Queering rurality: reading *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* geographically

Barbara Pini^a, Wendy Keys^a and Elizabeth Marshall ^b

^aSchool of Humanities, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD, Australia; ^bFaculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to research on geographies of queer rural youth through an analysis of an award-winning young adult novel, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Danforth (2012a). Three themes from the text are explored in this paper. The first is the well documented heterosexism of rural life. We note that the main protagonist, Cameron Post, experiences rural life on the margins, not only because of her queer identity but also because of her age and gender. A second theme in Danforth's text is that rural spaces can be transgressively queer. In this respect the author subverts connotations of rurality and heterosexuality and urbanity and homosexuality as well as universalising notions of rurality as static, repressive and exclusive. The final theme emerging from a geographical reading of the text is that of placelessness. While highlighting the pervasiveness of this theme, we note that it elicits criticism from readers in relation to the book's ending as it departs from the norms of familiar coming-out-narratives. In conclusion, we emphasise the efficacy of young adult literature as a source for furthering geographic knowledge about young people and sexuality.

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Introduction

In this paper we read Danforth's (2012a) young adult novel, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* from a 'decidedly geographic perspective' (Brown 2006, 334) as a means to contribute to knowledge about the spatialities of queer rural youth. The text has been described as a 'semi-autobiographical', a 'coming-of-age' or a 'coming-of Gayge' novel about a young lesbian woman (Danforth 2012b, 2013). In the aftermath of its publication in the United States, the book received starred reviews from *Publishers' Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*, praise in *The Boston Globe* and *The Stranger* and won various awards and appeared on a range of 'best book' lists.¹ Given the critical reception of the book, as well as its setting in rural Montana, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* offers a rich site for examining the representation of adolescence, gender, sexuality and space.

The paper begins with an overview of geographical scholarship on rural sexualities. Following this, we outline the methodological approach that informed the paper. In addressing the question of what a geographic reading of the novel can tell us about the spatiality of queer rural young women we focus on three key themes. The first is that rural space is discriminatory and hostile to lesbian youth; it is a space of marginality and repression. In this discussion we attend to the protagonist's identity as queer as well as the intersections of age and gender. The second theme that emerges from a spatial reading of the text is that rural space is represented as a transgressively erotic

space for queer youth. In this exploration we highlight the ways in which Danforth queers rurality and complicates bifurcated notions of rural/urban as heterosexist/queer. In the final part of the analysis, we examine the role of placelessness in Cameron's narrative, and detail readers' responses to the notions of movement and fluidity as defining elements of the novel's penultimate scene. In the conclusion, we highlight the still limited geographical work that engages with young adult fiction, and suggest that a study of this genre's production, writers, readers, reviewers and curators could provide rich knowledge about the spatialities of youth.

Queer rural lives: the literature

A key focus in the literature on rural sexualities has been on what Little (2003, 403) has referred to as the 'ubiquitous uncontested nature of heterosexuality' within rural communities. As a range of feminist rural geographers have demonstrated, traditional assumptions about family and gender roles and romantic ideas about nature buttress heteronormativity in rural places (Bryant and Pini 2011; Little 2007; Pini and Mayes 2014). While change may be occurring, Gorman-Murray, Waitt, and Gibson (2008, 182) lament that 'everyday homophobia still exists' in rural places, even in those non-urban places which, because of their more visible gay and lesbian populations, are imagined to be 'gay friendly'. In one of the few contributions to the literature on rural youth and homosexuality, Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2011) explore what rural heterosexism may mean for gay and lesbian youth via a sensitive rendering of the story of Harry, a 16-year-old, Anglo-Australian, working-class gay man who had grown up in a remote mining town in Western Queensland. Outed by his peers at school, ridiculed, harassed and bullied, Harry's young life is marked by shame, confusion and fear.

Notwithstanding the heterosexism that is often embedded in rural spaces, geographers have demonstrated that there a multiplicity of sexualities exist outside the city. Notably, some of the earliest geographic work on rural sexualities undertaken by Valentine (1994, 1995) detailed the 'queer country' lives of those who established lesbian communities in rural areas of United States. In this, and subsequent literature on the subject (Browne 2011; Sandilands 2002), scholars have explained that rural spaces have been viewed as offering freedom from the patriarchal and heterosexist city, and an opportunity to connect with nature to create a new way of being in the world. As increased visibility has been given to (adult) gay and lesbian rural residents, another body of literature has emerged which has further challenged the association between rurality and normative heterosexuality. Bell's (2000, 87) early work on representations of hillbilly erotics, for example, demonstrated that rurality can be coded for 'in-breeding, animalistic passions and polymorphous perversions'. In a more recent study Pini, Mayes, and Boyer (2013) turned their attention to non-normative heterosexual practices championed in a remote Australian mining town, and the employment of skimpy-bar maids who serve topless or in their underwear. They report that discourses of frontier masculinity are often used to legitimate the presence of skimpies who signify a version of heterosexuality far removed from traditional familial discourses of heterosex.

Despite the multiplicity of sexualities given expression in rural areas, geographers have noted that coming-out-narratives are typically predicated on migration from rural to urban spaces. As Halberstam (2005) has asserted, the conflation of queer culture with the city is produced and reproduced via coming-out-narratives, which suggest that the full expression of gay and lesbian subjectivities can only occur in city spaces, and that rural environments are always intolerant and repressive. Realising that overly reductive notions of coming out 'distort and discount lived experience' (Whitlock 2010, 94), geographers have sought to offer more sophisticated explorations of how the identities of queer and rural mediate the processes and practices of coming out. For instance, in Björklund's (2013) study of seven young adult queer novels set in rural Sweden, she explains that early in the novels the main female characters are typically presented as out of place. However, through sexual intimacy with another lesbian they claim their sexual subjectivity and become closer to family and friends. Like the two teenage girls who fall in love in a major Swedish film also analysed by Björklund

(2010), the novel's protagonists' expressions of queer subjectivity are not necessarily dependent on migration to the city.

In this paper we further Björklund's (2010) exploration of the lives of young rural lesbian women. We add to knowledge about the spatialities of sexuality for youth, highlighting the potential marginality of rural lesbian young women and one protagonist's experiences of self-hood as marked by oppression and discrimination. In doing so, we add gender to the analysis aware that discourses of femininity will also inform the everyday experiences of non-urban lesbian youth. While documenting the challenges facing rural lesbian young women we also emphasise their agency, and their capacity to resist and rewrite normative constructions of rural sexuality.

Methodology

In this paper, we draw on the insights of other geographers who analyse literature to provide insights into spatial inequalities related to sexuality (Abblitt 2008; Björklund 2013; Brown 2006; Cooper 2009; Jazeel 2005). Specifically, given the autobiographical dimensions of Danforth's novel we draw on the work of geographers who have found autobiographical writing to be a useful data source for geographers as it opens up to scrutiny the nuances of the co-constitution of self and space (Gorman-Murray 2007; Moss 2001; Pile 2002). While recognising the potential of autobiographical writing for building queer geographies, Gorman-Murray (2007) also usefully highlights its limitations. He reminds us that life writing is also subject to generic conventions, such as the notion of a linear progression from concealment to openness of one's queer identity that occurs alongside the move from childhood/adolescence to adulthood; this familiar sequence is often also marked by an affective transition from unhappiness to happiness. Concurrently, Gorman-Murray (2007, 17) cautions us to remember that all texts will be partial and that there may be restrictions on queer 'identities presented for public consumption in autobiographies'. It is possible then for difference and diversity within the queer community to be erased.

Mindful of these reservations, we found Sharp's (2000) three-pronged approach to spatialised readings of literature useful (see also Nairn and Panelli 2008). The first stage that Sharp suggests is a critical reading of the text that attends to its content, form, themes and use of literary devices. This step involved an immersion in the novel, repeated readings with note taking, and summaries of the key textual dimensions. The second stage Sharp (2000) recommends is gaining a sense of the context of the literary data. We achieved this aim through reference to the literature on queer, rural and youth geographies. However, it also required additional reading/viewing of texts relevant to some of the background events of the novels, such as Montana Bucking Horse Sale and gay aversion therapy. The final stage of Sharp's (2000, 332) approach is reception or what she defines as 'the place of the text in the reproduction of knowledge'. In order to address this phase of the analysis we collected all formal reviews published in review journals, magazines and newspapers (26 in total) as well as reader generated reviews on websites such as *goodreads* and other blogs (1600 in total) devoted to young adult and/or queer/lesbian fiction.² We subjected the large data set that we collected to repeated readings before undertaking thematic analysis using a combination of inductive and deductive codes.

We began our analysis with the cover of the text, which conveys the centrality of rurality to the novel and suggests tranquillity and repose. On top of a golden rolled bale of hay in a large open field with trees against an expansive horizon lays a person with feet kicked up in the air who we imagine to be Cameron. The character's face is hidden from the viewer as she looks towards the sky. As with all images, the cover could be read in varied and potentially disparate ways. For example, the fact that the Cameron is photographed alone could express the isolation of being a queer youth in a rural community. Similarly, that her face is obscured could be understood as indicative of rural as a closet-like environment. While all of these interpretations are possible, of note is Cameron's languid pose, her outfit of cowboy boots, denim shorts and a belted summer top which collectively evoke a sense that she belongs in rural space.

The conflicting interpretations that the cover evokes foreshadow the themes of the novel itself and the analysis we offer in this paper. That is, rurality has multiple meanings for queer youth. Dominant imaginings of queer subjectivities may assume them to be constitutive of urban spaces, but this is to deny both the diversity and complexity of queerness and rurality.

Marginality and repression and being a rural lesbian youth

Set in Miles City, Montana, in the early 1990s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* covers a period of five years in the life of its central protagonist. It is divided into three parts. Part one covers the summer of 1989 when, just as Cameron is beginning to gain a sense of her queer identity, her parents are killed in a car crash. In the absence of her parents Cameron is cared for by her grandmother and her conservative evangelical Aunt Ruth. In the second part of the novel, the period 1991–1992 Cameron enters high school and begins a relationship with cowgirl Coley Taylor who lives on a ranch outside of town. When Coley tells her mother about her relationship, Cameron's aunt sends her to a conversion camp called God's Promise. This is the setting for the final part of the novel and covers the period 1992–1993.

We are first introduced to Cameron on a Montana summer day as her grandmother drives her to the local lake to swim. On route she identifies the town's different landmarks for the reader explaining: 'These places, the stuff of all small towns, I guess, but they were our places, and back then I liked knowing that' (5). In mapping out her rural town and its inhabitants, Cameron constructs a version of rurality as one of community, safety, freedom, friendship and familiarity. However, within a few pages this idyllic sense of rurality as a space of autonomy is countered. As she and her then best friend Irene Klauson attempt to shop-lift some bubble-gum from a local store a friend of her parents enters asking her 'You stayin' out of trouble this summer?' (20). He knows that her parents are away camping, and casually works into the conversation that he will mention seeing her when he meets up with them next. The exchange he has with Cameron, while amiable and seemingly innocuous, demonstrates the surveillance of youth in rural communities and the lack of privacy they are afforded. There is a sense here of Panelli's (2002) conclusions in work with rural youth in New Zealand, that it is adults who are empowered to legitimate how spaces may be used and by whom, and that youth in rural spaces are always at risk of being watched, judged and discussed.

Surveillance emerges in a much more sinister way in relation to Cameron's nascent lesbian identity. Cameron is fearful of being outed at the video store for renting films with (often very muted) lesbian content. In a pre-internet era Cameron's need for exploration and affirmation of her sexuality is limited to renting films such as *Personal Best* and repeatedly rewinding it to watch Mariel Hemingway kiss Patrice Donnelly. She becomes an expert at reading the code for gay and lesbian content in the blurb on the back of videos. The fact that this is in code only reinforces her difference and a need for silence and secrecy. The smirks and innuendo of the video store owner suggest that her covert video renting could be disclosed at any time.

The limitations and repressions of small-town life for queer rural youth are perhaps most strongly conveyed in the novel through the character of Lindsey Lloyd. Lindsey, who meets Cameron through swimming, comes from Seattle where, as Cameron reflects 'everything sounded edgy and cool' (84). With her stories of parties and protests, bleached hair and eyebrow ring, and with a mother who knows a drag queen, Lindsey embodies urban diversity. She plays an important pedagogic role as she guides Cameron's emerging queer identity through books, newspapers, mixed tapes and conversations about the pride festival; she also signals the vast gap between urban and rural in terms of everyday knowledge and experience of difference. When, mid-way through the book, Cameron is outed by Coley Taylor, Aunt Ruth blames Lindsay and her 'wicked, big-city abominations' (248) while in Lindsay's wake Cameron often feels like a 'small-town hick' (99). Lindsay's liberty to fully express herself as a queer is often contrasted with Cameron's own concealed identity. For example, when Lindsey kisses her in a photograph, Cameron is apprehensive about what its

processing may mean in terms of exposure and sanction. Lindsey tells her: ‘There’s a dozen photo places I could go to where they’d probably give me a round of applause’, but for Cameron her choices are limited to ‘Jim Fishman at Fishman’s Photo-hut’ (101).

In detailing the surveillance and disciplining of Cameron’s sexual identity in the heterosexual rural, Danforth enumerates the ways in which non-metropolitan spaces are potentially problematic for her as a woman and as a young person. In this respect, she adds a critical lens to our understanding of queer lives in rural communities that has yet to be fully taken up in the scholarly literature. While recognising that sexuality and gender are intricately intertwined (Jackson 1996), it is important to highlight the ongoing gendered regulation of Cameron’s body and bodily practices. The sense of spatial freedom Cameron conveys in her familiarity with the town in the opening pages seems imagined rather than real as Grandma instructs her and Irene to ‘come home right after you’re done’ as she doesn’t want them ‘monkeying around downtown’ (5). It is Aunt Ruth, however, who is most intent on regulating Cameron’s femininity, not only buying her new more feminine clothes to wear, but modelling and championing normatively feminine activities. At the same time, Cameron yearns for the freedoms enjoyed by rural men she encounters such as her swim coach. Cameron observes:

I wanted to be like him, to drink icy beers after meets and to pull myself into the guard stand without using the ladder, to own a Jeep without a roll-bar and be the gap-toothed ringleader to all the lifeguards. (13)

As Driscoll (2014, 148) rightly notes, ‘the resources for articulating identity within rural communities are not age or gender neutral’. Cameron’s search for identity is circumscribed by her queer longings in a heterosexual rural environment and restricted by her youth and gender. The types of embodied practices that can be enacted by Coach Ted which convey physicality, strength, independence and leadership are beyond her reach. Similarly, she wistfully observes a group of her male peers as they engage in horse-play in an abandoned hospital building in the centre of town. The group of boys, including Cameron’s good friend Jamie Lowry, seek out the hospital and deploy the type of ‘tactics of invisibility’ often mobilised by rural youth seeking refuge from surveillance (Leyshon 2011, 313). That is, they gravitate to this environment where they are unrestrained from adult supervision to talk, to drink, to smoke marijuana and to enjoy each other’s company. As the only girl invited along with the boys she watches them enviously:

What they were doing was what they did all the time when we were together. It was some sort of freedom guys allowed themselves around each other, and I envied every moment of it. It was something louder, and harder, than anything I’d ever been part of with a group of girls. Not that I was really a part of it with these guys. It all seemed to come so easily to them, and I could only get so close to any of that. (82)

Cameron’s entrée into the old hospital site is facilitated by her young male friends who themselves are marginalised in the rural community. At the same time, her gender precludes her from being fully included. She cannot participate in the easy shared physicality that defines their relationships.

Despite giving important emphasis to Cameron’s youthful and feminine identities and the ways these inform spatial regulation in rural communities, it is Cameron’s queer identity that is most problematic in terms of inclusion. Danforth conveys the heterosexism of everyday rural life and its inculcation early on as Cameron reflects on the implications of kissing Irene. She says:

Even though no one had ever told me, specifically, not to kiss a girl before, nobody had to. It was guys and girls who kissed – in our grade, on TV, in the movies, in the world; and that’s how it worked: guys and girls. Anything else was something weird. (10–11)

This quotation brings to the fore a key theme of the novel that emerges as Danforth recounts classroom banter, describes the rituals of the school prom or explains local dating norms. That is, that rurality and heterosexuality are deeply intertwined.

Cameron’s longed for relationship with Coley Taylor takes form when Coley’s boyfriend Brett is away on a summer soccer tour; however, it is marked by suppression, fear and concealment. She

explains to the reader, 'We couldn't do so much as hold hands without scandal and made ourselves walk a couple of feet apart, wouldn't even let our arms brush' (202). On a night alone together Cameron and Coley are interrupted while having sex by Coley's older brother and two of his friends. Significantly, Danforth presents them dressed as stereotypical cowboys 'in boots and Wranglers, shirts tucked in, gleamy belt buckles; the works' (229). The men, all drunk, have a sense of interrupting something, as they search for alcohol in the flat. They dismiss the 'faggoty' fruity cocktail the girls had been enjoying earlier (229). When Cameron lightly touches Coley's neck, Coley forcefully slaps it away and Cameron conjures an excuse to leave. The rural space that Danforth presents here is claustrophobic and the threat of aggression and cruelty are palpable.

If what we have described above was the only portrayal of rural life offered by Danforth we would concur with Lindsay's early advice to her friend that, 'You gotta get the fuck out of Eastern Montana' (101). We'd share similar sentiments with the many rural readers (past and present) who shared their own stories of queer marginalisation in rural spaces in response to the novel, such as the young person who commented that 'It feels like the present day where I'm from ... a painfully small town in North Carolina.' However, Danforth's representation of rurality is more complex as she shows how rural spaces, practices and people can be queer. It is to Danforth's queering of rurality to which we now turn.

Queering rural space

Browne (2007, 886) argues that 'queer is more than shorthand for LGBT' and that queer entails 'radical (re)thinkings, (re)drawings, (re)conceptualisations, (re)mappings that could (re)make bodies, spaces and geographies'. Like other geographers we engage the verb 'queering' to explore the ways in which Danforth's text challenges the normative and in turn points to more inclusive ways of constructing places and constituting identities.

In the opening chapter of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, the narrator kisses her then best friend Irene Klauson in the hayloft on Irene's family ranch. The kiss is significant in marking the emergence of Cameron's nascent queer identity. The girls had been assisting Irene's father mend a fence and following this, sweaty and tired, retired to the hay loft to kiss. This queering of a quintessential rural space occurs throughout the novel; and, while Cameron experiences considerable conflict over the kiss she also enjoys it. In fact, both girls enjoy it to the extent that Cameron tells us they 'both knew we wanted to do it again' (15).

This early scene is echoed later in the novel on Coley's ranch, the night of the annual Miles Bucking Horse Sale, when Coley and Cameron first kiss. The festival itself is materially and metaphorically intertwined with rural heterosexuality through the tagline: 'If you can't get laid during Bucking Horse, you can't get laid' (159). The possibility of a queer lay is completely out of the question. When Coley seeks to console Cameron about the fact that Jamie has taken up with another girl she tells her, 'We can find you a cowboy in no time. Or two cowboys. Twelve cowboys' Cameron wants to ask 'How about a cowgirl?' but the question seems bizarre.

Coley is busy for the early part of the festival as she is nominated as a Queen of the Bucking Horse Sale. That such an award exists conveys the privileging of traditional discourses of femininity in the town, and Coley's acquiescence (at least in public) to such discourses. In her aspiring role as Queen, Coley is expected to flirt with cowboys at the Cattleman's Association to encourage them to fill her glass jar with tips.

Coley herself is quintessentially rural. Cameron explains that Coley does not need the symbolic accoutrements of rurality as do other female counterparts who wear blue Future Farmers of America jackets and spend time in the school's farm shop. 'Coley didn't need to cowgirl-up her persona. She was the authentic version' (120), a character who lives on a genuine ranch a long distance from the town and drives a pick-up truck. Significantly, it is this most rural of rural girls that Cameron kisses while wearing cowboy boots and a farm shirt belonging to Coley's brother. Danforth emphasises the natural rural setting as her protagonist prepares to kiss Coley.

We lay flat on our backs, our feet planted and our knees in the air, the just-setting sun coloring the remaining clouds in plum and navy with Pepto Bismol-pink underbellies and the sky behind them every candy-colored shade of orange, from circus peanut to sugared jelly slice. (178)

The two girls first meet at the evangelical church that Aunt Ruth requires Cameron to attend. Cameron describes it as 'one of those industrial size churches that look more like a giant feed shed than a house of worship' (67). The church is prescriptive and authoritarian in its teaching, and it is here that Cameron is introduced to the 'Extreme Teen Bible' and its definition of an 'abomination' as a man lying with a man (123). At the same time, church is where Pastor Crawford (in an 'epiphany' 125) suggests that Coley drive Cameron to and from bible meetings each week, a proposal that provides the genesis for the girls' friendship, and later, their sexual relationship.

When their lesbian relationship is outed, Cameron is sent to God's Promise, a religious conversion camp. In descriptions of the camp, Danforth focuses on the landscape, and in turn subversively queers the rural. Through a focus on the natural world as the setting for the violence of the religious camp, and its mission to denaturalise homosexuality, Danforth reminds readers that imaginings of rurality as natural and beautiful can be mere artifice.

The grounds at Promise had a little of everything that western Montana is famous for, things that the state tourism board makes sure show up on postcards and in guidebooks; golden-green fields for archery or horseback riding, densely wooded trails dotted with Indian paintbrush and lupine, two streams that, according to Jane, were just aching with trout, and a so-blue-it looked-fake mountain lake only a mile and a mile and a half's hike away from the main building. (267)

Importantly, Cameron arrives at God's Promise no longer seeking to hide or deny her queer identity. At the religious conversion camp, she meets other incarcerated youth or 'disciplines' as they are called including Jane Fonda and Adam Red Eagle. Together they talk, smoke marijuana (hidden in Jane's prosthetic leg), cry, laugh and support each other working hard to retain a sense of self amidst the shaming and denouncing of the 'therapeutic' interventions to which they are subjected. It is in the rural (and fundamentalist religious) space of God's Promise that Cameron becomes part of a larger queer community for the first time. It is here that Cameron finds queer camaraderie and support, and the necessary resources to begin a life of affirmation and visibility through leaving God's Promise for the world beyond. While, like Gorman-Murray (2009, 454), we don't minimise the role of shame and fear in Cameron's migration from this heinous organisation, we also see the role of 'feelings of comfort and love' that provide Cameron with 'the triggers for displacement and re-placement'.

A further queering of rurality occurs later in the novel through the gift of a book. Cameron returns home from God's Promise for the Christmas holidays only to be shunned at her local church with 'looks of flat-out disgust, sneers, people doing those big movement-side-to-side head shakes in my direction to perform their disapproval' (345). During the short visit, Cameron also learns that her Aunt has decided that she will remain at God's Promise throughout the following year into the spring and summer. As part of her re-education Cameron has not been permitted videos or books of her own choosing, but her grandmother passes on a present from a childhood friend of Cameron's mother, Margot Keenan.

Margot appears only a few times in the novel and her own story is never fully detailed. In many respects Margot plays a similar role in the novel as Lindsay in that she represents urban sophistication. Cameron tells us that her parents always 'stocked gin and tonic for (her) visits, bought limes just so they could make her drink the way she liked it' (50). After the death of Cameron's parents, Margot visits and takes Cameron out to dinner sporting 'black pants and black boots' and a 'non-Miles-City haircut'. (51). Margot is a business woman who lives in Berlin but travels the world for work. No mention is made of her having a partner. When Cameron and Margot look at a photo of a younger Margot and Cameron's mother, Cameron notes that it reminds her of a 'picture I had of Irene and me' while later Margot tells her 'I loved your mom since I met her' (55).

Notwithstanding the ambiguity surrounding Margot's sexuality and her relationship with Cameron's mother, Margot is important to the text in facilitating Cameron's exit from God's Promise. She does this via a gift she bestows on her Cameron during her visit home. In passing on the gift from Margot, Cameron's grandmother warns her that she will have to assess its suitability once unwrapped. Fortunately for Cameron the book, entitled, *The Campfire Girls Manual*, is deemed 'just fine' by Grandma (353). Inside the book is a letter wishing Cameron well. Hidden more carefully in the centre pages, away from the prying eyes of Grandma and Aunt Ruth, is three hundred dollars. A poem, 'The Torch Bearer's Desire' appears on the page next to the notes. It reads: 'That Light/ Which Has Been/Given to Me/I Desire/To Pass Undimmed/To Others.' Next to the poem Margot made a small annotation 'Here's hoping that cash is as good as light. Use it well. MMK.' (353). Margot's words of support and the cash for Cameron which resource her escape from God's Promise are hidden in a book which is strongly imbued with idealised notions of nature and the outdoors. This is consequently another rich illustration of the queering of rurality.

The final queering of rurality in the novel occurs in the last chapters of the book as Cameron and her co-conspirators, Jane and Adam, plan and execute their escape from God's Promise. Given the restrictions and surveillance of their movements the three develop a plan to leave under the pretence of going for a hike. This most archetypal of rural leisure pursuits is thus the ruse for their getaway. Maps and hiking trail guidebooks that Cameron solicits from the library as part of an independent study project on Montana history aid them in their escape.

Placelessness

In suggesting that rurality is queered in the novel we are mindful of not obscuring the challenges of rural life for a character such as Cameron. Notably, like the queer main character in *Geography Club* explored by Brown (2006), Cameron's story is also one of placelessness. Cameron is a champion swimmer and a significant part of the story is set at the lake where she trains and has swim meets. Her relationship with Lindsay centres largely around swimming as does her relationship with another character with whom she has a queer encounter, Mona. Her adolescence and search for identity are marked by swimming – an activity that is, in many respects placeless. It is not grounded or tied to land and it involves constant motion and movement. When swimming season ends, Cameron takes up running claiming it made 'high school feel less like foreign territory' (110). Despite wanting to run to ground herself geographically, the activity also suspends her (at least temporarily) in place. She explains: 'I'd keep my head down, my thoughts lost to whatever song was on, me somehow both in a high school in Miles City and also in some other world entirely' (114).

The placelessness experienced by Cameron is evoked in a range of other ways throughout the novel. For example, when she tells Irene they can no longer be friends, they are high in a Ferris wheel above a fair ground. The tropes of rurality as manifest in a country show are seen below – cowboys, cowgirls, tractors and pick-ups. Cameron is removed from this rural world, but not part of any other world either. Rather, she is suspended in time and place. It is similarly perched above a rural setting – hovering between places on the roof of the old hospital in the centre of town – that Cameron and Jamie fight after Cameron demonstrates a lack of interest in having sex with him. Perhaps most explicitly, it is at God's Promise, prior to deciding to escape, that Cameron most clearly articulates her placelessness. She is starting to feel as if she is losing herself as a result of the pathologising of her queer identity in 'therapy':

I'd felt like this since my arrival, like at Promise I was destined to live in suspended time, somewhere that the me I had been or the me I thought I was, didn't even exist. ... It's living in a diorama. It's living the life of one of those prehistoric insects encased in amber: suspended, frozen, dead but no, you don't know for sure. (312)

In the very final scene of the novel, Cameron, Jane and Adam stop at Quake Lake as they make their escape from God's Promise. It is here that Cameron's parents died when they crashed through a guardrail on the road that climbed a ravine over the lake. As she reaches the lake, Cameron decides

she must go into it. She states: 'I knew that I needed to be in that water, deep within it.' As Adam and Jane start a fire and prepare a meal, Cameron enters the water holding aloft a lit candle. She rolls onto her back and floats to the centre of the lake, talks to her parents about their deaths, her grief and her love for them before extinguishing the candle and swimming back to shore. As she climbs onto the bank she looks at the horizon reflecting, 'And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting' (470).

While the ending suggests reconciliation and self-acceptance it also reinforces the themes of movement and placelessness. What we found in reading through the numerous online postings from readers is that such an ending is not easily accepted in coming-out-narratives. Repeatedly many who expressed their enjoyment of the novel claimed to be disappointed by the ending, and wondered not only 'where' Cameron ended up but also lamented that there wasn't a clearer indication that she found happiness in relocating to a cosmopolitan, secular city. For instance, one reader wrote:

I wanted Cameron to stand up for herself, take down the man, show them that she's amazing, just as she is and ride off into the sunset kissing a girl. Or at the very least, I wanted to see her going to a good, nonreligious college in a bigger city where she could find people who accepted her, to see her growing up into someone amazing and proving her aunt and small town and all the people at God's Promise wrong. I did not get that ending. (2012)

Responses such as that cited above testify to Danforth's skills as a writer as they demonstrate readers' strong investment in the novel. Further, they provide evidence of how schooled we are in the dominant coming-out narrative. This narrative is not only mobilised via published fiction and non-fiction such as *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* as Gorman-Murray (2007) explains, but across other media. For example, the widely circulating campaign addressing queer suicide 'It Gets Better' constructs a coming-out story which positions childhood and teenage years as a 'temporary state of negative affect' that one moves on from into a positive adult world (Grzanka and Mann 2014, 384). In this campaign, along with many coming out novels there is a belief in 'linear progression' (Plummer 2003, 82) or a 'sequential, rational pattern' (Gorman-Murray 2007, 17) at the end of which the subject is fulfilled and happy (Mason 2012). Space is critical here not only in relation to generic expectations that there should be a rejection of rurality for urbanity and the religious for the secular, but also that, at the conclusion of the narrative, the subject should be fixed in place. Despite Knopp's (2004, 124) observation that placelessness may be pleasurable for queers, readers seemed to associate this state as an inferior one.

Conclusions

The Miseducation of Cameron Post by Emily M. Danforth reminds us that there is no coherence or unity to the category 'rural youth'. Her text adds to our understanding of how rurality and age can intersect to marginalise young people outside the metropole, and focuses our attention on the ways in which other social categories such as sexuality and gender may lead to additional exclusions for rural youth. In beginning our analysis of the novel we developed a claim enunciated by Danforth (2013) in interviews that the antagonist of the novel is the social and cultural conservatism of the town. In this respect we detailed the different manifestations of the repressive heterosexist setting of Miles City and its impact on Cameron's emerging erotic subjectivity. Following this, we articulated how Danforth deploys rurality quite differently in the novel in support of non-normative sexuality. Rural people are shown to express same-sex erotics and rural spaces are presented as conducive to claiming lesbian desire and fulfilment. Like Cooper's (2009, 134), work that details a 'non-normative sexual life going on in the interstitial spaces of the suburb' in her analysis of two New Zealand autobiographies, we noted a dissident sexual life being played out between hay bales, and in a paddock on a small-town lake. This queering of rurality is important in that it unsettles the conflation of queer and urban, complicates traditional narratives of rural queerness and opens up to scrutiny the

diversity of histories, experiences and identifications of gay and lesbian young people living in the country. In queering rurality Danforth does not simply invert and thereby re-inscribe binaries of rural/urban and heterosexual/homosexual. Her deconstructive task is more nuanced than this as she keeps in play the heterosexism of rural spaces while also attending to the role of placelessness, movement and fluidity in the coming out narrative. In her emphasis on the latter, Danforth confuses and frustrates some of her readers who bring to the text a range of expectations about what constitutes coming out.

Cumulatively, Danforth represents Cameron's experiences of rurality and urbanity as places of home, belonging, family and community in messy and complicated ways. We learn from Danforth that queer rural youth experience concurrent moments of rejection and acceptance and attachment and alienation. They are excluded from and discriminated against in some rural spaces, but simultaneously seek out alternative rural spaces and/or recreate rural spaces in queer ways. The types of 'diversity of intersections' between discourses of rurality and sexuality that emerge in the text have begun to be mapped in the geographical literature on adult gays and lesbians living outside the city (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2013; Waitt and Johnston 2013), but remain under-investigated in children's geographies. This is concerning when there is much a study of young adult fiction could tell us about the spatial dimensions of power, identities, practices and relations as they pertain to youth. In this paper we have only begun to address this oversight. This is not only in relation to what we may learn from a geographic engagement with young adult novels as texts, but also in relation to other spatial dimensions of the production (writing and marketing) and consumption (reading, reviewing) of novels for young people. New work in literary geographies (e.g. Anderson and Saunders 2015; Hones 2014) that is emphasising the dynamic, complex and relational associations between author, reader and text, the interconnections between real and imagined spaces in literature, and the role of fiction in broader constructions of place provide rich guidance for new spatial studies of youth and books.

Notes

1. These reviews are posted in full on Emily Danforth's webpage. See <http://www.emdanforth.com/sreviews.php>
2. Sharp's (2000) advice on attending to the book's reception was particularly apposite to our selected text as alongside receiving positive reviews and awards it was also banned by a Delaware school district in 2014. The novel had appeared on a summer reading list of contemporary novels suggested by public youth librarians across the state. The Cape Henlopen district board in the southern part of Delaware voted 6–1 to remove the book from the list on the basis that it included profanities. This reported rationale was undermined however when other books on the list were identified as also publishing words deemed obscenities and when the original complaint was posted online as this was focused largely on the novel's lesbian content. Concern mobilised around the view that the book was a pedagogic tool for lesbian sex with the complainant asserting it was akin to 'a roadmap or guide book on how to become a sexually active lesbian teen' (Atwell 2014).

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