

Spring 2018

Disarming “Nature” as a Weapon: A Queer Ecossemiotic Reimagining of Futurity and Environmental Ethics Through Memoir

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**Disarming “Nature” as a Weapon: A Queer Ecosemiotic Reimagining of Futurity
and Environmental Ethics Through Memoir**

by

Sam Lauer

A Thesis Submitted to the
English Department Graduate Committee
Bucknell University

In Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

May, 2018

Approved: 
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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank ruthless capitalism and the restaurant industry for killing my soul so sufficiently that, in the spring of 2016, I would have done anything but continue in that line of work. It was in that state of desperation and discontent that I accepted Alf's offer of this program. Upon achieving my Master's at Bucknell, this experience has proven to me that I can be a healthy and successful scholar-slash-activist-slash-worker in the system that entraps us as long as I remember where my passions lie. It has also given me the tools to break that system when the time comes.

Secondly, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional support of me in this program and in my process of coming out over the past ten years. Thirdly, I thank my mentors, namely Glynis Carr, Erica Delsandro, Nikki Young, Kelly Knox, and Carmen Gillespie for their continued support during my Bucknell education and for their ongoing compassion and excitement for my life and work.

Fourthly, I extend deep and moving gratitude for the partner who has been with me through this whole thing. Eileen, our time here has not been easy, yet I am grateful for every day I get to live by your side. Thank you for your patience and dedication. Thank you for your encouragement despite the hell-hole that is Lewisburg. Finally, I'd like to thank the energies of the universe that somehow pushed me here and push me onward from here. These energies are the same ones that keep the earth spinning despite humanity's best efforts to stop it. Every moment teaches a lesson, and I strive to fully inhabit those moments as they arise. To Bucknell. To the future. To the earth.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I posit that the need for an active, conscious, and radical queering of ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory has arisen in light of the postmodern problematization of “nature” and the “natural,” along with the queerness of society, culture, and science. The way we understand “nature” (in life and in texts), whether of physical environments, inherent selfhood, or normalcy, begs to be appropriately informed by discourses and realities of queerness in order for both social and environmental healing to take place. I have analyzed three works of queer creative nonfiction—memoirs—to illuminate the ways in which the lives of queer people and their queer phenomenologies might lay a groundwork for positive, healthy interaction between physical environments and animal societies, including humankind’s, and I found that queer experience and discourses provide much to the study of one’s relationship with environments and “nature.”

In this study, the three queer family memoirs from the twenty-first century I have analyzed are: *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, *The Nature of Home* (2007) by Greta Gaard, and *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson. I focused my reading on the extent to which these texts speak to the instability of prevailing systems and hierarchies we might not expect, such as family, home, love, and community. Eventually, these texts establish what signifiers “family,” “home,” “nature,” and “community” *could* be and mean if they were valued queerly, horizontally, and ecosystemically instead of hierarchically.

A Note on the Text

This thesis involves the intersections between ecocriticism and queer theory, and its goal is to intervene into a conversation that burdens the current progress of both fields. The conversation with which I engage is the one started by Greta Gaard and Greg Garaard, and it considers the vitality, usefulness, and pitfalls of queer theory in communication with ecocriticism. Garaard reacts to Gaard's queering the field by urging fellow ecocritics away from the abstraction of queer theory, but I'd like to respond to his sentiments.

One might divide responses to queer theory into two camps. The first camp would revel in abstraction and claim it as a strength, while the second would see such a construction as a detriment to the field and any with which it combines. I intercede into this division by asserting that queer theory has always been about the spectrum. Abstraction can be equally as productive as concretion, but so can any combination thereof. Garaard wants ecocriticism to remain rooted in concrete systems of action and towards the disclosure of engagement with real eco-issues, but I argue that ecocritics do not have to reject queer theory in order to retain those important foci.

What queer theory does for ecocriticism is, generally, to provide nuance to a science-focused discipline so that it appropriately addresses issues of the queer in the world, whether literally or figuratively. It questions stagnant assumptions, and it forces scholars involved to examine their privilege for the ways it may influence their work. Ecocriticism itself exists on a spectrum whereby values and approaches range from more radical or conservative, feminist or masculinist, theory- or praxis-driven, and more.

As I intrude into the conversation started by Gaard and Garaard, I settle firmly on Gaard's side. I find queer theory essential to the sustainability and future of ecocriticism. Ultimately, I respond to Garaard's critique of queer theory with an attempt to prove how queer theory uniquely adds to the field of literary criticism in my analysis of three twenty-first century queer memoirs.

In this analysis, I apply a value system to these works that attempts to horizontalize the typically hierarchized. What I hope to do is complicate the assumptions that queerness equals abstraction and, subsequently, that abstraction necessarily weakens an assumedly-scientific field. I hope to validate the positioning of each theory's assumed failures, too, following the standard set by Jack Halberstam in "recogniz[ing] failure as a [queer] way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique" (88). I will prove that what one scholar deems failure (of action, intention, or ethic) can be reclaimed as success, based on the situation, experiences, and nuance of all entities involved.

This text is made up of three sections with multiple chapters within each one. In the first section, Part 1, I discuss the theoretical backgrounds that substantiate the aforementioned conversation between Gaard and Garaard. In the second section, Part 2, I analyze the issue of "family" in respect to my queer ecoaesthetic and then I trace it throughout each of my three primary texts. In the third and final section, Part 3, I conclude and assess my process.

While the chapters within each part are in obvious conversation together, the substance of this analysis compares and contrasts the efficacy of each text's (and by extension, each author's) environmental ethic. My work addresses the reader and uses

language that is intentionally accessible to a larger readership. It is my hope that this analysis will guide readers through the conversations that are happening between queer theorists and ecocritics so that they may be able to engage in the debate and better assess their place or possibilities in our quickly shifting world.

Disarming “Nature” as a Weapon: A Queer Ecosemiotic Reimagining of Futurity and Environmental Ethics Through Memoir

Part 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: Contexts and Trajectory

Between the signifier and signified lies an immense gap. To some, such as Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman*), the gap is always oppressive for those who lie outside it, while to others, the gap provides opportunities to perform difference (Mortimer-Sandilands; Sandilands). The gap in meaning for a sign such as “nature” becomes particularly problematic when one considers the implications of discourses of “the natural” in patriarchal, Western culture. One might hear the term “nature” and imagine a beautiful landscape, but that is not the only sense of “nature,” nor is it the sense of “nature” I present in my title. For one might also hear “nature” and assume personality or inherent self, and that understanding is much closer to what I suggest when I refer to nature as a weapon in my title. In this sense, “nature” and “the natural” are inherently connected to discourses of power by serving as social scripts of so-called normalcy. I find that such scripts work to the detriment of the possibilities for unrestricted expression of human (and non-human) subjectivity and fully ethical environmental engagement. Insofar as these scripts and connections translate into and stem from dualistic systems of value, our ethical interactions with people and non-human others in social and political spaces fall short. For example, if society’s discourse of “nature” remains unsettled, we will continue to confusedly break down social groups as “natural” or not, which lends to weaknesses of judgments and ideologies.

Embedded within the understanding of “nature” and “natural” as established by and constituted through systems of power lies a hierarchical model of our world. This

hierarchy validates biological reductionism, social elitism, and environmental complacency, all of which diminish what scientists and theorists have come to establish as postmodern and historical realities of queer existence. Scientifically, historically, and biologically, humans and animals have always been queer in terms of their sexes and sexualities (Haraway; Bagemihl and Megahan; Jones; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson). Furthermore, social concepts that phenomenologically validate this history of queerness highlight instability and experiences of uncertainty in a way that achieves more and more social and political purchase as time goes on (Ahmed).¹ Primary among these ideas receiving increasing social purchase is the understanding that hierarchy is not the only, nor the best, way to organize our thinking. New systemic models arise from this postmodern force; instead of hierarchy, several theorists posit the importance of horizontalizing and metonyms like the matrix, Rubik's cube, Mobius strip, web, or ecosystem to describe values, meaning, and interactions.

The need for an active, conscious, and radical queering of ecocriticism as a literary and cultural theory has arisen in light of this postmodern problematization of "nature" and "natural," and the queerness of society, culture, and science. Here, I argue that the way in which we understand "nature" (in life and in texts), whether of physical environments, inherent selfhood, or normalcy, needs to be appropriately informed by

¹ I should clarify what I mean when I reference phenomenology in this analysis. In *The Presence of Nature* Simon James makes the point that "phenomenologists are not primarily concerned with what one experiences, but with how one experiences it" (27). Furthermore, he claims that phenomenological awareness of the environment is essentially an "experience-focused approach" from which one can develop "accounts of what the natural world *is*, and how we *ought* to act towards it" (1). James' environmental philosophy puts value on experience and centers on how humans can develop complex and ethical relationships with the environment. Sara Ahmed also works with this concept in her work on *Queer Phenomenology*. To Ahmed, phenomenology is central to ethics and engagement with others and environments because "phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (9), and "phenomenology helps us to consider how sexuality involves ways of inhabiting and being inhabited by space" (67); it teaches us how to see beyond ourselves for the depth and individuality in others.

discourses and realities of queerness in order for both social and environmental healing to take place. I analyze three works of queer creative nonfiction—memoirs—to illuminate the ways in which the lives of queer people and queer phenomenology might lay a groundwork for positive, healthy interaction between physical environments and animal societies, including humankind’s. I will reveal in this analysis how these queer writers—artists and theorists—may already be reworking and rewriting certain lifestyles, experiences, and terms in ways that could help liberate our planet.

In this study, I analyze three queer family memoirs from the twenty-first century, *Fun Home* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, *The Nature of Home* (2007) by Greta Gaard, and *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson. I will demonstrate the extent to which these texts speak to the instability of prevailing systems and hierarchies like family, home, love, and community. Furthermore, these texts establish what (eco)signifiers like “family,” “home,” “nature,” and “community” *could* be and mean if they were valued ecosystemically instead of hierarchically. These three memoirs present queer models of family that radically validate individual personhood at every level. Ultimately, these texts also promote queer models of environmentalism that place “nature” as a member of family and community, whose space is *not* a home for us to abuse and discard but a communal space that should outlast us regardless of whether we biologically reproduce. I argue that this acceptance of personhood, subjectivity, and environmentalism is significantly enhanced by such representations as the queer experiences and phenomenologies of the authors.

I am not the first theorist to approach the juncture of what Greg Garaard calls “queer” and “green” in his scathing review of queer ecocriticism, “How Queer is Green,”

but I am one of few. Nicole Seymour, Catriona Sandilands, Greta Gaard, and a handful of others within the last twenty years have developed the theoretical intersections between queer theory and ecocriticism/environmental theory, and my research will draw heavily on their foundations. I am eager to investigate the way that queer theory will help to refocus environmentalism so that it will be able to perceive and embody a new sense of futurity as informed by queer existence. For example, North American indigenous groups produce environmental ethics that ask us to be mindful of the seventh generation in order to save the world for the children. In fact, the Seventh Generation Principle “takes its name from the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee, the founding document of the Iroquois Confederacy, the oldest living participatory democracy on Earth” (“7th Generation Principle”), but the issue is that this sense of environmental investment doesn’t apply to everyone—for many humans cannot, will not, or meet difficulty in reproducing—and even so it only speaks to an anthropocentric model of investment, ethics, and activism.²

In comparison, if readers apply queer phenomenology to their environmental readings of texts, they will be able to establish an investment in the future of our environment that is neither solipsistically anthropocentric nor blatantly anti-humanitarian. The effect is that queer ecocriticism destabilizes the hegemonic binary once again, this time between human and non-human, and presents a horizontalization of ethics, an ecosystemic, encompassing web of interaction, in the liminal space beyond and within the binary. Queer phenomenology reveals that queer couples do not have an ease of reproduction typically accessible to cisgendered, heterosexual couples, and their innovation in conceiving expands to creativity in other realms as well (Ahmed). This

² Of course, this vein of thought does not intend to undermine native policies as wrong. More so it recognizes that appropriating indigenous environmental policies uncritically *is* wrong.

project will reveal how my three authors' texts establish re-readings of "family" and eventually come to incorporate the environment as a member of the community. In this sense, I hope to reveal how these three primary texts, all of which are written by authors who are creative writers as well as theoretical giants in the world of queer theory, might validate a new type of environmental ethic that rejects such environmental investment in terms of futurity for the sake of queer representation, replacing it with a more queer investment that I'll call presentism.³ In this venture, I also hope to validate a fresh environmental ethic as it is expressed in art through the unique genre of queer family memoir.

Using a model of textual analysis that examines the function and force of a singular key ecosignifiers, "family," I will assess the extent to which these queer authors' use of this term rejects the tyrannically constant, phallogentric tradition of signification and creates a space in theory, society, and ecology for open and caring interrelations, positive action, and lasting change. By examining these new linguistic representations across my three primary texts, I hope to achieve three aims. First, I intend to establish the genre of queer memoir as a commanding representational means for art, education, and activism. Second, I strive to help the reader understand more about the historical trajectory of queer and environmental discourses. Third, and finally, I hope to validate the

³ The concept of futurity in this thesis takes root in discourse started by Lee Edelman and furthered substantially by Nicole Seymour. Whereas Edelman argues that queer life determines an epistemology he calls "no future," hence the name of his main book—due to the reproductive inabilities he perceives of LGBTQ people and their inherent and radical resistance of heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist systems—Seymour asserts that Edelman's response is the problem: "many queer theorists have reached a point at which they cannot imagine a queer futurity," but the crux of this issue is that "by extension...they cannot imagine environmentalism [either], much less a queer one" (8). Seymour calls for a "concept of queer time that is attuned to environmentalism's focus on futurity" (18-9), and my thesis aims to assess how queer extensions of "family" could present exactly that.

importance of combining queer theory with ecocriticism by showing what unique good can come from their interaction.

It is not just a simple fact of these queer authors positing the most effective environmental ethic ever, however. Each of their approaches is limited by their white privilege. Many groups of Americans are restricted in their access to the environment, whether due to transportation, pollution, or other limitations; the experience of queer people in this sense is not unique, and saying that they are the most advanced social group with the most pronounced environmental ethic would be a problematic reduction of the information and situations at hand. When it comes down to it, each author understands the need to protect our world, but how they *act* in accordance with that realization differs. If we look at texts from Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, Black Americans, and Indigenous Americans, readers can extract the understanding that queer immigrants of color experience even further alienation from rural spaces than do any of the authors of my primary texts. The most vocal among my authors about these issues of conservation, preservation, and activism in communication with race and privilege is Greta Gaard, and she actually begins her memoir with a meditation on gendered concerns for environmental safety:

Within a year of my move to Bellingham, in the fall of 1998, a twenty-year-old woman came to visit relatives in town, traveling here from Massachusetts in order to explore the area and the college. . . . Delighting in her newfound home, she was walking alone around Lake Padden one Friday afternoon when she met a gardener, a man in his late forties, who invited her to join him in errands to his employer, his friends, and then to go out for a beer. Two days later, her lifeless

body was found alongside the Mount Baker highway near Glacier, her skull bludgeoned with a gardening tool, her body showing signs of sexual violation. The gardener had disappeared. Keri Lynn Sherlock. Twenty years old. When I walk at Lake Padden, I imagine the joy she felt in finding this place. I want to remember her adventurous spirit, her trust in the kindness of strangers, her love of the earth. I don't want to think about men's violence against women. (11-12)

What we understand as "nature" is not always as safe as we want to think. Gaard cannot ignore the urgency or the violence that necessitates it.

My analysis of these three texts brings me to the conclusion that Alison Bechdel and Maggie Nelson can afford to leave intersectionality and activism out of their memoirs because their stories are honestly about something else, but their stories do reach wider audiences. Gaard's less accessible, more 'niche' environmental memoir proposes an environmental urgency to act, coded in her understandings of "family." In this way, Gaard's memoir most closely approaches the type of environmental ethic that may best benefit the United States' physical environments and communities.

The ethic I strive to promote is one that has historical investment in North America since before the days of white settlers: it has strong *roots* in indigenous thought simply because those ancient peoples had so many things right. To say that my three queer authors somehow assert the best environmental ethic through their access to shifting speech and representation in queer memoir would not only, therefore, be a reduction. It would also be racist. These ideas, along with the experience of alienation from what should be one's "home," are not unique to these three female-bodied white, queer authors. In fact, it is articulated much better in the work of queer authors of color

(Jaimes*Guerrero; Young; Minh-ha; Anzaldua; Frazier). I posit therefore that recent work in queer memoir of the twenty-first century represents a resurgence of themes relevant to the type of change America and the world at large need in order to become effective agents in the preservation of our environmental longevity.

Chapter 2: The Problems of “Nature” and Signification

Many scholars have worked to define “nature,” but each rendition reveals a plethora more. This chapter will examine some of those definitions, ultimately settling on Val Plumwood’s assertion that “nature” lies within the powerful binaries of what she calls the Master Model. This chapter asks whether nature and its associations can be valued in a logical system where they are historically and inherently devalued.

In the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, Steven Rendall acknowledges the near impossibility of settling on one meaning for “nature.” Rendall tracks down the term’s history and reveals its conflicting translations between and across cultures. He acknowledges that “nature” has roots in Latin, but Heidegger turned the term into something new entirely:

The Latin translation of the Greek *phusis* by the Latin *natura*, from which are derived most of the words designating “nature” in European languages, can be considered an inconsequential event in Western history—or, on the contrary, a major event—with great historical import. Heidegger never ceased to problematize this translation as it had never been problematized before, though that led him to render the Greek *phusis* as *Aufgang*, “opening up,” “emergence,” rather than by *Natur*, “nature.” To gauge the significance of Heidegger’s gesture we must, however move beyond the pseudo-opposition between a supposedly Greek nature-growth and a supposedly Roman nature-birth . . . while Russian uses *natura* in the sense of “the essence of a being,” *natura rerum*, natural phenomena taken as a whole are designated instead by the term *priroda* from *rod*, which is close to the meaning of German *Geschlecht*: “generation, line, race, species.

Breaking with a long tradition, or rather a long obstruction, Heidegger proposes, then, to reinterpret *phusis* not as “nature” (from Latin *nasci*, “to be born”), but as *Aufgang*, an “opening-up” or “emergence. (703-4)

“Nature” represents the conflux of “the essence of a being,” “generation, line, race, species,” “to be born,” and “emergence.”

The world’s citizens also acknowledge “nature” as the physical landscapes that surround us. Even so, that understanding of “nature” as physical environments brings a separate set of definitions into question. How do we define “environment” or “landscape,” and is the ecosystem a functional ideal?⁴ In addition, how do we understand those ecosystems? Is this “nature” the commonly-misinterpreted Darwinian survival of the fittest (Bookchin)? Does it account for queer life scientifically? Does it responsibly account for anomaly? In *Keywords* Raymond Williams defines nature as:

perhaps the most complex word in the language. It is relatively easy to distinguish three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings. Yet it is evident that within (ii) and (iii), though the area of reference is broadly clear, precise meanings are variable and at times even opposed. (219)

The more we work to define “nature,” the more it settles into a gray area. Possibly more salient (and problematic) than physical landscape is the understanding of “nature” as that which is innate to an individual, that which has been coded as “natural,” normative,

⁴ In this thesis, I purposefully avoid discourse of nature in how I discuss environmental spaces in my queer ecocritical analysis of the texts later on. Instead of using “nature” and “natural,” I refer to so-called “natural” spaces with terms like “environment,” “physical environment,” “landscape,” “physical landscape,” “nonhuman entities,” or “nonhuman Other.” I acknowledge that some of these terms are equally fraught, but I must use them in deference of “nature” in this case.

inherent, healthy, and essential. What makes this matrix of meaning particularly poignant is the inverse pairing, what Lee and Dow call “contradictory coding” in their article “Queering Ecological Feminism: Erotophobia, Commodification, Art, and Lesbian Identity” (8), speckled throughout that makes something seemingly-respectable and valued like “nature” a weapon against identity of various forms. Sometimes we supposedly value “nature” when we say that his beauty is natural or that she is a natural-born athlete. However, that same discourse devalues existences equally close to “nature” when it negates queerness or gender fluidity as unnatural. Furthermore, racial language negatively links people of color with nature through discourses of animalism and dirtiness although being close to nature or animalistic is a positive thing for white male hunters. Lee and Dow develop these contradictions further:

Underwritten through the valuation of women as mothers whose “place” is in the home, itself eroticized in terms of its guarantee of sexual availability and de-eroticized via the home’s traditional association with procreative duty and family, the contradictory coding of women as producers supports forms of unpaid domestic labor fully concordant with heteropatriarchal ideology. Similarly, employment discrimination against queers gains legal sanction through the feminizing of gay men as unreliable (and potentially diseased) workers who, like women (though against nature), are economically vulnerable, yet unlike women (and in accord with nature), occupy privileged economic positions as men so long as they retain appearances appropriate to the heterosexual status quo (that is, so long as they stay in the closet). (8)

In sum, the problem arises when “nature” presumes to answer questions of power. Pioneering ecofeminist Val Plumwood writes about this issue of coding power *qua* natural. She suggests in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that “in systematized forms of power, power is normally institutionalized and ‘naturalized’ by latching on to existing forms of difference” (42). Essentially, the effect of these increasingly prolific, upwardly mobile institutions encouraged reading difference in the language of hierarchical values. A way of thinking emerged from this value differentiation, and as Plumwood writes, it gave “rise to a dualized structure of otherness and negation” (42). Plumwood delineates what she calls “the set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms which permeate western culture,” yet she worries for the “fault-line which runs through its entire conceptual system” and threatens its destruction (42). Understanding that her list may not be complete, Plumwood still reveals her “interlocking system”:

culture	/	nature
reason	/	nature
male	/	female
mind	/	body (nature)
master	/	slave
reason	/	matter (physicality)
rationality	/	animality (nature)
reason	/	emotion (nature)
mind, spirit	/	nature
freedom	/	necessity (nature)
universal	/	particular
human	/	nature
civilized	/	primitive (nature)
production	/	reproduction (nature)
public	/	private
subject	/	object
self	/	other . . . (43)

Clearly, Plumwood conceives of multiple understandings of “nature” when she composes this list, but in every binary, nature is devalued. From what we see here, nature codes as

feminine, body-based, animalistic, emotional, unstoppable/necessary, unhuman, primitive, and evolutionarily driven to reproduce. A hierarchy of value has been established, validated, and solidified within these dominant Western cultural associations, and “mother” nature gets constantly undermined in value by conflicting social constructions of the natural.

Greta Gaard extends Val Plumwood’s logic in her 1997 article “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” maintaining that hierarchy signifies a literal “holy order,” and that it is this chain of being, this Christian logic of domination that reinforces the rhetoric of colonialism in Plumwood’s master model (124). Furthermore, she contends, it is this Christian logic of domination that encourages genocide against mass groups of people, animals, and land by undermining humanity, individuality, and subjecthood on all levels (124-7). Gaard additionally explains how undervalued bodies are coded as social threats by means of this tautological master model discourse. The trick, by this logic, is to turn the threat, whether or not human, into an economic boon through mechanization (127), proving how much work Western cultural ideology does to distance itself from “nature” and the natural.

I wonder what ever happened to “nature” as “emergence,” as Heidegger interpreted or as “the essence of a being,” according to Russians (Rendall 704)? Gaard blames the epistemology of Christianity for distancing “nature” from its original contexts, but other scholars trace the cause elsewhere. Transgender historians like Susan Stryker pinpoint medical science as “one of the most powerful tools for social regulation . . . Since the end of the eighteenth century, science has gradually come to replace religion as the highest social authority” and the basis for comparing values within a hierarchical

model (36). Murray Bookchin claims, however, that capitalism is the crux (*Remaking Society* 160).

Progress and production conflict directly with “nature,” as we see easily in both Plumwood’s model. Murray Bookchin, scholar, activist, and eco-anarchist, has written extensively on the links between these value hierarchies, economics, and social planning: “The denaturing of the environment [, people, and the world] must always be seen as *inherent* to capitalism, the product of its very law of life, as a system of limitless expansion and capital accumulation” (his emphasis, 160). For Bookchin, this system of value incites

the real urban crisis of our time... a relatively new and cancerous phenomenon that poses a deadly threat to the city and countryside alike: urbanization. The nature of this threat [exists] not merely as geographic sprawl but a devastating dehumanizing of city life, a destructing of community, and a denaturing of agrarian life. (*The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of the Citizen* x)

Not all scholars agree with Bookchin, however, that the division of city and country created a cancer that pollutes the minds, bodies, and surrounding spaces of our world. His staunch separations here would be problematic for a queer study of the phenomenon, too, but he does seem to be onto something, as do the other scholars facing and analyzing the same issue. In the next chapter, I will assess what, of Bookchin’s argumentation, can be applied to my project, as well as what other scholars have to say on the matter of signification.

Chapter 3: Rewriting “Nature”

Regardless of where it comes from, the master model of hierarchical value remains ingrained in ideology, thinking, and assumption for many westerners. The issues in relation to these harmful, reductive dualisms are multi-faceted, and their triggers have been dispersed throughout human history. The work to move forward must now include a radical reimagining of the subjecthood of devalued individuals and experiences, and I know part of this work is done on the level of a liberation or reconceptualization of language. Murray Bookchin seems particularly aware of the effects Plumwood’s “mutually reinforcing dualisms” and the subsequent “fault-line which runs through its entire conceptual system” have on signification as a whole (42). To him, as well as to the authors of my primary texts, certain words are devoid of the value, certainty, and seeming solidity they used to encompass. Bookchin mourns the loss of the words “citizen,” “country,” “city,” and “community” among others (*The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*). Joan Tronto mourns the loss of “care” as both a value and ethic in response to philosophical debates that have ascertained a troubling ambiguity in the term. Ultimately, these authors see singular meaning replaced with multiplicity, and they suggest that multiplicity has more potential than we may realize.

What these authors have in common with my three primary texts is their ability to see new meaning in signifiers made heavy with their previous layers of signification. For Greta Gaard, Maggie Nelson, and Alison Bechdel—three queer authors, activists, and theorists—the need for new understanding functions preeminently in their art. The most powerful elements of their art, to me, are their experimentation in form and their reworking of two ecosignifiers primarily: “home” and “family,” although in this thesis, I

will only focus on “family.” I claim that the authors’ queer ecosemiotic approach to signification in their works, made possible and bolstered by the genre of memoir, introduces a new sense of environmental futurity in that regard, whereby readers can think positively of the environment for the future without having traditional personal stake in it through offspring. This new futurity will be termed presentism in this exploration. Ultimately, my analysis will examine the degree of efficacy that the ecosignifier of “family” attains in each text, and I will use that text’s example to assess the benefits of the environmental ethic proposed by each queer scholar.

Here, I examine how Gaard, Nelson, and Bechdel have attempted to reshape systems of signification to reflect their experiences with uncertainty in the world. I acknowledge that reforming such systems is a difficult feat to attempt, but I also believe in the power of experience with uncertainty, wherein we can dance between realities of what are, what have been, and what can be. That reality of multiplicity and destabilization is phenomenologically queer and reflects postmodern aesthetic trends and social values, while also producing the possibility for an ethics that take into account full human, nonhuman, animal, and environmental subjectivity.

Chapter 4: Queer Ecosemiotics

Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics states that "every pattern of signification is a cultural convention," yet it is curious to him that so many people are blind to this culturally-inclined "information theory" (32). Ultimately, Eco asserts that infinite systems of representation exist in language, and he calls these complex sets of signals "codes" (36).⁵ Indeed, Eco thinks it expected for codes to reduce and limit the infinity of words and signs with a "regulative function" (44). He insists that codes must be constraining because, in his words, "The fewer the alternatives, the easier the communication" (44). For the sake of simplicity, he categorizes and systematizes. Eco posits a necessarily restrictive system of signification that constantly inscribes and limits itself as a means of "structural simplification [to maintain] semiotic control" (45). It is this fear of multiplicity and uncertainty that keeps Eco's semiotic theory detached from and unhelpful for elaborating on the postmodern realities that my authors validate in their writing. Truly, Eco's semiotics would frustrate more than help a reading of these twenty-first century queer texts. Eco does "assume that maybe semiotics is destined to overcome one of its natural boundaries" of speech and writing, which demands a place in signification for new semiotic discourses, but he cannot go there on his own (315). Notable among these new semiotic discourses are the ecosemiotics championed by noted scholar, Timo Maran.

Maran's ecosemiotics take into account the way humans signify the natural world in language, implicitly and explicitly; it is immediately a more expansive approach. In

⁵ Lesbian theorists and ecofeminists Wendy Lee and Laura Dow establish a space for even more codes, as mentioned before, but their expansion allows for multiplicity, complexity, and overt meaning proliferation. They discuss how "contradictory coding" in speech, writing, and general thought reveals the need to undermine traditional semiotics, to deconstruct assumptions, and to establish new systems of meaning-making that are both critical of convention and creative in connection (8).

Maran's article with Kalevi Kull about ecosemiotics, he explains that "living systems are meaning-making systems... They are sign-using systems, or communicative systems," and I argue that it is reciprocally valid to argue that communicative systems are ecosystems, too (41). So, if "semiotics, by definition, is the study of various phenomena and processes of living systems, in which the mechanisms and roles of meaning-making are explicit, ecosemiotics is a view on ecosystems as communicative systems" and vice versa (41).

In short, whereas Eco's system of semiotics is mostly inscribed in the confines of verbal and written signification, Maran's ecosemiotics accepts the world, life, and landscapes to be "perceptual processes as sign processes [whose] actions [and interactions] modify the world" (42). Furthermore, ecosemiotics as a mode of literary analysis (similarly to how semiotics in general allows the reader to expose links and gaps in systems of written signification within any given text) accepts written landscapes, environments, and cultures as signifiers about the impact of the work in question. To provide just one of many examples, readers can assume the environmental ethic of a text based on the way the characters interact with their physical landscapes. Loosely, ecosemiotics interlaces the discourse of ecosystems into semiotic structural analysis; specifically, it can go so far as to evaluate the way structure relates to potentials for action.

Therefore, an ecosemiotic reading of any text should attempt to do two things. Initially, it must attempt to address the instances in the text where the environment is depicted, with a keen eye toward the characters' attitudes about the environment through the way they manipulate language. Second, this type of reading must look for places in

the text where the narrator or characters discuss the meaning of signs, especially if that meaning is assumed to be “natural” or “essential” to the character of the thing and its expression as a sign. When what’s assumed to be natural becomes something other than expected by a subversion, transgression, or otherwise disruption to standard expectations and conventions, a queer approach becomes viable. Queer literary theory dictates that such non-normative forces in texts expose truths about themselves and about the system in which they were closeted, as it were. The term “queer” in this analysis draws on the basics of queer theory as delineated by Annamarie Jagose in her 1996 definitional text: “Queer describes those gestures or analytical models that dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between [concepts]” (3), and even earlier in 1993 in *Tendencies* by Eve Sedgwick:

‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically. (8)

Furthermore, the use of “queer” in my analysis relies on an understanding of the third wave of queer scholarship and its pivotal reclaiming of queer as a verb, whereby “to queer” something means necessarily to assert its destabilizing nature, to complicate its assumed stability, or to demonstrate its “contradictory coding” (Lee et al 8). In addition, this project takes on queer in the more postmodern sense of how Jagose describes that “its recent deployment is often informed by those issues of identity, community, and politics” at large instead of just in relation to sex, gender, and sexual desire (93). Sedgwick acknowledges this work of “queer” too:

a lot of the most exciting recent work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. (8-9)

In my analysis, “queer” functions as an umbrella term for non-normative or abject subjectivities that too-often are under erasure through dominant ideologies of the natural. The queer ecosignification that my primary texts’ authors promote, then, of “nature” and of “family” will be the necessary backbone for an ethic of environmental care and reform moving forward.

Chapter 5: On the Significance of Queer Memoir

Much of the work involved in connecting with people and places starts with sharing stories and listening empathetically. Even in direct conversation, as Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, people do not “open the discussion by coming right to the heart of the matter,” for humans are storytelling beings, and “the heart of the matter” must be allowed to emerge “when it is ready to come,” through the process of story sharing (1). Therefore, genres of autobiography and memoir reveal how each of us approaches our own heart of the matter, so to speak, how each of us has “a body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations, and experiences of the external world,” using Isabel Durán’s terminology from her article “The Body As Cultural Critique in American Autobiography” (47). For, as Sara Ahmed writes, it is “the body [that] provides us with a perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds” (8). The body presented in a queer memoir specifically speaks to a societal embodiment that stands at odds with normative (thus, problematic) assumptions of the “natural,” of difference, and of science, based on the time in question. Thus, these autobiographies speak to and counteract their authors’ own erasures, as Anya M. Wallace justifies in her “Queer Memoir of Black Family” titled *Sour Green Apple*, and they give voice to perspectives “missing in the mainstream narrative” (1049). The three texts I read in this project align with the history of queer autobiography’s emergence in the Western world by continuing to rewrite the genre’s very conventions and by bringing new voices to conversations about queer motherhood, queer family-making, and queer home-building in the twenty-first century.

Queer autobiographies in the Western world have always intended to resist, critique, contest, and reconsider social scripts; and Nelson's, Gaard's, and Bechdel's texts from the twenty-first century perform the same work, both in relation to memoir genre conventions and of the "natural." Queer memoirs in the Western world started appearing around the turn of the twentieth century, when queer people involved in the literary and cultural movement of modernism instigated the trend of telling their story as protest. In *The Formation of 20th-Century Queer Autobiography* Georgia Johnston establishes this history and reveals how these authors wrote because of an urgent necessity "to narrate sexuality differently from early-twentieth-century medical and psychological representations" (5), and I think this urgency arose because the dominant narrative literally and figuratively traumatized these queer individuals and could have cost them their lives. Furthermore, Johnston's text tracks the emergence of these Western, yet queer memoirs, particularly those by lesbian modernists, and demonstrates the many ways these self-histories reinvent more than just scientific or medical conventions:

A linear narrative has long been typed as the hallmark of conventional autobiography,

since, traditionally, autobiography relies for its conceptual underpinnings upon the ideas of origin, resolution, retrospection, movement from a past to a present self, a division between public and private, and a division between "I" and the audience. Among the trademarks of conventional autobiography are also presentation of a subject and object protagonist writer "I" and presentation of the autobiography as truth. Women's autobiography puts these "autobiographics," to use Leigh Gilmore's term, into question. (4)

Johnston goes on to define how her primary texts rework these narrative conventions, and I admit that I see all of the same experimentation happening in works almost exactly a century later, such as the three twenty-first century queer memoirs central to this thesis.

While Johnston's work looks only at queer autobiographies by lesbians Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, and Gertrude Stein, trans* people and queer men were also beginning to tell their stories during the period of modernism.⁶ Exactly a century ago, in 1918, Jennie June (dead-name: Earl Lind) published *Autobiography of an Androgyne*.^{7,8} The little-known text broke barriers in terms of gender diversity, for, in it, June comes out as trans*—having been formerly known to the world as Ralph Werther (her pen name)—through the story of Earl Lind, a meek and tormented person who functions as the living dead-name for the effeminate, lively, opinionated, and fervently sexual Jennie June herself. However, this work does not criticize dominant Western culture to the same degree as the works Johnston studies, for June actually transitions to invest herself better in the proliferation of heterosexuality through her embodiment as a woman. This complacency on June's behalf is unfortunate, as most of what is so effective and inspiring to me about queer memoirs is their direct conversation with and dismantling of ideologies of oppression.

⁶ Throughout this analysis, I use "trans*" to signify the range and spectrum of transgendered peoples' lived realities. In general, the term connotes physical transition to varying degrees, fluctuation in one's gender expression to suit one's authentic self, and assertion of the ineffectiveness of gendered pronouns. I do not mean this term to reduce the significance of any individual experience, for, as Gayle Salamon asserts in her review of *The Argonauts*, "For Nelson, and for Harry, trans is a word that...does not capture with any precision the complexity of Harry's gender" (305). Instead, I use "trans*" as an umbrella term that validates the entire spectrum of queer gender embodiments.

⁷ The story, in comparison with today's standards of political correctness and socializing, presents a rather misogynistic and problematic portrayal of early Western trans* embodiments. June's story also valorizes living in accordance with one's "nature," which is certainly a stance important to her at the time as she struggled to live her most authentic life, but which is also clearly at issue with the arguments of my thesis.

⁸ Within trans* discourse, the "dead-name" refers to one's name before transition, the name to which one hopes to never be referred again, and the physical body that that name signified.

There is a discourse within queer memoir scholarship today, however, that the very act of queer life writing cannot be trusted. As Margaretta Jolly explains in her essay, “Coming out of the Coming Out Story: Writing Queer Lives,” that “queer life writing is surely a contradiction in terms. Autobiography in the postmodern era has established the self as a fiction or construct, discontinuous, performative, parodic, expressed in the third person, written collectively or collaboratively” (474). Certainly, Jolly’s statement draws from the postmodern problematization of nature *qua* essence, whereby it is commonly no longer believed that something inherently *me* exists outside of what culture dictates me to be. In this sense, Jolly reveals how a predominant discourse in queer life writing tends to affirm social constructivism, rather than essentialism. Jolly cites Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Adrienne Rich among others as critics who are “increasingly skeptical of the notion that sexuality is or can provide an identity in any knowable sense” (475). While I agree that queer life writing and coming out stories can be read as problematic by their affirmation of an assumedly-stable identity one can “come out” as, the genre itself can be (and has been) queered in productive ways that revise and ironize its faults.

Therefore, Margaretta Jolly, other queer scholars, and I call for a queering of the queer memoir in order to “dramatize the structural contradictions in the coming out model of life story” (479), in her words.⁹ By incorporating narrative disruption into these queer life stories, Jolly says, the coming out story can be worked “against itself” (482),

⁹ This type of scholarship engages with concepts like “strategic essentialism,” which was coined in the 1980s by Indian postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in reference to her work with subaltern studies. Feminist and queer theorists since the 1990s have taken up the concept of Spivak’s “strategic use of positive essentialism” from her work *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (281); they have adapted the way Spivak thinks of ethnicity to the way the world conceptualizes sexuality and gender identity in combination with other identity markers. Catriona Sandilands’ “Mother Earth, the Cyborg, and the Queer: Ecofeminism and (More) Questions of Identity” provides an excellent example of this queer version of Spivak’s argument.

and she reads two postmodern queer autobiographies that perform this integration. Some characters in her chosen texts come out twice (kind of like Gaard does in *The Nature of Home* or like Alison does as an adult in *Fun Home*), while some never label themselves at all (like Nelson in *The Argonauts*). In sum, by ignoring genre conventions for the coming out story, some authors are able to stop “creating false unities of self” that align with problematic essentialism (491). Instead, these authors—which I argue include Nelson Bechdel, and Gaard—affirm the importance of sexuality in identity formation but deny that sex lives are the only life story.

Queered queer memoirs today keep with the tradition of telling one’s story as protest while rewriting the genre of autobiography and destabilizing normative societal and cultural assumptions. Furthermore, these works undermine the standard coming out story as well as purposefully displace what Catriona Sandilands, in her essay “Queer Life? Ecocriticism After the Fire,” calls “heteronaturativity” (310).¹⁰ The autobiographies of Nelson, Bechdel, and Gaard in particular follow in the modernist trajectory of queer narrative self-disclosure by continuing to show how “rewriting sexuality [and discourse of the ‘natural’] requires changes in theories of memory, individuality, and language construction” (Johnston 17, 18). However, these works also follow the trends of postmodernism by dislocating constancy of meaning or identity at every turn.

Ultimately, the way an author writes their memoir can reveal elements of their ethics, pieces of their moral perspective, and examples of their critical reasoning, regardless of how performative the work may seem. Therefore, autobiography and memoir *may* be the best-suited genre form for scholars with the goal of assessing authors’

¹⁰ “Heteronaturativity” is the name Sandilands gives the process by which people, systems, and cultures normalize heterosexuality so much so that it is the only embodiment deemed “natural.”

ethics (Vaughn), as long as the scholar accepts the strategic essentialisms in the authors' tellings. In *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* T.N.Young reminds us that it comes down to the conversation *between* author and reader or storyteller and listener, for

narrative is a tool for moral imagination and moral agency that builds on a shared commitment from the listener and the teller in multiple ways. As teller and listener share the story, each engages in processes of recognition, creativity, reflection, and redaction. This is key for moral discourse, and it builds a conscientizing exchange that begets moral action. (18)

Art in its many forms certainly inspires how we act in the world, but our decisions and our motivation for our actions ultimately come from within. As I trace the degrees of my three authors' environmental ethics and familial inclusion, I will look closely for moments when their autobiographies move past their conventions and provide readers with the queer possibility to re-examine themselves, their humanity and animality, and their roles in this Anthropocene world.¹¹

¹¹ From Lewis and Maslin's article, "Human activity has been a geologically recent, yet profound, influence on the global environment. The magnitude, variety and longevity of human-induced changes, including land surface transformation and changing the composition of the atmosphere, has led to the suggestion that we should refer to the present, not as within the Holocene Epoch (as it is currently formally referred to), but instead as within the Anthropocene Epoch" (171). Essentially, the Anthropocene label defines a time of life on Earth that is undeniably marked by human involvement, for, as Lewis and Maslin prove, "almost all stratigraphic records today, and over recent decades, have some marker of human activity" (175).

Part 2: Examining “Family”

Chapter 1: Preamble

Discourse of the “natural” both excludes and includes many people simply based on their identity (Filemyr; Seymour; Edelman; Sandilands). For those caught in that gap between inclusion and exclusion, between validation and erasure, change is an urgent necessity. Queer people, people of color, immigrants, and others represent subsets of the American population who encounter limitation of access to “natural” spaces. Each of my primary texts, being authored by queer individuals, speaks to the aforementioned gap and to the degrees of natural inclusion that can be accessed or *reworked* for access. I have mentioned before that the texts promote environmental ethics in differing degrees based on their sense of urgency for change. Ultimately, the authors are white and able-bodied, so that privilege allows most of them to assert the need for change only at the level of language, which decades of critics, of color and otherwise, reject (Frazier; Young). Only one author checks her privilege at the door and engages with the need for action. Regardless, it is true, at the very least, that each of the texts reexamines environmental and ethical possibility through the potentials of queering language and expanding meaning. It will be my task, then, to assess the degrees of efficacy and activism that arise from each text’s *ethos*.

The titles of my primary sources individually affirm both my thesis topic and its author’s queer ecosemiotic. Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* makes its point of reference clear early on: Jason and his Argonauts aboard the Argo, making their repairs and remaking their home time and time again, never changing the name of their home. Similarly, Nelson suggests that signifiers these days that are “under construction” or

being re-worked due to embodied realities' necessities have no less validity than did that re-working and reconstruction of the Argo. We, therefore, her readers and fellow world citizens, are the Argonauts she references in her title as we navigate a fluctuating and constantly adapting world. Language is our Argo, and certain terms like "love," "queer," "family," "nature," and "home," in Nelson's memoir, demand to be reconstructed.

In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, the title is literally a reference to her home and her family—the focus of this chapter—while it also names the space where she felt most at home. In fact, we learn in the story that "Fun Home" is a moniker for Alison and her brothers' favorite place; it's a pun on the funeral home attached to their house, where their father conducts business. Bechdel's punning in the title calls attention to the ironic love of such a place oftentimes viewed as eerie and as close to death as a funeral home. To find comfort there and to call it "home" signifies a vacillation of typical meanings and typical associations. The reader comes to understand that home and death are not so separable or mutually exclusive.

Finally, the title of Greta Gaard's text *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place* calls into question two seemingly-stable signifiers as immediately as Bechdel's title does. Upon simply reading the title of Gaard's "creative nonfiction eco-memoir," as many critics call it, one understands that Gaard wants her readers to question what they understand as "home" and "nature," and to contextualize that understanding with reference to indigenous culture, environmental history and cultivation, and sustainable futures. This recontextualization, to Gaard, is essential for truly protecting the environments we call home without taking them for granted.

With the framing of their respective titles, each text formulates almost a manifesto for the need for linguistic plasticity against the tradition of phallogocentrism. In *The Argonauts*, *Fun Home*, and *The Nature of Home*, linguistic malleability, or what I call each author's "queer ecosemiotic," is the starting point for a new long-term environmental ethic that reflects the embodiments of queer individuals (and others who find limits in their access to physical landscapes) in patriarchal, hegemonic Western culture. For these authors, family and home are essential to their queered semiotics, and their queries take place alongside discussions of the "natural." I therefore dedicate this chapter to a close examination of how the ecosignifier "family" is queered in each text, and how that linguistic reshaping inflects an implied environmental ethic.

"Family," in relation to one's sense of belonging and placement in a given community, is a complicated term made even more complicated when informed by queer peoples' experiences. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams tracks the usage of complex terms from the English language over time, and his analysis of "family" follows its "especially significant social history" (131). He demonstrates its trajectory from signifying a single household, with or without servants, to "the sense of a particular lineage or kin-group, ordinarily by descent from a common ancestor" to "the sense of a large group, but made...open and voluntary through love" to a single household again (131-32). Williams relates the recent resurgence of the small kin-group understanding of "family" to bourgeois custom and the transition into the nineteenth century. He ends his entry on "family" with an admonition:

It is a fascinating and difficult history, which can be only partly traced through the development of the word. But it is a history worth remembering when we hear

that “the family, as an institution, is breaking up” or that, in times gone by and still hopefully today, “the family is the necessary foundation of all order and morality.” In these similar contemporary uses it can be useful to remember the major historical variations, with some of their surviving complexities, and the sense, through these, of radically changing definitions of primary relationships. (134)

Williams’s words here resonate with the difficulties faced by queer individuals across the globe in relating to the idea of “family,” and T.N. Young responds almost directly to him with the following statement from her recent text, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*:

While I agree that there is brokenness evident in the ways we are thinking and making policy about family, I contend that instead of a *crisis* in the family, we are simply witnessing further development in the landscape of American relationships . . . this changing landscape is and always has been important in a society made of people whose relationships and/or family makeups reflect more complicated circumstances and identities than the stereotype of the white heterosexual family with two children and a dog could begin to describe. (5)

Ultimately, it is the shifting ground on which the signifier “family” lies that makes this problem so interesting to me; and these newly defined “landscapes” of relation, as Young calls them, could lend depth to any system of ethics. The imagined model family that Young examines and demystifies here is exactly what Williams rejects; both scholars realize that relationality is more complex than the stories culture produces about it. I appreciate that, in her work, Young investigates what provisions we extend to people and

places based on these concepts of relationality. Certainly, nepotism and cronyism prove that people often extend special concern to the people closest to them. their families, and their friends, but these preferences also prove that such relationality applied shallowly is the same as corruption. Young’s work makes it clear that relationships are too-often grounded in materiality, so she encourages her readers to consider how we might connect tangibly to others without making it, and ourselves, always already commodified.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed reveals how “family,” in the traditional sense, explicitly problematizes queer individuals’ authenticity, and Jack Halberstam corroborates this point in “The Queer Art of Failure” (95). Ahmed’s argument draws on the data that reveal a significant portion of homeless youth in the United States identify as LGBTQ.¹² Too often in the United States (and abroad), when someone’s sexual or gender identity comes into conflict with their parents’ morals or religion, the individual with the divergent identity is no longer welcome in the space they used to call home, around the people they call family, to whom they are more than likely biologically related. Young emphasizes the too-ubiquitous reality for queer people of color in particular that “when [they] came out as [gay] to [their parents], their relationship changed” irreparably (1). Young builds on Ellen K. Feder’s assertion that “the family [is] an important element that contributes to formation and reification of social constructions of identity” (14). If Feder’s statement is true of family and identity formation, Young insists, “chosen families [versus families of origin] are often sites that *allow* for individuals to exercise freedom in developing behaviors, practices, and expectations that

¹² According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, “Family rejection and discrimination and violence have contributed to a large number of transgender and other LGBTQ-identified youth who are homeless in the United States – an estimated 20-40% of the more than 1.6 million homeless youth” (“Housing & Homelessness”).

represent the dynamic nature of family that they experience” (15, my emphasis). Truly, the “traditional” family historically signified a microcosm of the patriarchal, heteronormative, cisnormative, capitalist, hegemonic society at large, so any deviation of identity or relation within that unit represented complete “anarchy” (Bookchin). Cultivating one’s chosen family therefore stands, for queer individuals, as a radical act characterized by allowance and validation rather than ignorance and erasure.

Ecological anarchist and author Murray Bookchin suggests a similar reexamination and expansion of “family” in order for environmental activism to work. In *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*, Bookchin looks to the past and “the earliest cities [that] were largely ideological creations of highly complex, strongly affiliated, and intensely mutualistic communities of kin groups, ecological in outlook and essentially egalitarian and nondomineering in character” (24). Upon the growth of the modern city from the tribe, Bookchin continues, “the newer dwellers of the city, too, formed their own ‘brotherhoods’ in which ties, rights, and duties were solemnized by blood oaths and kinship rituals” (29). Bookchin laments the loss of this localization by which “family” spanned “blood ties, gender, and age groups” (26). I argue that these localized “family” groups Bookchin reveres reflect the same types of families that queer people are forced to choose and forge. In part, therefore, it is through the model of the chosen family that queer theory links with environmentalism.

Furthermore, the flexibility and creativity necessary for many queer couples to reproduce demand fresh conceptions of “family,” and new understandings speak volumes about queer theory’s associations with environmentalism. Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, exposes the flaws, from a queer perspective, of using

the signifier of “the Child” in environmental discourse (18-9). He ignores modern scientific realities that allow for queer procreation, so he goes so far as to make the two following claims. First, he asserts, “The Child, in the historical epoch of our current epistemological regime, is the figure for this compulsory investment in [the] misrecognition” involved in arguments like Save the Children or Save the Earth for the Children (18), and he follows up with this controversial statement: “For the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture...is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” (19). Edelman draws largely from Lacan to profess that queer existence provides intrinsic resistance to heterosexual Symbolic reality and rejects what he considers faulty argumentation along the lines of “reproductive futurism,” to which the figure of the Child is essential (19).

Nicole Seymour brings Edelman’s disputatious and privileged claims down to earth in *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination*, however, by revealing how, more than just through the figure of the Child, “much environmental discourse *depends on*, or even *requires*, a white-centric heterosexism, if not homophobia” (viii). Seymour insists that queer people *can* reproduce and do so outside the bounds of this “white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity” (7), so she rejects Edelman’s explicit arguments that queer existence means no future for human or animal races. Instead, she works to “identif[y] a tradition of queer environmentalism in contemporary fictions [that]...explicitly link[s] the queer to the natural world through an empathetic, ethical imagination” (1), rather than through simply the demands of reproductive futurity and arguments for the children.

Seymour, then, relates this conversation directly to the scientific innovations and legal freedoms of today, for one *must* recognize that these cutting-edge changes allow queer individuals to reproduce biologically. One should also recognize that these reproductive feats are not always simple, however. Often, the seed donor's identity becomes a compromise for the queer couple and/or stands as a surrogate for one or more members of the relationship. Ahmed ultimately suggests that queer bodies necessarily reshape "allegiance[s] to the form of the family" in order to lend authenticity to their unique reproductive attempts and chosen families, and these examples simply reaffirm that point (73). The queer futurity that Seymour demands verifies this reshaping of the family as optionally biologically related, empathetically and imaginatively understanding, and universally oriented towards environmental action (despite the contradictory coding of queerness and the "natural").

Thus, these chosen families and creative reproductive options signify the *cultivation* of ethics of care (for others, animals, and environments) rather than that care being assumed or forced based on a traditional and limited model of the family. Joan Tronto and other scholars have recently reworked an academic understanding of this care ethic so that its value stands less disputable.¹³ Instead of hierarchizing affection based on the patriarchal family model, Tronto, Karla Armbruster, and Raja Halwani, in their respective texts, suggest a horizontalization of care whereby the principles one would normally apply to one's family become universally applicable to all living entities.

¹³ In "Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics," Raja Halwani argues for virtue ethics to subsume care ethics and, thereby, ensure its social reputation (161). Joan Tronto's text *Moral Boundaries* reveals the reason for Halwani's apologetic and incorporative tone. Care ethics have been coded as women's morality through their inconsistent regulatability, their feminine politics of care, and their feminist standpoint on political theory. Tronto and Halwani both posit the usefulness of the care ethic despite its degraded social and cultural coding.

Armbruster in particular demonstrates how “this model [of ethics] can also help us move towards just, ethical relationships with animals, who . . . are inevitably dependent upon us and over whom we will always exercise some measure of power” (370). Tronto asserts that “caring...requires that we meet the other morally, adopt that person’s, or group’s, [or species’, or landscape’s] perspective and look at the world in those terms” (19), and Halwani reveals how “in acting from care, one utilizes one’s knowledge of the cared-for to tailor one’s action to suit the needs of the cared-for” (166-7). Ultimately, those who have been hurt and excluded from care empathize with others in similar situations, and these individuals then have the choice to incorporate those others into their group and practice the ethic of care within their own “family” (Ortner 17, 21 ; Armbruster 375).

These senses of family, empathy, and care are essential to the conception of an effective and accessible environmental ethic. It is my belief that queer individuals who have practice forming families and who have been barred from the “natural” and “nature,” both physically and metaphorically, are therefore better able to recognize the physical landscapes surrounding them as abject Others in need of care. The epistemic privilege of marginalization grants individuals such as these canny perspectives others may not be able to access, and it is not uncommon for these individuals to develop more well-rounded ethical systems due to their experiences on the margins. For the sake of my analysis, it is the degree to which one’s marginalization induces a closeness and empathy for one’s landscape and the degree to which one’s environment and physical landscape become members of one’s chosen family, treated with care and concern and action, that speaks to their environmental ethic’s efficacy.

Chapter 2: Our Family of *The Argonauts*

Creative writer and scholar of art, cruelty, and queer perception, Maggie Nelson, believes “in the personal made public” (*The Argonauts* 60). In her most recent book about motherhood and being a writer, *The Argonauts*, Nelson uses her life as an example in many ways. *The Argonauts*, which Nelson writes “in drag as a ‘memoirist’” (114), tracks the time from the beginning of Nelson’s relationship with her transmasculine¹⁴ partner Harry to their marriage, her pregnancy, and the birth of their son, Iggy. In these senses, *The Argonauts* is a memoir primed to speak about the contemporary queer family. However, this text more complex than it seems. At the same time as it tracks Nelson’s experiences as a writer and her feelings about the taboo against writing motherhood within academia, *The Argonauts* also examines Nelson’s history, her pregnancy, and her partner’s transition (41).

Nelson’s entire memoir is peppered with poststructural semiotic theories as she grapples with the limitations of linguistic expression, propelled by the urgency of trans* realities. As Holly Welker says in her review of *The Argonauts*, “the arrangement of the propositions in [the text]...feel[s] less like a single river running forward than many streams converging in a grand current. Whatever logic or intuition or advice Nelson relied on to determine their placement, it served her unerringly” (225). The story’s foundation lies on shifting ground and remains comfortable with multiplicity, yet the end product validates the unsettled, the transitioning, and the destabilized. Whereas Welker

¹⁴ I use the term “transmasculine” in reference to Harry in *The Argonauts* in order to represent a specific gendered experience whereby the individual presents as resolutely masculine, but when that embodiment goes against their sex assignments at birth, as demonstrated via their genitalia. “Transmasculine” suggests this specific embodiment as well as general gender non-normativity without direct medical and social transition. Harry will be referred to by masculine pronouns in this essay, as in *The Argonauts*, like he prefers. As a final point about Nelson’s partner, Harry’s full name (and stage name as an artist) is Harry Dodge, but I refer to him, as Nelson does in *The Argonauts*, as Harry.

uses the metaphor of a watershed and the river's many paths to represent Nelson's organization in *The Argonauts*, Nelson herself prefers the metaphor of birth. Just like the cervix during birth, whose "task . . . is to stay closed," the individual's experience of excess stress involves encountering a "wall [that] must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning" (124). Ahmed explains that fracture is not the effect of uncertainty; instead, queer phenomenologies like Nelson's embodied reality and her reading of birth as a metaphor for the queer reveal how one can grow by dancing with instability (164).¹⁵

The Argonauts elevates process and change as transformational necessities, and the text itself proves this point in many ways. Certainly, the subject matter of Nelson's memoir embraces change as it shifts from topic to topic, but it also essentially stands as Nelson's coming out story to the academic world. She recounts in *The Argonauts* how her partner Harry says to her, "*You've written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part, you said. Give me a break, I said back. I haven't written about it yet*" (32). Nelson does not just come out to the academic world for the first time in this memoir, she runs out of the closet screaming. Nelson's absolution of queer family accompanies her endorsement of queer pleasures of all kinds, pleasures that include pregnancy and birth, BDSM, anal play, and erotic performance art.

Performance art connects Nelson and Harry, as Harry's performance in his "butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook*" first alerted Nelson to her future partner's

¹⁵ The metaphor of dancing here has a powerful history within queer and feminist scholarship. Feminist critics Luce Irigaray and her protégé Eluned Summers-Bremner champion the idea of dancing with experience in order to be fully authentic while queer scholars Catriona Sandilands and Ahmed follow the same logic to associate queer experience in the world with dancing, both literally and figuratively, as a tactic for resistance to hegemony and validation of the individual subjectivity. I draw on both their uses of the present participle "dancing" in this passage, and I will touch on this concept again later on.

gendered reality. From hearing about this performance and eventually seeing it, Nelson encounters its two protagonists, both of whom vary gender pronouns throughout the film.

She then realizes that

words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words (*boi*, *cisgendered*, *andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings...One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. (8)

Given Nelson's fascination with "Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed," Harry's attitude (and bodily urgency) regarding signification—through even such a simple medium as pronouns—implicates him as an equal protagonist in her story (3). Throughout the memoir, Nelson compares her transformative experiences with her partner's. "For insight and wisdom," writes Welker, Nelson creates "a juxtaposition of Dodge recovering from top surgery while [her own] pregnancy progresses...[along with] the juxtaposition of Nelson's account of laboring to deliver their son...with Dodge's account of saying goodbye to his mother who is dying of breast cancer" (224). Welker goes so far as to insist that "the work is clearly a collaboration: a few sections are by Dodge, many sections are about him, and some are addressed to him" (223), and I certainly agree that *The Argonauts* reads as flexibly collaborative.

The Argonauts as a memoir influenced by collaboration has further formal vacillations that can be metaphorized through queer gender representation. For example, Nelson fluctuates in the way she uses tense, the way she addresses her audience, and the way she establishes her tone. In the opening five pages of her memoir, Nelson switches

tense more than ten times, creating the sensation that the text weaves in and out of time. Our memoirist's perspective, therefore, stays mostly omniscient, but it expands and contracts as her tone inflates and deflates. At times, too, Nelson's audience is clearly academic, so the reader experiences marginal notes and elevated language, but other times, the audience is "you." In these cases, "you" signifies, alternatively, the reader, other academics, and her partner Harry himself: a radical and intimate act of literary inclusion. In her review of *The Argonauts*, Debbie Hagan

sees [*The Argonauts*] as more of a genre-bender: a nonlinear essay that happens to be 143 pages. Without chapters and sub-headers, it reads like a collage of ideas . . . that becomes an enlightening journey. . . . She pairs [intellectuals', artists', and writers'] ideas with examples from her own life. If this were a memoir, she might step back, ruminate, and give alternative voice and perspective. Rather, she presents her ideas, then moves on. Thus, readers are left staring into the margins, filling in the gaps. (39)

In these senses of collaboration, collage, vacillation, and gaps for the reader to fill, *The Argonauts* queers the form and *genre* of memoir itself, an action which suggests how her text can be read as an example of the theory it hopes to project, and, therefore, the text itself performs the first stages of activism.

Aside from the form and genre creativity of Nelson's text, *The Argonauts* also enacts activism through the story it tells. Nelson introduces her memoir with a direct vindication of love and queer pleasure. The reader is immediately immersed in Nelson's style of blunt yet carefully crafted prose, and they encounter several of her most powerful gestures packed into one paragraph:

October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer. (3)

Queer pleasure “risk[s] the widowmakers” because there’s no investment in having a husband to be widowed by. Queer pleasure gets tattoos across its knuckles to remind the attached body of the “possible fruits” of a punch (even when there are too many letters than fit on one’s knuckles). Queer pleasure begs you to “fuck me in the ass” because it is the protagonist’s desire, and it isn’t scared to admit love before it’s felt in “an incantation” to summon what’s desired. Queer pleasure speaks of bachelor pads with unused shower stalls where stores of dildos are kept. Queer pleasure can do all of these things without disintegrating under the pressure because it is not invested in the same ideas of futurity, family, and normalcy in which some other sexual pleasures abide. Equally, queer pleasure can be vulgar as well as inspiring, carnal as well as theoretical, bodily as well as spiritual.

In her irreverent memoir, Nelson is clearly not interested in tip-toeing around taboo concepts, and she radically reclaims these nonnormative issues and voices her

opinions in order to validate complex human subjecthoods, using imagery of nature, representations of futurity, and theorization beyond signification to express her points.

From the very beginning of *The Argonauts*, too, the reader experiences a unique and poignant conflict between physical nature and the power of will. The first full sentence, above, lyrically describes torrential winds ravaging the bark of eucalyptus trees, but the destruction and force of the Santa Anas does not bother Nelson. Instead, it seems that she becomes piqued by and defiant of the drama and chooses an outdoor lunch with her friend. In the same moment, the literary spotlight highlights several non-normative embodiments; validations of risk, physical force, and anal sex occur one after the other alongside Nelson's expression of intimacy. In this introductory moment, the memoirist starts by choosing to engage with an "abnormal" and threatening environmental scenario. It is as if she knows the damage and harm threatening the tree pose no necessary limit to the durability of that natural entity, so she herself does not worry about measured risks, danger, or harm in going out into the "widowmakers." In fact, from this opening paragraph she seems to welcome pain as transformative, as part of the process for life, growth, and betterment. These associations provide the foundations for why she can reclaim birth and pregnancy as queer pleasures later on. Birth and pregnancy are, to Nelson, pleasures; having a child "isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair" (44). The "ironic" part of this pleasure is its queerness, as Debbie Hagan posits in her review of *The Argonauts*. Hagan, reading Nelson, asserts, "Pregnancy—perhaps the oldest and most natural human transformation—can be ironically disorienting, isolating, and quite abnormal. So, if pregnancy is not *normal*, then what is?" (40). Essentially, the whole of Nelson's introductory paragraph produces powerful images of queer futurity, and it is a

queer futurity of which Seymour would approve, for it literally starts with—and therefore inherently foregrounds—the physical environment.

However, it is not just the physical landscape and environments that figure prominently in the passage, for Nelson’s representation of anal sex in this paragraph introduces a pivotal query regarding metaphorical environments via the “natural” and pleasure. Using anal sex as her first and foremost example of queerness, Nelson validates queer pleasures in ways that go directly against the hegemonic understanding of the “natural” in patriarchal, Western culture, which has silenced so many for so long. Anal sex and sometimes even oral sex are coded as “sodomy” in many religious traditions and have been linked with evil or thought of as a so-called abomination that is still criminalized in some of the United States today.¹⁶ Despite the Supreme Court’s historic ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* that sodomy laws were unconstitutional, unfortunately, the ACLU website makes it clear that “*Lawrence* only directly invalidates sodomy laws in the four states that have laws that only apply to gay people: Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Kansas. But the equal protection clause forbids subtle discrimination just as much as it forbids obvious discrimination” (“Why Sodomy Laws Matter”).

Interestingly, if we look etymologically at the word “abomination” and its Biblical use, we can realize that its roots in Hebrew translate to “against custom” or “against culture” (*For the Bible Tells Me So*), with “culture” meaning one’s immediate community and civilization. Williams asserts in *Keywords* that the term “culture”

¹⁶ In the King James Version of *The Bible*, one can find in Leviticus this passage: “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (Leviticus 20:13). In the King James Version, too: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

signifies “a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence” (91), and this meaning also hints at the timeline of human futurity (here, “development”). Thus, the issue of reproduction is also at stake because it is not likely that one can get pregnant from anal sex (of course, it is possible, but we won't go into that here). This type of lovemaking will not give you babies to pass down your line, your blood, your money, and your land, a circumstance that causes a problem for most cultures as they operated in the past and function today.

Western patriarchal culture is specifically at fault when it comes to using ideology of the “natural” to propagate technologies of culture. For instance, queer sexuality such as it would play out with most gay male couples often involves this type of “fruitless” anal sex. Such acts of sodomy were coded as not only being against nature and against culture through the discourse of abominations, but also they were technically illegal in most states up until the last few decades, with the remainder of Sodomy Law States losing their constitutional backing in 2003 due to the Supreme Court’s ruling (“Why Sodomy Laws Matter”). Western patriarchal culture has a long tradition of silencing such queer voices and outlawing queer acts by using the discourse of their being against nature. In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha insists that this logic of “nature” and its ideological use through the image of “mother nature” actually manifests the voice of patriarchy and is only coded feminine to meet an end: oppression. Sherry Ortner started the discussion in 1972 when she published “Is Female to Male As Nature Is to Culture?” and asserted that “cultural evaluations” in disguise as natural ones set woman as inferior to man, and so on (7). Minh-ha goes so far as to say that what we often address

colloquially as “mother nature” in Western culture is, in reality, a manipulation of culture:

Nature, in such a container, will undoubtedly remain “his nature,” a culturalized man-made product, which one may refer to as Father Nature. The supposedly universal tension between Nature and Culture is, in reality, a non-universal *human* dis-ease. No conflict exists between what has conventionally been called Father Culture and Mother Nature, except when the pair are thought of as opposite to each other (instead of different from each other) so that Mother becomes a male-fashioned Mother exiled from culture, which is tantamount to saying Father Culture versus Father Nature. (67)

Through the application of Minh-ha’s argument to my thesis, one can see how a logic of nature is always in question when it’s voiced through hegemonic, patriarchal culture. When what is “natural” or against “nature” comes into question through this type of theoretical deconstruction, I posit that telling stories of the new “natural,” the new “normal,” is essential.

In a culture in which the logic of the father dominates even spaces coded as feminine or matronly to their detriment, Nelson’s memoir establishes paths of resistance. One such path is revealed in Nelson’s reference to Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* in this opening paragraph: “You had *Molloy* by your bedside . . . Does it get any better?” Beckett’s *Molloy*, first published in France in 1951, is the first text in a trilogy and is one of the author’s only works of fiction. The text recounts a mystery from different perspectives: that of Molloy, the assaulter; that of the investigator; that of Moran, the man the assaulter becomes; and those of the people the newly-named assaulter runs into on his

journey. The motivation for the assault remains in question, and the reader is left to assume whether the cause was Molloy's mother's death, his work stress as a writer, his descent into madness, or something else entirely.

Molloy problematizes the connection between son and mother, writer and text, and motivation and inspiration. Marta Figlerowicz asserts that many critics find *Molloy* (and the other two texts in its trilogy) frustrating to analyze because Beckett refuses to “produce any positive account of ethics,” and because he uses the text as a way to express anxieties that relate to society, language, authorship, and paternity (77)—all of which anxieties find new life in works, such as *The Argonauts*, today. Jeanne-Sarah De Larquier, in “Beckett's *Molloy*: Inscribing *Molloy* in a Metalanguage Story,” asserts that “in fact, *Molloy* can be interpreted as a metalanguage story, that is, a story about language, and more specifically, about the narrator's struggle with its arbitrariness insofar as it is indifferent to his needs” (43). I claim that Nelson's glee at noticing *Molloy* on Harry's bedside table speaks to her delight, at the very least, with its destabilizing presentation of signification.

In the same vein, the protagonist of *Molloy* traces the possibilities and limitations of new meaning. He experiments with naming and language, and, as De Larquier writes, he literally changes his identity from Molloy to Moran later in the text without much more than a word (44). In an interesting contrast with *The Argonauts*, however, Beckett's narrator invests increasing focus in the signifier over the signified (De Larquier), which is the opposite of what Nelson does and, furthermore, the opposite of what I suggest we do with language in order to expand its possibilities of signification. Whereas *Molloy* points out how, in De Larquier's words, “two signified objects have nothing in common, but the

signifiers do,” such as in the case of homophones, *The Argonauts* posits that one signifier can represent a whole ecosystem of signifieds, all unified under the same sign: “[T]he *Argo*’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*” (5).

For Nelson, this validation of ecosystemic signification is not only expressed in her title passage but also in her examination of her new partner. Because Harry’s transition provides comparisons and counterpoints to Nelson’s story and her struggles with meaning-making, Nelson seemingly puts much less weight on the dissimilar signifieds than she does on the newly liberated signifier. I mentioned earlier how Nelson first reacts to her transmasculine partner, and I hinted at her conclusion, which rejects semiotic binary completely in order to value the signification of the in-between itself. Nelson’s interest in Harry, who “is blessedly neither male or female” (142), reflects a comfort with which she engages that centers (ironically) on the queer without being undermined by its fluctuations. Ultimately, Nelson’s semiotics are far more radical than Beckett’s, but she likely recognized the linguistic experimentation within *Molloy* as a starting point that would link Harry, his philosophies, his body, and his future with her ideologies.

Perhaps her seeing Beckett’s *Molloy* at her lover’s bedside signifies something influential for Nelson because she conceives of Beckett’s limitedly-transitioning protagonist and relates the experience to Harry immediately.¹⁷ On the other hand, perhaps she realizes that Beckett closely examines what Marta Figlerowicz calls “the negotiation of personal limits” of expression, signification, and action in *Molloy* (82). It could also be

¹⁷ While Beckett’s protagonist does not transition in terms of gender identity, his identity is in constant reformulation through the distinction of Molloy and Moran.

that Nelson appreciates the male protagonist's fixation on the mother and what's hers, a fascination that comes through in the very first lines of *Molloy*:

Je suis dans la chamber de ma mère. C'est moi qui y vis maintenant. Je ne sais pas comment j'y suis arrivé. (7)

[I am in my mother's room. I am the one who lives here now. I don't know how I got here.]¹⁸

Furthermore, according to Levin, this motherly fascination is inscribed in the "quest narrative" genre of the text, whereby "Molloy sets out to find his mother and fails" (265). Finally, I wonder if Nelson's delight might come from her understanding of *Molloy* as a text interested in, as Levin describes, "foregrounding the troubled relationship of writing and authorship, recasting writing as a function of obligation stripped of artistic motivation" (271). I read Nelson as realizing the depth of *Molloy*'s signification: the text presents a protagonist whose destabilized masculine embodiment relates to the values of thinking deeply, feeling fully, and engaging earnestly in what Figlerowicz calls Beckett's newfound "ethical systems [based on] character" (77). *Molloy* certainly frames the opening of *The Argonauts* through its queries regarding signification, authorship, and the figure of the mother. At the very least, Nelson's seeing and comprehending *Molloy* establishes a path of resistance to hegemonic culture, and she shares this path with her partner and newly-formed family.

The Argonaut's opening passage typifies what Gayle Salamon sees as Nelson's "unabashed paean to fullness" (305), and the memoir unfolds in further evidence of such fullness with linguistic playfulness. Nelson seems careful to craft each sentence so that it

¹⁸ The phrasing in brackets signifies my translation.

signifies to the greatest degree and expands, rather than so that it clearly signifies only one thing and narrows in on that meaning. As other critics have agreed, Nelson's memoir primarily tells the story of her family, but it does so many other things that we can't sum it up as just a queer family memoir. The expanded signification that Nelson promotes has value in and of itself; it is value forged by creativity and sanctioned by the necessity of queer bodies. The title of Nelson's queer memoir becomes another pivotal example of the linguistic instabilities illuminated through queer life, in many respects. *The Argonauts*, as a title, directly alludes to Greek mythology and the quest of Jason and his Argonauts, but it comes to mean much, much more for Nelson, as she explains early in the text. A few pages in, she comes back to the moment where she stopped during *The Argonaut's* opening paragraph. She picks up right where she left off:

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name." Just as the *Argo's* parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new." (5)

I mentioned this passage earlier in reference to *Molloy* and in the opening to this chapter; Nelson finds validity in the multiple signifieds contained in any one signifier. The ecosystem of meaning for "*The Argonauts*" and "the *Argo*" itself—which Nelson describes equally throughout the text as "(*Argo*)" and "Mobius strip" (44)—exemplifies

what I describe as a queer ecosemiotic. We must realize, though, that “*Argo*,” to Nelson in this moment of her memoir, ultimately signifies love and the variations by which individuals can feel such emotions for one another. “Family,” “love,” and “*Argo*” are signs constructed across time and space, and Nelson proposes that alternative understandings can co-exist without the need to erase any other meanings. Basically, her queer loving with her transmasculine partner in their “tribe as family” need not delegitimize the validity of heterosexual affairs and traditional families (13), yet that which has been historically suppressed and blocked from being coded as “natural” does need to surface in order for healing to occur.

After sending the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Nelson feels the effort has failed, however, to communicate her message to her lover, so she tries again. For the third time now, she attempts generally the same message (I’m vulnerable and you’re vulnerable and let’s be feral in that intimacy together), but she uses a different artistic venue to signify—poetry.

After the Barthes, I tried again, this time with a fragment of a poem by Michael

Ondaatje:

Kissing the stomach
 kissing your scarred
 skin boat. History
 is what you’ve travelled on
 and take with you

We've each had our stomachs

kissed by strangers

to the other

and as for me

I bless everyone

who kissed you here. (6)

Ultimately, she “didn’t send the [poem] fragment [to her lover] because [she] had in any way achieved its serenity. [She] sent it with the aspiration that one day [she] might...be able to behold the names and images of others inked onto [Harry’s] skin without disjunct or distaste” (6). This statement, in the context of the Argonauts and Ondaatje’s poem, begs to be analyzed. I read it as Nelson’s attempts to try again at sharing “the *Argo*” of love with her new partner, hence the boat imagery, and this message, she realizes, has been constrained by Barthes’s reading of Greek myth at first. Of course, she would find limitation in theory alone; this is a story centered on the body. She, through Ondaatje and the poetic form, speaks of the body of her lover, his “scarred / skin boat,” his stomach, and his kisses “by strangers,” which she shortly connects to her reading of his gender. The literal and metaphorical plenitude of repeating kisses in this poem reflect the loves Harry may have had before and the anxiety Nelson can’t hide about knowing of those connections. However, the poem and its sharing open a line of communication between lovers so that the Argonaut of love those moments may have been might not efface the new relationship’s potential.

Throughout *The Argonauts*, queer gender expression becomes a metaphor through which we can understand the multiplicity inherent in language, but the gist of Nelson's exchange with Harry here deserves its own attention. Nelson tries for a third time to express her truth because she has an urgent need to share it and be understood. Nelson wants her transmasculine partner to know that she's committed to him and their relationship and that she can respect the body as process. She certainly begins with a trust in words and a belief that expression will signify her intention (remember her admiration for Wittgenstein!). However, Harry's inability fully to comprehend her meaning in her initial "incantation" and the secondary "fragment" forces her to rework her signifiers again. This reworked and fluctuating expression, along with Nelson's desire to be understood, replicates Harry's experience as a trans* person. Specifically, her multiple attempts both reflect and are caused by the confusion Harry causes when people attempt to address him with proper pronouns. For how can there be a proper pronoun for someone as androgynous as Harry Dodge who prefers the in-between? If something as simple as pronouns can't work correctly, she ponders as she "become[s] a quick study in pronoun avoidance" (7), then how can we trust love notes or other subjective expressions?

In the end, it is Nelson's decision to send the poem fragment that establishes the beginnings of what I see as her environmental ethic. The gesture in the aforementioned passage that contains the most force to me is her explanation of the reason *why* she sent the fragment. Nelson doesn't send the message because she fully understands it, internalizes it, or embodies "its serenity" (6). Similarly, she does not send it because she trusts Harry fully or because she accepts, completely, her new partner's past. Instead, Nelson sends it "with the aspiration that one day" she could achieve the serenity it

expresses. In the moment that is now, she understands what may change with the future, and that investment in the present—what I call “presentism”—is what I propose works so powerfully as an environmental ethic in queer memoirs such as Nelson’s.¹⁹

Ultimately, Nelson’s memoir, as informed by queer reproductive discourses posited by Seymour and Edelman, produces an environmental ethic that invests in the future of our species and planet without focusing myopically on one’s own biological offspring, so Nelson promotes a futurity firmly embedded in the presentism. Ahmed also writes about queer presentism and futurity in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. In this text, she

argue[s] that what is “**present**” or near to us is not casual: we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there. Rather, certain objects are available to us because of the lines that we have already taken. . . . For a life to count as a good life then [within the traditional model of family that excludes queerness], it must return the **debt of its life** by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s **futurity** in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such **gestures of return**. (21, my emphases)

Ahmed means to exonerate the familial deviant—often a queer individual— whose experiences, she insists, have a lot to teach us about relearning investment in our world. In the passage above, Ahmed suggests that queer lives teach others how time and action need not be focused on systems of debt and grand gestures of return. Instead, she claims, queer lives invest in the present and often biologically reject those systems of debt propagated by the traditional heterosexual family. The queer life therefore queers others’

¹⁹ “Presentism” is meant to be used in conversation with Nicole Seymour’s concept of “futurity.”

understandings of family by breaking the bonds of familial debt (in terms of offspring and more). In Youngs's terms, queer life rewrites provisional investment in the old relational ideal. Using the discourse of economics to its logical extent here then, queer lives demonstrate what free and open investment of care looks like, for these individuals understand that relationships formed *are* the desired return. Additionally, queer life opens up others' comprehension of futurity to include every minor orientation of which we're already a part. Using this same understanding of the present as an activistically-effective unit of time, Nelson asserts that investment is constant and fluid, and, if it can be an ongoing process informed by our many orientations in the world, it can last well into the future. From my understanding of Seymour's and Ahmed's arguments, I propose that Nelson's memoir validates the assertion that environmentalism does not have to end with bodies that take issue with traditional reproduction.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson has limits to her extension of this "presentism," but I insist readers can extrapolate on this ethic of care and apply it to physical landscapes and human/nonhuman relations through Nelson's recurring discussion of the "human animal" (21, 70, 72, 83, 142). In a recent address at the James Fenimore Cooper Conference in Oneonta, NY, former president of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment), Rochelle Johnson affirmed what many ecocritics these days have been calling "Systems Ecology," "Literary Ecologies," "Cyborg Ecologies," and "Queer Ecologies."²⁰ Her understanding of these ecologies harkens back to work done by Donna Haraway, Stacy Alaimo, Catriona Sandilands-Mortimer, and Bruce Erickson, and it

²⁰ These terms are all synonymous of expanded interrogations into traditional understandings of "ecology," both as a term and a field of scientific study. Each name corresponds to a slightly different focus taken when approaching new conceptions of "ecology," but there is a common, extractable link: what we thought we knew was wrong, and the first step forward begins with queries into the "human" and "natural" distinction.

validates the logic that “humans are animals just as easily affected by their physical landscapes as those landscapes are affected by them. We, as scholars and world citizens, do ourselves a disservice when we forget that we are a part of our natural ecologies, our local watersheds, and our natural communities” (Johnson). Johnson—and Nelson, by extension, through her “human animal” terminology—respects the systems ecology that values humans on the same level as any other entity on earth but that also expects humans to engage with their local landscape as positive, productive cultivators of the space’s longevity for the sake of the betterment of all.

Nelson’s “human animal” focus also often coincides with a discussion of her queer family, her pregnancy, and her partner’s transition. Some might interpret this comparison of the human as animal with Nelson’s very queer family to be inappropriate or contradictory to traditional ecologies, but I posit that Nelson here taps into something scientifically-backed and poignant. Nelson criticizes what patrice jones calls “the social construction of gender by way of animals” (368), a criticism that, I argue, strengthens her presentist ideology and substantiates her ethics. jones’s article “Roosters, hawks, and dawgs: Towards an inclusive, embodied eco/feminist psychology” challenges traditional psychology for using this problematic “social construction” mentioned above to such a degree that its effects on real people and animals have been horrifying: erased subjectivity, brutal slaughter, “sexual assault among people, and forcible impregnation of dairy cows” (376). jones insists that, had these psychologists and scientists studied their animals with respect to the more accurate, queer aspects of ecology, the “current [ecological] crisis” might be less severe (376).

patrice jones uses the examples of roosters, dogs, and ducks to reveal how psychologists' and scientists' misinterpretation of animal behavior actually came to validate heterosexist, cissexist, and bio-elitist ideologies, which perpetuated in culture quiet easily. jones actually references "ecofeminists Catriona Sandilands (1994) and Greta Gaard (1997), [who] have noted [that] the actual biodiversity of natural sexual behavior decisively rebuts the commonly voiced homophobic charge that homosexuality is unnatural" (373). jones even mentions how plants' characterizations in early botany books affirms this cissexist and heteronormative model of sexuality and family (373). jones's final point worth note here calls attention to "animals injured by the environmental violations" of humankind, for we must "call for the 'queering' of nature itself" to reflect its original authenticities, but we must also realize that human interference in the actual scientific paradigm (through pollution, experimentation, animal husbandry, agroindustry, and more) has led to intense psychological trauma for both human and nonhuman animals as well as the increased prevalence of transgendered and homosexual traits among various species (372, 374). Nelson therefore presents her example of the queer family in a way that both harkens jones's study and that utilizes the most appropriate terminology she can access—animality—to demonstrate how queer animals can really be, whether human or nonhuman. Ultimately, this reworking of what "animal" and "queer" mean in context with one another signifies how Nelson's ethics and presentism might incorporate larger groups than just her chosen family.

Certainly, Nelson's presentist ideology benefits her chosen family in *The Argonauts*, and her ethics suggest that others can be included in that group, but the extent to which she actually incorporates larger groups in her ethics and presentism vacillates.

About two-thirds of the way through *The Argonauts*, Nelson overtly delineates her beliefs. In this moment, she presents her version of what “some would call...an ethics[:]....So far as [she] can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself” (96). Her presentist betterment ideology, as it is inspired by her and her trans* partner’s embodied queernesses, therefore, also involves a mutually-beneficial ethic of pleasure, flourishing, and gratification. As I see it, it is the extent to which Nelson can derive pleasure from her natural landscapes, therefore, that she would ever incorporate it as an Other worth mutual gratification through her sense of ethics. And it is the extent to which she can derive pleasure from these landscapes and nonhuman animals that she will seek to incorporate them into her chosen family and protect it for the future in the moment. Certainly, as Salamon claims in her review, *The Argonauts* “tells the story of... [Nelson’s and Harry’s] excursion into the shared project of making a home and building a family” (303). It is truly a process to build this space together, and Nelson writes of Harry’s son Max, “a near stranger who was quickly becoming family,” that “time to learn” about one’s newfound family members and their ability to experience “relaxing pleasure” with you are essential (12). For her ethics to extend to others of all sorts, however, Nelson would have reshape her ethics of mutual-gratification and intimacy to include the environmental and nonhuman Other, and I am not convinced that she is able to do this work in *The Argonauts*.

For Nelson, it clearly takes more than simple surface knowledge to be able to engage in ethical interactions with another entity, and her deeper attention to others’ pleasures and individualities lends value to the environmental ethic she implies. For example, she knows that those who look at her chosen family, say in a photograph, likely

will think they have “never seen anything so heteronormative in all [their] life,” and it is in this first, shallow glance at her family that the lie is expressed (13). The family that Nelson forges in *The Argonauts* contains her transgender partner, Harry’s son Max, and the child of this pairing, Iggy, whose birth is recounted in the memoir. Simply looking and hoping to understand will not work, as Nelson’s family confirms, and any ethics that engage with the world so shallowly lack intimacy and therefore efficacy. Ahmed explores this same issue and its misinterpretation in *Queer Phenomenology*:

In the face of what appears, we must ask what disappears. In the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a “point” along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background. (90)

In relating to Max, too, Nelson demonstrates an appropriate application of her ethics through her complicated role as a step-parent. Step-parents are individuals firmly outside the traditional family, but whose presence in a blended family supports those same traditional ideals. Being outside and within the family, therefore, Nelson realizes that, to Max, she stands opposing biological “parents[, who] are Hallmark sacrosanct” (21).

Eventually, Nelson writes of her young stepson’s favorite games, which I read as primary examples of how her ethic of presentism works. “Fallen Soldier” (12) and “Bear Family,” Max’s two “favorite toddler game[s]” (22), both typify the mutual-gratification and engagement necessary for an ethical relationship with new family modes now and with the intention of building a future. For the child meeting a new parent in *The Argonauts*, Fallen Soldier provides a peaceful moment whereby the stepparent becomes “the good Blue Witch who had to sprinkle healing dust all over [the wounded soldier] to

bring him back to life” (10). In this fantasy healing process, Nelson “picked up each [of Max’s] limb[s] and turned it over, trying to find the wound” (12). Her careful, phenomenological awareness of his small body establishes a chain of trust between the hopeful stepparent and trusting child that also stands as a model for how one might interact with nonhuman animals or environments to their benefit and healing.

Furthermore, Bear Family “took place in our morning bed” and encompasses anything from “Baby Bear play[ing] at home with his bear family” to his “ventur[ing] off on his own, to spear a tuna” (12-13). The family of care that’s being built here intentionally expands beyond its own humanity, and it still encourages the autonomy of its youth. This game shows what type of creativeness children can come up with in hopes of bringing people together. It establishes a safe space for the trust between stepparent and child to grow while teaching Nelson more about Max’s individuality and “inventiveness” in respect to both his family and to nonhuman animal communities (13). The role and importance of a childlike mind is central it seems, as Nelson clearly venerates the child as the autonomous agent in these interactions; the parents are simply along for the ride. Ultimately, there stands potential for readers, too, to expand their understandings of “family” to include nonhuman animals, the environment, and physical landscapes as members after reading these passages, and it is in this way that Nelson’s ethics of mutual-gratification and intimacy become a basis for positive change in the now, both for her and her family and for readers and theirs.

Later in her memoir, Nelson makes her ethic more clearly applicable to a wider range of “family,” but it does meet limitation. After her discussion of “sodomitical maternity [as it] was on full display in A.L. Steiner’s 2012 installation *Puppies and*

Babies” (70), Nelson provides another inspired vindication of the queer pleasures of motherhood and family-making:

Indeed, one of the gifts of **genderqueer family making**—and **animal loving**—is the **revelation of caretaking** as a detachable form—and attachable to—any gender, **any sentient being**. . . . The installation . . . partakes in a long history of queers constructing their own families . . . and that presents queer family as an umbrella category under which baby making might be a subset, rather than the other way around. (72, my emphases)

Nelson’s most powerful techniques here are 1) the inclusion of animal loving in her assessment of family making and 2) her revelation of care as connectable to, assumedly, any sentient being. Ultimately, Nelson’s ethic of care and mutual-gratification has the potential to include nonhuman animals and landscapes or physical environments, but I think she is just being hyperbolic here, honestly, in her art-inspired and frenzied state. One can only hope that Nelson’s investment actually extends to physical landscapes in this way, but there is no proof of it in this text. She makes grand claims of involving “any sentient being” in these ethics she learns, but readers encounter no examples actually interacting with trees or plants of any type. Nelson does, at least, respond to the queering of “family” and to loving like animals, but somewhere in her logic, she is leaving something out.

A few pages later, Nelson touches again on her expanded sense of family as she explores today’s environmental crisis. In her and Harry’s discussion of the film *X-Men: First Class*, Nelson considers the concept of “lived experiences . . . on this peeled, endangered planet” (82). She shares truisms about the state of our world only in passing,

however, as the memoirist quickly turns her focus to comparisons of some of those lived experiences on such a planet. First, Nelson examines the act of watching a reality TV show on which the contestant was a

breast cancer patient recovering from a double mastectomy. It was uncanny to watch her performing the same actions [Nelson and Harry] were performing [after Harry's top surgery]—emptying her drains, waiting patiently for her unbinding—but with opposite emotions. You [Harry] felt unburdened, euphoric, reborn; the woman on TV feared, wept, and grieved. (82)

Top surgery relates closely yet peripherally to a double mastectomy just as the heterosexual ideal family relates similarly to what Nelson's presents to be. These lived experiences are comparable and can inform one another. Continuing to reflect, Nelson shares an experience in which "you [Harry] pass as a guy; I, as pregnant. Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours" (83), and the chosen, queer family, *passes* as the heterosexual ideal. However, Nelson knows this association lies simply "on the surface...but that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness" (83).

Nelson values her queerness, her animality, and the acts of cultivation that went into her "genderqueer family making" (72). Furthermore, she can compare the similarities and contrasts between the different realities, these paradoxically comparable moments, but what she *feels* will always hold precedent. Nelson feels the ecological reality of humans as animals whose bodies, as Debbie Hagan writes, "are shells in perpetual flux" (40), and so, for her, it is urgent and always embodied. Within the current

world paradigm, one could view personal, embodied experience as that which is signified by a particular societal intersection. Extending this logic, within the current ecological crisis, analogous experiences (similar signifieds) occur despite vastly different instigations (divergent signifiers), and what remains on that “endangered planet” are “scarred” “animals” of various forms that have trouble relating to one another (82, 6, 83). Nelson speaks for healing, positive transformation and change, and the expansion of our familial communities *because* she feels deeply and pays attention to the world as it shifts.

Nelson ends *The Argonauts* with a somewhat succinct summary of her and my main points on family and production. She writes about her newborn child Iggy, her mother, her partner, her stepson, her community, the production of meaning, queer pleasure, futurity, and care. In the letter she imagines writing to Iggy before his birth, she tells him:

I want you to know, you were thought of as possible . . . not in any single moment, but over many months, even years, of trying, waiting, of calling . . . [we were] always committed to the charge of ever-deepening understanding—two human animals, one of whom is blessedly neither male nor female, the other of whom is female (more or less), deeply, doggedly, wildly wanted you to be. (142)

Nelson refuses to buy into Edelman’s maxim of “No Future” for queer people, and she equally denies the belief that queer families and queer pleasures are perverse. She pledges her dedication to Iggy as a human animal who wanted him and who loved him even as a concept waiting to be fertilized. Her desires for Iggy, she admits, were deep, dogged, and wild, yet those terms do not tarnish her love of her son, as many theorists before her might claim. She validates the family she forged as-is and refuses to apologize, because it

is sanctified with love, devotion, and care. In fact, watching her stepson play with his new brother, she writes contentedly, “But really there is no such things as reproduction, only acts of production... When all the mythologies have been set aside, we can see that, **children or no children** . . . we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our **care**, its ongoing song” (143, my emphases). Children or no children, Nelson insists, we must care for our world and our fellow citizens now, lest the blaze dies and the song ends.

Before I can conclude this section, I need to address the extent of limitations I perceive in Nelson’s linguistic and activist expansion in tandem with the ethic she proposes. Clearly, Nelson explores the places where the natural, queer, familiar, and strange converge in signification. To me (because I have studied these things) and to scholars of color (whose environmental realities reflect significantly more pressing degradation and pollution), however, Nelson’s queer ecosemiotic analysis of love and the *Argo* will never be enough to instigate change. Certainly, academics and scholars who read *The Argonauts* may be able to extract her environmental ethic and her expanded sense of family, but I worry that Nelson’s suggestions only allow for change at the level of language, effectively trapping activist potential by proposing the problem is solved within minds and hearts and the realm of the linguistic. I admit that one memoir does not need to instigate full change on these mental, emotional, and verbal levels, but I cannot see much actual change happening just because Nelson says we should care and think about how we express ourselves. Nelson’s presentist, queered environmental ethic does connect the multiplicity of queer bodies with the potential for connection and transformation in environmental and nonhuman bodies, but how deep does that link go?

Nelson's memoir, while more accessible than some, is not the type of book everyone will pick up and want to read. As Samantha Brennan muses in her review of *The Argonauts*, "I did wonder how accessible *The Argonauts* would be for readers outside academia. But maybe that's not the point. Maybe we are the intended audience, those of us who lead these lives, read these books, and create families in an intentional way" (20). Regardless of who the writing is for, it inherently excludes some. Unfortunately, Nelson's dense yet lofty philosophical text, however rooted in the body, does not speak to the majority of outsiders' experiences in the United States, and to evaluate its activist content, it does not create an action plan for those interested in concrete change. Of course, Nelson's memoir on family, motherhood, writing, and queerness never claimed to accomplish such goals, so some of its limitations make sense in that context. What limitation does not make sense, however, is that Nelson proposes to expand the meaning of "family" in the context of her queer experiences, but her good work of horizontalizing values within academia and metaphorizing the Mobius strip in signification and action means nothing when her family model still holds to hierarchical structures that limit outsiders from closeness and involvement. Simply enough, when she pictures her "family," the image is insular, and the environment is just background, despite the games they play and the world in which they feel they are animals.

Nelson unconsciously establishes a hierarchy wherein human life is obviously valued more than surrounding nonhuman animal or plant life. The image I referenced before of Nelson with her partner and children, along with its subsequent surface-level misinterpretations, presents reality in some ways and illusion in others; reality appears in the closeness and the isolation of the family's four members from the rest of the world.

This isolation seems to be part of what Nelson means (and even desires) when she defines her “family,” but the illusion is that we cannot be separated from our physical environments so easily. The landscape may appear to be just background, but a scholar of queer “nature” would know better. Nelson’s memoir does begin some great work of queering the discourse of “family,” but her inclusion of physical landscapes and nonhuman entities is poignantly limited. Perhaps a more accessible text, such as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, will do better.

Chapter 3: *Fun Home*, Family, and Loss

In contrast to Nelson's somewhat niche memoir, whose audience seems to bifurcate between decidedly scholarly or selectively queer, Alison Bechdel's autobiographical graphic memoir appealed to mainstream markets almost immediately upon its release in 2006.²¹ Surely, Maggie Nelson's name would pique the attention of some, but Alison Bechdel's name has been known in certain social and academic circles for decades. Ultimately, Bechdel's career as a lesbian cartoonist propelled her name into popular culture. J.K. Gardiner writes of Bechdel's mainstream cartoonist career, "[the] graphic lesbians, who first appear in 1983 develop continuing characters and a story line by 1987, and simultaneously come out together and bid their audience adieu in the 2008 Houghton Mifflin volume *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*" (189). Bechdel is a queer and feminist theorist who uses art as a means to express ideological, social, and cultural complexities. Their most common mode of expression is the comic strip, yet *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, their first graphic novel, becomes an expression of self-history through art, and it sets the precedent for their second graphic novel and companion piece, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, that was released in 2012.

Fun Home explores Bechdel's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood in relation to the spaces they loved, the people who confused them, and the family that was there through it all. The text also traces Bechdel's coming out as a lesbian and their gender dysphoria as a girl alongside their father's gayness, a gayness that was hidden and

²¹ I refer to Bechdel with gender neutral pronouns *they*, *theirs*, and *them* because, as one comes to know them through their memoir, they grew up in a time where transgender identification worked differently. They express that if they had grown up today, they would have been a trans* man, but given their own cultural and historical contexts, they present as a butch lesbian. My pronoun signification arises out of respect to Alison (Al) and that internal disjunction.

gradually exposed in pieces throughout his life up until his death.²² Gardiner claims in her article about *Fun Home* that “the memoir... repeatedly ponders Bruce Bechdel’s death in a traffic accident that may have been a suicide, and the story weaves back and forth to analyze this event through dense allusions to canonical authors, myths, and popular culture” (189). As a memoir, therefore, *Fun Home* looks deep into Bechdel’s past and attempts to solve the mystery that plagues them with guilt: did their coming out to their family encourage their father’s existential crisis, which lead him to commit suicide? Gardiner describes this conundrum as the text’s “central aporia, a fact and a double enigma: the fact of the father’s early death and the enigmas of whether or not it was a suicide – and, if so, whether or not it was precipitated by daughter Alison’s coming out, the book’s secondary and more hopeful story” (190). The text’s main characters are Alison’s childhood family, including their two brothers, their mother, and their father; their father’s occasional lover appears in the story, too. In sum, their hometown of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania serves as the most basic setting. As a memoir, *Fun Home* obviously addresses the history of these people and places, but what the text imminently examines are questions of family in light of a terrible tragedy—Bruce Bechdel’s horrific death.

In approaching questions about the meanings of “family” and “home,” Bechdel’s text provides some answers right away in its title. “Home” is modified by the adjective “fun,” and the subsequent adjective of “family” modifies a generic marker, “tragicomic.” In assessing this title and its network of associations, one can link “family” with “fun,” “home” with “fun,” “home” with “tragicomic,” and so on. However, two pairings—“family” with “home” and “fun” with “tragicomic”—are particularly poignant

²² In this sense, Bechdel lays two queer lives side-by-side just as Nelson does in her formal arrangement, which compares her experience of pregnancy and her child’s birth with her partner’s gender transition and his mother’s death.

associations for this project. Bechdel will later trouble the association between house and home in *Fun Home*, but family and home are inextricably linked from the start. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel insists that although “our house was not a real home at all...we really were a *family*” (17, my emphasis). This statement proves that Bechdel considers the spaces her family occupies to be “home,” regardless of how the space presents itself physically. Furthermore, the title’s latter pairing—“fun” with “tragicomic”—brings together concepts of fun, tragedy, and comedy. The tragicomic itself straddles a space between tragedy and comedy, and the signifier “fun” added to the mix could make the association go either way. It could add a sardonic tone to the tragicomic readers are about to open, or as it does to me, it could insist that readers ought to find fun in this and other “spaces between,” a phrase championed by Eluned Summers-Bremner in her essay “Reading Irigaray, Dancing” (108).

Bechdel spends much of *Fun Home* validating these types of liminal, or in-between, experiences as they arise. Individual characters’ queer embodiments are the first liminal experiences worth mention. Bechdel reflects on their father’s differences to them, yet their meditations on gayness throughout the text validate a sameness that goes unspoken in his lifetime. Indeed, both Alison and Bruce in the text seem to have parts of themselves stuck in-between inner feeling and outer expression: the closeted self battles the individual’s authenticity.²³ The inherent layers of time involved in the telling of this memoir make the character of Alison fairly liminal, too. There are three different Alisons in *Fun Home*, if one reads closely. First is the Alison of their childhood, followed by the fresh-out-of-the-closet Alison of college age, and the final Alison is the narrator outside

²³ In this analysis, “Alison” will signify the character within the text of *Fun Home*, across her various incarnations, and “Bechdel” will signify the author outside the text whose work I analyze.

the text, the retrospective memoirist, who writes the captions, who somewhat-omnisciently acts within and tells the story, and who pieces together its clues.²⁴ In addition to character formation, Bechdel uses the graphic novel format of their memoir narrative to play in the gaps of literary representation by adding a new layer of signification: visual semiotics. Thus, certain symbols appear throughout the text as indications of these liminal experiences or pivotal moments. Furthermore, these visuals help the graphic novel to tell an emotionally complex story, lessening the impact of the story's intensity while validating it by way of its visual representations.

The musical version of *Fun Home* applies equally liminal and creative tactics to its storytelling presentation. There are three Alisons in the musical, too, so Bechdel's layers of signification across time are still present. The cast is small and actors play multiple roles, depending on how many are needed to dance or support the musical routine; the stage and set are minimalist with sections that rotate to reveal different settings and times. Additionally, the visuals attempt to corroborate the feeling of a graphic novel at times through lighting techniques made to fragment the stage into graphic frames. Of course, as a musical, too, this version of Bechdel's memoir adds multiple other layers of signification onto the story through music (song and dance), both in terms of a small orchestra the cast itself. After reading the graphic novel in communication with the musical, one will realize how clues emerge and piece themselves together so that the full story cannot be grasped without seeing both forms.

In some sense, as hinted by the title, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* combines elements of tragedy and comedy that further elevates this in-between space and

²⁴ *Fun Home* did so well as a graphic novel that, in 2014, it was developed into a script for Broadway. The musical, released on Broadway in 2015, signifies these layers of Alison by using three different actors (and by incorporating Bechdel's opinion as an active member of the musical's development team).

experience as inherently valuable. Gardiner recognizes this dual conception behind *Fun Home* as “the generic plenitude in Bechdel’s work, which . . . exceeds . . . opposition” (190). She maintains that the memoir “incorporates and builds upon” many tenants of the past, of characters, and of form (189), but I assert that this playfulness queers the genre of memoir itself. Is it just a memoir? Is it a graphic novel first and foremost? Is it a mystery novel? Is it a critical treatise? Is it a therapy tool? Is it a musical?

Bechdel seems to suggest their story, similar to Nelson’s, doesn’t suffer from its many liminal positionings. There is no thinning to the point of breakage, no weakening; instead, it becomes enhanced. Ultimately, Bechdel’s formal and generic playfulness throughout *Fun Home* signals (and authenticates) what several queer scholars have asserted as the need to “dance with instability” in order to be authentic (Ahmed; Summers-Bremner; Sandilands). The story Bechdel undertakes is hard to tell, and they do not have all the answers. In fact, for Bechdel, the very act of telling their story in this way helps them navigate historical and interpersonal inconsistencies while providing comfort amid their unanswered questions and broken heart.

Fun Home’s liminal affirmations occur not only just within the story itself, its imagery and symbolism, or its formal and generic experimentation, but also through its linguistic and conceptual innovations, as with Nelson’s *The Argonauts*. Family conflict precedes and accentuates the first time the term “family” appears in this memoir, problematizing the concept right from the start. Bechdel begins by, in Gardiner’s terms, “ironically invoke[ing] the happier family in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*” (191), before revealing what her experience of family was actually like growing up. For example, at the beginning, it’s Christmastime in Bechdel’s story. In the animation for this

segment, young Alison’s facial expressions reflect their growing fear and disappointment in the rage that was so common in their father before they leave the house and explore nature to settle down in the frames right before Bechdel mentions their “family” for the first time.²⁵



Figure 1: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 10.

It is shortly thereafter that Alison narrates, “Sometimes when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family . . . or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children” (13). Here, we have the first reference to Bechdel’s family in specific. In the graphic frame, all three Bechdel children sit around a gleaming Christmas tree while their father rules the right side of the frame as a seemingly-contented shadow after having just posed as basically a domestic tyrant (Figure 2).²⁶ Although the memoir itself partially valorizes Bruce Bechdel for his

²⁵ Bechdel does use the term “family” once before the moment I focus on, but that reference (Figure 1) draws attention to a different, fictional family to which young Alison compares their own.

²⁶ “Graphic frame” (occasionally, just “frame”) is the phrase I use to connote an individual segment on any given page of the graphic novel. Any given page can contain two (60) to twelve (220, 221) graphic frames

struggles and complicated life in the closet, moments like these prove that the man was no icon, no tragic hero. Bechdel writes their family realistically and thereby undermines linguistic stagnancy.

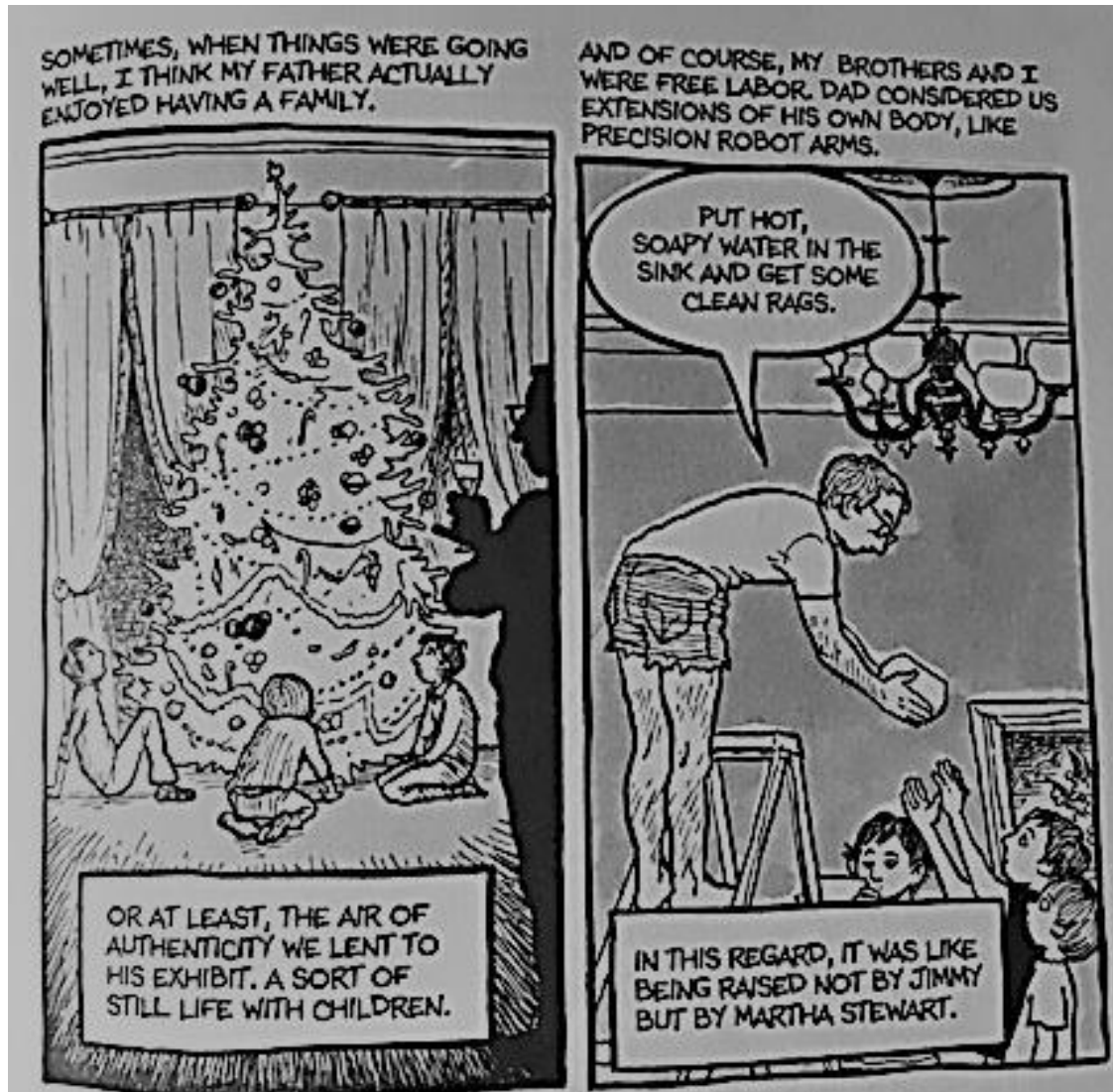


Figure 2: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 13.

that tell the story through just text, just a cartoon, or cartoon plus text; printed (or reimagined) maps, letters, or photographs from Bechdel's past; or segments from classic novels, printed as they were in their original text. I want to draw attention to these "frames" with distinction from the term's use in cinematic studies, for I see reading a graphic novel as a very different experience from watching a film. I do, however, aim to indicate and apply in this analysis the similarity between my "graphic frame" and the frame that holds a painting or drawing.

Even in the first mention of “family,” the term’s use signifies a fluctuation between the fabricated image of an ideal family perfection and realistic family struggles, and the realism of this oscillation make the scene entirely relatable. Even the most apparently-perfect, heterosexual family contains conflict, strife, and pretense. Around a graphic frame depicting a family portrait later, Alison writes that her father “used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not...That is to say, impeccable” (16). Bechdel’s overt task in the memoir therefore becomes discerning authenticity from simulation.

Bechdel’s examinations of the term “family,” then, coincide with those into the character of her father and her demonstrations of his vacillating character. This connection arises again with the symbol of lilacs. In effect in a graphic novel, symbols and images come to stand as equal signs and signifiers, valued at the same level as words. Lilacs do not appear until halfway through the text, and after that point they appear again and again. I consider this timeline of lilacs’ frequency of inclusion in the narrative significant, given the meaning attributed to the lilac upon first encounter, the existence of many other flowers in the graphic frames before that (all of which pointedly lack the lilac), and the way the lilac reappears to punctuate the scenes (or ideas) it accompanies. When the lilac first appears in *Fun Home*, it shares a graphic frame with Bruce, and its presence brings together Bechdel’s examinations of nature, queerness, the canon, and the mystery at hand.

The lilac does not obviously signify “family” in *Fun Home*, but it does evince a similar ecosystem-like arrangement of signification that brings together issues of queerness, family, environmentalism, and closure. I believe the lilac’s presence

represents Bechdel's vacillation between disclosure and disguise.²⁷ The lilac bush, as a sign, is natural, yet its cultivation as a garden plant at Bruce's hands complicates. The single cut lilac recalls the landscape from which it came, the hands that perhaps tended each flower, and the amalgam of animals and insects who found sustenance there. A bouquet of lilacs signifies even more so because it has been cut and gathered for show in a place likely far removed from the bush. As I mention above, the lilac first appears in *Fun Home* next to Bruce in a graphic frame of him holding and gazing at a vase full of those purple beauties, which we assume he has hand-cut and arranged himself (*Figure 3*). Alison writes, "If my father had a favorite flower, it was the lilac . . . A tragic botanical specimen invariably beginning to fade even before reaching its peak" (92). The analogy proposed between Bechdel's father and these flowers rings clear immediately: decadent, sweet-smelling lilacs signify a pattern in Bruce's behavior whereby he distracts from his own unravelling with ostentation of artifice. Just under this initial graphic frame is a segment from *Remembrance of Things Past*, in which Bechdel examines "how Proust describes the lilacs bordering Swann's Way" before, ironically and poignantly, calling Proust a "pansy" (92, 93), drawing a pointed connection between their father and this author.²⁸ Obviously even young Alison's assumptions are strong enough that they

²⁷ There is quite the legacy attached to the lilac that follows this same pattern of representation. Bechdel does with Bruce's character and the figure of the lilac in their graphic novel what others have done with similarly gay male icons of the Western literary canon. Historically in American poetry, the lilac makes its main appearance in the work of Walt Whitman, namely his elegy for Abraham Lincoln, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. If we take this poem and its signification as precedence, one can expect the lilac in Bechdel's work to draw on, at the very least, similar themes of revered father figures gone too soon and righteous life stunted, both of which it does. This information all goes without saying the literal form of the lilac confers a masculinist tradition of representation in its phallic form. The lilac buds themselves look like tiny phalluses while the larger coniferous collection of buds looks even more like erect penises. The symbol of lilac, therefore, has a literary history of connotation involving homosocial bonding, masculine intimacy, and that which society disavows.

²⁸ The irony has additional levels in this case because Proust was actually a gay man who wrote negatively about homosexual love and who never fully disclosed his own sexuality during his lifetime, just like Bruce.

connect the literary mind, their father, nonnormative sexuality, the lilac, and that which is hidden.

Directly below that lilac segment is another, smaller graphic frame that contains physical lilacs again. The flowers in their vase populate the left side of the frame, and the lower left corner shows a magazine called the *Wayside Gardens* catalog. The frame is almost lopsided in that the signification of the image takes place almost completely on the left-hand side. Here, the appearance of the lilac signifies Bruce and his struggles as well as the general possibilities of the “spaces between” that Bremner-Summers and I enjoy so much. This time, the appearance of lilacs is underscored by the informative *Wayside Gardens* catalog, all of which weighs down the image and destroy its artistic balance.

Proust even wrote *Sodom and Gomorrah* with a tone of curious jealousy directed toward the pleasures of these Biblical wastelands. If “pansy” means coward, Proust may have been one; if “pansy” means queer man, Proust certainly was one; and if “pansy” here means overly sentimental and/or feminine male, Proust did write romantically, but we cannot be sure.

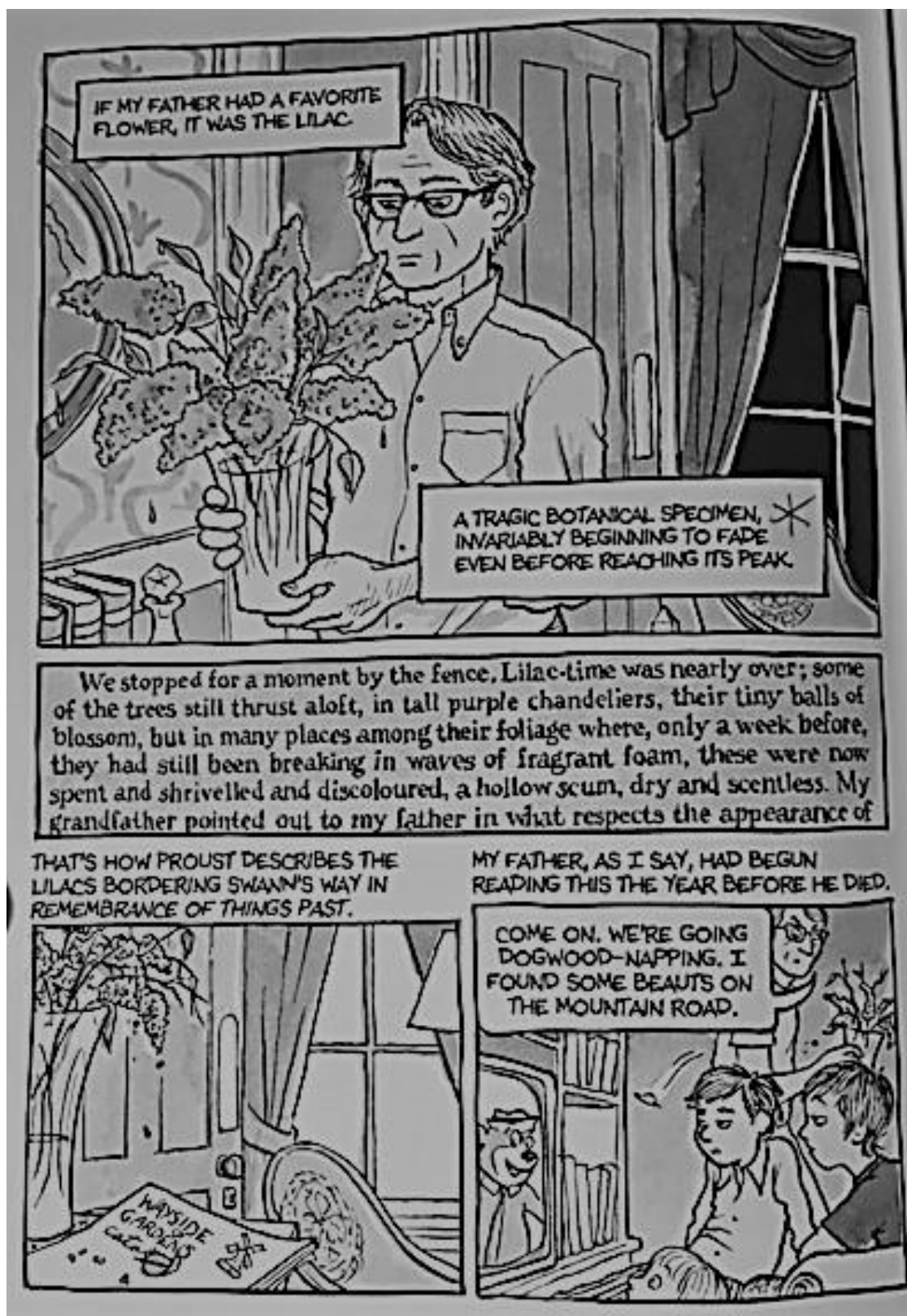


Figure 3: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 92.

When lilacs appear next, Alison the narrator explores their childhood self's version of gender expectations, which they transgressed yet felt vicariously through their father (*Figure 4*). Where they "measured" their father's masculinity against others, finding it "short, [they] stepped in" to fill in the gap, and the way that young Alison performs this "step[ping] in" involves their fervently boyish hairdo and dirtiness (96). The second frame on this page holds this pivotal moment in the story—when Alison the narrator begins to admit her gender dysphoria, which ends up being another uncommon trait she shares with her father—and it just so happens to involve a lilac.



Figure 4: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 96.

Bruce holds a painting, which again occupies the lower left-hand corner of the frame, and he polices his child's gender, the variance in which young Alison had been using to feel authentic. Readers learn later that both father and child, unbeknownst to the other, vicariously affirms their own gender identity through the actions, dress, and interests of the other. These two family members who seem to contrast each other so starkly inform one another's experience in ways no one else around them could. The lilac's placement in this moment again signifies Bruce and his experience along with the struggles of being in-between; however, it focuses more metaphoric meaning on young Alison and gender identity in specific.

The next moment of interest along these lines does not focus on the lilac; instead, the *Wayside Gardens* catalog appears again and accompanies an interesting gender-related exchange between Bruce and college-aged Alison. Alison and Bruce sit at the kitchen table together, snacking on Snyders of Hanover, a brand of pretzel that many Pennsylvanians will recognize. Alison reads *Custom Shirtmakers*, a magazine oriented and marketed for men, while their father reads *Wayside Gardens*, a magazine with a tricky gendered association in Bruce's hands. *Wayside Gardens* represents a luxury gardening outlet, and Bruce's interest in it links his interests of plant cultivation and landscape design, more feminine environmental actions, with architecture, a far more (typically) masculine alternative. Alison is not bothered by her father's unique magazine choices, however, nor his gender idiosyncrasies. The two sit in peace, snacking and reading together while Alison the narrator reconsiders Proust and Alison in-the-story chats with their father about French Cuffs and cufflinks.

As with the original appearance of *Wayside Gardens* alongside Proust, however, what seems to be a positive association that encourages each character's authenticity is, in reality, one that functions as a harbinger of doom. In its first presence, the magazine accompanies Alison the narrator's examination of the doomed lilac, seeming so alive yet so close to death, and its second appearance, with Alison as a college student, shaping this bonding experience with Bruce through the specter of his oncoming death.

The next time the lilacs arise, they signify this same bifurcation of disclosure and indiscernibility as well as meaningful theorization about queer family-making. Alison the narrator has just shared "that the end of [their father's] lie coincided with the beginning of [their] truth," and they dive into a retelling of one of the most formative experiences they ever shared with their father (117). Alison claims that "we saw the most unsettling sight," but its unsettling quality is the intense "surge of joy" Alison felt in the moment (117, 118). A "bulldyke" walks into the restaurant where young Alison dines with their father, and even then, young Alison recognizes and yearns for the bulldyke's embodiment "like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they've never spoken to but know by sight" (118). Here, young Alison speaks to a family connection forged simply on what one can discern from sight, intuition, and perceived sameness.

This moment also relates to a similar focal point in *Fun Home: The Musical*, and Bechdel here gives her musical viewers a glimpse in this scene something that readers of the graphic novel will miss. Something readers do not get to see is the massive ring of keys hanging on the pants of the old school butch who walks into the deli, and the musical underscores the importance of these keys through a song appropriately titled

“Ring of Keys.” The song is full of young Alison’s feelings after seeing this woman. They struggle to utter what exactly they were thinking: “I feel... I feel...” Young Alison eventually puts into words that something of this person’s appearance speaks to an internal familiarity: “Your swagger and your bearings and the just-right clothes you’re wearing. Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace-up boots.” In the end, however, it’s the ring of keys at her side that strikes Alison the most, “And your keys, oh. Your ring of keys! I know you.” The levels of access signified in this ring of keys speaks to young Alison about their potential for the future: if they can accept their gender and sexual identities, they will be, on some level, free. In Mark Hain’s article in *Queering the Countryside*, he talks about this type of recognition between rural queers in suburban or urban spaces, and he validates what would be Alison’s autonomy here, too:

Assertion of choice in one’s engagement with cultural products becomes a way of figuring things out, looking at the world, recognizing and rejecting certain ideologies, imagining the self, and locating a sense of self-worth in a time and place where some audiences may be starving for any remotely positive representation of “difference.” (167)

The cruel irony of *Fun Home* is that young Alison was “starving” in some ways for “any remotely positive representation of ‘difference,’” despite their father’s closeted queerness, and yet they are the one of the two of them who embraces the chance to come out and flourish. How the musical’s creators expressed the recognition and yearning in young Alison’s song brings me to tears almost every time I hear it; truly, the moment poignantly expresses an acknowledgement of “family” based on qualifications far outside the bounds of genetics. What’s more is that it expresses the sentiment that sometimes

queer people feel stronger family bonds with other queer people even if they have a loving, living, accepting biological family. This painful experience played out by Alison in the musical speaks loudly.

“The vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years... as perhaps it haunted my father,” muses narrator Alison in the graphic novel just before the lilacs appear, and finally they do right when Alison speaks of the time “after Dad died” when she mourns him and wonders what he may have left “ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled” (119). Once again, the lilacs signify a role reversal and the porous gap between experiences of father and child, life and death. The lilacs here represent Bechdel’s imagination of what flowers Bruce would have had decorating his space while reading Proust before he dies. Of course, they assume he’d surround himself with his favorite flower. The author still ponders their father’s life and whether their own coming out and gendered dreams “haunted [their] father” the point of precipitating his possible suicide. The lilac in this frame implies the depth of similarity in the experiences of these two family members, therefore, while it also signifies Bechdel’s processing of the loss of their father and all those things he had left undone.

Although the musical does not place the exact same emphasis on the lilac as Bechdel does in her physical book, the lilac does appear once and meaningfully in the musical version of *Fun Home*, during a powerful convergence of “family” and “home.”²⁹ College-aged Alison, recently having come out and more recently having started dating Joan, decides to bring their girlfriend home for the break. After socializing with both parents, Alison responds to her mother about Joan’s room choice while they’re there, “I

²⁹ The musical version of *Fun Home* has been slightly different in each of its known performances. The one I saw was limited in contrast to the original Broadway productions, so I cannot be sure how much of my viewing experience is unique to me, the particular performance I saw, or the cast in general.

thought I'd put her in the Lilac Room." Once again, the lilac underscores that which straddles a binary of hidden and disclosed. Alison certainly brought their partner, their new "family" member, home, but they will assumedly sleep in separate rooms out of some level of respect for traditions and the old "family." Whether it arises due to Alison's sexuality or Joan herself, the lilac represents, to some degree, the anxiety of change and the coping mechanisms individuals create in response to transition.

Looking back at the lilacs of the graphic novel, readers must examine their final appearance to perceive the full story. In their last moment in *Fun Home*, the lilacs appear in a semi-wild state outdoors, and they emphasize, once again, all that goes left unsaid and the struggle Bruce must have experienced living so long in the closet. Just prior to this moment, Alison the narrator shares an intuitive dream about nature she had "two nights before [their] father died" (123, *Figure 5*). The narrator explains the dream with bucolic language and the scene is beautifully pastoral. The moment dream-Alison hoped to share with their father is wasted on their waiting, and their father seems careless to have missed it.

The gorgeous sunset scene that dream-Alison wanted to share fades quickly, a transition reminiscent of what happens to any individual when their chances for authenticity are muffled. The fiery explosion of color signifies, in part, the fire of one's spirit, which can help the individual grow when stoked. Unfortunately and poignantly, dream-Bruce misses the moment, yet Alison the narrator suggests he still "did possess a certain radiance...perhaps due to his habit of excessive, even idolatrous, sunbathing" (124, *Figure 6*). In this graphic frame, one might notice a short lilac bush right outside the door Bruce's family leaves in order to go to church. Those live flowers, then, frame

this moment when Alison claims that that radiance is all Bruce has, and that light within him was stifled for a long time before his death. Alison then ponders his death and the “inevitably dimming, crepuscular effect” it had on friends, family, and other mourners (124). Alison can’t deny that their father still kept his inner flame burning. He still lit up the room and sunbathed, and when he dies, Alison insists, it is like a light goes out.

It is important to note that this realization that solidifies in the narrator’s mind fuses two experiences of reality as well. First, the reader encounters Alison’s dream and its surface-level landscapes made to be consumed by the viewer. Second, the reader goes into Alison’s memory and their thoughts about the reality of their father, the Bechdel’s house, and the landscaping Bruce did there. The two experiences link distinct environmental realities together, too. First, the landscape made by time rather than human hands acts as the setting for Alison’s “premonitory dream,” while the second landscape cultivated and shaped by Bruce’s hands toward his goals of artifice functions as a passing setting for Alison’s thoughts (124, *Figure 6*). Ultimately, Bechdel unintentionally queers their discourse of “nature” through these seemingly-background environmental placements. The dream world of landscape and sadness reflects a theme of what Bruce has lost, while the world of landscaping and memory relates more to a theme of what Bruce has built.



Figure 5: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 123.

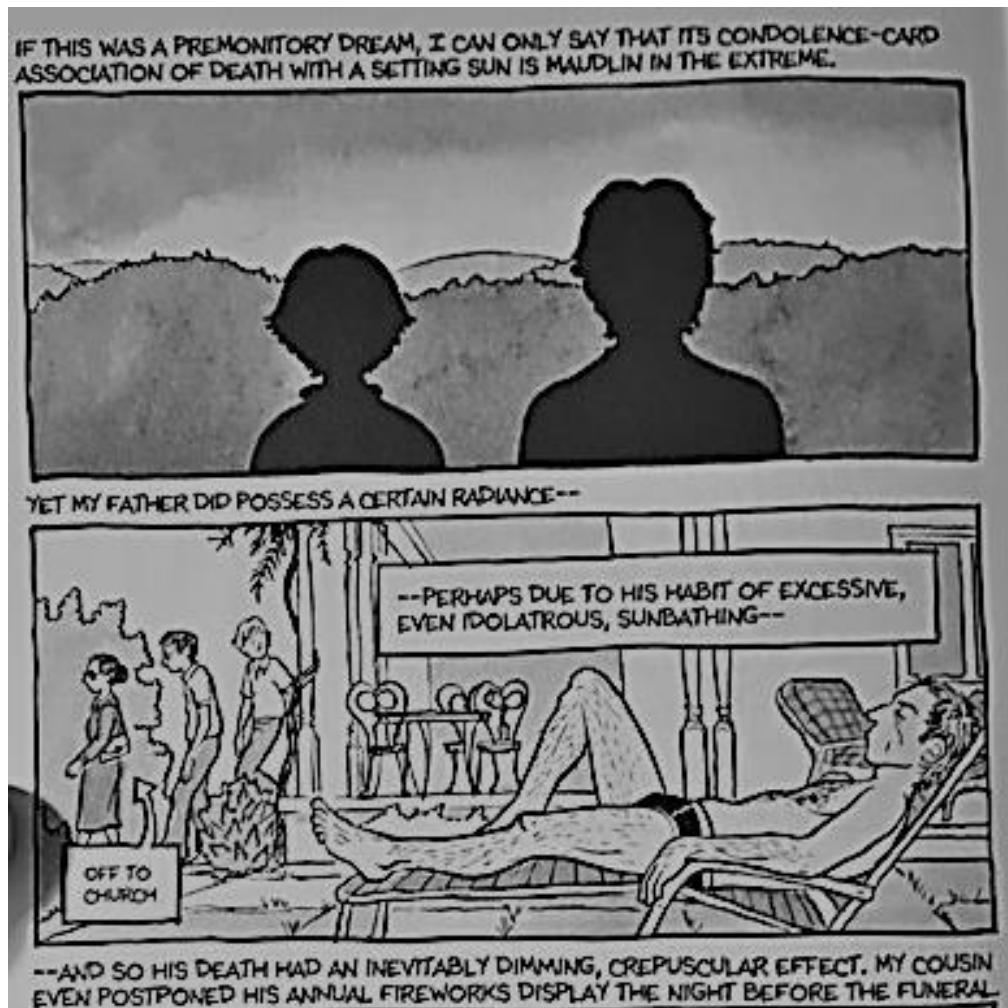


Figure 6: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 124.

Environmentally, too, the surface-level landscape means something different than the refined, landscaped yard. Murray Bookchin berates environmentalists who only see the surface in *Remaking Society*:

Nature, in turn, is not a scenic view we admire through a picture window—a view that is frozen into a landscape or a static panorama. Such “landscape” images of nature may be spiritually elevating but they are ecologically deceptive. Fixed in time and place, this imagery makes it easy for us to forget that nature is not a

static vision of the natural world but the long, indeed cumulative, *history* of natural development. (36)

Alison and Bruce gaze longingly at this “frozen” landscape in Al’s dream, so it could be that this problematic environment functions to distance Alison from Bruce’s truth in this space: yes, he was stifled in some ways, but he found happiness in others. The problematically deceptive dream world shares what Bruce lost while the more accurate environmental depiction of his house and lawn show what he built. Perhaps the meaning here suggests that Bruce’s value centers neither on what he lost nor what he could never express; rather, Bechdel’s environmental shift centers us instead on the reality that Bruce built, despite how limited he felt or was perceived as in that experience. Once again, the lilac appears to underscore a moment of bifurcation in which Bruce’s urge to disclose his sexuality and be authentic is eclipsed by his love of safety and constructed illusion.

The lilacs in *Fun Home* function to signify fluctuating identities and the carefully constructed space between the fully disclosed and the hidden. In the musical, they function similarly, appearing in the pivotal moment when college-aged Alison brings their first girlfriend home to meet the family, for it is “the Lilac Room” where Al decides to have Joan stay while they visit the Bechdels. Lilacs become a signal for that which cannot be expressed in simple or binaric terms. They embody the border between life and death, flourishing and suffocating, disclosing and disguising, the boundaries of “family,” and more. Thus, they prove that life can exist in the margins, that meaning can vary and still express what’s intended, and that natural/floral lives mimic human lives (but not vice versa). In this last scene with the lilac framing Bruce’s struggles with “radiance” (124), the bush also signifies that Bruce’s personality, as he could express it, was at least

partially authentic. What Bechdel processes, using the metonymies of lilacs and light, is the question of whether Bruce's life was full and authentic regardless of how much he was not able to be himself. Each time the lilacs appear, they signal to the reader that the apparent contradictions of the scene are not as mutually-exclusive as one might expect. In the end, these lilacs come to promote Bruce's and Alison's individuality, their struggles, and their divergent yet similar gender and sexual identities.

As with "family," the visual signifier of lilacs in *Fun Home* expresses a plenitude of meaning that allows for and celebrates multiplicity and fluctuation. After carefully considering both signifiers of "family" and lilacs, readers can understand how Bechdel's use of these terms open up discourses of ethics and engagement in a way that lends a value to what LGBTQ embodiments can teach us. Throughout *Fun Home*, gender identity and sexual orientation are valued as means of genuine expression as well as pathways for resistance to hegemony. These deviant embodiments function to expand readers' appreciation of "family," and they may even directly link to queered ecological understanding in the minds of readers.

Despite all this good queer work, I must remember my environmental focus. There is only one point in *Fun Home* that Bechdel explicitly discusses her local ecology and her place within it. Allison narrates and ponders what would have happened "if only [their father] had been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek" (125), his hometown, and whether "the peculiar topography [of the place] really did exert some kind of pull" (126). Alison then goes on to explain the "peculiar topography" she suggests here, and its idiosyncrasy seems to be the fact that the land was once "the

Allegheny Front, where the vast forest of the Allegheny Plateau . . . abruptly breaks into tidy ranks of long ridges and cultivated valleys” (126).

What Bechdel, local Pennsylvanian acting as geological historian, focuses on here is the alteration of the land for the sake of industry and community. The land itself was reformed to accommodate human life, and this sharing of the land, this connection, Alison ponders, may be what kept their father from leaving. Alison the narrator and Bechdel directly associate the altered mountains, the changing landscape of the Allegheny Front, and the affected watershed of her hometown with the state of her family’s health, and curiously enough, the lilac appears here again, however, not in image form this time. Shortly after their brief history of the alteration to the Allegheny Front, Alison shares what they experienced in Beech Creek as a kid (*Figure 7*). They contemplate the recent change whereby “Interstate 80 had just been blasted through the ridge beyond ours,” forcing local engineers to create a “massive earthen berm [between the town and highway to] effectively deaden any hint of noise from the [highway beyond]” (127).³⁰ The Bechdels play a card game on their porch and ponder the berm in the distance before Alison describes the effects of such a construction project. Young Alison explores their physical landscape, watching the sun rise and following its setting “behind the strip mine-pocked plateau” (128, *Figure 8*). Narrator Alison notes a particular “perversity” of this landscape, however. The pock-marked mountains, the energy-crisis-induced sunrise watching parties, the strip mines along the plateau, and the falsely glistening stream all signify this “perversity . . . precisely because it was polluted” (128).

³⁰ Alison mentions PA route I-80 and Bald Eagle State Park, which, given her proximity to Lock Haven and Lewisburg, might give Bucknellian readers a specifically localized sympathy for these land modifications’ impacts.

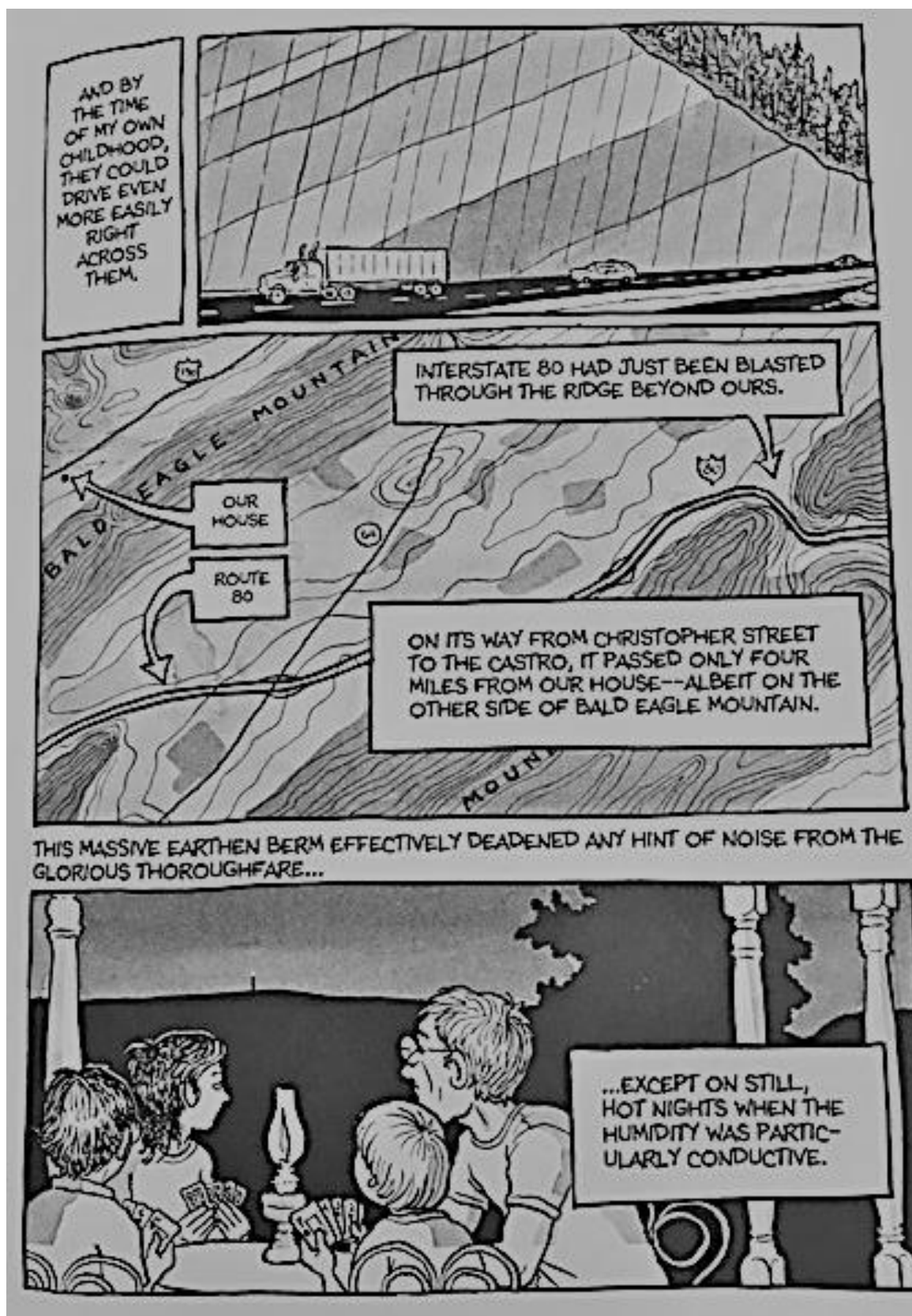


Figure 7: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 127.

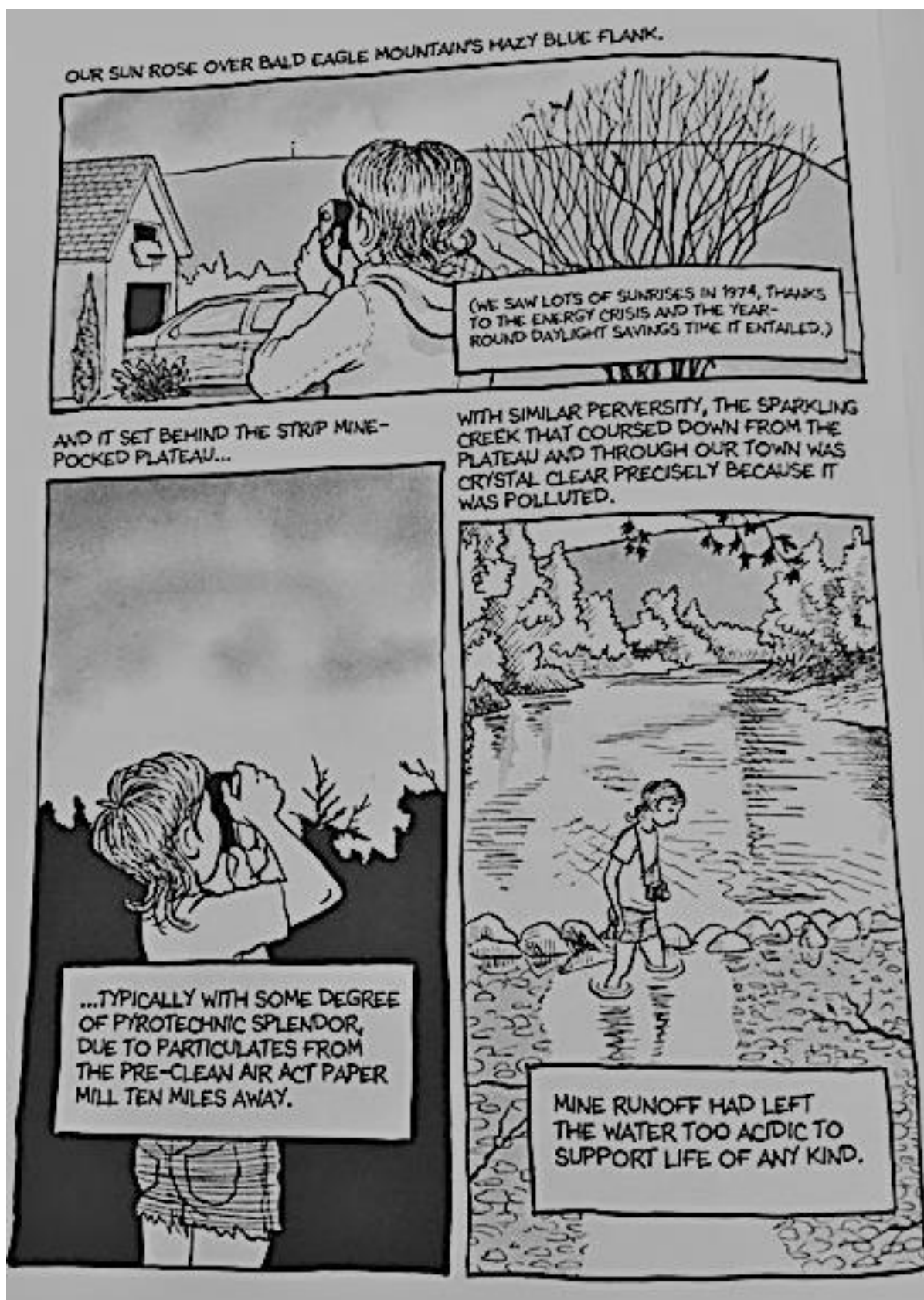


Figure 8: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 128.

Young Alison appears unbothered by all this perverse landscape modification, but their childhood naivety as demonstrated in the following page contains stinging clarity: even this scarred, tattered, poisoned landscape inspires young Alison. After “wading in this fishless creek and swooning at the salmon sky,” they seem to have found inspiration in “learn[ing] firsthand that most elemental of all ironies . . . that, as Wallace Stevens put it . . . , ‘Death is the mother of Beauty’” (129, *Figure 9*).

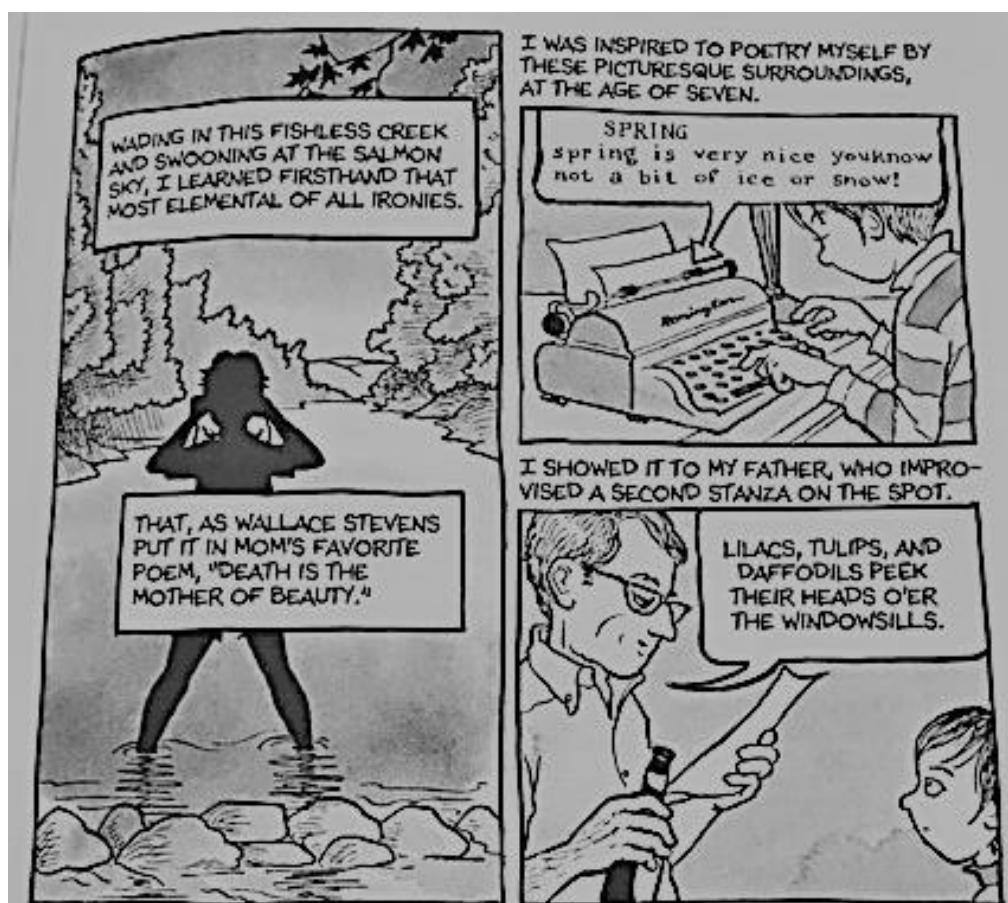


Figure 9: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, page 129.

In fact, young Alison finds themselves so “inspired to poetry,” as they assume Wallace Stevens was “by these picturesque surroundings” that they write poetry for the first time (before they give up on it for good). The pastoral reverdie that Alison composes rhymes,

and certainly reads like a seven-year-old wrote it. They are so proud of their creation, though, that they share it with their father, who “improvised a second stanza on the spot: **Lilacs, Tulips, and Daffodils / peak their heads o’er the windowsills**” (129, my emphasis).

Lilacs once again appear to punctuate the queer fluctuations of reality, and in this case, the queerness in question maps onto the physical landscape of Beech Creek. At this point in the text, lilacs appear in word alone, but it is fairly telling that this expression comes from Bruce Bechdel. As with his love of lilacs in the past, Bruce’s fascination partly comes from the poignancy of appreciating the beauty of something so close to death, and his mention of the doomed flower here again signifies *his* impending death as well as his unsettled authenticity as a closeted queer person. What’s equally interesting, however, is the application of the lilac symbology to Alison’s descriptions of Beech Creek. I have demonstrated in this analysis how the lilac functions as a validation of Bremner-Summers’s “spaces between,” whether in reference to sexuality, gender, personality, or simply to being alive. In this sense, then, the lilac Bruce mentions in his stanza retroactively frames Alison’s descriptions of the pock-marked and polluted Beech Creek, insisting that one can enjoy (and even love) a landscape that has been so altered and that is, perhaps, so close to death. It is a queer ecological stance indeed, for it values the entity in-transition, whose longevity need not be marred by what damage others perceive of it.³¹

In this section of *Fun Home*, environmental awareness converges with discussions of the in-between and other queer expressions, as validated by young Alison’s poetry, Bruce’s creativity, and Bechdel’s queer ecosemiotics in general. It appears that Bechdel,

³¹ Here, “queer” signifies unusual, unique, or strange, as with its first uses in the English language.

through the various Alisons of her past and through the figure of the father in *Fun Home*, advocates for an ethic of environmentalism that focuses simply on observing and appreciating. Unfortunately, Bechdel's interest with the "perversity" in their physical landscape—that which demonstrates the degradation of land, nonhuman animal, and human health and longevity—produces stagnation rather than action toward positive change (128). Bechdel's assertion of the perverse picturesque subsumes the landscape itself, and young Alison is content to consume the space visually before attempting to recreate it through poetry.

Young Alison's attention to landscape follows the problematic trajectory of which several ecocritics warn. In line with Murray Bookchin's arguments about frozen landscapes earlier, these theorists admonish that, in any consumption of one's landscape through distance and beauty, surface-level appreciation of physical environments and their subsequent aesthetic enjoyments are not enough to make the individual become fully engaged in the longevity and health of that space. In fact, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, in *Queer Ecology*, "ask us to dwell on what has been lost and recognize the value of devastated landscapes instead of fetishizing the about-to-be-absences of more 'pristine' natures" (39). Without close attention to one's "devastated landscape" and phenomenological awareness that acknowledges the pain that leads to the beauty, the observer stands no chance to be an activist, yet the observer should also not dwell in the horrors of destroyed landscapes either without also practicing direct ecological activism as praxis. A truly effective environmental ethic would be focused on direct engagement and close observation of the natural systems and queered ecologies

that are so inherent in the Anthropocene today.³² Bechdel appreciates their local and queered ecology, but their attraction to that perversity problematizes the path of inspiration to activism.

Unfortunately, while Bechdel's examination of "family" in *Fun Home* begins to suggest how the author's model of family (and its subsequent ethics and values) can be expanded to incorporate landscapes and nonhuman animals, such an examination (and the text, and Bechdel herself) does not include actual environmental praxis. In fact, only out of the convenience of the story, Bechdel's familial expansion incorporates her father's lovers (at his behest and without her fully realizing what that meant) and manmade physical structures that are personally meaningful, rather than the actual physical landscapes, peoples, and animals in need. To be fair, *Fun Home*, as a revolutionary and radical text, has produced positive change in the world through two means of healthy exposure. First, the graphic novel itself is consistently used in LGBTQ courses at varying educational levels, as evidenced by my research into Queer Studies professors' syllabi. Second, the formation of *Fun Home* into a musical allows its complicated topics to have much more exposure in ostensibly heterosexual popular culture. However, these methods of proliferation work to support queer activism and awareness (in varying degrees, though, as many donors to the original Broadway production downplay the queer issues and admit having been afraid to donate too much due to the assumed risk of not being able to find additional donors in the future), while only peripherally examining the "natural" and doing nothing for actual environmental engagement.

³² In this use of "queer," the emphasis lies on destabilization and the ways in which healthy ecologies are disrupted and reformed in response to pollution, dam-building, highway-building, construction, logging, and more.

Fun Home's mainstream accessibility works for the betterment of the world and Bechdel's ethics of acceptance and disclosure are well-developed, but, as a text, it was never fully equipped to ignite or even to discuss environmental activism. In addition, Bechdel applies natural symbolism to reflect human emotional complexity, but in doing so, she manipulates environmental imagery to support human agendas. Furthermore, she never looks past the surface-level damages to her local biosphere, and while she at least sees those damages, she does not address their deeper meanings, original causes, or solution paths. As Ariel Salleh claims in *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Post Modern*, "the ecological crisis . . . provokes us to reframe our history, to inscribe a new understanding of ourselves in relation to Nature, so-called, and to ask how can we get to live this new sensibility in practical ways" (3). Bechdel provides a direct response to the first two of Salleh's tenants, but they fall flat when it comes to truly *practical* ways to apply this new sensibility.

Despite its mainstream accessibility as both a graphic novel and Broadway musical, Bechdel's *Fun Home* demonstrates an environmental ethic, once extrapolated, that leaves much to be desired and still engages activism mostly on the level of language. *Fun Home* is a text that provides popular culture with complex images of queer people, thereby implicitly encouraging activism, but it fails in the task of explicitly encouraging activism and change.

Chapter 4: *The Nature of Home and Family*

Of all my primary texts and authors for this analysis, only *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place* and its author, Greta Gaard, are directly and explicitly aligned with the queer eco-realities central to this thesis. Her scholarship focuses almost solely on the intersections of feminism, queer theory, and ecocriticism in engaging with activism, community building, and policy change. Of course, I have already referenced Gaard's theoretical work multiple times in this analysis before coming to this segment. Her scholarship incorporates action plans for "opening up the canon" with performative analyses of different feminist perspectives (1992), methodological research on indigenous peoples' rituals (2001), poetic assertions of the power of water (2003; 2007), reviews of other pivotal ecocritical texts (1990; 2011), and treatises on the burgeoning field of "queer ecofeminism" (1997). In this last work, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," Gaard advocates for "reconceptualizing humans as equal participants in culture and in nature" and for liberating both history and the future by acknowledging how certain patriarchal religions of the past have been responsible for the oppression of women, nature, and more today (132, 123). For Gaard, therefore, the work of queer ecofeminism inherently includes attention to the past, awareness of the present, and hope for the future, but the process for change needs to occur *now*.

Greta Gaard's presentist effort for change immediately sets her apart from Nelson and Bechdel because Gaard explicitly works to dismantle "oppressive structures" through both language *and* action (119). Her 2007 creative nonfiction eco-memoir, *The Nature of Home*, brilliantly demonstrates how literature and language *can* incorporate an action plan of engagement with the future in the current moment. *The Nature of Home* was

written, as Candace Barlow points out in her review, in response to “the demands of academic life, specifically those of balancing [one’s] commitment to a profession that frequently leaves little choice as to where one lives with the desire to be truly ‘at home’ in a place” (214). The memoir follows Gaard’s attempts to build a family and to “[find] a sustainable relationship with place that balance[s] work, community, and ecological environments” (ix). This sense of balance that is so important to Gaard hints at her in-depth understanding of the fiercely impacting intersectional realities in predominantly patriarchal Western culture. Barlow asserts that Gaard’s eventual “aim is to demonstrate how what we call ‘home’ is necessarily informed by conditions that are simultaneously” (214), in Gaard’s words, “social, ecological, and economic” (viii). *The Nature of Home* is also about Gaard’s efforts to come more fully to terms with her relationship with her father after his death. Like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, therefore, *The Nature of Home* reveals Gaard’s feelings for her father and her process of connecting to his memory.³³ Ultimately, Barlow writes, Gaard (like Nelson) “models an ethic of care and connection” for her readers so that they may be able to find a home in nature and respect others fully, thereby engaging in the betterment of our world (215).

Home, whether one considers it to be the physical structure, the landscape, the town, a feeling, or whatever, is a microcosm of culture at large—just as family is to Young, Feder, and Ahmed—and Gaard attempts to tease out and rework those elements of both culture and home that remain entrenched in and influenced by colonialist, sexist, racist, elitist, ableist, ageist, capitalist, heterosexist, and cissexist value systems. Barlow reminds readers that *The Nature of Home* specifically addresses and “explore[s] the

³³ Coincidentally, all of my three primary texts focuses on the death of a parent, in one way or another. Bechdel’s and Gaard’s texts seek to reconnect with fathers known too little and gone too soon, while Nelson’s text associates more with motherhood and specifically, the loss of Harry’s mother to cancer.

processes whereby place-based connections are formed, interpreted, and transmitted in both personal and cultural narratives” (214). Gaard partially performs this work of exploration by varying styles, tones, and formats throughout the five sections of the text. Her style in *The Nature of Home* ranges from lyrical, creative passages to ethnographies of American ecocultures and anecdotes about academia.^{34,35} Each of the five sections in the memoir—titled “Year One,” “Year Two,” “Year Three,” etc.—has two parts and alternates between two distinct ecocultures from Gaard’s past. These two predominant spaces for Gaard’s memoir—NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) and the Vipassana meditation retreat school—provide two very different conceptions of gendered accesses to one’s natural environment, and they both helped to shape the ecoaesthetic she utilizes today. NOLS represents the masculine, scientific, and somewhat-physical transcendental tradition of environmentalism while Vipassana relates to the feminine, emotional and mostly mentally-engaged tradition of environmental involvement. Once again, the memoir focuses on “[finding] a sustainable relationship with place that balances” extremes of engagement (ix), so Gaard’s mission in the narrative becomes finding a place that allows for her enactment of a balanced environmental ethic that would, in Barlow’s terms, “address how gender and sexuality...impact human/environment relationships” (215). Gaard claims her balanced ethic of

³⁴ These ethnographies, which Barlow calls “multilayered bioregional histories” (215), add real weight to the theory that infuses Gaard’s memoir. Barlow suggests that Gaard is able to “offer research methodologies potentially helpful to environmental studies courses utilizing experiential or community-based learning” by looking explicitly at communities effected by environmental racism and sexism (215). This example is only one of many that explains how Gaard’s text provides an action plan for success.

³⁵ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands loosely defines the ecoculture as “the totality of the *ecosystem*” (456), whereby cultural studies are combined with ecosystem studies. The communication of these fields forges together “a practice of cultural studies to adequately address and challenge the ways in which ecological relations are imbricated in the cultural fabric of late capitalism” (455-6).

environmental interaction as queer, and I believe that it has a sort of additional level of balance, which is that between theory and praxis.

If *The Nature of Home* models literary activism in Gaard's balanced and queer eco-ethic, a claim which I will develop further in the following paragraphs, several structural elements of Gaard's eco-memoir also serve to embody this queer standard in ways that participate with the queer environmental ethic she evinces in the text. Gaard's shifting tone—didactic, scientific, sociological, anecdotal, factual, elated, lyrical, or otherwise, depending on the subject matter at hand—testifies to her queer aesthetic and ethic. Furthermore, her variant styles, which find reflection in her shifting tones, testify to this same embodiment. Finally, like Nelson and Bechdel, Gaard queers the very genre of memoir through her inspiring life-as-lesson action plan illustrated in the text itself.

Within this one work of literature, essentially a text of nature writing, Gaard models how to create a proactive and ethical ethnography; how to engage with indigenous people, their beliefs, and their history effectively; how to acknowledge many Americans' struggles over land rights; how to incorporate one's environment in their family; and how to make anyplace one's home. All of these queered formal elements along with the dual timeline of Gaard's narrative support the queer eco-ethic at the heart of this text.

Gaard compares these two life events and their respective environmental camps simultaneously, relating feelings and epiphanies across process and time, hoping to find a balance between the two that she can use to help shape her world as family and home.³⁶

Barlow writes that "*The Nature of Home* nevertheless insists that finding a home in nature might inspire awareness of the interdependence binding people to the earth as well as to each other" (215), and I believe it is this process of locating and building a home

³⁶ I'm referencing her work with NOLS and Vipassana meditation.

that helps Gaard recognize the ever-expanding possibilities for what “family” can mean. Gaard, like Nelson and Bechdel, queers the readers understanding of “family” both literally and figuratively. Literally, the memoir traces the establishment of her relationship with her partner Shawn, their process of home-building, their separation, and the birth of Gaard’s daughter.³⁷ This literal queering of the family promotes what Gaard calls for in her 1992 article and lesson plan “Opening up the Canon: The Importance of Teaching Lesbian and Gay Literatures” increased representation of these literatures in order to validate erased subjectivities and to destabilize the heterocentrism of the canon.

In *The Nature of Home*, therefore, Gaard explores how a queer family builds their home in and in support of the physical landscape. It also exposes the links between the queer and the natural linguistically. This linking of queer family with place accompanies the first time “family” is mentioned in the text. In her preface, Gaard explains: “These essays approach the relationship to place as a primary relationship, seldom acknowledged and yet potentially equal in force to any marriage, partnership, or family relationship” (viii). From the start, therefore, Gaard’s semiotics indicate that her sense of queered family includes the physical environment.

When Gaard mentions “family” for the second time, she does so at the end of a catalog of traits she wants her new home to have, thus reworking the traditional understanding of “family” that is historically valued much more than the trees and creeks in one’s yard are. Gaard introduces her memoir with this passage, which reveals both her proclivity to oversimplification as well as her queer and environmentally-minded stance. Here, she advocates and establishes her “third choice” between “leav[ing] home or

³⁷ Shawn is a butch lesbian, so female pronouns are used by both myself and Gaard in reference to her partner.

d[ying]” “when the economies of a region no longer support a people’s existence” (1). Essentially, the third choice is to stay and work with the environment, and by making this choice, Gaard elevates the land and its systems to at least equal level with humans and theirs:

After five years of a weekly commute through farmlands, forests, and lakes stretching 150 miles between my partner’s house in Minneapolis and my job in Duluth, both Shawn and I wanted a home together. We imagined somewhere with mountains and pine trees, progressive culture and activism, work and career opportunities, friends and family. (1-2)

Gaard contemplates home after five years of commuting to keep her partnership going, and she lists her most essential needs for the place they decide to inhabit. Interestingly, as I mentioned above, the traditionally-shaped category of “friends and family” comes dead last on Gaard’s list of needs and desires at first. The statement proposes, in some ways, that friends and family can be built anywhere, so Gaard and Shawn begin their story together by contemplating where the best landscape is for their other goals.

As the memoir progresses, Gaard’s perspective shifts from the search for the ideal environment to the search for the best place to *build*. As this shift occurs, readers will see that what gets built in this space, then, becomes both a family and a home for it. Readers can assume, therefore, that her “third choice” between leaving and dying in a place ravaged by economic and ecological crisis uplifts the needs of the earth to be at least equal with the needs of the humans so important to its health. For Gaard, one does not need to leave or die to make a family or to build a home; if one chooses a space to stay, they can actually do the work needed for long-term, positive change. She comes to realize

that the human family can exist anywhere, but the environmental family: the “mountains and pine trees, progressive culture and activism, [and] work and career opportunities” are less easily rearrangeable (1). Right from the beginning, Gaard thus demonstrates a horizontalization that complicates traditional understandings of environmentalism and that values earth and nonhuman animal life equally with human life.

The next time “family” appears, Gaard elaborates on her previous supposition that one’s relationship with their environment can equal their relationship to their lovers or family: Summer was tourist season in Duluth, and on weekends the lakewalk was throttled with

families walking its narrow path, riding in horse-drawn buggies, roller-blading, pushing baby strollers, and pulling dogs...But on summer weeknights, the lakewalk belonged to the locals, and there weren’t many of us out that nights. You could still feel alone with the lake. (18)

Gaard addresses the busyness of tourist season in Duluth, contrasting hectic weekends full of tourist families with calm weeknights when the locals rule the lakewalk. Whereas the hustle and bustle of these tourist families fills up paths meant for only a few, the serene nights when tourists are gone allow for greater intimacy with the environment.

Gaard reveals her relationship with the waterscape:

Kneeling by the water, on pink and blue and cream-white lake stones, I invoked the Ojibwe stories of the Lake as a great-grandmother, a powerful spirit who would give you what you asked for if you asked from the heart. It was a moment I did not take lightly. First I thanked the lake for the gift of place, for the unembraceable enormity of silence and spaciousness. I promised to give back to

water, to work as an ally and a granddaughter. And I put both my hands in the lake, and asked. I met Shawn the next day. (18)

In contrast to the experience of crowded paths at the lake packed with tourist families and their surface-level investments, this moment reveals what a familial relationship with one's environment can look like, and it remarkably resembles Ojibwe spirituality. Gaard draws on the "Ojibwe stories of the Lake as a great-grandmother" (18), a tricky feat for an ostensibly white scholar, attempting to emulate native spirituality while acknowledging the history and ramifications of its colonialization. Gaard fills her eco-memoir with accounts of native myth, native ecological procedures, and destroyed native spaces. Thus, she clearly attempts to utilize this knowledge in ways that do not idealize indigenous groups through reductions of their logics or by saying simply that they had it right all along. Instead she works to form an appropriate and equally-effective environmental ethic for the future. One's relationship with their physical landscape should be similar to the relationality that indigenous groups felt with their world if it aims for ethical sustainability, and Gaard's manipulation of "family" reveals her understanding of this necessary change while actively working not to appropriate it.

Gaard's identity enables her already to have a fairly queered conception of family from the start, but her assertion of place as family member complicates the process by which she and Shawn choose to have children and actually start their family. Gaard refuses to take the easy way out by moving to (or staying in) an already-manicured and already-healed landscape for her future family's home. Instead, she realizes that settling in a "perfect," or environmentally ideal, place only lessens one's connection to the betterment of that space; she's in it for the work, the activism of physically and

linguistically cultivating change. There are elements Gaard imagines for her future family and home. What surfaces are her desires for a partner, a child, and a space linked with the environment in which she can actively build a home. It appears to me that Gaard considers the flawed environment as a parent or teacher through the experience it provides others to cultivate, heal, and love it. Several indigenous cultures rooted in barren landscapes have worked with this same logic for generations (*In the Heart of the Desert*), and Gaard reinvents that methodology here with her own queer spin. She refuses to choose the easy home with Shawn and have children in the more perfect place. The appropriate home, for Gaard, will be found later, and in this space she will feel ready to have children. Certainly, this association regarding the environment or physical landscape works toward its elevation as a conclusive member of one's family.

Once again, Gaard addresses "family" in her chapter titled "Explosion," which was originally published on its own in *Ethics and the Environment* and which demonstrates Gaard's most creative stylistic experimentation in *The Nature of Home*. Taking place in "Year Four" of her eco-memoir, this segment focuses on water, love, and the limits of family relation. As Barlow writes, "Gaard argues for the formation of more equitable communities attentive to, if not united around, the common purpose of sustaining human and ecological health into the future" (215). Therefore, it seems to me that Gaard considers the work to be done to be similar to what Bookchin, Ahmed, Sandilands, and others propose, which is that we rescale and reimagine human/environmental communities first in order for the good work of activism to be performed. Essentially, she confers that a wave of change needs to begin within the

microcosm of one's own family in order for change to reach culture and society at large.

In "Explosion," Gaard begins with a warning:

In the beginning there was only water, and you were a part of it. Never mind what you have heard. This was your first relationship, your connection to water. And the quality of this relationship, the character of your beliefs about water, shapes all relationships in your life. . . . Water precedes you, water survives you. . . . Water becomes you. But Narcissus-like, you look at water and see only your self. You believe you are alone. You are afraid. You need to control this fear, this aloneness, this terrifying separation. You see the power of water and you want power . . . You believe blocking the flow of water gives you power. You believe blocking the flow of feeling gives you power. You believe harnessing the animals, fencing off the land gives you power. And for a while, these strategies work. But there are consequences. That which is diverted, divided, suppressed, always returns with greater force, and when it returns, no one can control it. No one.

(133-4)

Gaard radically reclaims water as a figure and entity worth note and admonishes readers of what will happen if we forget this deep connection. She identifies humankind's need for power and control as at least one cause of negative environmental "consequences" and laments that we harm that which is prior to and part of us. In our "separation" from our landscapes, Gaard insists, humankind feels powerful but actually loses strength. Gaard's queer eco-ethic requires us to instead work *with* the force of water by first changing the way we think about relationships.

I find Gaard's explanation of water as "your first relationship" to be particularly useful in our understanding of her expansions to "family." Humans tend to forget that we, animals, and our Earth are composed mostly of water, yet Gaard reminds us that we are natural entities, regardless of how separated we feel from our environments (or from the concept of "the natural"). We are made of water, and "water returns. Water knows there are no separations...water precedes you, water survives you . . . [and] water is patient . . . [for] that which is diverted, divided, suppressed, always returns with greater force." In forgetting this alliance, this relationship, that we should have with water (figuratively and literally), Gaard warns, we are likely to see a revolution. Using a forceful and intimate stream of conscious questioning rhetoric, Gaard then asks her readers to

Imagine a family. Picture the **elders** first. How many do you see? Where are the **children**? . . . How many people are needed to form a family? Can you be a family of one? Look at it another way: is there a limit to the relations of family? Is there a certain number of people allowed in a family until a limit is reached? . . . Do family members have to pulse with the same blood, or will love create a family where the blood does not run alike? Do the people have to be the same age and gender, or can they be many? Do they have to be the same skin color, the same culture? Do they have to pair up boy-girl, boy-girl, or can they pair up wherever love joins them? Do they have to be the same **species**, these family members of yours, or will you treat other species as family too? Is **the land** part of your family, or are there limits to the flow of family relations? When you say "family," are you talking about who will be included? Or for "family" to have real meaning, do you have to leave someone out? (134-5, my emphases)

Here, the queer subject stands at the center of her analysis once again, and that presence teaches the reader exactly how a human life can be like water and how the suppression of any life force causes its “return with greater force” in response to such imbalance (134). I believe Gaard consciously associates queer social embodiment with her understanding of water. Water becomes a way to literally metaphorize the queer phenomenology elaborated on by Sarah Ahmed. Water’s wavering, fluctuations, depths, destabilizations, and divergencies reflect values held within queer experience and queer theory, so that return to the water would remind us how ubiquitous queerness is in society, culture, and nature.

Clearly, Gaard’s conception of “family” explores issues of exclusion and inclusion, human and animal, even cultural and natural. The memoirist queers the meanings of “water,” “family,” and “relationship” so that they are fluid, thus they become capable of informing the reader with a new sense of inclusion: “Are you still there? Do you see that how we treat the water resonates, influences, shapes how we treat each other?” Gaard asks toward the end of “Explosion” (140). She drives home her point a few pages later, again addressing the reader and demanding, “It’s time for you to choose. What do you want to believe about separation, about family, about what kind of power, what kind of energy you will use to feel safe? What kind of relationship will you have with water?” (142).

Throughout “Explosions,” Gaard’s invocations and musings perform the difficult work of turning a work of literature into a text that will instigate change, and this effort is expressed partially through her conceptual variations as well as through her stylistic creativity. One of the most effective techniques of this passage is Gaard’s application of

the formal or plural pronoun “you,” which engages the reader directly. I posit that Gaard uses inclusive pronouns in this way to invite the reader and to more concretely challenge their perspective, encouraging them to expand their sense of family and relation to value that which changes, that which is stagnant, and that which humankind has historically been told it can rightfully control. Ultimately, Gaard rewrites the definition of “family” entirely so that relationality becomes a radical act of bonding beyond the boundaries normally prescribed by patriarchal, hegemonic Western culture. By the end of this segment, Gaard completely reverses hierarchical family arrangement in favor of the more ecological model of horizontalization. She incorporates into “family” people of different cultures, ages, genders, colors, and sexualities; elders, children, and biological family members; different species; and the land itself.

The full title of Gaard’s eco-memoir is *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*, and this subtitle signifies an additional complication on the level of “family” and its relation with the history of the United States. Gaard notes late in her memoir, “As a European American, I feel **grateful** to find family roots that go back one generation, roots that must seem shallow to the indigenous inhabitants of this place, who can see their history reflected here for millennia” (196, my emphasis), but I’m skeptical of her apparent distinction between European colonialization and American, and I’m confused by what exactly she feels thankful for here. Gaard is “grateful” for “shallow” roots, and my struggle lies in understanding what she means by framing her relatively recent connection to America so positively.

From reading Gaard’s scholarship, I know that she is aware of the colonialization by way of both East and West northern quadrispheres in Earth’s history, and I also know

that she wants to expose how “colonial origins retain the ideology of divinely inspired domination” to the detriment of entire nations (“Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” 122). Therefore, I can only assume that this positive assertion arises because Gaard perceives how her family’s lack of background in the United States means she *can* comfortably choose her home and where she builds a family. Those whose roots run deep, she seems to suggest, are often complacent about the state of their land or ignorant of the potential they have for bonding with those spaces anew. They are unaware of the depth of connection between their family and their land, and Gaard refuses to take this connection for granted. Gaard, by comparison, “tak[es] root in a place” (referencing her title) in a way that frees her presumption and opens her family’s possibilities of relationality with that place.

One could read Gaard’s gratitude for her shallow roots another way as well. Perhaps her statement suggests that with shallow roots, she is certainly thankful, inviting readers to infer how grateful she would be with what she aims to build: deeper roots. Gaard could be embracing change once again here by acknowledging that growth is necessary for depth, that a healthy future is based on developments made now.

The essence of Gaard’s eco-memoir describes the action of “taking root in a place,” and the investment she develops in her land as a family member respects its present state while keeping an eye on the future. This type of engagement with landscape hints at future while grounding much of the work to be done in the present, so that Gaard’s environmentalism rings true with the idea of “presentism” also extant in Nelson’s and Bechdel’s memoirs. In fact, Gaard’s speculation about a presentist ethic draws on the complicated space—that both Nelson and Bechdel also champion—within

the dichotomy of life and death. Gaard's prime inspiration for her foundation of this ethic is the Hindu goddess Kali, whose

three forms, creation, preservation, and destruction are manifested in many ways.

. . . The dance of Kali teaches that pain, sorrow, and death are not to be overcome by denying them. They are woven into the texture of creation, so that realizing the fullness of life requires accepting the cycle of death. (188)

Kali demonstrates the entirety of life's cycles without the limitations traditionally associated with death. Kali the Destroyer invokes "white for Virgin, red for Mother, and black for Crone" (188), so that her destruction intrinsically connotes the virginal, the motherly, and aged or near death. Thus, in this representation of multiple stages of life, Gaard insists, "Kali's gift is the freedom of being fully present for life, a freedom that is possible only after full confrontation and acceptance of death" (188). Kali reveals how what appears to be dead returns in new life, so readers can learn from Gaard here how ineffective environmentalism can be if it rejects possibilities for change due to stagnation and fear in the present.

While Kali the Destroyer is Gaard's example of present engagement and awareness of the cyclical nature of life, Kali also demonstrates Gaard's application of indigenous belief to the discussion of patriarchal Western culture's greatest faults. Gaard doesn't simply consume these indigenous stories only to spit them out again to bolster her narrative and promote what she believes. Well, yes, she does do this, but Gaard shares the original belief as respectfully as she can. Her tactics of respect and non-appropriation in this instance involve sharing the original mythology so that readers can place the values of Western, patriarchal culture in a worldly context. Earlier in this analysis, I mentioned a

moment in *The Nature of Home* when Gaard draws on Ojibwe myth at the edge of her Minnesotan lake. She specifically “invoke[s] the Ojibwe stories of the Lake as a great-grandmother, a powerful spirit who would give you what you asked for if you asked from the heart,” so she asks great-grandmother for a partner, which the lake dutifully provides, with its own creative and sassy spin (18), for what the lake provided (Shawn) ended up being the wrong answer to Gaard’s search for family and home. However, the mistake and its lessons were essential for Gaard’s growth and ultimate development, both in terms of the queer memoir as a genre form and in her life.

While some feminist and ecofeminist scholars caution against the personification of landscape or anthropomorphism in nonhuman animals, some indigenous scholars, such as M.A. Jaimes*Guerrero (in her article “‘Patriarchal Colonialism’ and Indigenism: Implications for Native Feminist Spirituality and Native Womanism”), remind these critics and theorists that indigenous cultures across the globe historically formed real relationships to their landscapes through this exact personifying logic (59). Following that logic, the line of thinking asks how we could engage with something as an individual without recognizing its personality, influence, and individual subjecthood? In fact, Jaimes*Guerrero challenges these same problematic theorists for reappropriating the logic of the colonizer in their very act of rejecting anthropomorphism. Ultimately, seeing subjectivity in an assumedly-inanimate object like the landscape displays what Jaimes*Guerrero calls “restoring the female principle” (67), whereby feminine values such as empathy, relationality, and attention to nature are engendered rather than disallowed. Without this female principle and its close attention to the ecosystem, Jaimes*Guerrero argues, the worst case scenario (and certainly, the horrible scenario that

played out for indigenous North Americans) leads to “genocide . . . often inextricably linked with ethnocide . . . and with ecocide” (68).³⁸

Gaard applies indigenous environmentalism to her ethics while consciously working to avoid the pitfalls of appropriation; ultimately, Gaard’s memoir validates and expands upon this indigenous environmental ethic without co-opting or erasing its origins. In her article, Jaimes*Guerrero goes on to reveal the historical, ecological perspective of Native North Americans, claiming that “in the cultural contexts [of indigenous kinship,] . . . one is expected to practice . . . bioethics in a new environment respectful of the bioregion in its diversity” (66). Indigenous kinship models precede and supercede the expansion of “family” I valorize in this analysis, but the overlap between the two perspectives is clear. Jaimes*Guerrero speaks of indigenous kinship models where tribes housed separately but together, and in these kinship models, a bioethics of involvement with the entire landscape surfaces. Each member of the landscape—whether human, nonhuman animal, or flora—was considered a part of the tribe. This tribe mentality almost exactly encapsulates the expanded or queered family, as demonstrated in this thesis.

Regardless of how similar these conceptions of family are, Gaard’s eco-memoir would be racist if it suggested that readers simply consume and regurgitate indigenous spirituality or some variance of an indigenous land ethic. In the moment just before Gaard mentions Kali in *The Nature of Home*, she asserts a beautiful realization: “Finally, I understand. This is the food that matters most: Family. Community. An enduring

³⁸ Westerners are terrible at this attempt to value femininity for its impact on interacting with physical landscapes and nonhuman entities (Ortner). We’re often too intoxicated by the logic of “Father Nature” in disguise as “Mother Nature” that we allow the feminization of nature to justify its exploitation (Minh-ha). Patriarchy’s spin on these values through the logic of nature as feminine has worked historically to distance western cultures from that environmental feminist appreciation.

relationship to place” (188). Essentially, Gaard emphasizes to her readers these three things so they can have life, be sustained, and live well. Kali, then, becomes an example of what this “food” can look like, and Gaard’s mythsharing models the type of engagement she believes we in the United States (and across the globe) need in order to enact positive environmental change. Therefore, Gaard provides these indigenous examples of great-grandmother Lake or Kali the Destroyer to get the reader to realize the type of relationality they’re missing when it comes to one’s environment, but yes—her application of Native themes to prove her point is still problematic. What she does to counter her appropriation is to make sure she understands the mythology’s origins accurately before applying them to her own environment.

Gaard ends *The Nature of Home* with renewed family and reaffirmed presentism. She laments the loss of her partner [“My partner wanted to travel the world. I still wanted a home, and a child” (190).], yet Gaard still represents herself as being in a *family* after “it was clear that [she] was truly single” (198). With the entire text up until now focusing on Gaard and Shawn and their desire for children, this point in the text signals a departure. Here, the metaphorical water is rerouted, and Gaard becomes stronger and flexible enough to provide her own answer to the conflict:

I thought again about the child. I knew I would have to act decisively. And I chose someone with a heart of kindness, a man who moved earthworms off the sidewalk after the rain and walked the nearsighted dog for an elderly neighbor. I chose a teacher, an environmentalist, a feminist ally. With eyes wide open, we began our child unconventionally, without a marriage contract or any expectations other than shared parenting. A year and a half later, I pushed our daughter from

my body into water—the maternity ward’s water-birthing room used purified water, water from the Mississippi [around which Gaard makes her home]. 198

In contrast with the literally queer family Gaard and Shawn formed together, Gaard enters a figuratively queered heterosexual relationship in order to have the child of whom she dreams, and this relationality, this fresh sense of “family,” is ironically even more “unconventional” than the prior (198). Gaard partners with a man “with a heart of kindness” and a love of environmentalism in order to grow the child of her dreams, all the while creating home and reforging a family in the process. It interests me, too, that the “family” Gaard ends up inhabiting isn’t revealed until the last moments. The world she envisions in the beginning of *The Nature of Home* shifts and erases itself as Gaard realizes what she needs and how, unintuitively, to achieve it; that original list of requirements gets reimagined because Gaard reevaluates what she desires for her world, both now and for its future. It takes up until the shift into Gaard’s “Epilogue” for readers to finally grasp the family and home she builds, and this extended revelation strikes me as equally and resoundingly queer.

Using the logic she developed earlier in her eco-memoir, Gaard’s last moments in *The Nature of Home* equate family and activism with water, opening up the further association of water with home itself, an association that relates once again to presentism. Gaard highlights water’s “resilience,” its “healthy adaptation to environments,” its “teachings,” its “accepting impermanence,” its “flow of relationships,” and its “movement of energy” before explicitly claiming it as a model for family and home (199). Gaard’s discourse of watery revision informs her queer ecosemiotics of “family” by validating the flowing expansion of signification that she stresses to her readers in the

hopes that they will allow her message to take root in their hearts and will incorporate nonhuman entities and environmental spaces in one's "family." The present is a fertile moment for activism, and Gaard's metaphorization of water is linked to that logic, too. It is by relating to and understanding Gaard's water-inspired discourse of adaptation that readers can learn that the present is constant, that actions of love can instigate change, and that change at the level of language is only the start.

Greta Gaard's eco-memoir stands apart from Nelson's or Bechdel's in some ways, for Gaard fiercely and consciously engages with the intersections of queer theory and environmentalism, informing an activism and invites the reader to *do* instead of just analyze or assess. Whereas Nelson's memoir engages with questions of "the natural" in response to queer life without any pronounced necessity to act for future change, Gaard explicitly challenges the reader's understanding of "nature," "the natural," and human/environment interaction through action. Additionally, Bechdel's memoir engages with questions of "the natural" and queer life, but their text more clearly involves the altering landscape as a member of young Alison's local community. There's no equable closeness of familial intimacy in *Fun Home* as in *The Nature of Home*. While Bechdel does not directly engage in environmentalism in the memoir or as a successful scholar in real life, however, their text reveals how activism still has a chance.

As much as queer ecocriticism and queer ecofeminism highlight intersectional social and cultural issues, they also disclose how privilege, identity, and social standpoint work like a Rubik's cube of influence on whether or not, and to what degree, one can partake in activism. Therefore, I believe queer ecocritical authors in particular should consider their privilege when they write to be sure their perspective, suggestions, and

action plans are truly accessible to the common person. This type of consideration could look like Gaard's attentiveness to minority or disparaged communities in her work, but it could look very different based on the author or the issue.

Gaard stands alone when it comes to whether these white authors address and unpack their privilege simply because it never really comes up in Bechdel's or Nelson's works whatsoever. Gaard's life is undoubtedly blessed, and her navigation of the spaces between academia and activism afford her great amounts of privilege. Academic, intellectual, or university privilege underscores the entire text, for it took Gaard ten years of work, life, and journaling to assemble her narrative, yet her quality of life never diminishes across her memoir. Her economic privilege also allows her to experience the Vipassana meditation retreats so central to the text. These retreats that bring people together for fourteen days of silence, meditation, and inner-exploration contain racial privilege, too, a point which Alice Walker corroborates in *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*.³⁹

Gaard, instead of ignoring the reality made visible by Walker and others, directly acknowledges her interlocking privileges as a white woman within academia. Rather than hide behind or ignore her privilege like Bechdel and Nelson do, Gaard admits what is available to her that may limit others, and, therefore, her ethic of care for one's environment and all Others becomes truly genuine in ways the other authors examined in this thesis cannot. Ultimately, Gaard calls into question a system that is broken by

³⁹ In this novel, Walker creates the character of Kate (somewhat an avatar of herself), a spiritual African American woman who begins the story at a Buddhist meditation retreat. Kate soon notes and laments to herself as "she seemed to be the only person of color there" (5); readers are primed to assume this is a common occurrence after Kate decides "she had reached an impasse on the Buddhist road" due to this, and other, hypocrisies.

revealing its constant flaws, but she goes a step beyond what Nelson and Bechdel can do; Gaard's work is inherently oriented toward action.

I see this action-orientation of *The Nature of Home* displayed in three elements of the text. First, formally, Gaard's ethnographic case studies and poetic fragments break up the narrative of her life with equally important stories about the landscape. These constant historical and cultural ethnographies of places affected negatively by environmental racism, classism, and sexism powerfully demonstrate what can be lost if one's community ignores environmental degradation. She posits that these communities lose not only the health of their landscape but also the health of every individual within that space, and they furthermore lose their dignity from allowing patriarchal, hegemonic Western culture to determine their values, land access, and economies. Second, linguistically, Gaard queers conceptions of "family," thus forcing the reader to reconsider much of what they have taken for granted or simply assumed. Gaard challenges readers to think and act as she does through these linguistic fluctuations because, without a queer appreciation of words being so drastically reworked, the multiple meanings might falsely be thought to cancel each other out. Third and finally, Gaard's story itself reveals a path to action by using her environmentalism, her life, and her experiences as examples for others.

Unfortunately, the relationship Grandmother Lake provides for Gaard dissolves, but that fact does not derail her focus. Instead, the occurrence sharpens her attention, allowing her to maintain optimism in a moment of loss instead of wallowing or giving up. Gaard looks forward to her daughter and her home, regardless of Shawn's presence; the boundaries of family here are clearly porous, possibly intentionally so. Gaard strives to

educate, to love, and to transform both herself and others despite the pain she feels, for change makes way for depth and future growth. In fact, near this breakup moment in the memoir, Gaard explicitly lays out her activism for her readers. She insists that social change is two-fold work, involving service to connect people to place and activism to intervene in the issue at hand. It could be that this return to action is part, also, of what consoles Gaard amid her heartbreak, but it is clear that, at least, she does not need a lover to help and empower the “family” she hopes to grow. It exists within herself, in her potential to grow in connection with the land.

Part 3: Conclusion

Chapter 1: Assessing my Process

Using a queer methodology to compare the environmental ethics of *The Argonauts*, *The Nature of Home*, and *Fun Home* is a little more complex than I've made it seem so far. In my work of comparing and contrasting I have established a hierarchy of works entirely unintentionally through a discourse of assessment that values certain works, techniques, or impacts over others. Clearly, the queer impetus I have worked to establish toward horizontalization conflicts with that sentiment. Therefore, I must spend a portion of my conclusion assessing the different but comparable traits each queer text applies that makes it beneficial to the field of ecocriticism in its own right. While I have previously hailed Gaard's memoir as the "best" because it is the most oriented with action and therefore the most likely to encourage environmental activism, the next few paragraphs will be dedicated to the leveling of that discourse, to the propagation of the positive and useful qualities of both *The Argonauts* and *Fun Home*.

If my aim is to venerate that which is ecosystemic and horizontal, I must be able to see each text's differences as valuable on their own terms. I cannot simply say that the best queer ecocritical texts encourage the reader to act differently in the world, because, on the most basic level, what encourages one person to act may be entirely different from what encourages another. What's more is that action is not always the best option, especially if it does not take the wellbeing of the land and ecosystems themselves into account. In fact, if someone would read, for example, Gaard's memoir and assume they now are the activist who is ready to engage with Gaard's specific landscapes, I would discourage them from immediate action. In all honesty, I might even discourage them

from action at all if their intentions went against what grassroots groups in the area were already organizing around.

Furthermore, an individual may sometimes want to engage with these issues, but their talents, skills, and passions might lie elsewhere other than activism. In fact, activism does not have to be as “active” as I had previously assumed. Some of the good work of activism can be done in an office, over a phone call, or through research and writing, and to suggest that activism must require physical labor would be ignorant and ableist. Moreover, there are already people on the ground getting their hands dirty, so to speak, and these people need backers and financial support more than they need outsiders jumping into the game over-excitedly. With this further elucidation it becomes clear that activism is not and should not be the pinnacle to which all environmental engagements aspire.

I acknowledge that my drive to elevate activism comes from an existing theoretical base in ecocriticism, queer studies, and postcolonial studies. The traditions of these fields have historically aimed to study and discover texts that work best at instigating change in the Western world. In fact, part of Garaard’s criticism of queer theory focuses on what he understands as its proclivities toward abstraction and its distance from addressing scientific realities and possibilities of action and change. In sum, he sees the combination of queer theory with ecocriticism to limit ecocriticism’s ability to encourage positive, environmentally-inflected change in the world. Outside of just ecocriticism, critics in varying fields will occasionally berate others’ works of theory for being too abstract and distanced from complex, physical, lived realities. Ultimately, all these arguments ignore the fact that action and change arise from unpredictable

catalysts, depending on the individual. They also ignore the possibility that action might not always be what authors want their readers to engage in directly after finishing their texts. Oftentimes, further research is necessary, if not mandatory, for activism that is long-standing, sustainable, and productive for all.

In the spirit of these complexities, I proceed by briefly reexamining my three primary texts with the intention of horizontalizing their benefits and potentials. There can be no “best” work in a properly queer thesis, for any mentality that ranks in this manner presupposes the value of hierarchy, and that is never the type of work I want to support or create. Eve Sedgwick reminds us in *Tendencies* that “the word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (xii). “Queer” does not climb ladders or measure ascendancies. “Queer” compares planes of existence in their own right, and Sedgwick also reminds us that it “can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements . . . aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (8). The next chapter will do the work of re-queering any elements of my thesis that have problematically been built up as a hierarchy.

Chapter 2: Rethinking the Texts Horizontally

My first step in the effort of horizontalizing the work of these authors must be to reclaim the concept of “failure.” Jack Halberstam asserts the queerness of failing in text appropriately titled *The Queer Art of Failure*. Here, he claims, “We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent” (88), queering the discourse of failure while praising queer people for their failures as acts of resistance to Western patriarchal hegemony. If winning is normative, the argument goes, then would not the queer position be to fail? Even outside this queering of “failure,” it is easy to see that failure in one realm links with success in another; for an example related to this thesis, one text’s failure of activism might reflect success in rhetorical gestures. Furthermore, Halberstam reminds readers that “winning is a multivalent event: in order for someone to win, someone else must fail to win, and so this act of losing has its own logic, its own complexity, its own aesthetic, but ultimately, its own beauty” (91). Failure, then, seems much more egalitarian, equitable, and inclusive, so I embrace the idea of failure’s beauty as I look back over the assertions I have made about these works.

One central criteria for evaluating these texts deals with their divergent stages of accessibility. Gaard’s orientation as an activist and ecocritic helps her memoir address pertinent issues to the improvement of humanity’s relationship with its physical environments and nonhuman Others, but it is not altogether accessible to readers outside of academia. Similarly, Nelson’s *Argonauts*, with its theoretical intertextualities and vague, high-brow marginalia, speaks to a primarily academic readership while addressing

themes relevant to the lay person. Nelson's more visceral style and irreverent tone make her discussions of motherhood and queer life trajectories possibly more accessible than Gaard's matter-of-fact and crisp tone, despite its similar themes. Even just by searching each book on Good Reads, a website for book recommendations, one can see that Gaard's memoir, with only 9 ratings and 0 reviews, lacks in accessibility and readership what Nelson's maintains. Nelson's memoir has over 15,000 ratings and over 1,600 reviews. Certainly, accessibility can and should be measured beyond the bounds of Good Reads, and some of those measurements would take into account the reader's social location, socio-economic class, level of education, and interest in these fields.

Regardless of how we measure accessibility, however, something about *The Argonauts* speaks to a broader readership than does *The Nature of Home*. Likewise, *Fun Home* exceeds the accessibility restraints of both *The Nature of Home* and *The Argonauts* combined. This tragicomic exists in both graphic novel and musical form in popular culture, though, so that additional layer of performativity would obviously draw in an expanded readership, a readership only further developed with the numbers of young adult readers it attracts. Certainly, Gaard's and Nelson's works are mature and adult-oriented, whereas Bechdel's memoir could be understood and loved by adolescent and pre-teen readers. In comparison with Gaard's 9 ratings, 0 reviews and Nelson's 15,000 ratings, 1,600 reviews, Bechdel's memoir outreaches both with over 90,000 ratings and over 7,000 reviews. When it comes to the reputations of each author, Bechdel's previous work and her creativity across genres mark her as more well-known than the other two. Nelson and Gaard are staunchly academic authors, whose cultural capital meets limit in its restriction to scholarly spheres.

It could also be the forms of *Fun Home* that make its story more accessible, for graphic novels and musicals are approached differently by far than standard first-person narrative memoirs. In addition, a reading of these three texts that would focus on the ecosignifier “home” along with “family,” like I have done above, would prove that Bechdel’s text addresses issues of home and physical space differently than either Nelson’s or Gaard’s ever could with just words on their pages. The pictures and maps that Bechdel composes ground the spaces she discusses with their undeniable physical presences. Without the help of maps or visuals in their narratives, Nelson and Gaard have produced texts that perform, linguistically, the work that they hope to see done physically. There is a layer of accessibility provided by their creativity, in that sense. Their stories still address LGBTQ experiences and realities, so their neologisms and work to reinvent traditional paths would still be a largely relatable theme for much of their queer readership.

Chapter 3: Moving Forward

Looking for ways to move forward with this project has not been a difficult feat. While my intersection of focus in this thesis has been to justify the links between the queer and the green, there is a wealth of work already done by scholars of color regarding racially- and ethnically-inflected “queer” environmental relationships. The United States’ particular historical ideology as a national melting pot invited foreigners across the globe to immigrate here, but Americans’ feelings for those immigrants were generally far from welcoming. In effect, the indigenous Native Americans were pushed off the land they knew as home (Jaimes*Guerrero), and Asian Americans, whether or not they were refugees of war, were barred into cities, concentration camps, or industrial jobs (Waldie; Hayashi) while Hispanic and Latinx Americans were kept strictly around borders (with their proper side clearly dictated) (Martín-Junquera; DeGrave) and African Americans were physically threatened for enjoying the beauty of nature even after the times of slavery (Ruffin; Finney; Frazier). Forward motion with this project could therefore involve the closer examination of these isolated environmental experiences through the optics of this queer eco-theorization.

Another venture would involve investigations of ecosignifiers beyond “family,” for there are other ecosignifiers present in all three texts that would be ripe for further analysis. Chapters on “home” and “community” could be composed easily. The theorists I have drawn on heavily for this project—namely Val Plumwood, Nikki Young, Nicole Seymour, and Murray Bookchin—have already established interrogations of these two particular ecosignifiers, and additional terms could easily be traced throughout these texts for the benefit of queer theory, ecocriticism, and their intersection.

Furthermore, the context of a Master's thesis in Literary Studies does not necessitate such expansions as delving into analyses of visual arts, poetry, and/or drama. However, there are certainly other works of art in these forms from the twenty-first century that address the same issues as these three queer memoirs. Using the time constraints of the twenty-first century, such works of visual art include those of all the artists Nelson mentions in her memoir, Cummings's *Notes from Camp*, Freehold Artist Exchange's *Queers in Nature*, and Devan Shimoyama's paintings, such as "Moon Twins" and "Constellation"; works of poetry that address these issues include those by Jess X. Chen, Camille Dungy, Katie Hays, and Demian Diné Yazhi; more films approach these concerns than are able to be elucidated here, so genres of interest include horror, apocalypse, romantic comedy, and psychological thriller films; and dramatic works that do the same include *image / a / nation*, *Cooking Catastrophes*, and *Red*. In addition, an extrapolation of these ethics and modes of reading onto different *novels* would prove quite valuable to the field of Literary Studies. Twenty-first century novels that would work well to read in this fashion include Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, and others.

Expanding the scope of the thesis to examine texts outside of the twenty-first century, too, would prove enlightening to the subject of queer ecocriticism. One might be able to study the rise of this queer eco-ethic and aesthetic by reading texts that published in the 1980s, 1950s, 1910s, or likely many other times throughout world history. My thesis also meets limitation in that it reads only texts written by white womyn,⁴⁰ so a

⁴⁰ I write "women" with a "y" here to signify the diversity of feminine expressions that surface in the lives of the three authors I chose to focus on with this project.

valid expansion of this topic would be to read queer memoirs from people of color or, generally, people of immigrant or divergent ethnicities.

What I draw from the presence of all these possibilities is that this project touches on a thematic current that has informed life on this planet for the past several hundred years. Entropy, being unavoidable in its ubiquitous deconstruction, affects all environments and all relationships. Queer people, in particular, feel this entropy affect their personal relationships, whether highly valued or in passing. For this reason and others I've highlighted in this thesis, queer individuals are forced to reinvent discourses of the "natural" in ways that only seem to work to the benefit of our planet's health. All the rest of us must do is remember our connections to one another and our world, listen to these peoples' stories, and remain open to their potential to change us.

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