DRAWING THE ARCHIVE IN ALISON BECHDEL’S

Fun Home

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Placing Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home alongside other graphic narratives, most notably Art Spiegelman’s Maus (1993) and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis (2003), that explore intergenerational trauma and the role of the child as witness, seems both obvious and potentially inappropriate, even presumptuous. In writing about the Holocaust and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, respectively, Spiegelman and Satrapi take on histories that have been formative for global politics in the past century. In Fun Home, by contrast, there is no mass genocide or the same obvious connection to political debate, and the single death, that of Bechdel’s father, someone who might be categorized (however problematically) as a pedophile, suicide, or closet homosexual, raises the possibility that there are some lives that are not “grievable,” certainly not in a public context (Butler 2004, 20).

But a queer, even perverse, sensibility not unlike Bechdel’s draws me to idiosyncratic or shameful family stories and their incommensurate relation to global politics and historical trauma. I want to risk inappropriate claims for the significance of Bechdel’s story, to read it in the context not just of Maus and Persepolis but also efforts to redefine the connections between memory and history, private experience and public life, and individual loss and collective trauma. Fun Home confirms my commitment (in An Archive of Feelings [2003]) to queer perspectives on trauma that challenge the relation between the catastrophic and the everyday and that make public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful. And although Fun Home’s critical and popular success obviously provides many entry points for readers (and warrants its sustained attention in this issue of WSQ), Bechdel’s narrative of family life with a father who is attracted to adolescent boys has particular meaning for me because it provides a welcome alternative to public discourses about LGBTQ politics that are increasingly homonormative and dedicated to family values.

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I write more as a specialist in queer studies than as one in graphic narrative, but I hope nonetheless to articulate how Bechdel uses this insurgent genre to provide a queer perspective that is missing from public discourse about both historical trauma and sexual politics. The recent success of graphic narrative, a hybrid or mixed-media genre, and also a relatively new and experimental one, within mainstream literary public spheres suggests that providing witness to intimate life puts pressure on standard genres and modes of public discourse. I seek to juxtapose *Fun Home* with other prominent graphic memoirs such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* to show how its queer sensibility extends their treatment of the relation between individual and historical experience, so central to second-generation witness, especially through a more pronounced focus on sexuality. But I also want to situate *Fun Home* as part of other insurgent genres of queer culture, such as memoir, solo performance, women’s music, and autoethnographic documentary film and video, including the traditions of lesbian feminist culture within which Bechdel’s long-running *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip circulates. Standing at the intersections of both contemporary LGBTQ culture and public discussions of historical trauma, *Fun Home* dares to claim historical significance and public space not only for a lesbian coming-out story but also for one that is tied to what some might see as shameful sexual histories.

**WITNESSING SEXUALITY**

Dori Laub’s claim, in the context of Holocaust testimony, that trauma is an “event without a witness” (in part because the epistemic crisis of trauma is such that even the survivor is not fully present for the event) takes on a different resonance in Bechdel’s story about her father, who was run over by a truck while crossing the highway outside the house he was restoring (Felman and Laub 1991, 80).2 In a literal sense, his death is an event without a witness (other than the truck driver, who thinks that her father might have jumped back into the road); and Bechdel and her mother’s hunch that it is a suicide, or somehow connected to his complex sexual history, is ultimately only speculation. While the moment of her father’s death is arguably the “unrepresentable” trauma to which the text insistently returns, it is also the point of departure for the more diffuse narrative of his sexuality, which encompasses not only his attraction to young men but also his devotion to literature and home restoration, his emotionally volatile relation to his wife and children, and his artistic
ambitions. Like Satrapi and Spiegelman, Bechdel serves as an intergenerational witness who explores the ongoing impact of traumatic histories on successive generations and into the present; each of their texts in its own way is haunted by questions about the effects of growing up in the vicinity of powerful combinations of violence and secrecy, including forms of secrecy that in the interest of protecting children’s innocence seem only to harm them. But Alison’s experiences growing up with an eccentric family and an emotionally erratic father in a funeral home in rural Pennsylvania may seem of a different order from Marji’s direct witnessing of war and revolution in Iran in *Persepolis*. Bechdel’s case might seem more comparable to that of Spiegelman, who has been shaped by a story that precedes him and the withholding of which produces forms of what Marianne Hirsch has called “postmemory” (1997). But *Maus* emerges from Spiegelman’s interviews with his father (the basis for its written text), whereas Bechdel has no such overt connection of witness to her father, since he emphatically did not tell her about his sexual life. (Even their brief explicit acknowledgment of a shared homosexuality just before his death is something of a missed encounter.) While not on the order of the literal horror of Spiegelman’s father’s life in Poland and Auschwitz, Bechdel’s father’s story is arguably “unspeakable” in its own way, a reminder that “the love that dare not speak its name” is an applicable term even in the era after Stonewall, since men who desire other men but who are married and living in small towns, or men who desire young boys, rarely talk about their sexual desires, particularly not to their young daughters. (I hesitate about language, since the term “pedophilia” carries connotations that presume its criminality or immorality, although I sometimes use it here in order to challenge such presumptions.)

I’d like to underscore, then, that Bechdel’s focus on sexualities, and especially illicit or secret sexualities, gives a decidedly queer twist to the second-generation witnessing exemplified by *Maus* and *Persepolis*. The secrecy and shame attached to Bechdel’s father’s sexual life make it function like occluded trauma and suggest the relevance of witness to a range of seemingly ordinary contexts. Bechdel explores the story of her father’s death out of a desire to understand her own history and the genesis of her gender and sexual identity, seeking to be the sympathetic witness who can make available the rich and contradictory story of his life so that he is something more than a pedophile, suicide, or tragic homosexual. Her
witnessing is complex, like a version of Nachträglichkeit, in that she goes back to the past and revisits it for the signs of queerness that she didn’t quite see at the time.

Sexuality also complicates the graphic narrative’s dynamic combination of the visual and textual and its important use of the visual to both enhance and trouble acts of witness. While it can carry with it the presumption of the evidentiary truth of seeing so attached to the visual, graphic narrative’s hand-crafted drawing distinguishes it from contemporary realist forms such as photography and film and reminds us that we are not gaining access to an unmediated form of vision. For example, Spiegelman’s famous cats and mice and Satrapi’s stylized black-and-white forms reconfigure the relation between the visual and the truthful, demonstrating in visual form testimony’s power to provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual.

One of the biggest representational challenges for Bechdel is not so much the mystery of her father’s suicide as the secret of his sexual attraction to young boys and the messy question of his sexual identity. To become a “witness” (either literally or more indirectly) to anyone’s sexuality is a difficult documentary task, given its frequent privacy or intimacy, and this general secrecy can be further heightened when that sexuality is constructed as immoral or criminal or perverse. Moreover, for a child to explore a parent’s sexuality is potentially to transgress social boundaries. Yet while Bechdel has no way of directly knowing all the details of her father’s sexuality (and perhaps because of that), she is an avid observer and collector of evidence both as a child and as an adult artist, and one of Fun Home’s distinctive features is her reproduction of paper documents that have provided crucial access to her father’s story in the absence of more direct forms of information. It is this archival mode of witness that I want to explore in further detail.

**DRAWING THE EVIDENCE**

One of the most striking examples of archival documentation in Fun Home, with respect to both its visual qualities and its narrative significance, is an image that Bechdel has called the book’s “centerfold”—a two-page spread, the only one of its kind in the book, that features a careful reproduction of a snapshot of the family’s male babysitter.
Taken by her father during a family vacation, the photograph of Roy lying supine on a motel bed, wearing only jockey shorts, his arms raised to expose his bare chest and his torso turned to face the camera, combines the conventions of pornography and the high-culture nude. In an interview, Bechdel describes coming across the photograph after her father’s death and being startled by this disturbing visual and material evidence of his parallel life taking place in the room next to where she and her brothers were sleeping and in the midst of their childhood fun on the beach (Chute 2006, 1006). As much as the event of her father’s death itself, this unsettling image, which resituates what she thinks she knows about her own experience and her family’s history, serves as the initial inspiration for *Fun Home* and becomes the visual and emotional kernel out of which the story emerges.

The “centerfold’s” visual elements—its style, composition, layout, and sequencing—underscore its emotional significance. The frame also includes Alison’s hand holding the photograph (tilted at an angle) as a reminder that there is a witness here, for whom this photograph leaps out of the past in an odd version of Benjamin’s notion of history as that which...
“flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin 1940/1969, 255). The
details that give it the historical qualities of a 1970s snapshot are painstak-
ingly reproduced—the square shape, the white border, the printed date
(mysteriously blotted out by her father). Accentuating its capacity to dis-
rupt the family history, on the following page (2006, 102) Bechdel draws
the strip of negatives (like a miniature graphic narrative) that includes
images of her and her brothers playing on the beach right next to the
image of Roy (all of them bordered, ironically, by the familiar “Kodak
Safety” logo). But the proximity of these ostensibly disparate images
(both enabled by the technology of the home camera) offers evidence of
her father’s capacity to inhabit different worlds simultaneously and shows
how the putatively innocent family vacation is closely shadowed by sexual
desires that it excludes or renders invisible. Adding a further layer of
complexity to the image of the snapshot is the superimposed text that
offers Alison’s adult comments and reflections. Using the powers of the
graphic form to combine word and text, Bechdel both reproduces the
visual evidence and engages in a discussion of what it means.

Indeed, along with Alison, we might ask what kind of visual evidence
the photograph offers. What, in other words, is wrong with this picture? Is it in itself incriminating because it represents an erotic gaze
that is inappropriate? Does it gesture toward a sexual act that remains
unwitnessed in the photo, providing circumstantial evidence of some
possibly criminal form of behavior? Is the problem homosexuality? Or
intergenerational sexuality? Or just the fact of secrecy? And, if the last,
is her father responsible for the secrecy, or is it the product of his times?
Offering no easy answers to these questions, the photograph’s status as
evidence is indeterminate. Its real significance lies in what it means to

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Fig. 2.: Alison Bechdel, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, 102. (Copyright ©2006 by Alison
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Bechdel looking at it from adulthood. As such, the photograph becomes a key document in what I have elsewhere called the “archive of feelings,” serving as a touchstone for both her father’s feelings and her own, as well as for the complexities of their relationship. Following in her father’s path, Alison reads the photo not in realist terms but in aesthetic and erotic ones: “The blurriness of the photo gives it an ethereal and painterly quality. Roy is gilded with morning seaside light. His hair is an aureole” (Bechdel 2006, 100). Part of her shock comes from viewing the photograph as framed through her father’s sexual desire. She acknowledges that “the picture is beautiful” and wonders why she is not “outraged” as she might be if it were a photograph of a young girl (100). “Perhaps I identify too well with my father’s illicit awe” (101). Alison moves away from moral condemnation of the image, letting it sit uncomfortably within ambiguous distinctions between the erotic and the aesthetic, the past and the present, the father’s sexuality and his daughter’s.

This image is of particular interest to those reading intertextually with Maus, in which Spiegelman strategically places three archival family photographs—a snapshot of the future artist, Artie, with his mother (who committed suicide); a photograph of the dead brother, Richieu, whom Artie never knew; and a studio portrait of his father in a concentration camp outfit taken shortly after his release from Auschwitz. In an important reading of these images, Marianne Hirsch suggests that, precisely because they are reproduced as copies rather than drawn, the photographs rupture the surrounding graphic text and hence become a sign of unassimilable memory (1997, 29). It’s interesting that photographs have a similar emotional and visual power within Bechdel’s text despite their being drawn images rather than copies. Bechdel has suggested that she draws actual photographs to remind the reader that her story is connected to actual lives, echoing Hirsch’s emphasis on the photograph’s access to the shock of the unassimilable real and its ability to hover between life and death by bringing the absent dead into the realm of the living. That Bechdel’s drawings could have the disruptive force of photographs owes something to the labor she devotes to reproducing them. Her detailed and, by her own admission, even obsessional act of reproduction becomes a form of witness, made possible by a sustained attention to the object that reinforces her attachment to it. The style, however, is not photorealism. The cross-hatching and shading that she uses to render the photograph’s qualities are those of the drawing, or even the print; in fact, by drawing
her father’s photographic portrait of Roy, she returns it to the genre from which it borrows and becomes the artist her father aspired to be. Despite their differences—the photograph instantaneous, the drawing laborious; the photograph apparently truthful, the drawing achieving other kinds of verisimilitude—both serve as technologies of memory. And it is not just as images but as material objects connected to lost pasts that they serve as the site of dense and often unprocessed feeling.

Moreover, unlike the photographs of dead family members that interrupt Spiegelman’s text, Bechdel’s photograph points toward disturbing sexual desires, which might better remain lost or forgotten. Noting the effort at “censorship” in her father’s blotting out of the date on the photo, Alison concludes that the photograph’s “evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed,” like the relation between “public appearance and private reality” in her father’s life (Bechdel 2006, 101). Whereas Spiegelman’s photographs might safely (albeit painfully) inhabit the family living room or album (while also, as Hirsch argues, constituting public history), Bechdel’s photograph has an uneasy relation to publicity—although her father sealed the image and its negative with the other vacation photos in an envelope marked “family” and saved the box, it is not necessarily for public or even private consumption. For Bechdel as a public and political lesbian, there might be something disturbing about her own inability to recognize her father’s hidden life, even if she wouldn’t be expected to as a child. She carries the responsibility of not continuing to closet him, even if revealing his questionable sexual behavior casts doubt not only on her own sexuality but also that of gay people more generally. Rather than taking on the potentially heroic task of exposing the persecution of the Jews or the Iranian people, as do Spiegelman and Satrapi, Bechdel has to grapple with the more ambiguous morality of her father’s status as a perpetrator of sorts. (Although, ultimately, Spiegelman and Satrapi also trouble easy moral categories: Spiegelman by being willing to explore his father’s bad behavior and even the painful repercussions of his mother’s suicide, and Satrapi by exploring the mixed results of the Islamic revolution, especially for women.) Central to *Fun Home*’s moral and political complexity is its willingness to engage with sexual desire as a messy and unpredictable force that can’t be relegated to scapegoated perverts. Mimicking her father as witness to the image, Alison is brought closer to him only at the risk of replicating his illicit sexual desires.
Placed in the larger context of the chapter in which it appears, whose title, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” and whose literary references come from Proust, Alison’s discovery of the photograph leads to a complex sense of the connection between her and her father. She explores their shared identity as “inverts” as well as her own “inverted” relation to her father—where he is sissy, she is butch; where he is aesthetically fussy and baroque, she is spare and minimalist; while he wants her to wear a dress, she wants to wear his suits. Immediately before the image of the photograph of Roy, she describes their shared interest in the image of a young man posing in an *Esquire* magazine fashion spread—she wants the suit, while her father wants the boy, and in anticipation of the image to follow, there is another layered set of gazes as she holds the magazine and her father watches the image over her shoulder (Bechdel 2006, 99). The image of Roy’s photo inverts this structure as Bechdel draws herself holding the photograph that provides access to what her father saw, as though *she* is looking over *his* shoulder. In either case, she can’t separate herself from her father’s sexuality or his aesthetics, a point that she underscores by noting Proust’s ability to convert the one into the other. Graphically representing this relationship through more drawn photographs that appear at the chapter’s end, where father and daughter mirror each other as gender-crossing homosexuals, they are intertwined in a way that doesn’t allow easy distinctions between perverse and normal sexuality, obsession and art, or pre-liberation closeted queers and out and proud lesbians and gays.

**BECHDEL’S ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS**

In addition to photographs, *Fun Home* is structured around many other paper documents, including diaries, maps, and books, especially literary ones, that Bechdel also painstakingly reproduces to obtain access to history. Describing herself as a compulsive collector, she imports this archive into her text, rendering each document with such care that her drawings carry some of the same magical qualities of the photograph’s verisimilitude. Indeed, photography is an integral part of her laborious process, since many of her drawings are based on actual photographs, some of them acquired through research and others made by posing herself in settings that she then draws. As adept with print sources as visual ones, Bechdel also lovingly reproduces pages of print text from both literary and handwritten sources, often blowing them up beyond their
usual size so as to emphasize their material qualities and emotional meanings. Bechdel thus creates an “archive of feelings,” using the intensive labor of her drawing to become an archivist whose documents are important not merely for the information they contain but because they are memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past. The act of drawing itself thus becomes an act of witness, while also giving rise to a collection of emotionally charged documents and objects.

Offering the promise of direct witness, Bechdel’s childhood diaries are an especially poignant document in her archive because they also show early signs of her “obsessive compulsive” impulse to document or witness and its relation to creative autobiography. Introduced to the genre by her father, who initially gives her an advertising calendar to write in, the diaries connect her to the high-culture literary world of Joyce, Proust, and other writers to which her father, the high school English teacher and frustrated artist, aspires, but they are also part of the culture of young girls in the 1960s and 1970s who did not necessarily think they were making art. The ordinary life that the diaries document—school, TV, vacations—takes an ominous turn though, as Alison’s efforts to witness in a world of silences, secrets, and repressions lead to various
forms of writer’s block, censorship, and unrepresentability. Sentences are disrupted by the insertion of a hesitant “I think,” which later turns into a blot and then morphs into a “curvy circumflex” mark that eventually strikes out entire sections of text.

The act of witnessing appears to break down as Alison is unable even to document the everyday events that are so frequently the subject of adolescent journals. The graphic act of striking out words with a mark that is a cross between word and image (and which in turn makes the drawings of the text of the diary become as much image as word) provides its own eloquent testimony to the impossibility of documenting truthfully what she is seeing or experiencing. It suggests the potential ordinariness of the unrepresentability that is the hallmark of some theories of trauma. Even though she has no direct knowledge of her father’s sexual desires or activities, the diaries provide witness to the secrecy and uncertainty that pervade the house, testifying to her inchoate reaction to that which cannot be narrated. There’s something deeply poignant about the form of witness provided by that odd graphic symbol, especially since what it effaces (and announces) is nothing so dramatic as the violence of war or genocide but simply the all-too-ordinary life of an adolescent girl growing up with silences around emotion and sexuality.

In a subsequent chapter, Bechdel plays with denial as both personal and political, linking her own censorship of sexual issues—masturbation and menstruation—with the Watergate scandal and its lies and omissions, as well as with her father’s arrest for giving a beer to a minor. Perhaps her inability to testify to her own sexuality explains her father’s failure to make his own transparent. Alison describes as “Wildean” her use of the phrase “How Horrid!” to represent sexuality because “it appears to embrace the actual horror—puberty, public disgrace—then at the last second nimbly sidesteps it, laughing” (a comment that she illustrates with a television image of a Roadrunner cartoon in which the bird narrowly misses being hit with a falling object) (Bechdel 2006, 174). Indeed, Alison often circles around her feelings or speculates about them at a distance. Like her father, whose lack of feeling for the corpses in his undertaking business leads him to show the young Alison a body in what she imagines to be an effort at vicarious feeling, she often turns to the activity of documentation in the absence of feeling. Although it might seem that drawing replaces words, compensating for narrative’s lapses, Alison’s “compulsive propensity to autobiography” (140) sug-
gests that witnessing can be the sign of emotional distress as much as its
cure. She frequently links the creative and the compulsive in describing
both her own and her parents’ artistic talents, as well as connecting the
expressive energies of creativity to those of sexualities that might be
seen as perverse.

Perhaps creative obsession and a desire to have access to feelings that
remain elusive explain Bechdel’s elaborate and varied renditions of
archival documents. Especially notable is her use of maps, inspired by the
Wind in the Willows map that she loved as child, to locate from a carto-
graphic distance her father’s circumscribed trajectory in the small town
of Beech Creek in the hills of western Pennsylvania as though she might
be able to map the history that she can’t comprehend as a direct witness.
Equally important are the drawings of literary texts that become the
vehicle for a dazzling array of intertextual references that pervade Fun
Home and, by orienting it towards high culture, have led to its critical
and crossover success. Although space limitations prevent me from
exploring this archive in detail, were I to do so I would want to link the
high culture references to the equally dense proliferation of lesbian and
feminist texts. In addition to Joyce and Camus and Proust and Fitzgerald,
there are not only other versions of modernism represented by Colette,
Sylvia Beach, Virginia Woolf, and Radclyffe Hall, but also a feminist
canon that includes Our Bodies, Our Selves, Olga Broumas, Adrienne
Rich, Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, Rita Mae Brown, and Jane Rule (but
also, adding a queer touch, Cecil Beaton!).

Bechdel includes drawings of
stacks of books that serve as a kind of bibliography for the narrative
(2006, 76, 205, 207). Alongside such literary icons as Joyce and Proust,
Fun Home also finds its foundation in Bechdel’s long-running serial comic
strip Dykes to Watch Out For. Bechdel’s ability to move seamlessly
between lesbian culture and high culture, combining, for example, in
one hilarious series of frames cunnilingus and the Odyssey, is crucial to
Fun Home’s power to craft new archives of history and memory.

QUEER TIME
One effect of Bechdel’s archival documents is the insertion of her family
story within a larger public history and one that is significantly queer.
For example, Alison refers to having been in New York as a young girl
not long before the Stonewall riots (but having no awareness of them
until much later), suggesting that she is both part of that history and out-
side it. (It’s notable that she makes contact with history when she leaves Beech Creek for a larger world, particularly that of New York City.) In representing the Bicentennial of 1976, during which she and her family made one of the periodic trips to New York that appear to have given her father access to an overtly gay culture, she links the tall ships on the Hudson to another version of U.S. culture, a moment of gay ascendancy and sexual expression in the West Village and a time before AIDS. She reminds us of other temporalities and histories that pervade the national public even as they remain largely invisible within it—her father’s queerness and her own incipient lesbianism. In asking about the relation between two generations of queerness, her own and that of her father, Bechdel also raises larger questions about histories of sexuality and their relation to national histories.

Alison’s references to histories of sexual liberation and sexual community suggests that her life might be significantly different from her father’s not only for personal reasons but also for historical ones—she comes out in a culture of 1970s lesbian feminism that is part of her college experience; her father, despite fleeting contacts with a world beyond rural Pennsylvania, in Paris and New York (and also perhaps even more significantly through literature), does not have access to the social world that might allow him to assume a more overtly gay identity. Would this also prevent him from being a lover of young boys or a suicide? Is the book calling for the social or structural changes that might make history work itself out differently? Bechdel offers no simple answers to these questions, thus avoiding the pieties that can sometimes accompany a cultural politics of witnessing that would encourage us to sympathize with her father as a victim of history whose problems could be solved by our retrospective enlightenment. Although Alison certainly gestures toward this version of historical contextualization, she also refuses to settle for it definitively—“Maybe I’m trying to render my senseless loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. There’s a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that’s a problematic line of thought. For one thing, it makes it harder for me to blame him” (Bechdel 2006, 196). Pursuing this more selfish investment in her father’s fate, Alison also notes that this altered version of history would erase her own—had her father assumed a gay identity he might never have married and had children.
Moreover, he might have avoided suicide only to become a member of the generation of gay men affected by the AIDS crisis that emerges in the years immediately following his death.

By playing out the alternative histories in negative as well as positive ways, Bechdel reminds us that there can be no self-congratulatory separation of past and present, as though her father’s life would never happen now and her lesbian identity is safely cordoned off from his. By constructing a more complex intergenerational connection between herself and her father, she doesn’t disavow the relation between his homosexuality and her lesbianism, between his femme tastes and her butch style, between his fussy home decorating and her compulsive drawing. She is willing to claim her father for herself and hence for history, insisting that his story be incorporated into a more fully historicized present but also that its unassimilability be acknowledged in order to problematize the present. In doing so, she embraces a queer temporality, one that refuses narratives of progress.

Indeed, Fun Home can be productively read alongside recent critical interest in queer temporalities, particularly Elizabeth Freeman’s call for rethinking queer generations in order to feel the “temporal drag” of putatively anachronistic categories such as “lesbian” and feminist” (2000). In fact, one of Fun Home’s charms is that it claims a relatively unapologetic relation to the lesbian feminist culture within which Alison came out, although it maintains the sense of self-deprecating humor that is the hallmark of Dykes to Watch Out For (and gives the lie to the idea that the culture of lesbian political correctness is unremittingly sincere or serious). In this case, the anachronistic identity is her father’s closeted homosexuality, which persists even in the post-Stonewall period of gay liberation, thus serving as another reminder of uneven temporalities. Bechdel makes the interesting move of claiming a paternal lineage for a generation of lesbian feminism more commonly known for its embrace of a matriarchy and also connects it to a version of homosexuality that might seem the anathema of her generation. She joins a cluster of lesbian artists who have claimed their father’s stories, sometimes in order to explore butch identities but also in ways that go well beyond this obvious connection in order to rewrite queer generational histories.

In doing so, Bechdel also adds a queer dimension to the witness narratives of other graphic narrative writers such as Satrapi and Spiegelman, extending their consideration of the messy complicities of past and
present through her more overt treatment of sexuality. As second-generation narratives that explore the legacy of catastrophic events across time, all three narratives understand how (as Hillary Chute also points out) history makes itself manifest in ordinary life, in the endlessly petty complaints of a Holocaust survivor father, in the dress codes of young Iranian schoolgirls, in the restoration of a rural Pennsylvania home. By representing not only her own lesbian identity (as part of a generation that is repeatedly erased or misrepresented in the public sphere) but also her father’s stigmatized identity, she enlarges the scope of historical witness. It is important to understand these graphic narratives not just as efforts to explore the personal effects of history; they also use ordinary experience as an opening onto revisionist histories that avoid the emotional simplifications that can sometimes accompany representations of even the most unassimilable historical traumas. Thus, one of Spiegelman’s most important contributions to Holocaust representations is not the history of the camps themselves but his exploration of his ambivalent relation to his father. Satrapi’s text is most trenchant when exploring the contradictions of the Iranian Revolution and its relation to previous histories of colonialism. Like these authors, Bechdel refuses easy distinctions between heroes and perpetrators, but doing so via a figure who represents a highly stigmatized sexuality is a bold move. I find her willingness to represent her father with compassion and complexity particularly poignant in the current moment when not only a general public but LGBTQ cultures are quite willing to disavow stigmatized identities that might disrupt the clean wholesome image of gay people who just want to get married and have families. Those of us who resist this direction for LGBTQ politics have had a hard time making ourselves seen or heard in a public sphere that has been dominated by calls for and against gay marriage, but Bechdel sidesteps this debate in favor of a different form of visibility.⁹

In the two final images on the last page of *Fun Home*, Bechdel returns to the relationship between Icarus and Daedalus that opened the narrative, in the wake of having linked it to the complex relation between Bloom and Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. She follows a close-up of the truck that killed her father (linking him to the falling Icarus) with one of her father, in the position now of Daedalus, catching her in the pool as a child. Reversing time and inverting roles in a fantasy that makes him the paternal protector, Bechdel ends with the possibility
of rewriting history, including the canon of male literary heroes that her text continually invokes. With this messy story of a father who is neither hero nor victim, crafted from an aesthetic power that is also linked to compulsions both psychic and sexual, Bechdel keeps history indeterminate. *Fun Home*’s queer witnessing deserves to be part of its highly successful and well-deserved reception, since it provides such a compelling challenge to celebratory queer histories that threaten to erase more disturbing and unassimilable inheritances. Perhaps we can look to graphic narrative and other new genres of public feeling that shape personal witness into historical commentary to renew both queer politics and public cultures.

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NOTES

1. The category of graphic narratives in which *Fun Home* could be classified is huge, but I compare it with these two because they have had such significant mainstream visibility and because they all bring the graphic narrative to “serious” subjects that allow it to compete alongside the novel. The crossover success of Bechdel’s book is all the more notable, given her long-standing work on the weekly comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which, while very successful with a lesbian audience, has not necessarily been widely read by others. For a good selection of reviews of *Fun Home* and information about its many reviews, see Alison Bechdel’s web site at www.alisonbechdel.com.

Following a practice that has become conventional in discussions of memoir, I use “Bechdel” to refer to the author outside the text, and “Alison” to refer to her presence inside the text. I use the term “graphic narrative” for reasons that Hillary Chute suggests in her essay in this volume, especially since these three texts are closer to memoir or creative nonfiction than to the novel. For more on graphic narrative, see the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* edited by Chute and Marianne DeKoven (2006).
2. Cathy Caruth’s notion of “unclaimed experience” has also widely disseminated the association of trauma with unrepresentability and epistemic crisis. See *Trauma* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996).

3. See Hillary Chute’s essay in this volume for more on Satrapi’s graphics.

4. Bechdel’s reproduction of the photographic archive as a form of access to history is reminiscent of Zoe Leonard’s work in *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, a series of fictional photographs created for Cheryl Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye and Leonard 1996). See *An Archive of Feelings* for a discussion of this work and the use of invented archives by lesbian cultural producers (Cvetkovich 2003). Bechdel’s use of the graphic narrative to combine text and image can be compared to the blurring of fiction and documentary in other visual genres such as photography, film, and video to document history.

5. I’m thinking here of Cathy Caruth’s work but would argue that the ordinariness of unrepresentability reframes her emphasis on its extreme nature.

6. For a rich discussion of the literary references in *Fun Home*, see Michael Moon’s review (2006), especially his argument that Colette is ultimately more important to the narrative than Joyce or Proust.

   I would also compare Bechdel to visual artist Nicole Eisenman, who combines references to Picasso and many other canonical artists with lesbian popular culture, often using a cartoonish style.

7. In addition to Freeman’s article in *New Literary History* (2000), see the special issue of *GLQ* that she edited (2007). For other important work on queer temporalities, and especially the reclamation of failed or perverse histories, see Dinshaw (forthcoming, 2008), Love (2007), and Nealon (2001).

8. Examples include Marga Gomez, *A Line Around the Block*; Peggy Shaw, *You’re Just Like My Father*; and Lisa Kron, *2.5 Minute Ride* (2001) (which is also a second-generation Holocaust story). These are all in the genre of solo performance, which I would link to the graphic narrative as another insurgent form of memoir that makes personal experience historical. See Holly Hughes and David Roman on queer solo performance as a form of historical witness in *O Solo Homo* (1998).

9. See, for example, the “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage” statement (2006), Duggan 2003, and Warner 1999.

**Works Cited**


