept the boys trapped, but it should not be fully equated with the camp as Camp Levi had very real ways of hurting the boys.

After getting lost in the woods and falling asleep, Will awakens to an encounter that changes how he sees reality. This encounter clarifies the legends he learned as a child and helps him develop a new consciousness that is not controlled by the lasting effects of the camp. "I woke up—very suddenly, with a jolt—to the sound of voices in the distance [...] the voices of women," Will explains (White 318). When finally he finds these women, who survive out in the Neck much like the women in his legends, he asks if they know of these stories. "We *are* women and we *are* in the woods," they respond (White 320). This sarcastic response to Will's question

is followed up by the women saying their reasons for being in the woods are complicated. This complexity is never further elaborated in the novel, but it is evident the legends of the Neck do not fit these women. If anything, these women seem to dispel some of the legends because what is evident is that they are not prostitutes and are not running from men, as they welcome Will. The women are exceedingly welcoming to Will and even make a bed for him beside them, which he quickly falls asleep in. He awakes again from sleep to the women dancing in the distance. He describes this peculiar experience in the novel:

I leaned up, expecting to find the women tucked away in their own sleeping bags. Only they weren't. They were at the edge of the trees. They moved slowly, arms around each other's waists, turning round and round in a small circle. [...] The image of them echoed into several repeated images. There were many women in the dark now, multiplied over and over, dancing to music that must have existed only in their own heads. (White 322)

These dancing women are a part of this forest. For them, the Neck does not exist as a space separate from themselves. This passage could be seen as feminizing the forest, the forest equated with femininity because of the women. Indeed, it seems that these women are an extension of Will's projection of Suzette earlier in the novel, although this is complicated by the fact that the women also welcome Will into the forest. If these women are equated with femininity, then Will, as a man, must be equated with masculinity. And if this is the case, then his addition into the ecology of the forest would partly masculinize it. Of course, Will is gay—and gay men have been historically feminized by society—but the women in the forest seem to be queer as well, and homosexual women are often labeled as masculine. The women are not just dancing in the forest, they are intimately dancing with each other. "They moved slowly, arms around each other's waists," he describes (White 322). Nevertheless, even with the inclusion of complicated

gender dynamics in the forest, it is still mostly represented as a feminized space due to its maternal qualities and non-combativeness.

Through venturing deep into the forest, Will heads towards the same place the women from his mother's stories went to for answers. Although Will's gayness again creates a potentially complicated—not to mention harmful—equivocacy between gay men and women, generally these scenes show an evident tendency of people to retreat into the natural world to find solutions to their problems. However, the women he actually finds in the forest are not necessarily escaping from anything, though it seems they do find comfort and happiness through their existence in the space. It is this type of behavior that is explored in Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's book *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Irigaray writes about her experience growing up in a sequestered childhood, a childhood that included copious rules and even boarding school. She was locked away at school and told not to live her life as she wanted to. She was treated as though her opinions or thoughts didn't matter. When she was young, Irigaray was told by her mother to go out to the garden as punishment, but instead of feeling reprimanded in the natural world, Irigaray found the time among plants to be fulfilling, supportive, and liberating. "She shouted at me; 'Go away to the garden!' Amazingly, her behavior did not affect me too much. In the garden, I felt at home and pacified, and I did not ask for more to recover my health. I was just worrying about the possibility that my parents could send me to the boarding school again," she writes (Irigaray and Marder 11). Irigaray points to something that is inherently different from the original tales Will is told before he experiences the Neck for himself, that going into the forest can give peace away from industrialization and oppressive political circumstances. It does not give healing, rather it provides a space for people to think for themselves. Similar to Irigaray's experience of feeling at peace in the garden, Will's

anxiety falls away from him when he is surrounded by trees in the woods. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. But I did,” Will remembers (White 318). Irigaray’s time in the garden was meant to be a punishment. Will’s time in the woods likewise is supposed to be scary based on his previous knowledge of the space and punishment he received at Camp Levi. Instead, the forest relaxes him and allows him to contemplate his situation. There he finds a model for finally shrugging off the effects of Camp Levi—divorcing himself from the structures and pressures that the camp perpetuates. By starting to accept the complexities of the place he has thought of as the Neck for so long, he is able to begin to accept his own life.

Walking back to where he left Father Drake and Cake, Will must face these men again. He handles this situation as if he were a different person—and in some ways he is. Will is *becoming*, like the women in the woods, free from the expectations of a societal structure that does not value his life. Unfortunately, Father Drake has not, for whatever reason, had the same epiphany, but Will empathizes with him. He explains:

But Father Drake and I are not enemies, I know this now; he is not the villain of my story. I understand the rage that lives in him lives in me, too. We are made brothers by it. We grew up being told our love was filthy and wrong. And later we were drawn back to the camp, still fascinated by this place and its failed promise to restore us into the Almighty’s fold. He was, and is and perhaps always will be, the distorted reflection of my own worst desire, which turned out not to be my attraction to the same gender but my longing to obliterate myself completely and remake something new and wholesome in its place. (White 324)

The transformation of Will’s feelings towards Father Drake is monumental in his acceptance of his own struggles with identity. He does not specify whether Father Drake will ever be able to

liberate himself from the camp, but he nonetheless comes to understand that he, too, was trapped by this biopolitical machine. Much like Arendt's identification of 'the banality of evil', Father Drake is yet another person swept up in carrying out the torture of camps—but he is also the exact type of person wanted by the camp to control. Even after Will offers to help Father Drake and Cake, they do not leave with him. They refuse to enter the outside world, saying that it despises them too much, that they would rather stay in the ruins of the camp. Will knows this space is changing though, and he says this to Father Drake. The buildings which once made up the camp are now overgrown with plants and falling apart—it is being reclaimed. When Will and his fellow campers liberated themselves from the physical camp long ago, they also liberated the forest of the camp. Now, many years later, after Will has mostly freed his mind from the lingering restrictions and hate the camp imposed on him and stressed, so too has the forest become liberated in Will's mind. Because the Neck as Will experiences it is a reflection of his mind and the values he holds, so in accepting his own complexities, he allows for the acceptance of this environment. Of course, this liberation, Will's understanding that this space is not merely the Neck or a camp, does not liberate it for all other people. Similarly, Will's acceptance of his own sexuality does not also liberate others' struggles with this issue. This is made evident through this interaction with Father Drake. Furthermore, Will's experiences with the forest remain mostly gendered, which makes a reader question how truly liberated the Neck is in his mind. However, it is through singular people starting to understand the complexities of their identities and the ecologies they exist in, the hope that this knowledge spreads, and the work of so many to share their revelations with others, that there is any chance of beginning a process towards queer and ecological liberation.

New Understandings: A Conclusion

Throughout *How to Survive a Summer*, readers follow Will on his path towards acknowledging the foundational problems with a society built upon strict Christian, capitalist, and heteronormative values. This is not an easy task for him to undertake and it takes years to fully understand the power these biopolitical institutions have on not only people's lives but the ecologies they live in and with. His traumatic experience at Camp Levi shows the extreme extents these institutions will go to in order to maintain their validity, relevance, and power. At Camp Levi, not only are the participants, both attendees and administrators, involved in the policing and validation of the camp but so too does the camp force the forest and lake to participate in this torture. The camp uses toxic environments labeled as "natural" to keep the boys questioning the "naturalness" of their lives. This novel shows that to fully liberate humans from the shackles of oppressive Christian, capitalist, and heteronormative structures, their ecologies must be liberated as well. If these rhizomatic spaces are not freed from imposed identities, they will continue to be successfully used by these oppressive structures to validate their existence and control humans. Individual people's changes may not be enough to entirely eradicate the power these structures hold, and many people, like Father Drake, will no doubt refuse to involve themselves in this difficult experience, but only through these individual revelations can a collective force to combat these structures be eventually made. It is true that this work is not totally successful in unshackling various ecologies, like the forest and the lake, from imposed, harmful identities. Throughout the novel women and various ecologies are unable to "fight back" by themselves and are shown only in their most happy and peaceful selves while out of the reach of men—further perpetuating the idea that women and ecologies cannot stand up to the might of men. Nevertheless, this novel takes an important step towards a more liberating

experience for people, one that is acutely tied to our ecological surroundings and connection.

This story not only acts as an example of this process but aids this process beyond the characters within its pages. Through offering a template for this work, *How to Survive a Summer* can be read as a call to action to begin to liberate humans and the ecologies we exist in from the oppressive structures that control our lives. Just as Will is *becoming* in this novel, our understanding of the human experience and its connection to ecologies is too.

Chapter Two

Living Within Lakes: Queer Identities, Multiplicity, and New Understandings in Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*

The second novel I explore in this project, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, focuses on the early life of Cameron Post, a young queer girl who grows up in rural Montana. As with most queer children, Cameron's understanding of what is queer and what is normative is gradually gained throughout her childhood. Emily Danforth's novel focuses on three specific spaces to show the bildungsroman of this character and her process of understanding her place in the world. It is in these three spaces that this chapter unfolds: first, in Miles City where Cameron was born and raised; second, at God's Promise, a conversion therapy camp Cameron is sent to by her aunt; and lastly, at Quake Lake, a large lake formed by a dam overflowing into a valley. This lake has significant importance to Cameron's family history because it is both where her mother vacationed as a child and where she died. Cameron's strength as a swimmer is mirrored throughout the novel by the inclusion of a lake at each of these important spaces. In Miles City, the local lake is where Cameron meets her first serious sexual partner. At her conversion therapy camp, the lake acts as a place of sexual escape for the campers and is crucial to their coping with the torture they endure. The last space, Quake Lake, is where the novel ends. Cameron's story is not about any attempt to fit herself into normative society, as many conversion therapy narratives are, but rather how to convince the people around her that she does not have to fit in their world. It is for this reason that in this chapter I focus on Cameron's process of trying to have the normative people in her life accept her, the ultimate realization that she can't rely on them to do

so, and the eventual liberation she finds through the conviviality with other queer people and her environment. By following the narrative of the novel through its various ecological settings and analyzing the transformation Cameron undergoes in her understanding of complex queer identities, Danforth presents a story that shows a queer youth exploring the power and range of both individual and ecological identities.

This novel is especially important for my project because it wrestles with the normative quality of the LGBTQ+ movement and the introduction of more nuanced existences. Throughout the novel, Cameron never identifies as a lesbian, even though this label is often foisted on her by others—though more often in the form of “dyke.” In fact, she seems to struggle with the introduction of what I call in this chapter “the queer alphabet.” My use of this term is to denote the types of mostly rigid identities which have sprung up post-WWII and are used in such capitalistic endeavors as modern pride parades. Cameron’s struggle with the queer alphabet is only continued when she attends her conversion therapy camp because she comes in contact with queer identities not included in this normalizing structure. At camp she meets both a disabled queer person and someone who identifies as two-spirit, a Native American identity. These characters introduce identities that decentralize whiteness, normatively abled bodies, and western secularity from contemporary conceptions of queerness. In other words, these alternate identities reject the “queer alphabet” that relies on western, white, and urban definitions of queerness. While not perfectly folded into the story, as the indigenous representation Danforth presents fails to account for the full complexity of these identities, the mere inclusion of these alternate identities allows Cameron to experience expressions that are different from the “queer alphabet” and helps her come to terms with the fact that she, too, may not fit within a rigid identity included in it. With these friends, Cameron embarks on a journey towards better understanding

the self, a journey that does not necessarily help with understanding *which* identity she is but rather acknowledging that she is always *becoming*. As such, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* presents an innovative approach to the typical coming of age novel and allows for a blossoming discourse about accepting one's place *outside* of the normative. In this novel, a reader learns alongside Cameron as she attempts to accept the person she is becoming through a convivial connection to fellow queer people left out of the normalizing queer alphabet and a strong connection to the environment. Cameron's queer, rhizomatic resilience is accented by her ecological surroundings and her connection to these ecologies, and this resilience allows her to flourish in a world that wants to trap her in a fixed—and wrong—identity.

Miles City: Becoming Queer or Queer *Becoming*?

Although Cameron understands that her attraction to women is peculiarly different from the norm long before she becomes friends with a fellow swimmer named Lindsey, as she felt in love with a girl named Irene when she was younger, it is not until their friendship that she begins to gain the vocabulary and broader cultural understanding of what her feelings mean outside of herself. Lindsey and Cameron are swimming competitors in the summers, when Lindsey is with her father in Montana. During the school year Lindsey lives with her mom and stepfather in Seattle. A social contrarian, she makes it a point to go against the grain—and Cameron notices. “This summer Lindsey had come back a lot taller, and she'd changed other things, too. She's chopped off the ponytail that she used to tuck up into her swim cap and she'd bleached what was left of her hair a bright white. [...] She also had an eyebrow ring, a little silver thing that the stroke judges made her remove before she could compete,” Cameron describes (Danforth 84). These attributes, starkly different from what is the norm in Miles City, a place where people so

conform to the standards of gender expression that Cameron's aunt tells her repeatedly to "chew like a lady" and sells pink toolsets, piques Cameron's interest (Danforth 92). And so that summer, after the reacquainting that happens annually between Lindsey and Cameron when they meet poolside before the first race of the season, they become quick friends. Not only because Cameron takes interest in Lindsey's easy defiance of the norms but also because Lindsey sees, perhaps through the stolen glances given by Cameron, someone she too can confide in.

The competitive rivalries between swimmers takes a back seat that summer, as Lindsey and Cameron explore how to fit themselves into a society that seems hell-bent on either rejecting their condition or organizing them into categories that don't quite fit. This newfound friendship leads to each sharing the micro-worlds they have found that help foster their difference from the normative. "Lindsey told stories about Seattle, where everything sounded edgy and cool, stories about the concerts and parties she had been to, all the crazy friends she said she had. I told her about the hospital, the secret world we'd discovered by breaking in. From our beach towels in eastern Montana we listened to mix tapes of bands I'd never heard of," Cameron recounts (Danforth 84). Each of the girls' experience forms a sort of bodily and mental expression, as is the case with Lindsey's eyebrow ring and Cameron's work boots and love for Miles City. These micro-worlds act as separate ecologies, or in the Deleuzian sense as *rhizomes*, which meet and aid their *becomings*. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is the generative function of being, a result not of imitation but influence. As such, it is the rhizome, which Deleuze writes "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles," that influences the expression of being for each girl, not the alphabet of queer culture (7). Through each of their cherished

ecologies, these micro-worlds, the two girls are able to explore a deeper connection, even eventually come out to one another.

Even the two girls' coming out is tarnished with identification rather than bred out of influence. Lindsey exposes her queerness when she expresses her frustration with being in Montana when Pride is happening in Seattle. She then has to clarify to a sheltered Cameron that she was not, in fact, talking about "German Pride," as Cameron so believed, but rather "Gay Pride" (Danforth 86). After this revelation, Lindsey makes the bold move of subtly questioning Cameron's queerness. "If I could take you to Pride, like in a perfect world, if I could private-plane us to Seattle, would you want to go with me," Lindsey asks before a race one day (Danforth 87). Cameron, sensing the gravity of the question and potential for her carefully crafted queer-but-not façade to crumble, jokingly replies that she would go if there was cotton candy, a response Lindsey is far from appeased by. But in truth Cameron's hesitation is warranted, as she understands, perhaps better than Lindsey, the broad-ranging implications of placing herself in an identifier which in rural Montana could spur violence and aggression. Whereas Lindsey will be able to flee back to the queer-alphabet safety of Seattle at the end of the summer, Cameron will stay in Miles City—where the word queer is not even used. Furthermore, Cameron does not want to be the specific type of queer that Lindsey says she is; she is quite alright being just a girl from rural Montana and rather values her independence from any sort of identification with some radical movement. However, after a brief intrusion into their microcosm of queerness by a swim meet official, Lindsey asks again if she would go with her to Pride and Cameron accepts. "I knew my answer meant more than just the words I was saying, but I nodded and said, 'Yeah, I'd go. I'd go with you,'" explains Cameron (Danforth 88). Cameron's begrudging willingness to venture into Lindsey's world, rather than signaling a real want to

attend Pride and attach a label to herself, stems from a need to further explore her feelings towards Lindsey. From here on, the two are queer confidants for each other and begin to explore this side of themselves beyond just the hypotheticals of alternative culture.

After this coming-out-without-coming-out episode, Lindsey becomes a teacher of sorts for Cameron by explaining the wild world of queer culture outside of Miles City as she sees it. Whereas Cameron simply knew that she was different and never put a label on what that difference might mean, Lindsey knows the full vocabulary of queerness, all of the words that have become the anti-symbols for the cis-gendered and heteronormative labels: man, woman, heterosexual. She tries to explain what it means to be queer through the lens of her own life:

Lindsey had kissed five girls before, and had done other, mysterious, *serious stuff* with three of those. Lindsey's mom knew a guy, Chuck, who was a drag queen, Chasity St. Claire, and Lindsey had seen him perform at a charity thing. Lindsey was gonna join the GLBU group at her high school. *U* stood for *undecided*. I hadn't known, before Lindsey, that it was an actual category. (Danforth 89)

While Lindsey may be exaggerating the extent of her expertise on this subject to Cameron—hence the mysteriousness of some of her claims—she nevertheless does explain as best she can the construction of the queer-friendly spaces beyond Montana and the vocabulary that can be discovered there. It is here that Cameron first faces what Michel Foucault calls the “*specification of individuals*” in his book *The History of Sexuality* (42-43). Whereas, for Foucault, pre-19th century discourse centered around sodomites going against the will of religion, an act as it were, the 19th century presented a new era. The 19th century introduced sodomy as an identity. “The homosexual was now a species,” he writes (Foucault 43). Cameron's interest at the prospect of understanding a new form of human, a type of human whose description she just so happens to

fit based on another person's understanding of the complex feelings in her body, makes her want to spend even more time with Lindsey, leading her to try and have Lindsey stay the night at her home. Little does she know, Lindsey has thought exactly the same thing and when questioned by Cameron about where she will sleep when she comes to Miles City for the next swim meet at Scanlan Lake, Lindsey responds: "I'm staying with you, right?" (Danforth 90). The elation and stress this response brings to Cameron, given so casually and assertively by Lindsey, causes her to swim terribly that day. But with this response also comes the chance for the positions of power in their friendship to shift, at least temporarily, and allow Cameron to try and share the world she has crafted in her hometown, a world that while not as explicitly filled with queer language as Seattle, accepts some of Cameron's peculiarities and even provides space for them.

Cameron's rural hometown, though holding traditionally conservative views towards queerness, also provides that rare attribute which can seldom be found in the lawful metropolises of America: children's run of the entire town. That is, the ability to go anywhere and do anything, the irony of having endless possibilities because one already knows everything about a place. This knowledge, and the wise ability of middle-of-nowhere-America teens to use it to their advantage because oftentimes the Sheriff goes to church with your mother so they won't ever be in *that* much trouble beyond a stern talking to or volunteering at the next potluck, is exactly what Cameron was so excited to give Lindsey. "I wanted to share this summer world with Lindsey when she came, all that was best about Miles City in July spread out before us like a picnic table heaped with pies," describes Cameron (91). This peculiar strength of understanding, which Cameron possesses from growing up in Miles City as a queer person, allows her to move freely throughout the space without trouble—much like, as the environmental philosopher Michael Marder notes, how an animal in its environment moves about with confidence. "Animal

experience [is] pure immanence (the animal moves like ‘water in water’), as immersion in its milieu, with which it fuses,” he writes (Marder 125). The next day, Cameron, using this immanence, takes Lindsey to the abandoned hospital she and her friends found and now regularly go to in order to practice their freedom. Once inside, while her friends (all of whom are men) are busy blasting fireworks down an old hallway, Cameron shows Lindsey to a room known by the teens as the ‘key room.’ “We’d found this room before, Jamie and I—the key room. [...] There were so many keys, like maybe it could have been every key, ever, to the building,” the Cameron describes (Danforth 97). And there, in that room filled with keys, Lindsey and Cameron for the first time unlock the last barrier in their friendship and bring about something more: romance. Interestingly, it is Cameron who facilitates this step towards a romantic relationship, as she is the one who finds space in the world for the two to fully express themselves.

The two girls, while alone and holding hands in that room, contemplate the chance of being in this *other world*, where even the sounds of the cars on the streets outside the abandoned hospital were muffled by the fireworks crackling through the air on the other side of the hall. This micro-world within the key room offers a separate space outside of both the conservative restrictions of Miles City and beyond the tendency of places which rely on a queer-alphabet to classify queerness, like Seattle. In that world they finally kiss, though it ends abruptly when Lindsey, due to her own inexperience with homosexual behavior, is apprehensive. Cameron describes:

So that, and the gin, and the dark, were enough for us to act on what had been there all summer. Lindsey was the expert, and I let her lead me, her mouth hot and her lips frosted with sparkly orange-flavored lip gloss. She pulled off my tank top in a couple of jerky

moves and took off her own T-shirt even faster. Her skin was warm and smooth on mine. Her hands pulling me into her until there was no space between us at all. She had me pressed up against the wall, a light switch indenting my back, her wet mouth everywhere, when she pulled away. (Danforth 97)

Lindsey's expertise can only go so far, and she pulls back because she doesn't know how to proceed, saying, "I've never done anything more than this" (Danforth 97). After this brief interruption, the girls continue to explore each other's bodies, this time as equals. They walk through this new world together, a world that has changed since they stepped into the key room—a *becoming world*. Even though Lindsey may have the symbolic vocabulary and culture of queerness mastered, and those things do impact the rhizomes that Cameron and she experience, words and concepts do not replace *becoming*—the process of existing and the things which make them queer.

In fact, the time spent with Lindsey, even if more sexually charged than the time spent with Irene when Cameron was young, is dampened by Lindsey's desire? to conform to stereotypical queer classifications. "She started me in on the language of gay; she sometimes talked about how liking girls is *political* and *revolutionary* and *countercultural*, all these names and terms that I didn't even know I was supposed to know. [...] I just liked girls because I couldn't help not to," explains Cameron (Danforth 99). Again here, as when Cameron wants to show Lindsey *her world* and not just become infatuated with the Seattle-queer-punk scene Lindsey provides, the novel seems to imply a multiplicity of what it means to be queer. The novel refuses to allow queerness to be dominated by labels and symbols rather than personal experience. For Cameron, her experience is not ruled by the opposition to heterosexuality, and all the radical implications that brings, but rather by her sexual drive. She is not a new species

which needs classification. This is perhaps why, later in the novel, Cameron finds herself in love with a girl, Coley, who by all other assumptions is 'straight'. Cameron's infatuation with her begins as only a friendship but soon develops into something more than that, even though Coley has a boyfriend. One night, while looking at the stars in the back of a pickup truck, the two start to inadvertently talk about lesbians, to which Coley says, "I'm not like that, Cam" (Danforth 182). However, to be 'like something' is to identify with something else, and Cameron similarly does not identify as something *other*, and Cameron does not subscribe to the label of lesbian either. Nevertheless, the tension of this moment starts to build and, eventually, after Cameron is standing on the outside of the truck while Coley sits on the edge of the truck-bed, they start to kiss.

At first this somewhat innocent act goes unnoticed by the girls but soon Coley becomes nervous after the fact. She believes it is a bigger deal than Cameron does, saying, "I didn't really think I would like it and I did" (Danforth 184). While their friendship continues after this episode, for a while the two girls are careful around each other. Cameron decides not to join the swim team that summer and lifeguards at the lake instead. Each night, after their shifts, Cameron, Coley, and their friends swim together and enjoy the privacy and freedom the lake gives the teenagers. "Sex and Scanlan went together seamlessly [...] almost all of us were familiar with the appeal of the relative privacy of the below-dock world [...] Coley and I were careful never to be underneath the dock together without at least one other person along," Cameron describes (Danforth 195). This precaution by both girls does not last for long, as eventually in Cameron's room they kiss again. Cameron writes off Coley's allowance for these romantic moments a type of cognitive dissonance, explaining: "I think Coley got pretty good at convincing herself that what the two of us were doing with each other night after night after hot,

still, big-sky Montana night was just some bound-to-happen-in-college-experiment thing come early” (Danforth 200). Cameron does not particularly think that Coley’s dissonance is wrong because she, too, doesn’t necessarily view what they are doing as a radical act against heterosexuality. The same immanence which Cameron uses to show Lindsey the abandoned hospital shows itself again here. Their relationship continues throughout the summer as the two continue to kiss, cuddle, and have their private romance but hits another stage when Coley gets her own apartment. One night, after drinking and watching a movie the two begin to have sex, a big step for their relationship and a more severe problem for Coley, as she still technically has a boyfriend. Nevertheless, the novel describes Cameron exploring her body. “I didn’t know exactly what I was doing, but I figured it out,” she explains (Danforth 225). After performing oral sex on Coley, Cameron proclaims her love for her. Coley has difficulty responding to this because she sees it as going against God, though eventually her body takes over and she is sliding her hand down Cameron’s body when her brother knocks on the door, rupturing their world and ending their love making.

After this near exposure incident, Coley begins to distance herself from Cameron. At first, Cameron shrugs at this and blames it on Coley’s boyfriend coming back to town. During this time apart, Mona Harris, an older lifeguard at the lake, and Cameron begin to become closer and eventually kiss under the docks at the lake. But for Cameron, who is still in love with Coley, it doesn’t amount to anything more romantic. “And that’s all it was. Maybe ten minutes of making out,” Cameron says (Danforth 245). Unfortunately, Cameron’s newfound freedom, the freedom to make out with another woman at the public lake, is short lived. When she gets home, her aunt Ruth is waiting for her with terrible news: Coley has told their pastor about their affair and, as a result, Ruth has decided to send Cameron to a conversion therapy camp, “God’s

Promise.” The reasoning, according to Pastor Crawford, whom the aunt has brought in to consult on Cameron’s ‘condition’, is that “there are too many unhealthy influences here” (Danforth 249). Ironically, the place that has too many unhealthy influences is a rural town in Montana, not the queer-alphabet-filled Seattle which comes to Cameron’s mind when she thinks of influences that would not align with what these adults view as pure. A reader quickly comes to understand that Miles City’s environment, both physical and mental, is carefully maintained by the residents and they go to such great lengths to distance themselves from anything that makes them uncomfortable or changes the environment they craft. Cameron’s queerness threatens to do this.

Miles City is a farm town that, while producing more than just agriculture and heterosexual cis-gendered children, maintains other plants and animals through violent means. Scanlan Lake, the lake in which Cameron and her friends swim, is an artificial construction. It is made by the city diverting water from a river into a reservoir. Not only this, but the lake is not allowed to fully take on its typical state, as the city makes lifeguards pour copper sulfate into it every week to kill any life. While the chemicals are used to kill off the snails that cause swimmers’ itch, it unfortunately also kills harmless life like fish. This chemical cleansing process is explained in the novel by Cameron:

We made it a verb, called it copper sulfating, and we had to do it on Saturday nights because the lake didn’t open until noon on Sundays. That gave the chemical enough time to kill some lake weed, a bunch of those swimmers’ itch snails, and a myriad of additional lake life, mud puppies and small fish, things we’d find floating on the surface the next day; but also by then it was supposed to have stopped its dangerous toxicity so that human swimmers could again enter the water. (Danforth 204)

It is with the same vigor with which the inhabitants of Miles City cleanse the lake of any biodiversity that Pastor Crawford wishes to clean the city of sexually deviant behavior. Cameron's sexual attraction is seen as a disease—an implicit parasite—from which she will be able to recover. “Pastor Crawford said a long prayer in which he asked for God's help in my recovery,” Cameron recounts (Danforth 250). The pervasive need in this town to police not only the identities of sexuality and gender but also of the environment echoes Foucault's writing on biopolitical power. In “Right of Death and Power over Life” he writes that in the modern age power works to “incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them” (136). The city administrators control the lake for their pleasure and the pastor monitors the sexual deviance of the inhabitants. Instead of the city destroying the lake or the pastor purging the impure people, they are treated for their ‘defects’, though often through violent tactics.

The connection between Cameron and the environment of Miles City, and the experiences that come out of this connection, offer a robust place to begin thinking about the biopolitical implications of the queer ecologies in this novel. From a biopolitical standpoint, Cameron's life and *becoming* rely on her existence with this city. Her experiences here shape her queerness and how she identifies, or more aptly, doesn't identify—as she is yet to call herself any of the labels given by Lindsey. However, Cameron's becoming is interestingly mirrored by the becomings of spaces she grew up with and all the components that come with them. The hospital, overgrown with vegetation and abandoned, becomes a world for Cameron and Lindsey. The lake is both made through force each summer for Cameron and her friends to swim in and controlled through the harsh treatment of chemicals. Week after week, the lake's ecosystem regenerates and week after week it is killed by the city. These ecologies intersect and constitute

the framework for Cameron's rhizome. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson write in their field-generating book *Queer Ecologies*:

The task of queer ecology is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes the considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of the world.

(5)

The understanding that queerness and environments are interconnected, from their physical to political attributes, is a reflection of their rhizomatic qualities. It is this understanding that is critical to a reading of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, because Cameron does not hate her rural town; she does not think she doesn't belong there. She does not subscribe to the identifiers from either her community or the queer-alphabet. Just as the lake continues to regenerate its ecosystem every week even though the city tries to control it with toxic chemicals, Cameron is insistent in staying true to herself, her own *becoming*. This persistence against the biopolitical machine's delineation of identifiers foreshadows the difficulty her conversion therapy camp administrators will find in trying to 'turn her straight'.

God's Promise: Beginning, Smoking, and Mutilating

While the novel does not explain exactly how Cameron knows about conversion therapy camps, it is heavily implied by the text that she has some prior knowledge of these spaces. In fact, even her best friend, a straight boy named Jamie, seems to understand the system Cameron is heading towards—a system her aunt Ruth has already become an arm of before they even

leave Miles City. “He hugged me fast, told me he’d see me at Christmas if the warden allowed it,” Cameron describes of her parting goodbye with Jamie (Danforth 263). Indeed, Jamie’s analogy of Ruth as a warden provides a sufficient description of what takes place once it is decided Cameron will attend God’s Promise. Her TV and phone are taken out of her room, she is no longer allowed to answer the phone when it rings, and she is forbidden from seeing any of her friends except for a brief goodbye with Jamie. Cameron knows that once she gets to camp, all communication with her life in Miles City must end. Even her grandmother will not be permitted to write her until three months into her stay. The camp itself is described by Cameron as a compound. It is a prison of sorts for young children who happen to have homosexual tendencies, though it is disguised as a quaint, even beautiful, summer camp. Cameron, after her first glimpses of God’s Promise while on a tour with a girl who attends the camp, describes it:

The grounds at Promise had a little of everything that western Montana is famous for, things that the state tourism board makes sure show up on postcards and guidebooks: golden fields for archery or horseback riding, densely wooded trails dotted with Indian paintbrush and lupine, two streams, that, according to Jane, were just *aching with trout*, and a so-blue-it-looked-fake mountain lake only a mile and a half’s hike from the main building. Both sides of campus (the compound) were bordered by grazing land of cattle ranchers sympathetic to the holy cause of saving our souls from a lifetime of deviance. (Danforth 267)

God’s Promise is nearly *too* beautiful. It is a manicured and well-positioned compound that manages to gain people’s trust and sympathy through aesthetics even though it employs no licensed psychologists or professionals of any sort. It is shown to the public as a campus, something palatable, but it is a compound that exists in isolation. This allows the camp to hide

the torture it inflicts on the children and prevent them from escaping. Claudio Minca, in his article “Geographies of the Camp,” links barbed wire and camps to the “environmental history and the production of the same capitalist ecology, affecting both humans and animals with the same techniques” (80). At God’s Promise, the link does not involve barbed wire, but similarly uses the same policing techniques of animals on humans, as cattle ranchers employ large swaths of land and the occasional redirection of herds to contain their animals. These ranchers do not need barbed wire, just as the camp does not need it to contain the children.

The cattle ranchers are not alone in extending help to the camp; large corporations do as well. When Cameron and Ruth show up to God’s Promise for the first time, the place is nearly empty. The girl giving the two a tour, Jane Fonda, tells them that many of the disciples—a term given to the children at the camp—are away with one of the administrators at a grocery store. Cameron soon learns that stores often give the camp supplies. “Sam’s Club and Walmart give us a big discount, and free food, sometime,” Jane tells them (Danforth 267). This passage is especially interesting because it directly ties this compound to capitalism. It insinuates that Walmart, the corporate bastion of late-stage capitalism in America, supports the efforts of this camp. It is this, coupled with the fact that families must pay—in 1992—nearly \$10,000 to have their children attend the camp, that exposes part of how this facility is able to maintain the aesthetic beauty that hides its brutality so well. The other half of the reason this camp is able to exist is because Lydia March, the assistant director of the camp and camp psychologist (though notedly without a degree), is a wealthy woman from England who wanted a place to turn homosexual children, like her nephew who runs the camp, Pastor Rick, heterosexual. However, this connection is never directly revealed to anyone by the administrators as it threatens the carefully crafted façade of this institution’s validity.

Even with the extreme surveillance that this state-of-the-art camp provides, surrounded by watchful cattle ranchers and miles away from a town, Cameron does find respite in the conviviality of the camp attendees and the wooded surroundings of the compound. She first learns of the importance of time spent there during her tour. “Some disciples are at the lake, maybe. Summer camp just ended last week, so this is like a transition time before the regular school session starts,” Jane explains (Danforth 269). During the attendees’ time at the camp, not only the surroundings become places of respite from the torture that they go through, but they also become exceptional spaces within the camp where campers can talk honestly and share experiences, feelings, and information freely. The lake is especially known as a place where homosexual experiences happen. In the novel, Adam, another camper, describes getting a hand job from a fellow disciple, Steve, in the lake. Cameron learns this from a discussion she has with Adam in the woods about Adam’s Native American upbringing in a conservative and normative household. Although Adam’s family is Native American, their father is a businessman with mayoral aspirations who has totally abandoned his indigenous beliefs in order to thrive in a normative society. The term “homosexual” is actually limiting in describing Adam’s sexual experience with Steve, however, as Adam’s presence introduces a new form of identity that Cameron never learned from Lindsey’s queer-alphabet jargon—two-spirit. According to Adam, two-spirit people, or *winktes*, are “supposed to somehow bridge the divide between genders and be healers and spirit people. We’re not supposed to try to pick the sex our private parts most align with according to some Bible story about Adam and Eve” (Danforth 312). Adam is referred to in the novel by he/him/his pronouns, perhaps showing a need for him to let others normalize him enough to function within a society not built for his true identity, although many two-spirit people, like the indigenous scholar Joshua Whitehead, do go by gendered pronouns. Greta

Gaard, in her article “Towards a Queer Ecofeminism,” explains how European colonizers actually used Christianity, much like the way the administrators at God’s Promise do, to suppress not only queer indigenous understandings of people but also in order to warrant broad extraction from and destruction of the environment. In fact, from an ecological standpoint, the suppression of queer indigenous understandings itself destroys the ecology that once thrived before Europeans arrived. Adam is a reminder of this brutal past and current colonial pursuits but also shows, similar to the lake Cameron treats with chemicals earlier in the novel, ecological resilience in the face of continual peril at the camp.

Danforth’s inclusion of Adam in the novel does expand the representation within the story but it also can be interpreted, somewhat dangerously, as merely another episode of the colonizer using the indigenous. The scholar Robert Bittner praises *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* for its attempt at including a two-spirit character, writing that Adam’s “presence is enlightening as well, giving Danforth the chance to explore two-spiritedness as an identity and a historically important aspect of indigenous culture” (18). And while Bittner argues that “Danforth makes a valiant effort to cover as many aspects of his gender and sexuality as possible without making him sound like a case study,” he fails to acknowledge the faults of Danforth’s almost-hasty inclusion of this character (18). Adam is not given a central plot in the novel. The most that is learned about his past before the camp is scattered over a few pages and his presence, and the conversations that he is included in, are centered around Cameron’s bildungsroman.

To attempt to understand the intricacies of such a misunderstood and misrepresented identity, it can be helpful to turn towards the source: indigenous writers. In Joshua Whitehead’s essay ““Finding We’Wha”: Indigenous Idylls in Queer Young Adult Literature,” he deconstructs

the implications Danforth's novel has for indigenous understandings — revealing why so many of them are misleading. There are some blatant misrepresentations Whitehead spots in the novel. He writes that “Adam, in a scene with Cam, (inaccurately) calls himself a ‘two-souls person,’ much to Cam’s curiosity and amazement.” (Whitehead 233). One could pass this inaccuracy off as a young person not fully understanding their own complex identity, especially when their accessible family members, in this case Adam’s father, do not practice indigenous beliefs or support them. However, Danforth has the ability to correct this mistake through the narration that takes place in the novel and chooses not to do so, implying that she, herself, either does not care to accurately portray this identity or is ignorant to its full complexity — either of these reasons for the misrepresented inclusion of the two-spirit identity in her novel are suspect.

Beyond the smaller inaccuracies of representation, Whitehead explains subtler, although perhaps more worrisome, systemic problems with Danforth’s use of the two-spirit identity. Specifically, he notes how Cameron’s interest in Adam’s identity, and her interest in the prehistoric, can be read as a sort of settler-validation. Whitehead argues that “the function of settler queerness at large [is] to adapt, assimilate, and adopt Indigeneity to fit its own needs and to bolster its own identity” (236). In the case of Cameron, he writes “Cam begins to Indigenize herself, to play Indian, to skin-walk as an Indigiqueer [...] I argue Cam means to align herself with the precontact fantasy of a campy Indigenous queerness” (233).⁴ Whitehead examines how Cameron looks toward the past for affirmation that her queer identity is normal and, in doing so, uses ideas of indigenous identities and a pre-settled Nature for this endeavor. Cameron’s reliance on this fantastical idealization of a queer, pre-settled Indigenous culture comes at the price of utilizing her friend Adam for his heritage rather than uplifting his indigenous identity. Moving to

⁴ Whitehead uses the term “Indigiqueer” to differentiate queer Indigenous identities from those of queer settlers.

the authorial level, one can also interpret Cameron's fictional 'queer settlement' of indigenous culture and identities as Danforth's. Whitehead shows that the unfortunate result of what Bittner rightly wishes to praise as inclusive storytelling in this book actually comes at the expense of indigenous culture, land, and true modern-day inclusion. This does not mean that Adam should not be included in this novel as a two-spirit character, as if such a choice were up to scholars, but rather that we must continue to improve our representations of misunderstood identities and work towards decolonizing queerness from a settler queer mentality — a mentality that takes from indigenous people and does not truly include them.

The inclusion of Jane, as with Adam, provides yet another example of an identity that is not reflected in the earlier parts of the novel. Jane is disabled. Cameron is at first disgusted with Jane's lacking of one of her legs. "Jane was messing with the straps and buckles on her leg, pulling at things. It was grossing me out. The stump was all covered with a brace and padding, but I was afraid that if she didn't stop messing with it soon, it wouldn't be," Cameron recounts (Danforth 275). However, Cameron's disgust is followed quickly by astonishment because Jane shows her how she keeps cannabis, that she grows for all the campers to smoke, stashed inside of her prosthetic leg. She is further impressed by Jane because of her acute ability and knowledge of the environment surrounding the camp. The fact that Jane's understanding of the environment comes as a surprise to Cameron is not particularly unusual, as disabled people, like queer people, are often categorized as "unnatural." In Aaron Apps' book *Dear Herculine*, he deconstructs the idea of a "healthy" form of an environment to show how it oftentimes comes from an ableist perspective—viewing the uncommon as "unnatural." Apps argues for "messy ecologies," environments that are not normative but rather diverse. In fact, he shows how normative understandings of ecologies actually overlook and hide the amazing diversity that is usually

present and that variation is common, even beneficial, in environments. Although Apps is writing from the perspective of intersex people, his conceptions of a disabled person's place in an ecology are useful for understanding Jane. Cameron does not expect her to have the agency and confidence she does, and is certainly not expecting her to be able to navigate the forest—something she does gracefully. Furthermore, Jane's disability actually *provides* the ability for the campers to have cannabis. Jane's and Adam's inclusion in the novel helps show how Cameron is learning more about what it means to be "othered" in society—or rather *unlearning* the normative.

The woods act not only as a space where the children can speak freely about themselves and reflect, but also as a space that works as a fertile—and hidden—growing area for the cannabis Jane Fonda cultivates for the campers. The cannabis, or weed as the campers call it, is grown just out of eyesight of the camp administrators. The process is meticulous and precise, as Jane only grows enough to last through the winter. In the novel, Adam and Cameron are enlisted to help Jane harvest her crop in late September. "Farmer Jane's pot patch wasn't far from one of the main hiking trails, the one to the lake, but Jane knew what she was doing, which plants to grow near, how to disguise her path. Even after following her out there and spending better than two hours tooling around among the smelly crop, I probably couldn't have found it on my own without taking forever to do so," Cameron recounts of her and Adam's trip into the forest to harvest the crop (Danforth 303-304). The patch of weed was planted by Jane in a clearing, so that the plants could get the sunlight they needed to grow. At first, Cameron is surprised by how green cannabis actually is, how vibrant the color looks. "The actual, real-life leaves I'd seen immortalized on so many patches sewn to backpacks and black-light posters and CD cases were surprisingly impressive," she describes (Danforth 304). Cameron's shock at seeing the plant for

the first time, not attached to the pop culture identity of laid-back “stoners” and rebellion, is notably about the plant’s innate beauty. When Cameron first arrived at the camp, she did not think that any of the attendees would be smoking cannabis. However, she finds that cannabis is a way of enduring their stay at God’s Promise—and without Jane it would not be possible. After finishing picking the buds Jane grows for the campers, Cameron describes her with admiration: “She stretched her neck and squinted at the sun, using the back of her forearm to wipe her brow, her face determined and proud, just like a sepia-tinged portrait of an Old West pioneer missionary woman come to convert the natives and settle the land, only this time the crop wasn’t corn or wheat, and this time it was Jane who was in for conversion” (Danforth 309). This description of Jane is interesting not only because the conversion of Native Americans to Western values is compared to the attempted conversion of Jane but also because Adam, a Native American, is present. After hundreds of years of oppression, genocides, and Native Americans being thrown into camps, their people and culture are still present in society—resilient even if impacted by white settlers. Furthermore, it should be noted that Jane is not actually settling the land like the surrounding ranchers. She chooses a clearing and cultivates the cannabis because it is a necessity for the campers, who have no desire to stay and continue to cultivate the land once they can leave the camp. Nevertheless, the author’s representation of indigenous peoples is often suspect. As will be investigated later, she fails to fully grasp the two-spirit identity and seems to try to save white people from criticism for colonialism.

Even with the queer conviviality that the campers find in the forest and between themselves, they are still subject to the biopolitical goal of the camp: conversion from the “unnatural” human state of homosexual to the “natural” state of heterosexual. The administrators at God’s Promise employ multiple methods in their effort to *cure* the attendees of

their “unnatural same-sex attractions” (Danforth 289). During the attendees’ first one-on-one counseling session with Lydia March, the pseudoscience psychologist for the camp, they create a diagram that contains an iceberg and a ship. This diagram depicts a ship heading towards the iceberg—towards sure destruction. On Cameron’s diagram Lydia writes “*Cameron’s Same Sex Attraction Disorder*” over the iceberg and “*Family, Friends, Society*” above the ship (Danforth 288). This blatant representation of heteronormative society as an industrial machine heading towards an iceberg which represents Cameron’s queerness ironically undermines the very logic that these children are “unnatural” that the administrators wish to push on them. If machines are the symbol of normative society and icebergs symbolize queerness, then it follows that queerness is “natural” and normative society is not. Moreover, this relationship between the ship and the iceberg, and the administrators’ obsessive goal of removing it, presents a subconscious representation of climate change: machines’ pollution causing the removal the ice caps, glaciers, and snow in many parts of the world. ““So you are gonna try to melt away my tip?” / [...] ‘Something like that’,” Cameron remembers from a discussion with Reverend Rick and Lydia (Danforth 289). This is not the only problem with this diagram, as it also emphasizes Cameron’s same-sex attraction without allowing for a full conception of her sexual feelings—it implies a purely binary representation of attraction. Cameron has already experienced romance with a boy. She first explores this side of herself with Jamie, her hometown best friend, but later in the novel she discusses her attraction to Adam, who is a two-spirit individual. “Adam was tall and he had long muscles and he held himself like a principal dancer with the Joffrey, all grace, all refined power and strength. Sometimes we ran the trails together on the weekends, before the snow came, and I found myself checking him out in ways that surprised me,” Cameron explains (Danforth 294). So not only does same-sex attraction not fully describe Cameron’s identity

because she has some attraction to straight, cis-gendered men, but she also finds that she is attracted to a gender-queer person, even if she does only use he/him/his pronouns when referring to Adam.

It is in the forest that Cameron comes to understand the full impact this therapy is starting to have on her. Even if the camp oftentimes undermines itself and it never fully accomplishes its goal of converting the attendees, it is nonetheless often successful in destroying the lives of the children sent to it. While in the woods with Adam and Jane, Cameron ruminates on what she has experienced so far and how the camp has changed her:

At Promise I was destined to live in suspended time, somewhere that the me I had been or the I thought I was, didn't even exist. [...] Jane had just called it *forgetting yourself*, and that was a good way of putting it too. All the "support sessions" were designed to make you realize that *your* past was not the *right* past, that if you'd had a different one, a better one, the *correct version*, you wouldn't have even needed to come to Promise in the first place. I told myself that I didn't believe any of that shit, but there it was, repeated to me day after day after day. And when you're surrounded by a bunch of mostly strangers experiencing the same thing, unable to call home, tethered to routine ranchland miles away from anybody who might have known you before, might have been able to recognize *the real you* if you told them you couldn't remember who she was, it's not like being real at all. It's plastic living. It's living in a diorama. It's living the life of one of those prehistoric insects encased in amber: suspended, frozen, dead but not, you don't know for sure. (Danforth 313)

The language Cameron uses, that of "right" and "wrong," the possibility that there could be a "correct version" of someone, echoes the unlearning Cameron has done earlier in the novel on

what place the queer, disabled, or colonized subject has in a normative society. The conversion camp understands that the process of changing a person's sexual attraction is impossible but it *can* convince the children that they are wrong, potentially ending their practice of their sexuality. It's ironic that to be "natural" the children, in Cameron's view, must become plastic. Through this tortuous process of becoming plastic, the children begin to forget their own existence. They are not changed into what the camp advertises is the end result (heterosexuals), only convinced that they are trapped in normative society forever—that resistance is futile.

The ultimate example of the devastating effects of this camp's treatment of the children is seen when Mark, an attendee at the camp, castrates himself and pours bleach over his severed penis. Mark's exact reasons for this brutalization of his body are not fully discussed in the book, at least not from his personal perspective. What is given to the reader is that Mark's father sent him back to the camp after he got home at Christmas time because he was "not ready to come home," meaning he was not cured (Danforth 366). Mark's realization that he cannot be made the person his father so desperately wants him to be culminates in a lecture he gives during a group therapy session at God's Promise and the subsequent castration he performs on himself during the night. Mark's roommate, Adam, finds him lying on the ground surrounded by blood and bleach. He describes this scene to Cameron saying:

He was completely bare-ass naked. I pretty much tripped over him getting to the light, and then when I turned it on, I mean, I didn't know, I just knew it was bad. [...] I couldn't see [his penis], so I didn't know that he'd done what he did. I just knew that he was naked on the floor, there was a fucking lake of bleach, and it took like four more seconds until I saw blood leaking into the bleach and I went for Rick. I thought maybe he'd tried to drink it, or slit his wrists, or something. (Danforth 388)

However, Mark did not drink the bleach or slit his wrists. He mutilated his penis, as Adam later explains, to “cut off the problem area,” the part of himself that he believes is the root of his sexual attraction to men (Danforth 389). Then, to finish the job, he pours chemicals over the wound to purify himself. There is an interesting connection here from the “lake of bleach” to the lake Cameron uses chemicals to purify earlier in the novel. In both instances chemicals are used by people to make life easier for others, not necessarily the thing the chemicals are used on. In this way, Mark’s self-castration is not really done for his own benefit but for his father’s, just as all the children are sent to the camp not to save themselves but to save the ship heading towards the iceberg. After Mark is taken to the hospital, none of the campers ever hear from him again. A state official comes to the camp to evaluate it for harm against the children but no actions are taken by the state following their review.

The traumatizing episode with Mark, and subsequent failure by any adults to do anything about it, sends ripples throughout the campers and acts as a catalyst for them to reassess their existence at God’s Promise, especially Cameron, Adam, and Jane. They begin to understand the full effects of the oppression the camp performs on them and how they cannot hope to leave the system by embracing it. Mark’s struggle exemplifies the paradoxical effort of the camp to both convert children and also imprison them indefinitely. Without an ample supply of children, the biopolitical machine that is a conversion therapy camp cannot thrive. “Nobody ever leaves because they’re all better,” Jane says to Cameron (Danforth 390). The three then decide that they will take matters into their own hands and leave the camp. As if by divine purpose, as snow falls around them while huddled in a barn, the three are caught in the middle of a thundersnow storm, where thunder rings and lightning streaks the sky. “Zeus is angry,” Adam says in response to the thunder (Danforth 392). They peek out of an opening and watch the commotion. “One of the

pinetrees lit up momentarily, its snow-heavy bows, its massive height against the black nothingness, and then it was gone, and then something else got the spotlight, some other section of land that had been blackness before, and all the while the thunder rumbled behind the spectacle and the snowflakes whirled and flew,” Cameron explains (Danforth 393). This display of the environment’s strength and power seems to serve a purpose for these three, as it makes their attention turn from their hidden conversation to the outdoors, where they see the Reverend Rick arrive in a car with food. This is helpful because the three are not allowed to be outside, and if caught they would run the risk of their plan being overheard. The thunder cues them into Rick’s arrival and that they should head inside so that no one comes looking for them in their absence from dinner. Though not quite an endorsement of their plan to secretly leave the camp, the timing of the thundersnow cannot go unnoticed.

After Cameron is gifted a book about a place called Quake Lake, the three’s plans for leaving change drastically from heading towards Bozeman to hiking to this body of water. The reasoning, as Cameron puts it, is due to the miracle of being given a book about a lake that has so much personal meaning to her shortly before the trio is set to leave. When Cameron’s mother was young, her family used to visit a campground for vacation. One year while visiting, the family chose to leave their campsite to go and eat dinner at a nearby restaurant. While they were gone, an earthquake caused a dam to overflow and the water poured down into the valley where the campground was located. At the other end of the valley, a mudslide off the side of a mountain trapped the water. As a result, all of the people who were left in the campground drowned and, according to Cameron, their bodies, cars, and belonging still reside at the bottom of the valley—now called Quake Lake. The lake has further importance for Cameron because her parents later died there. When she was young, her parents took a short trip to the lake, where

they drove off the side of the road, through a guardrail, and drowned. Because of this intense emotional attachment to the lake, the gifted book spurs Cameron to convince Adam and Jane to hike through Montana to the place of her parents' death. "It was difficult to gauge just where their car had broken through the guardrail based on summary reporting and a map of the lake, but I had a general idea," Cameron remembers (Danforth 435). Interestingly, the story of Quake Lake subverts the camp administrators' idealization of what is "natural" by reinforcing the conception shown in the iceberg diagram. The "natural" iceberg in this case is the environment flooding and destroying cars, RV's, a campground, and human lives—instead of a ship. Years later, after the earthquake, Cameron's parents and their car are subsequently "taken" by the environment, although there is no indication that this was done due to an environmental cause like an earthquake. While this conception within the novel does little to paint the environment as benevolent, it does allow it to be perceived as having some form of agency. Furthermore, it should be noted that Cameron's pilgrimage towards Quake Lake is not done out of spite towards the environment but because she wishes to pay homage to both her parents and a place that has become so important to her life.

Quake Lake: A Path Towards the Unknown

Cameron, Jane, and Adam leave God's Promise in the final chapter of the novel, disguising themselves to the administrators as merely going on a hike in the forest. There is no description of the actual journey from the camp to Quake Lake. The chapter begins with the three's amazement at the lake, which takes hold of Cameron in a super-natural way. "Now that we could finally see the water, I just wanted to get down to it as quickly as possible," Cameron

recounts (Danforth 457). This eerie quality of the lake is reinforced for Cameron by the “skeleton trees” that shoot out of the water. She describes the scene:

There were these trees, mostly trunks, just a few thick branches left at the top of a couple of them, stuck out in the water, a tiny grove left behind from before the quake and flood [...] The closer we got, the stranger those skeleton trees looked too—there, just past the center of that section of the lake, many of them twisted or bent, their wood bleached and weathered, but in all these years since the earthquake, since the water had come and come and settled around them, soaked their roots beyond their capacity to grow, they hadn't toppled. Still they rose up out of the water, like gnarled walking sticks left behind by a race of giants. Or worse, the bones of the giants themselves, picked over by even more gigantic giants. (Danforth 457-458)

These trees are a physical reminder of the past of the valley. They mark the ever-changing quality of this environment. It is as if one can view this place's *becoming*, as if the rhizome that is the valley has left markers of connections long past—connections that these three children can now make as well. The trees don't go unnoticed by Adam and Jane. Adam describes their majesty and the feeling they get from the valley saying, “there's all kinds of powerful energy here. It's unsettled or something” (Danforth 460). The three also liken the space to a Lakota legend from Adam's Native American ancestry, where a giant who was once visible to man now lives in hiding in a mountain surrounded by water. This lake presents a space which has reclaimed its environment from humans. Once a campground, the epitome of ecotourism and an arm of normative society, it now contains a vibrant ecosystem, partially forged with the cars and bodies which now act as habitats for life deep within the water.

The rhizomatic quality of the environment drives Cameron to memorialize her parents by swimming naked with a candle out into lake and, in the process, helps her better understand her own *becoming*. Once out in the middle and looking at the gnarled ghost trees as if they are her parents, Cameron professes to them her love and comes to terms with her changing identity and path through life. “Maybe while you were alive I hadn’t even become me yet. Maybe I still haven’t become me. I don’t know how you tell for sure when you finally have,” she says to the trees (Danforth 468). While Danforth paints the environment of the lake and its indigenous qualities as creating a helpful space for Cameron, it should be noted that her self-fulfilling use of this space, coupled with what Joshua Whitehead calls Cameron’s “faux-ceremony,” furthers a colonizer-centric use of ecologies. Whitehead notes that Cameron’s personal use of the space for her own becoming leaves behind her friends at the shore, thereby making the space exclusionary. This is particularly glaring given that the space is indigenous land and Adam is indigenous — Cameron excludes the original stewards of the land to further her own liberation. Whitehead further critiques this scene for what he sees as Cameron not only excluding indigenous people on their own land but also trying to become a form of indigenous person herself — a form that still holds the power of colonizer and is distanced from actual indigenous people. “She realizes her queerness by performing a faux-ceremony, by giving herself a queer baptism into/with/beside her adolescence and desire to Indiginize, to fossilize herself [...] [She] enters herself into a series of becomings (re: role-playing, simulations) through her insertion into this Indigiqueer idyll; becoming-Indigenous,” Whitehead writes (235). Although Whitehead’s use of the term “faux-ceremony” is right in regard to the prospect of Cameron’s potentially trying to utilize a sort of indigenous ceremony for herself, a reader could argue that the ceremony is not faux for Cameron, who does gain perspective from it — thereby disputing the ownership of the term

“ceremony” with which Whitehead charges it. Nevertheless, there is evidence of Cameron’s ignorance to the respect that should be paid to such places as Quake Lake in regards to indigenous beliefs such as Lakota legends, respect that could be written off as youthful ignorance but must be confronted due to the author’s adulthood and lack of recognition of such ignorance.

After Cameron is finished with her candle, she swims as fast as she can back to the shore and is helped back to the ground by Adam and Jane. “Adam slogged into the water, soaking his shoes before grabbing me by the elbow, pulling me up fast and perfect as if he’d done it so many times before. Jane came around from behind him, her arms stretched wide with the bright striped beach towel strung between,” Cameron recounts (Danforth 469). Here the novel reminds the reader of Cameron’s current stage of *becoming* through snapshot of the communal care she received from her fellow queer peers. The three of them are in sync, working as if they are one, though this rhizomatic quality of this bond between the three children is not necessarily definite. The novel ends with Cameron ruminating on the limitless opportunity for them now that they are no longer in the camp and restricted, mentally at least, by normative society. “And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting,” she explains at the close of the novel (Danforth 470). This understanding of the multiplicity of their futures acts as a pledge against the normative. The children embrace what the scholar Jack Halberstam deems “queer time.” For Halberstam, queer time operates “against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial development” (75). For these queer youth, they practice this concept through the abandonment of normative life and its obsession with stability for a life of rhizomatic experience—a life liberated from the consequences of normality and filled with endless possibility.

Beyond the Camp: Expanding

The brilliance of Danforth's novel lies in Cameron's choice to not accept the identities others want to impose on her, even if those identities are "queer." However, this is not an easy feat to accomplish. Cameron undergoes a difficult childhood in rural Montana, a tortuous existence at a conversion therapy camp, and faces a potentially dangerous unknown future in order to achieve the type of acceptance she finds with herself at the end of the novel. In this novel, the camp acts as a double-edged sword, both a place of intense pain and suffering and of a sort of conviviality of queer existence that Cameron would not have received in Miles City. Similarly, lakes are also doubles. From this book, one begins to understand that it is not that one must endure the same pain that Cameron did but rather one must seek out the same type of communal love and appreciation she found with Adam and Jane. Moreover, queer people might look towards the environment—its complexity, variation, and expanse—to see an example of how to live a truly authentic life. And although the exact use of indigenous cultures is oftentimes suspect in this text, the inclusion of these valuable peoples should be lauded and encouraged in future works, as they serve to only add more to the collective understanding of identities and ecologies. It is through these connections and their multiplicity that queer people will be able to liberate themselves from the oppression imposed by normative society. And, hopefully, this appreciation and respect for the environment that queer people gain can be shared so that it, too, can benefit from deconstructing the harmful norm.

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