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## **Vital Lines Drawn From Books: Difficult Feelings in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?***

**Heike Bauer**

### Abstract

This article examines the representation of a transnational archive of queer books in Alison Bechdel's graphic memoirs *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* for the insights it provides into role of reading in making sense of the often difficult "felt experiences" of lesbian life. In both memoirs, books serve an important narrative function in the portrayal of Alison's lesbian identification and its complex emotional entanglements with the lives of parents who are trapped – killed even, in the case of the father – in the wastelands of patriarchy and heterosexual expectation. The article argues that in this complex family dynamic in which "sexual identity" itself is a problem and emotions remain largely unspoken, books act as fragile conduits of feelings, shaping familial relationships even as they allow Alison to contextualize her life in relation to historical events and social norms. Reading books allows her to understand the apparently U.S.-specific history of her family in relation to a wider queer history in the West.

Keywords: lesbian, Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?*, books, graphic memoirs, feelings, cultural politics, family, queer history

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A defining feature of twenty-first century cultural criticism is its close attention to the relationship between feelings and trans/nationally delineated cultural and sexual politics. This scholarship is prompted by the recognition, as Ann Cvetkovich notes in *An Archive of Feelings*, her influential study of trauma and lesbian public cultures, that despite the growth of trauma studies in the later twentieth century, “questions remain about what counts as a trauma history and whose feelings matter in the national public sphere” (Cvetkovich, 2003: 37). The focus of Cvetkovich’s project lies on the U.S., yet she nevertheless shows that questions about sexuality, power and everyday life reach across national and historical boundaries as she examines “how (homo)sexualities function in transnational context [and] whether queer sexualities can disrupt cultural and state nationalisms that presume and enforce heteronormativity” (Cvetkovich, 2003: 121). Cvetkovich’s words echo those of Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, who, when observing what they called the “transnational turn” of sexuality studies in the late 1990s, similarly point out that “the laminations of the social into a person’s body and psyche” are marked by circulatory cultural forms that exceed the boundaries of the nation state (Povinelli/Chauncey: 443-444). While the theorization of sexualities in relation to complex geopolitical histories has considerably complicated understanding of the political exigencies of the sexual subject, Cvetkovich, amongst others, also notes the difficulties of aligning such abstracted critical questions with what she calls “the felt experience of everyday life, including moments that might seem utterly banal in comparison with moments of shock or ordinary extraordinariness” (Cvetkovich, 2012: 12).

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How, we might ask, are queer lives negotiated via cultural production? And, more specifically, what is the role of books and reading in mediating the effects of damaging histories of homosexual denial and persecution, and their affective pull? This article examines Alison Bechdel's excavations of family history, *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?* (2012), for the insights they provide into the "felt experiences" of queer existence in the U.S. since the Second World War, and how Bechdel tries to make sense of it by reading her way through the canons of modern fiction and lesbian literature. Via books – including British, Irish and U.S. texts and European writing in English translation – Bechdel's memoirs historicize her family and interrogate the queer entanglements of her own lesbian life with the lives of parents who are trapped in a damaging emotional void forged during the socially repressive and sexually persecutory Eisenhower era.

Reflecting the fact that tracing feelings is a difficult business, influential readings of Bechdel's first memoir have mainly focused on the objects she constructs to tell her narrative: the archives of feelings, family and queer intertextuality that are so central to the story (see Chute, 2010: 175-217; Cvetkovich, 2008; McBean, 2013; Rohy, 2010). Jennifer Lemberg in turn examines the book as a form of witnessing while Adrienne Shaw reads it in the context of contemporary lesbian community making (Lemberg, 2008; Shaw, 2009). I want to turn attention to the representation of Alison's<sup>1</sup> interpretation of the archives she creates, and, especially, in the role of books in negotiating her relationship with her parents. For reading as much as writing

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to "Alison" when discussing the protagonist of *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, and to "Bechdel" when discussing the maker of these books, a distinction that aims to aid clarity rather than seeking to fix the slippery subject of memoir.

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and drawing is part of Bechdel's creative process, allowing her to ask difficult questions about familial relationships, how such relationships are shaped by the sexual politics of the time and place in which they are formed, and what kind of stories can be told about them. Both memoirs are framed in relation to published writing – *Ulysses* in the case of *Fun Home*, Winnicott's work in the case of *Are You My Mother?* – and the narratives are developed with and around a wide range of references to fiction, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. They suggest that reading fiction and related critical work, as much as – or even more than – the therapy that accompanies Alison's adulthood, allows for a deeply personalized examination of the relationship between the personal and the political. Where Freudian psychoanalysis offers a template for understanding psychic relations of, and within, a standardized "family" in the West, its uses for understanding the complexities of queer existence are limited by the fact that it rearticulates heterosexist assumptions about "normal" development within a Western family context (see Halberstam, 2007). Winnicott observed that a "tremendous reading urge" can be a way of self-soothing for children who suffer from depression (Winnicott, 1989: 88-89). Bechdel's graphic memoirs suggest that in an emotionally distant family environment, books can act as fragile conduits of feelings, shaping familial relationships even as they allow Alison to contextualize her life in relation to historical events and social norms.

### **Queer Reading, Lesbian Comics Making**

Bechdel's memoirs are at the forefront of a new interest in the politics and representation of feelings, and an "unprecedented media presence" of comics including lesbian graphic memoirs (Murphy : 2003). Starting out in the late 1970s

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with the strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, she, in her own words, “skulked at the cultural margins” for almost thirty years as a chronicler of and contributor to lesbian subculture before the success of *Fun Home* (Bechdel 2013a). *DTWOF* in semi-fictional mode tracks the changing lives of a group of queer friends in an unnamed city in the Midwest and in so doing portrays major social and political shifts in the U.S., ranging from critiques of PRIDE’s conservative turn in response to Ronald Reagan’s anti-AIDS propaganda to lesbian parenting. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, in contrast, marks Bechdel’s overtly autobiographical turn as it examines her own family, specifically the difficult relationship with her father, Bruce Bechdel, whose tragic death – a suicide in Alison’s view; an accident according to her mother – prompts her to excavate the story of his only partially repressed love for teenage boys. The book catapulted Bechdel –and lesbian autobiographical comics – to the attention of wider popular and literary audiences, becoming what literary critic Heather Love has called “an instant classic” because of “its layered personal and social histories, its play with perspective and memory, and its sheer narrative interest” (Love, 2012). Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, tackles the difficult if close relationship between Alison and her mother in a bid to extricate Alison from its unresolved pull. Various read in terms of the psychic issues at stake in trying to represent “mom” and its dexterity in depicting the artistic concerns involved in making the book, *Are You My Mother?* addresses head on Alison’s emotional entanglements with her mother, a difficult relationships whose jarring dissonances remain unresolved (see Love, 2012; Roiphe, 2012; Miller 2012).

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Critics have well documented the generic qualities of comics as a particularly apt medium both for documenting everyday experience and for bearing witness to traumatic events and how they affect those who live through them or live with their aftershock. Hillary Chute, for instance, has shown that the labor involved in comics making defines the emotional boundaries of this kind of representation. In her analysis of Bechdel's work, the visceral dimensions of the graphic memoir genre are derived from the physicality of the creative method. "In the act of creating *Fun Home*," she argues, "Bechdel inhabits the contradictions of being *of* her parents and yet separate from them" (Chute, 2010: 202-203). Chute points out that Bechdel's complex embodiment in drawing and redrawing her mother, her father and her self is further enhanced when she re-enacts scenes from the past that have not been captured in the family photo album, posing, for example, as her father so that she can then draw him from the photograph of her self posing as him. Yet while such creative embodiment clearly plays an important role in Bechdel's memoir making, a body-centric analysis alone cannot fully account for the relationship between the drawing process and the prominent role of the written word in the memoirs. The interplay between words and image as much as the space/time logic of sequential art are what allows comics formally to draw out the gaps, contradictions and uncertainties that mark the realms of feelings and the processes by which they are experienced and remembered (See Heer/Worcester, 2009). We might say that the formal characteristics of comics constitute the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" which characterizes, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's famous formulation, the affective pull of queer reading and cultural

representation, and which, in the case of comics, also are an overt feature of the medium itself (Sedgwick, 1993: 8).

Where “queer” is a term associated with movement and the crossing of boundaries, Bechdel nevertheless emphasizes that her lesbianism – which she calls “the central organizing principle of [her] existence” – guides the direction of her travels (Bechdel, 2003: 3). It informs her understanding of the extraordinary plot that binds the Bechdel family: the father’s only partly closeted life, the mother’s collusion in keeping his “secret,” and the impact on Alison of a family environment that is highly aestheticized and intellectualized but emotionally detached. In this environment where “sexual identity” itself is a problem and emotions remain largely unspoken, books serve to forge – and break – tenuous lines of communication between Alison and her parents. By representing her search in books for the questions to ask about the complex dynamics of her family, dynamics that are formed around sexual secrets, denials and a tragic death, Bechdel draws a complex picture of familial relationships shaped by historico-cultural circumstance through which social norms work themselves into the fabric of feelings.

### **Dictionary Failure**

Words are at the heart of modern sexual politics. At least since the coinage or, in the case of the lesbian, the widespread usage, of terms by which people are identified collectively in relation to their sexuality, critical debates about the limits and possibilities of such a vocabulary have multiplied. In contrast some of the keywords themselves – notably lesbian, gay, homosexual – have proved to be particularly

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resilient against historical change, continuing to be meaningful, if not necessarily exclusively so, labels by which people align themselves collectively. While there is a link, then, between the vocabularies of sexuality and everyday existence, this link is often asynchronous, as much backwards looking in time as the product of contemporary culture. Comics collector Michael J. Murphy has argued that the increased interest in lesbian and gay comics is linked to an increased interest in the history of sexuality, suggesting that there is a real temporal connection between queer pasts and the present and their role in imagining a queer future (Murphy: 2003). While considerations of the future are conspicuously absent in *Fun Home*, history's intimate presence is a key question in Alison's attempt to understand her father's life and its ramification for her own existence. The book's subtitle – a family tragicomic – marks the familial setting as temporally flawed by evoking a sense of dramatic anachronism through the allusion to a genre – “tragic-comedy” – which had its heyday in the seventeenth-century. At the same time, however, it also gestures towards the problematic role of performance as an artificial cover for real feelings in the family, a motif that recurs both in the father's aesthetic displacements and the mother's “acting out” of artificial feelings via her involvement in amateur dramatics.

In a press release from 2006 Bechdel explains that “in the book [she tries] to sort out how much of the way [her father's] life turned out was his own responsibility and how much it was the result of larger forces beyond his control. I speculate,” she continues, “on whether, had I come of age when he did, I would have been able to make different choices. I don't come up with any answers. But that interplay between the personal and the political is an enduring fixation of mine — it's also a primary

concern of my comic strip” (Bechdel: 2013b). Where Alison’s life is political, inspired by her lesbianism, Bruce Bechdel’s apolitical stance raises questions about the connections between sexual politics and other forms of political engagement. There is, for instance, no mention of his relationship to the civil rights movement, a movement that profoundly reshaped the U.S. political consciousness. Instead one of the book’s prevailing images is the picture of Bruce as gay man who is –only just – out-of-time and hence channels his, as it turns out only partially repressed homosexuality, into aesthetic pursuits, which include the decoration of the heterosexual family home and reading books. Alison is fascinated by the fact that he graduated from college a dozen years before the Stonewall Riots in 1969, a transformative event in twentieth-century gay history, and the narrative repeatedly turns to pondering how Bruce’s life might have unfolded differently had he been born a few years later. Alison in turn repeatedly tries to imagine how her own life might have unfolded had she been born at the same time as her father when homosexuality was a crime as well as a social taboo. Yet this paternal fantasy has particular existential limits. For Alison recognizes that while “there’s a certain emotional expediency to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia ... that’s a problematic line of thought” (p. 196). “For one thing,” she continues, “it makes it harder for me to blame him” (p. 196). “And for another, it leads to a particularly literal cul-de-sac. If my father had ‘come out’ in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother....” “....where would this leave me?” (p. 197). Alison’s impasse is represented visually by the depiction of her looking around the gay subculture she is part of in 1985 and envisaging her father located within it. While knowledge about gay history allows Alison to understand her father as a historical subject, this ultimately fails to provide

answers about the “erotic truth” (p. 230) of his life and how it shapes Alison’s relationship with him.

Povelli and Chauncey have pointed out that “the antigay politics and discourse of the 1950s” cannot be sufficiently explained by a focus on the domestic concerns that affected U.S. culture and politics after World War II, but that they need to be understood in terms of the transnational “circulation of ideas, political ideologies, and fears” that shaped the imperatives of social reconstruction at the time (Povinelli/Chauncey: 1999: 443). The conspicuous absence of history books from *Fun Home* suggests that Alison, knowing her father’s story to be absent from the “official” narratives postwar America tells about itself, searches elsewhere for understanding how the anti-gay laws and propaganda of his youth impacted on him. Yet after the father’s death she nevertheless looks for words that may explain his life by consulting the family’s dictionary for its entry on “queer” (p.57). Concluding with a panel that depicts Alison campily but determinedly drinking sherry, the sequence ends with the observation that “most compellingly at the time his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster’s” (p.57). The dictionary thus figures in Alison’s memory as the object that defines her experience of the father’s death –which she thinks of as a queer suicide – and her failure to pinpoint its cause. Dictionaries have a direct relationship to the social. For when words enter the dictionary, they are given one or more “definitive” meanings which register their existence as part of a historically defined linguistic and national entity. The history of Webster’s dictionary itself is closely tied up with the national history of the United States. First put together in the early 1900s, it serves as the reference point for the

things, acts, concepts and ideas that are seen to belong to the linguistic realm of the United States as a nation (See Bynack, 1984; Mugglestone, 2011). As dictionaries tend to record linguistic and related social changes that have already occurred, the absence of a queer definition for Bruce Bechdel, one which Alison *knows* to exist even if she cannot find it in the dictionary, locates his life at that curious temporal fissure between the emergence of new subcultural modes of identification and their official entry into a dominant national language.

The significance of the absence of an “official” definition that would fit Bruce Bechdel is further enhanced by the way his absence from public discourse is contrasted to Alison’s lesbianism in a way that suggests that her self-articulation prompted his death. Following Alison’s futile search for her queer father in Webster’s dictionary, *Fun Home* continues on the next page with a panel that serves as a forceful reminder that Alison is in no doubt about how to define herself. The opening panel of this page depicts a flashback to the moment four months before the father’s death, when Alison had written to her parents to announce: “I am a lesbian” (p.58). The announcement is typed out in the standard font of a Smith Corona typewriter, its typeface contrasting with the hand lettered speech and commentary of the comic. Yet the distance achieved by the mechanical mediation of Alison’s coming out – an event she had envisaged to be “an emancipation from [her] parents” (p.59) – is almost instantly negated in a telephone conversation with her mother. For the mother responds to Alison’s lesbian identification by telling her that the father “has had affairs with other men” (p.58). While at the time Alison experiences the news about her father’s homosexual relationships as an unwelcome pull “back into [the parental]

orbit” (p.59), retrospectively she comes to think that her coming out may have had “a cause-and-effect relationship” (p. 59) with her father’s death by fatally injuring “the line that Dad drew between reality and fiction” (p.59). Alison’s memory of coming out to her parents thus remains tightly wound up with her father’s death, not least through her remembering her attempts to find words that speak for and about him in Webster’s dictionary.

“Queer” is not the only word insufficiently defined in the dictionary. When the thirteen-year old Alison first encounters the word “lesbian” in a dictionary its “alarming prominence” causes her to have “qualms” (p.74). Alison’s lesbian identification proper, “a revelation not of the flesh but of the mind” (p.74), only takes place five years later in a bookshop when she encounters “a book about people who had completely cast aside their own qualms” (p.74). The narrative thus juxtaposes the forbidding dictionary definition with affirmative stories told by and about lesbians. After her encounter with lesbian life in the bookshop, Alison’s own lesbian becoming quickly gathers momentum. She embarks on an increasingly bold search for lesbian and gay books in the library, books “which I quickly ravished” (p. 75); she is seen masturbating while reading Anais Nin’s *Delta of Venus*; she attends a “Gay Union” meeting and not long afterwards comes out to her parents to misinformed paternal approval and “mild” but “devastating” maternal disapproval (p.77). Alison’s “lesbian” reading, then, reflects the fact that books can play an important role in lesbian and queer life both in the formulation of a sense of self and in terms of shaping a collective identity, however tenuous and amorphous this may be. In this context, even repositories of dominant culture such as the dictionary are open to queer

transformation – for example, when Alison reads the dictionary with her first girlfriend, everyday entries such as the one for mouth gain “erotic” meaning (p.80). In contrast, in relation to Bruce Bechdel’s life, books, however important they may be in the displacement of his homosexual desires, ultimately fail to provide sustenance for his existence. Furthermore, when Alison goes in search for words to define her father, the dictionary proves insufficient: neither the entry for “queer” nor that for “father” (p.197) allows her to solve the conundrum of his existence and its entanglement with her own life.

### **Novel Intimacies**

While in the distant world of the Bechdel family, Alison and Bruce negotiate their lives through books in radically different ways – Alison’s relationship to books is intimate and affirmative in relation to her lesbian identification whereas Bruce shows “a preference of fiction to reality” (p.85) – books nevertheless forge a real connection between father and daughter even if the closeness between them remains largely fictional. When a teenage Alison joins her father’s literature class at school and they discover a shared love of reading, “the sensation of intimacy was novel” (p.199). It also remains largely unspeakable. For as father and daughter begin to exchange queer books, they are unable to translate the shared experience of reading these texts into words. *Fun Home* records only one face-to-face exchange between father and daughter in which they begin to discuss their “inverted” desires. This takes place when the adult Alison asks Bruce why he had given her copy of *Colette* to read. He initially denies that he thought that the book had special meaning but eventually concedes that “I guess there was some kind of ... identification” (p.220). This

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admission is followed by him briefly mentioning his first (sexual) “experience.”

While the words in this sequence suggest the beginnings of closeness between father and daughter the images make all too clear that their lives remain parallels that do not touch.

The conversation, which takes place in the car on the way to the cinema, unfolds over two pages and twenty-four panels of identical size. They all depict, with little variation, Alison’s head and the head of her father side on and in parallel to each other. The father, who is driving the car, never once turns to look at Alison. She too mostly looks straight ahead but every now and again glances at her father or, once, out of the window. This sequence is the closest we get to an exchange between Alison and Bruce about their sexualities and it is also the father’s most direct account of his desires. Yet the repetitive imagery and closed environment of the car brilliantly capture the fleeting extraordinariness of the situation. Eighteen panels in, after the father’s admission that he dressed up as a girl when he was young is followed by Alison’s admission that she wanted to be a boy, the conversation comes to a halt when Alison asks if the father recalls *her* younger self. “Remember?”, she asks. The question remains unanswered. Instead in the remaining six panels we follow Alison’s internal ponderings as the father drives them to the cinema where they arrive “all too soon” and the conversation ends (pp.220-221).

In face-to-face encounters between Alison and her father, then, a conversation about books elicits glimpses at a shared intimacy, which nevertheless remains largely unspoken and unspeakable. In the confined space of the car, Alison’s reference to

*Collette* prompts her father to mention his own “identification” even if he all too quickly shuts her out again and returns to his usual mode of loaded and forbidding silence. Faced with such silences and the unexplored truths of her father’s not-so-secret life as a lover of young men, Alison turns to fiction to interrogate her (dis)identification with her father. *Fun Home* ends with a reference to “the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories” (p.232). Articulated via references to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the final scene depicts an image of pending touch between father and daughter, an image that anticipates narrative closure: for at the end the father “was there to catch me when I leapt” (p.232). Alison’s feelings thus remain suspended in the space between fiction and the real created by the anticipation of paternal touch.

### **Lesbian Business**

*Fun Home* examines how sexuality, as mediated via the realm of fiction, provides an affective point of connection between Alison and her father. *Are You My Mother?* in contrast shows that Alison’s lesbianism lies at the core of the difficult relationship with her mother. Published six years after the first book, this second graphic memoir explores the contradictory dynamics of a difficult mother-daughter relationship.

Where *Fun Home* is overtly political – including references to Alison’s own radical lesbian feminism alongside a critique of the social denial of homosexuality in the U.S. pre-Stonewall – *Are You My Mother?* deals with the more pernicious perpetuation of anti-lesbian attitudes and their felt impact. Framed in terms of key concepts by which the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s rearticulated the mother-daughter relationship – which gained popular influence around the time Helen Bechdel gave birth to Alison – the narrative is firmly located in psychic time. Critics have read the

book variously as an exercise in self-analysis, an accomplished rendering of the creative process of self-representation, and as an attempt to repair the damaged mother-daughter relationship (see Love, 2012; Giamo, 2013). But the book also addresses a critically under-discussed aspect of many queer lives: the jarring between the protagonist's politicized lesbian existence and her on-going relationship with a parent who, while not aggressively or violently homophobic, nevertheless largely figures her child's sexuality as unspeakable and socially embarrassing.

The relationship between an adult Alison and her mother is conducted mainly by telephone. Accordingly, they are mostly represented in separate panels and in their separate private spaces. A key sequence in the book, which depicts the women in a one-sided telephone conversation dominated by the mother, reflects how their complex bond is mediated by Alison's lesbianism. For here Alison determines "that at the next pause [she] would tell her [mother] something about [her] life" (p.227). True to plan, she announces that her comics strip, *DTWOF*, is now being published by papers in Chicago and Philadelphia. What follows is a poignant and painful exchange in which the mother initially tries to change topic, but upon hearing that Alison also signed a book contract, begins to rail against her daughter's "lesbian cartoons" (p.228). "I don't want relatives talking about you," she says, asking "What attitude am I supposed to take? Defend you? Laugh it off?", before closing the subject in the next panel with the words: "I'm not comfortable with it. You know I am not" (p. 228). The mother overtly rejects her daughter as she bows to social conventions that figure lesbianism as an undesirable, shameful secret. Alison's reaction in turn reveals that the mother's embarrassment provokes complex feelings in the daughter. For Alison

initially tries to stand up for herself – “This is what I’m doing, it’s who I am”, she says (p.228) – then tries to reassure the mother that the lesbian cartoons, unlike the memoir, “can’t hurt you” (p. 228) before falling silent as she attempts to hide her crying.

The exchange is marked by a sense of the social norms that have such a negative impact on the mother-daughter relationship. For while the rhythm of this argument from Alison’s point of view appears to be spiraling out of control– she moves from self-assertion to displaced concern for the mother to silent hurt – the sequence nevertheless ends with her realization that neither mother nor daughter are to blame for their dysfunctional relationship. As the mother continues to talk against Alison’s silence, the commentary notes that Alison “Suddenly saw something very clearly” (p. 228). “Whatever it was I wanted from my mother,” it continues, “was simply not there to be had. It was not her fault” (p.228). “And it was therefore not my fault,” concludes the next panel, “that I was unable to elicit it” (p. 229). Here the power dynamics between mother and daughter have shifted as the mother’s initial assertiveness turns to into a searching question – “Can you understand me?” –which remains unanswered as Alison holds the phone away from her ear. A commentary box at the bottom of the panel states “I know she gave me what she could” (p. 229).

This sequence brilliantly captures how the mother’s and daughter’s willingness to engage in dialogue is marred by the mother’s social anxieties that prevent any real exchange between them. It furthermore shows the dissonance between psychological insight and on-going feelings of hurt and upset. The final image of the sequence, a

panel that covers two thirds of the page, depicts Alison crying. Crouched forward with her head on the desk and her hand still on the phone, she is surrounded by commentary boxes which explain that her mother had supported her financially during the last nine months, thus enabling the lesbian cartooning she rejected so vehemently during their telephone conversation. The image traces the void that occurs when psychoanalytical insight fails to uplift negative feelings. It shows the visceral impact on Alison of the disjunction between the mother's material support and verbal rejection of her lesbian cartooning. It reappears a couple of pages later in a panel that shows Alison recreating the experience for a photograph, so that she can draw it for her book. While her posture recalls the feeling of hurt, and while the image is repeated in the camera screen suggesting that the experience is not worked through, the caption nevertheless suggests that it "got easier" to bear it (p. 233).

### **"But it is hard to figure out what the story is"**

Unlike *Fun Home*, which unfolds according to the reconstructive logic of Bechdel's unraveling of the father's family secret, *Are You My Mother?* is overtly concerned, then, with the felt *effects* of events, a concern that anticipates from the outset a lack of narrative closure. The spectre of Bruce Bechdel haunts the narrative, which considers his damaging impact on the relationship between Alison and her mother, and shows how Alison's making and publication of *Fun Home* further puts pressure on the link between them – not least because the mother does not engage with Alison's belief that her father committed suicide. While the father-memoir, more than any other book, is a frequent topic of conversation between mother and daughter, discussion of its content is mostly displaced onto formal and practical questions relating to the book's

completion. Here, then, the father-memoir itself represents the thin line between fiction and the real that demarcates what is allowed into discourse.

A sequence built around a telephone conversation when Alison tells her mother that she needs to rewrite the father-memoir depicts the complex set of displacements by which mother and daughter articulate their emotional demands on, and anxieties about, each other. In characteristically layered Bechdel-style, their speech bubble dialogue is accompanied by a commentary which looks back to an earlier conversation between them during which the mother had said that “she wished I had written the book about my father as fiction. On the theory that it would not have exposed our family in the way memoir did” (p.28). Read separately and in isolation, the speech bubble dialogue captures vividly the thin membrane that separates the two women’s understanding of each other and how it relates to the issues at stake in the telling of Bruce Bechdel’s life. “Ha! You have too many strands!”, says the mother to which Alison replies: “I do. I just need to tell a story.” “Yes. Narrative is what they want” comes the response, prompting Alison to say: “But it is hard to know what the story is.” The mother does not reply. Instead the dialogue is visually interrupted by a couple of panels on Virginia Woolf, which reflect on Woolf’s take on fiction and conclude that for Woolf “fiction achieves ... a deeper truth than fact” (p.29). When we return to the conversation, the perspective has shifted from a depiction of Alison to that of the mother on the phone in her living room. This panel, which takes up roughly three quarters of the page, reflects in the commentary on Woolf’s difficulties to write about her own mother while visually drawing out the distance between Alison and her mother. It shows Alison’s mother sitting on her sofa surrounded by copies of

the *New Yorker* and several books, most prominently one by Sylvia Plath. Scattered on the floor are single pages whose layout suggests that they are drafts of Alison's work, although their content is the least clearly drawn part of the whole panel. The panel marks a turning point in the conversation. Repeating Alison's statement, "But it is hard to know what the story is," it leaves it figuratively hanging in the room, unanswered, as the mother responds "I'm reading Sylvia Plath. She put her head in the oven" (p.29).

The abrupt change of topic moves the question of "what the story is" – whether or not the father committed suicide and what his death reveals about the social reality that shaped his life – from the discussion of *Fun Home* that started it to a scrutiny of the mother-daughter relationship. A subsequent panel shows Alison's willingness to collude in the mother's silence about Bruce Bechdel. Depicting part of the back of Alison's head and her full reflection in a window surrounded by tear-like snowflakes, the commentary explains the mother's shift of topic from the *Fun Home* manuscript to Plath's suicide as follows: "Mom means this kindly, commiseratingly. 'Oh, the writer's life.' Still, I think of my own oven and am glad it's electric" (p.30). The excuse made here for the mother, even as it humorously acknowledges a change of pace in the conversation, evades a discussion of the mother's refusal to engage with Alison's work, and by extension with the (impact of the) family secrets that propel it. Not discussing the nature of Bruce Bechdel's death renders it as unspeakable as his life ultimately proved to be unlivable.

While the narrative at this point veers away from the subject of family history to a discussion of the mother's interest in writing poetry, the unresolved issues between mother-daughter resurface shortly afterwards when Alison notes that she has "never read Sylvia Plath. My mother has never read Virginia Woolf. In general, we have stayed out of one another's way like this" (p.30). These literary reference points – Woolf for Alison; Plath for her mother – subtly draw out the different points of perspective by which mother and daughter position themselves in the world. On the surface, Woolf and Plath are similar in that they were both feminist and both committed suicide. Yet is difficult not to read these literary interests and the deaths of the authors under discussion in terms of their sexual politics. While Alison looks to the explorative sexual politics of Woolf, her mother is aligned with a writer whose poetry focuses on difficult relationships with men and whose only novel, *The Bell Jar*, makes a feminist case that is impeded by the novel's casual anti-lesbianism. Elsewhere in the narrative, the mother's cultural interests are seen to include European theatre as well as art and music. At this point, however, when the discussion revolves around the piecing together of the story that would become *Fun Home*, the mother's cultural reference points are firmly located in the U.S.. This reinforces the sense that the mother's realm of experience and her relationship to Bruce are indelibly shaped by a national context, which, at the point when they began their relationship, was both hostile to homosexuality and offered limited opportunities to women – even as it ultimately leaves unanswered the question of why the parents remained politically uninvolved and socially conservative at a time when the civil rights movement began to shake the bedrocks of American society.

The literary dissonances between adult Alison and her mother are juxtaposed to a sequence in which Alison reconstructs a more intimate relationship between them and imagines how it was destroyed by the father. She finds a series of five photographs of herself, aged three months old, in which she is held by her mother. According to Winnicott, the mother's "holding of an infant, a human being in the making" in the right way and at the right time allows the child to be introduced to the world without damage (Winnicott, 2000: 183). Alison, however, arranges her baby photographs into a sequence that traces how the "rapport" between mother and baby and related sense of "joy" experienced by baby Alison "is shattered as I notice the man with the camera" (p.32). She imagines that her father, on seeing the mother-daughter bond, destroys it with a single remark: "she is such a brat" (p.32). Even "at three months," Alison notes, "I had seen enough of my father's rages to be wary of him" (p. 32). This sequence, which unfolds over a double-page spread, formally disrupts the depiction of the problematic present-day mother-daughter relationship by turning the focus on the father's damaging impact on both of them. *Are You My Mother?* ends with a bird's eye view of a young Alison on all fours, with her back turned to her mother. The commentary notes that the mother has given her "something far more valuable" than the unspecified "thing" missing in their relationship: "She has given me a way out" (p.288-289). The "way out," as indicated in the lead up to this final scene, leads through the realm of culture. Alison's mother supports her reading, writing and drawing and thus, ultimately, her ability to work as a cartoonist: a form of narrative closure that renders material the maternal void of feeling and fills it with cultural production.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> After Helen Bechdel dies on 14 May 2013, Alison Bechdel includes a link to the

## **Queer States of Feeling**

While, as Cvetkovich notes, any starting point for analyses of the cultural politics of feelings must begin by asking questions about whose feelings count in national contexts, then this question is intimately related to a consideration of how to make nonnormative feelings count. Bechdel, similar to Cvetkovich, makes books whose presence in the public sphere disrupts dominant narratives about suffering and collective identity. But reading books in turn also allows Bechdel to understand the apparently U.S.-specific history of her family in relation to a wider queer history in the West. In both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* books play a central role in the portrayal of Alison's lesbian identification and its complex emotional entanglements with the lives of parents who are trapped – killed even, in the case of the father – in the wastelands of patriarchy and heterosexual expectation. It is as tempting to overestimate the potential of books as conduits of feeling and intimacy as it is all too easy to deny their role in negotiating relationships that are fraught. Bechdel's books show that reading can have a felt impact: here it makes possible the interrogation of her own experience and brings it into queer dialogue with fictional representations and critical work from across time and space.

Bechdel's family narratives ultimately fail to offer an effective form of closure. Yet this failure is itself of affective value. Judith "Jack" Halberstam has argued that

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mother's obituary, as published by a local paper, on her own website. This too emphasizes Helen's cultural interests:

<http://www.lockhaven.com/page/content.detail/id/545348/Helen-F--Bechdel.html?nav=5010>

“failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictably adulthoods” (Halberstam, 2011: 3). According to her, failure, while “accompanied by a host of negative affects ... also provides the opportunity to use these affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam, 2011: 3). The metacritical, hyper-analytical self-sufficiency of Bechdel’s memoirs in many ways appears intent on closing down interpretation, a strategy that perversely mirrors the emotional void caused by the distanced intellectualization that characterizes Alison’s relationship with her parents. Yet the references to books through which Bechdel develops her memoirs also break through the apparent sense of stasis. The “deeply crafted, intensely structured object(s)” that are Bechdel’s memoirs depict the failure to understand and communicate, a failure which marks the relationships between Alison, her mother and her father (Chute, 2010: 178). Where both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* grapple with the sometimes unbridgeable schisms between knowledge, feeling and intimacy, they also show that Alison’s story can be told. References to books moreover give her narrative a collective shape. For they remind us that however nationally and historically specific and distinct Alison’s experience may be, it is shaped by larger circuits of experience and feeling. These circuits pass through postwar U.S. society into Alison’s twenty-first century present via complicated cultural routes along which we find the brave, the dead and the everyday of queer existence.

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