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Rural Space as Queer Space: A Queer-Ecology Reading of *Fun Home*

Debra J. Rosenthal and Lydia Munnell

Many students reading Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* for the first time express surprise that a queer narrative can take place in a rural setting. They imagine that the civilized, accepting communities in which queer-identifying folks can safely come out and escape small, backward-thinking hometowns are found in urban areas. However, literary, historical, and phenomenological evidence shows that this model does not always match the lived experiences of queer-identifying people in rural areas. Numerous queer folks choose to live and form communities in rural settings. In fact, the rural, with its mountaintop removal mining, repurposed architecture, and, at times, anachronistic culture, can reveal itself to be already queer. When we teach *Fun Home* to undergraduates in our Feminist Literary Criticism and our Introduction to Queer Studies courses, we explore queer space and the ways that the author's youth in rural Pennsylvania can challenge students' assumptions about the queerness of city and country. We recommend that teachers consider an environmental reading of the memoir that focuses on the queering of rural space so students can understand the "strong relationship between the oppression of queers and the domination of nature" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 29).

Construing rural areas as either precious or backward has led to what Bud Jerke calls "queer metronormativity," the belief that "queer culture and identity can only be situated in an urban geography" (268). In problematizing queer metronormativity and framing Bechdel's Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, as essentially queer, it is helpful to use Jack Halberstam's understanding of queer space in opposition to white, male, postmodern geographies that privilege the global over the local and the cosmopolitan over the rural. Halberstam argues that "[u]ntil recently, small towns were considered hostile to queers, and urban areas were cast as the queer's natural environment. . . . [T]he division also occludes the lives of nonurban queers" (15). We recommend exploring with students Emily Kazyak's point that formulaic stories about queer folks often involve a rural-to-urban migration story—one that may or may not accurately describe their experience. Kazyak argues, "At the heart of the narrative is the 'stock character' of the 'oppressed rural gay': those who must flee to the city to come out, find a queer community, and become liberated" (562). Clearly, this urban/rural binary, in which the urban is privileged and the rural devalued, runs deep in American culture, paralleling the Great Migration of African Americans from rural Southern oppression to opportunities in Northern cities. It runs so deep that it affects our views of hate crimes in rural areas, the fairness of our legal system, and even the narratives of queer-identifying folks in rural areas. These ideas can then be paired with students' personal reflections

in order to create a background for the metronormativity that Bechdel's Beech Creek subverts.

We also explore the ways Bechdel shows the urban environment to not necessarily normalize queer identity. Moving quickly to the text provides our class with interpretive evidence and talking points. For example, the urban site that promises liberation turns out to be humiliating: Alison gets "eighty-sixed," or refused admission, at a New York City bar when out with a group of lesbian friends (*Fun Home* 106). Alison had "come to New York after college, expecting a bohemian refuge," but instead she finds that "[Greenwich] Village in the early eighties was a cold, mercenary place" (107). These instances challenge the concept of queer metronormativity and help students see the way *Fun Home* reorients space and sexuality.

In our Introduction to Queer Studies class, we also complicate Bechdel's understanding of place, environment, and sexuality by studying the way the rural town of Beech Creek was, for young Alison, a place of repression and death as well as one of acceptance and beauty. The map illustrations demonstrate that Bruce Bechdel's entire life and family are situated on the same two-mile stretch of land in the Susquehanna River watershed region. *Fun Home's* deep interest in mapping reveals Alison's efforts to understand place and her sexuality amid such tightly bound connections to a rural locale. Young Alison literalizes Adrienne Rich's invitation to begin with "the geography closest in—the body" ("Notes" 212) by explicitly linking her body to the land: for example, Bechdel's illustration of her father's obituary highlights the words "Beech Creek" at least seven times as if to emphasize his (and by extension, her) rural placedness. She muses that her father's fate might have been different "if only he'd been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek" (125). In another example, Bruce Bechdel writes in a letter to Alison, "It's ironic that I'm paying to send you North to study texts I'm teaching to high school twits. Faulkner IS Beech Creek. The Bundrens ARE Bechdels" (200). While Bruce sees his family mirrored in Faulkner's deeply rooted characters, Alison claims that the "narrow compass" of her father's life "suggests a provincialism on my father's part that is both misleading and accurate" (30).

Fun Home's depictions of Alison's engagement with the environment reveal that what appears as natural is socially constructed and can hide ecological degradation: there might not be anything natural about human-polluted nature. For instance, young Alison describes her childhood place with inspired nostalgia, punctured by an awareness of human-made biohazards. She reflects on "Bald Eagle Mountain's hazy blue flank" and the way the sun "set behind the strip-mine-pocked plateau." She realizes that the "pyrotechnic splendor" of beautiful sunrises indicates that the atmosphere is contaminated "due to particulates from the pre-Clean Air Act paper mill ten miles away." As a girl she wades in Beech Creek's waters and understands that "with similar perversity, the sparkling creek that coursed down from the plateau and through our town was crystal clear precisely because it was polluted. Mine runoff had left the

water too acidic to support life . . . " (128). Beech Creek's translucency is thus anything but natural: the crystal-clear water is caused by the strip mine's acidic industrial runoff, which obscures its pollution and so normalizes acceptance of a toxic environment marked by "perversity." Thus, the supposedly natural environment of colorful skies and transparent water proves to be a nonnormative deviation: the rural environment may already be queer.

A queer-ecology reading of *Fun Home* exposes young Alison's awareness of the parity between "ecological degradation and sexual inequality" (Sbicca 33) and usefully opens up the scene of the Bechdel children's visit to a strip mine. Alison's interpretation of their visit overlays environmental exploitation onto sexual oppression and thus presents as "anthropocentric heteronormativity" (Griffiths 294) the exploitation both of the ecosystem and of the naked white woman on a pinup calendar hanging in the strip miners' office. The mining equipment looms huge and threatening, dominating the background and damaging the landscape as it removes the top of a mountain to extract coal for the creation of electricity. The environmentalist Bill Conlogue argues that "to write about the region is to record trauma both human and environmental. . . . Although coal mining here has all but ended, strip mines still scar mountainsides, . . . and streams run stained with acid" (18). At first, Alison and her brothers do not question the damage and violence wrought by mining but instead are "excited about seeing the monstrous shovels that tore off whole mountaintops" (112). As they drive to the strip mines, young Alison picks up a roll of paper lying in her father's car, but Bruce admonishes her not to open it because it is "dirty." She misunderstands his meaning and muses that the white paper "looked clean enough to me" (111). When she unrolls it and sees a naked woman being used to advertise a local company, she expresses her newfound understanding of the connection between compulsory heterosexuality and dirt with a simple "Oh" (112). Feeling exposed by the calendar image, she says, "I felt as if I'd been stripped naked myself" (112), in an echo of the miners' stripping of the mountaintop. Her identification with the white pinup woman may open up the question to students about the ways that race infuses the woman-as-land trope. She feels "inexplicably ashamed, like Adam and Eve" (112) by the nudity (this reference to the Garden of Eden will resonate with Alison's later thoughts about a snake and a "postlapsarian melancholy" [115]). When Alison sees a similar nude calendar hanging in the strip miners' office, she feels "astonished" by what seems to be a "bizarre coincidence" (113) that both her father and the miners have calendars that exploit white women's presumed erotic availability.

Compulsory heterosexuality is evident when Bruce holds up a loaf of Strohman's Sunbeam bread so that Alison's face appears directly between the naked pinup girl and the too-wholesome Sunbeam girl on the bread package (manufactured by the company whose truck will later kill Bruce). The juxtaposition cannily positions young Alison between two types of female identity: a highly eroticized white woman available for male consumption and a virginal, traditional, innocent, white-bread (literally), maiden girl (112). Caught between

these opposing choices of heteronormative female sexuality, Alison suddenly feels it is “imperative” (113) that the strip miner not know she is a girl. She finds a queer way out of this virgin/whore binary: she asks her brother to call her Albert (113). As the heavy machinery repurposes the mountain into a commodity, Alison performs a different type of repurposing. Throughout the visit to the strip mine, the heteronormative, masculinized space of the miners exposes Alison’s deviation from expected sexual and gender norms. She cannot identify with the highly eroticized female body on the calendar that reflects and ensures straight male dominance. As Greta Gaard argues, “By attempting to ‘naturalize’ sexuality, the dominant discourse of Western culture constructs queer sexualities as ‘unnatural’ and hence subordinate” (121). Alison’s desire to reassign her gender and to repurpose her identity as Albert, when juxtaposed with the mine’s goal of repurposing the environment, reflects the queerness of strip mining, an exclusively rural activity. Although Alison’s brother ignores her request for a new name, she connects her experience to a “Proustian transposition” that melds “Proust’s real Alfred and the fictional Albertine” (113).

In the woodland scene that follows the strip mining sequence, the Bechdel children practice shooting a gun, and they become frightened by a large snake. Young Alison feels a “postlapsarian melancholy” as she reflects that she “failed some unspoken initiation rite” (115) associated with the trope of “rurality being grounded in macho-masculine gender expression” (Sbicca 48). Bechdel continues the memoir’s theme of the incommensurability between word and meaning as she wonders why she did not record the full woodland adventure in her diary: “No mention of the pin-up girl, the strip mine, or Bill’s .22. Just the snake—and even that with an extreme economy of style.” The accompanying illustration shows the children in the woods with a text box of young Alison’s diary that reads simply: “Saw a snake. Had lunch” (143). Later she wonders if her father was struck mid-road by a truck because he had come upon a large snake, a “vexingly ambiguous archetype” (116). By failing to have a successful adventure out in nature or to kill the phallic snake, Bechdel revises the typical coming-of-age story. Her struggle to recast her gender assignment within her rural context is mirrored in her inability to write about such a recasting; both constitute a search for identity where sexuality and rural placedness share an ineffable link.

In these scenes, Bechdel challenges the natural-unnatural dichotomy to reveal how the environment and sexuality can be mutually queered.¹ As Gaard points out, queer sexuality has historically been considered against nature, which suggests that nature would be valued and prized in a heteronormative society. However, Western culture actually devalues nature and queers and instead grants primacy to culture and heterosexuality. Gaard theorizes this contradiction: “from a queer perspective, we learn that the dominant culture charges queers with transgressing the natural order, which in turn implies that nature is valued and must be obeyed” (120). But an ecofeminist perspective shows “that Western culture has constructed nature as a force that must be dominated if culture is to prevail”; thus “the ‘nature’ that queers are urged to

comply with is none other than the dominant paradigm of heterosexuality . . . itself a cultural construction . . .” (121). Against a backdrop of strip mines, highways, polluted air, and toxic creeks—products of the cultural mandate of heterosexuality—Bechdel’s depiction of her rural natural world can be reframed as akin to her queer identification.

Bechdel’s queering of herself and her environment within the context of the heteronormative makes *Fun Home* so accessible. Because many students identify with the specifics of young Alison’s middle-class, rural-suburban, gender-traditional upbringing, they are easily led to the more complex and subversive implications of this upbringing. Bechdel’s understanding of place in *Fun Home* is far more nuanced than the typical urban/rural binary; she artfully works the queer and the straight so that they cannot be unraveled. The memoir challenges assumptions about metronormativity through its decidedly queer depictions of rural life and the unnaturalness of mountaintop strip mining. Reading *Fun Home* with a queer-ecology focus can give students an increased understanding of place, of the complications inherent in the queer rural-to-urban migration narrative, of the link between sexual and environmental exploitation, and of the ways metronormativity is problematized in Bechdel’s queer depictions of rural life.

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¹Goldsmith extends the natural-unnatural dichotomy to architecture by discussing the liminal positioning of porches and the way they straddle inside and outside, nature and culture.