THESIS


PERFORMATIVITY IN COMICS: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND

SEXUALITY IN ALISON BECHDEL'S *FUN HOME*


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ABSTRACT

PERFORMATIVITY IN COMICS: REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND
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This thesis examines the role of comics in rhetoric and composition studies. By examining *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel, this thesis shows that comics employ specific forms of visual-verbal rhetoric that can be useful to developing visual-verbal literacies in rhetoric and composition instruction. This thesis also suggests that gender and sexuality are underexplored areas in comics studies and examines representations of gender and sexuality through three main lenses: Foucauldian feminism through theorists such as Sandra Bartky, performativity through Judith Butler's framework, and queer theory through theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich. In the conclusion, this thesis proposes that one use for comics, specifically *Fun Home*, in rhetoric and composition classrooms is as a way to introduce queer theory and queer pedagogy into a first-year composition class.

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Introduction

I grew up reading comics. As a child, I preferred comics from the *Archie* series, particularly *Betty and Veronica*. As a teenager, I became obsessed with superhero comics, specifically those about the X-Men and Batman. As a young adult, I entered the world of graphic novels, loving *Watchmen*, the *Sandman* series, and *Maus*. Through all these phases, one thing stood out to me in particular: not many other people were reading comics, and if they were, they weren't talking about it.

Comics reading seems, and for my life has always seemed, to carry a certain stigma: people who read comics are "geeks" or "nerds" and comics themselves are "dumb." Similarly, literacy scholar Stergios Botzakis suggests that "when people think of comic-book readers, they typically get a vision of a stunted person who lives in his parents' basement and spends countless hours arguing the minutiae of his particular popular culture interests" (50). There is a perceived, specific niche readership for comics, and when I admit that I read comics, there are those who place me into preconceived notions about the readership of those texts.

All this is to say that I have spent a lot of my life defending comics as an interesting, even important medium, and my right as an intelligent, literate adult to read and enjoy that medium. There are many arguments as to why comics are not generally seen as intellectually or culturally legitimate, and I will explore some of those in this introduction. However, my experience as a comics reader and my work as a comics scholar increasingly convinces me that for a multiplicity of reasons, comics is mostly a

misunderstood medium. While often viewed as a lesser art or lesser literature, comics is rather best understood as a unique medium. Many texts in the comics medium blend elements of literature and art, but the medium cannot be fully understood through either of these lenses. Instead, comics must be understood by appreciating the unique rhetoric of the medium, specifically the medium's ability to communicate through a combination of visual imagery and alphabetic text. At its best, comics is a powerful medium because it creates a space for stories to be translated in a way that could not be done without both alphabetic text and images. By studying comics in rhetoric and composition, scholars have a chance to explore the unique visual-verbal literacy and rhetoric of comics reading, valuing the elements of the form without needing to validate them as a form of literature or art.

Certainly not all comics portray stories that could not be told any other way, but as a reader and scholar of comics, I often use their potential to tell these hybrid stories as a way to defend the medium at large. I am always excited to come across an example that reveals the power that images and alphabetic text have together in a comics format, and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel is one of the best examples of the storytelling potential for the comics medium as a unique visual-verbal medium. *Fun Home* is a memoir told through the medium of comics that details the author's story of coming out to her family. Her tale is complicated by the fact that her disclosure exposes that her father, Bruce, had been hiding a lifelong series of sexual relationships with men. Shortly after their shared disclosures, Bechdel's father dies by being hit by a bread truck, and although it is officially considered an accident, there are indications that the death was a suicide. *Fun Home* then is both a retelling and the active work of the author's

attempt to sort through her own identity in relation to her father's at a time when tragedy makes those identities particularly difficult to sort through.

While the content of the story is compelling in and of itself, the complicated nature of the comics medium expands and delineates the complicated nature of the story and the subject matter. *Fun Home* functions powerfully on its own merits, but it is also a stunning example of how comics as a medium can work to represent complicated identities, bringing visual and verbal elements together to tell a story that could otherwise not be communicated with such depth. My thesis will develop the specific elements of *Fun Home* that work so successfully within the comics medium and show how those elements complicate understandings of gender and sexual identity. Before I begin discussing *Fun Home*, though, it is necessary to explore the history of comics and use that history to situate this particular comics study within the field of rhetoric and composition.

Comics hold specific value to rhetoric and composition scholars when we understand that readers who value and understand this medium engage in a form of visual-verbal literacy. While rhetoric and compositionists value multiple forms of literacy, comics are often judged specifically through a verbal literacy lens. In the past, comics have come under scrutiny for a variety of reasons, but the medium's relationship to children and verbal literacy has been a continual area of contention. In American scholarship, probably the best known criticism of comics is the work *The Seduction of the Innocent* by Dr. Fredric Wertham. A prominent psychiatrist, Wertham uses unsubstantiated audience studies and inflammatory psychological arguments to level wide and varied criticisms against comics' effect on American children.

Among many different claims, Wertham argues that the level of violence and sexuality in comics creates unhealthy expectations for the children and youth who read them (Wertham 56). He also argues that superhero comics corrupt children, teaching them to either be bullies or to learn to submit to the wills of more powerful individuals (Wertham 54). In relation to comics as a form of instruction, Wertham argues, "Of course we can now reach multitudes of children and semi-illiterate adults with images rather than with cultivated language. But should we? Any degradation of language is a potential threat to civilization" (qtd. in Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* 32).  Even though Wertham's book was originally published in the 1950s, his arguments continue to influence public perception of comics and their potential dangers to American literacy.

Wertham's arguments rely heavily on the common misconception that comics are strictly for children, an assumption he takes for granted (Groensteen "Why Aren't Comics" 30-31). In fact, Wertham's assumptions were in some ways self-perpetuating. *Seduction of the Innocent* led to a series of "televised Senate hearings designed to investigate the issue of comics' negative effects on children" (Versaci 6). Those hearings in turn led to the creation of the "Comics Code," a restrictive ratings code that forced comics publishers to avoid adult themes in comics, which could extend to anything from the actual subject matter to avoiding complex characterization that might confuse children (Versaci 6-7).  Literary theorist and comics scholar Rocco Versaci argues that "the end result of the Code and the publishers' conformity was the mainstream juvenilization of the medium, which in turn caused the general public to equate comic books as a form suitable only for children" (6).

This history of comics as dangerous children's literature becomes especially complicated if we look at comics as an international medium. In describing the history of French comics, cultural theorist Thierry Groensteen argues that comics were originally intended for an adult audience, and it wasn't until they began to be printed in children's magazines that they became sites of critical attack. He describes comics as "a genre suspected of having great influence on the morality of young people" and points out that until 1964, *Petit Larousse illustre*, "the most widely read French dictionary," claimed "these comics soil the imagination of our children" (Groensteen, "Why Aren't Comics" 31).

Charles Hatfield, literature professor and comics scholar, argues that in more recent years, the debate over comics and literacy can be seen as the trickle down from Wertham's claims. He notes that comics are viewed as potential "stepping stones" for literacy since they contain pictures instead of words, but they are also seen as hindrances to literacy for the same reason. In other words, they are valued or devalued because they are seen as "easy" (Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* 36). Hatfield argues that "what both schools [of thought] neglect is the specificity of the comics reading experience" (*Alternative Comics* 36). Instead of being viewed as a specific form of literacy, comics are devalued in comparison to literature, either as a dangerous substitution or the stepping stone Hatfield mentions.

Groensteen describes this devaluation as "constantly being assimilated with what is known as paraliterature, a badly defined set of popular genres that includes adventure stories, historical novels, fantasy and science fiction, detective novels, erotica, etc…" ("Why Aren't Comics" 38). Whether seen as dangerous to childhood imaginations or the

last pathetic bastion of alphabetic text teachers can use to engage children raised on TV and video games, comics are devalued as a site of serious study because they are misunderstood. As Groensteen points out, "comic art is an autonomous and original medium. The only things it has in common with literature are: that it is printed and sold in bookshops, and that it contains linguistic sentiments" ("Why Aren't Comics" 39). However, historically comics have not been understood through such a lens, and popular views of comics often reflect that history.

It is worth noting at this point that *Fun Home* is often credited as being successful in part because it is such a literary text (Chute, *Graphic Women*, 180). This assessment in conjunction with my praise for Bechdel's text seems to trouble my position that comics do not need to be literature to matter, but I will challenge this kind of thinking in Chapter 4 when I examine how literature functions untraditionally in *Fun Home*.

In rhetoric and composition, scholars then have a chance to embrace comics as a unique medium that teaches a specific form of literacy using specific forms of rhetoric. Scholars from other fields are making headway in creating valid scholarship for comics, but there is still too much focus on understanding comics either as a form of literature (see for example *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* by Rocco Versaci) or a form of art (notice Groensteen's focus on "comic art" rather than comics themselves in the quote above). However, even within that search for legitimacy, the editors of *A Comics Studies Reader*, a collection of recent and historically influential scholarly works on comics, note that "one feature in particular distinguishes the current wave [of comics scholarship]: a fresh appreciation for the distinctive properties that set comics apart from other mediums" (Heer and Worcester xiv).

Rhetoric and composition provides an excellent space for the study of the "distinctive properties" of comics and the specific form of literacy that in comics encourages understanding the relationship between the verbal and visual. This is largely because rhetoric and composition studies sidestep the concerns of comics validation, since scholars in this field can accept comics as valid texts without any association to "more valid" art forms.

Rhetoric and composition has specifically avoided the high/low culture split of other fields like literature studies, instead arguing for an inclusion of multiple types of texts as valid areas of study, based on their value as specific rhetorical situations. This has been the case even from early in the history of rhetoric and composition as a field. In *A Theory of Discourse*, compositionist James L. Kinneavy, defines the field of rhetoric and composition as discourse study, focused around the study of full texts, specifically looking at their situational possibilities. "Text" could include

> Faulkner's speech of acceptance of the Nobel prize; or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; or the twenty-five minute discussion of the members of the press with Undersecretary of State George W. Ball….or Shakespeare's *Othello*; or the single sentence "Fire" screamed by a hotel occupant running from a building; or Toynbee's twelve volumes of *A Study of History*. (22)

Kinneavy here illustrates that rhetoric and compositionists can find useful texts for study in canonical texts, non-canonical texts, and even in acts or spaces that many would not consider a text at all.

Similarly, in establishing a direction for future rhetoric studies, the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism was established in 1970, and in their conclusions they argue "Rhetorical criticism must broaden its scope to examine the full range of rhetorical transactions" (Bitzer and Black 225). Like Kinneavy's list, the committee's example list of potential texts to study spans a range of textual possibilities:

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"informal conversations, group settings, public settings, mass media messages, picketing, sloganeering, chanting, singing, marching, gesturing, ritual, institutional and cultural symbols, cross cultural transactions, and so forth" (Bitzer and Black 225). It is clear then that even as rhetoric and composition was forming its own field, texts as sites of study could be found outside of the high/low culture split. The study of comics within the rhetoric and composition field then can potentially best serve as the space to study comics as their own medium, without trying to force them into a literature or art framework to validate their study.

Looking at comics through a rhetoric and composition lens has two main benefits: 1) Readers of comics can understand comics as a unique medium with a specific visual-verbal reading experience that shouldn't be devalued in relationship to other forms of reading and 2) In interpreting comics' visual-verbal rhetoric, readers of comics learn a form of literacy that can be translated into other visual-verbal texts they encounter, like advertisements. This second benefit may be of particular importance to compositionists, since those of us who study rhetoric and composition often teach rhetoric and composition. Therefore, there are multiple teaching potentials in valuing this form of literacy. In my final chapter, I will discuss one of these potentials in relation to queer pedagogy in the composition classroom.

Unfortunately, current scholarship on comics from the rhetoric and composition field seems to be in danger of ignoring key properties of comics that distinguish the medium. Specifically, there is a focus on understanding comics as a form of visual rhetoric, ignoring comics' common inclusion of both imagery and alphabetic text. In some ways, this ignorance also contributes to devaluing the specific form of literacy the

comics medium provides. In all fairness, the focus on visual rhetoric may stem in part

from Scott McCloud's definition of comics in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.*

McCloud is a cartoonist who has created several successful comics series and has also

created three works of comics criticism, all notable because in addition to theorizing

*about* comics, they are drawn *as* comics. The best known of these is *Understanding*

*Comics*, and even though the book is often criticized in scholarly circles for a lack of

theoretical base, it continues to have a prime spot in comics theory as a jumping-off point

for discussion (Christiansen and Magnussen 13-14).

In the first chapter, McCloud attempts to create a definition for what comics are,

and suggests they are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,

intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response" (9). I will later

discuss the problems with McCloud's definition, but for now it is important to note that

despite the criticisms of McCloud's work, his book has several strengths that make it

appealing. As cartoonist Dylan Horrocks explains,

> *Understanding Comics* is one of my favorite comics. It expresses and explores the
> same love for comics I've always felt but, like Scott, found all but impossible to
> share with people outside the comics community. It argues persuasively for
> comics' limitless potential - that they needn't be restricted to any particular styles,
> formats, subject matter or media. And it inspires cartoonists to ever more
> ambitious creativity - to fearlessly explore uncharted territory. When I first read it,
> it opened up for me new ways of imagining comics. (6)

Impressively, this endorsement comes from a text primarily designed to discredit large

portions of McCloud's argument. Therefore, much like the book itself, McCloud's

definition of comics continues to hold a certain primacy in the field, despite potential

scholarly or theoretical deficiencies.

An example of a text that uses McCloud's definition to argue for comics as an

important form of visual rhetoric can be found in the online comics journal *ImageTexT:*

*Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*.  Rhetoric and composition scholar Franny Howes argues that the study of comics in the rhetoric and composition field creates a space for scholars to challenge "the rhetorical tradition," referring both to the way scholars trace "the evolution of rhetoric" and the well-known text *The Rhetorical Tradition* by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. She argues that by applying elements of comics scholarship—specifically the way comics scholarship teaches us to read and value images in texts—to visual texts that are not traditionally associated with comics themselves, we can reclaim "indigenous visual rhetorical traditions" (Howes). She claims that instead of creating one rhetorical tradition, the blending of rhetoric and composition studies with comics studies creates room for a "multiplicity of visual rhetorical traditions" (Howes). In other words, comics studies helps scholars within rhetoric and composition studies view indigenous visual texts as a form of rhetoric to be valued as a part of *a* rhetorical tradition, which challenges the field's concept of *the* rhetorical tradition.

While I agree with Howes' claim that the pairing of comics studies and rhetoric and composition studies creates exciting possibilities for both fields, Howes represents a mindset that for comics to be valued in the field, they must be linked to concepts of visual rhetoric. This same mindset in the rhetoric and composition field can be found elsewhere. For example, in the University of Florida's English graduate program, students can choose to take either a rhetoric and composition track, *or* a comics and visual rhetoric track ("MA & PhD"). Comics here are associated primarily with visual studies and separated from other forms of rhetoric.  We can see the same focus on the visual happening in the course descriptions for visual rhetorician and compositionist Marguerite

Helmers, whose "Visual Rhetoric" course includes three texts: a website on imagery,

*Understanding Comics*, and *Maus* ("Marguerite Helmers").

This focus on comics as one example of visual rhetoric ignores the increasing

trend in comics scholarship to explore comics as unique. As indicated by *A Comics*

*Studies Reader*, increasing recent scholarship argues that the reason that comics are such

an interesting medium to study comes from their uniqueness in consciously combining

visuals and text to make meaning. Scholarly works like Howes' and the split found in

rhetoric and composition college classrooms threaten to put rhetoric and composition

behind other scholarly fields in valuing the uniqueness of comics, in this case ignoring

the important link between visual and verbal rhetoric in comics texts. In order to best

employ comics studies in the rhetoric and composition field and keep abreast of the work

in comics scholarship, rhetoric and composition cannot afford to ignore that link.

In *A Comics Studies Reader*, the editors include an excerpt from WJT Mitchell's

*Picture Theory*. The excerpt begins with his claim that in studying text and images he

finds it

> more helpful to begin with actual conjunctions of words and images in illustrated
> texts, or mixed media such as film, television, and theatrical performance. With
> these media one encounters a concrete set of empirical givens, an image-text
> structure responsive to prevailing conventions (or resistance to conventions)
> governing the relation of visual and verbal experience. (W. Mitchell 116)

He asks an important and profound question for the studies of media that use alphabetic

text and images: "Why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or

separated?" While Mitchell's focus in this excerpt is on film, the placement in a reader on

comics studies makes the implications for comics obvious.  In fact, comics scholarship

often stems from similar questions, finding spaces where text and image placed side-by-

side challenge meaning or create new meanings that would not occur in a solely visual or solely verbal space.

This is not to say that visual and verbal components are kept exclusively separate from each other. Comics are a medium where the boundaries between text and images are often consciously blurred and made porous. Will Eisner, well-known comics cartoonist and author of the touchstone text on comics form, *Comics and Sequential Art*, argues that often in comics, "text functions as an extension of imagery" (3). At times, alphabetic text can be drawn with artistic typefaces that create "supportive involvement," such as when the drawn style of the words helps to create a mood for the imagery of the story, or "direct involvement," such as when the way words are drawn influences the way they are meant to be read (Eisner 4). At the same time, comics can also heighten the distinction between image and alphabetic text, as words are usually separated safely from the image in the white space of a conversational bubble. Eisner argues, "The format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills" (2). Comics creators and scholars alike see the verbal-visual element of comics as intrinsic to the medium.

It is clearly necessary for scholars who study comics to accept that the relationship between alphabetic text and image is key to understanding comics. In rhetoric and composition, it is specifically necessary to explore the potential for a medium that blends words and images both as scholars who appreciate the importance of literacy and teachers who seek to instruct students in a multiplicity of written and read literacies. If scholars in the rhetoric and composition field value comics as a unique

medium employing visual-verbal rhetoric rather than one more form of visual rhetoric, we expand the possibilities for literacy, both for ourselves and for our students.

Thus in my thesis, I will focus on the visual-verbal rhetoric in *Fun Home* through a gender and queer studies lens. Chapter 1, "Comics as Medium: What Comics Are and How They Work Rhetorically," will expand on the concept of comics as a medium. I will define comics, explain the structural elements used to create narrative in comics, and look at some specific design components that function rhetorically in the medium. In Chapter 2, "Gender in Comics: Establishing a Feminist Methodology for Understanding Gender Representation in Comics," I will expand on those rhetorical design components, defining the gender and queer theory lens I will be using as a methodology to understand female representations in comics, specifically preparing to examine representation in *Fun Home*. Chapter 3, "Gender in *Fun Home*: Sexuality and Performativity as Queer Methods of Resistance and Subversion" will utilize that methodology to examine the representations of performed and embodied roles at work in the graphic narrative, exploring cultural expectations for gender and sexuality and the way Bechdel works to subvert those expectations.

In Chapter 4, "Embodied Archives: The Function of Queer Archives as Embodied Texts in *Fun Home*," I will further survey and evaluate embodied performance in *Fun Home* through an examination of archival texts. Finally, in Chapter 5, "Queer Theory in the Classroom: *Fun Home* as a Tool for Challenging Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality," I will return to the idea that comics' visual-verbal rhetoric can be useful in teaching students, specifically looking at the possibilities of *Fun Home* as a tool to

introduce queer theory into an undergraduate classroom. Let us begin then with defining

what comics are and how they work rhetorically.

Chapter One: Comics as Medium: What Comics Are and How They Work Rhetorically

Before introducing the gender lens through which I primarily will be examining

*Fun Home*, it is important to foreground what comics are and how their visual-verbal

rhetoric functions.  While comics are often related to other mediums such as literature,

art, and films, and in fact do share overlapping elements with those mediums, they

function as a very distinct medium with unique structural and design elements.  The

gender theory I use in my examination is supported and complicated by the rhetorical

function of these elements, so it is necessary to understand how they work to allow

readers to understand stories in the comics medium. I will begin by introducing what

exactly comics are and why it matters to create a definition for this medium.

To Define or Not to Define?: The Comics Question

Comics studies is a field of contested definitions and terms, and it is surprisingly

difficult to create a definition for comics at all. First, there is a concern among comics

scholars for what should be highlighted as essential to comics. As noted above, Scott

McCloud's definition places a primacy on image: for him comics are "juxtaposed

pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or

to produce an aesthetic response" (9).  This definition admittedly borrows from Eisner's

descriptions of comics as sequential art. While this definition continues to function as a

touchstone, it is often disputed. One definition written as a response to McCloud's comes

from comics historian R. C. Harvey. He declares, "It seems to me that the essential characteristic of 'comics'—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content" (75). Much like my own position, Harvey argues, "I even go so far as to say that in the best examples of the art form, words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other" (75-76). While similar to my position, Harvey's definition also has potential problems. He focuses on a blend of visual-verbal elements, at times arguing that there should be an equal representation of both for a text to be a comic: "Comics are a blend of word and picture—not a simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true mixture" (qtd. in Horrocks 5).

Like McCloud's definition, Harvey's definition has also come under critique since it precludes the possibility of comics in which alphabetic text and imagery are not equally important. Horrocks, in response to Harvey's definition, points out, "After all, you can't say one moment that the essential nature of comics is 'a blend, a true mixture' of word and picture, and then condemn every comic you find that fails to properly fulfill that criteria as 'bad comics,' or even '*not* comics'" (5). Horrocks also points out issues with McCloud's definition that have to do with his focus on form as essential, rather than considering the complex histories and material conditions that created comics (2). With all these considerations, Groensteen goes so far as to label the definition for comics as "the impossible definition," suggesting that no one definition will ever successfully represent the entire comics medium (*System* 12).

Yet the task of providing or creating a definition is an undertaking that most, if not all, comics scholars address early in their scholarly work (see for example Hatfield

"Defining"; McCloud; Tabachnick "Introduction"). Hatfield refers to the field's obsession with definition as "a great deal of prefatory hemming and hawing about what comics *are* and how to delimit the field of study—that is, how to know what to include and what to exclude" ("Defining" 19). While it is potentially irritating or even passé to begin with a discussion of definitions, without one solid workable definition for the field, it seems necessary for me to begin by defining "comics" within my own work.

My definition for comics pulls from elements of McCloud's work, Harvey's work, Groensteen's work, and my own experience with comics, specifically focusing on how comics employ visual-verbal rhetoric. Because of my own studies and comics reading experience, I cannot entirely agree with McCloud's definition. While I appreciate the focus on sequential art in his definition, I find the primacy of image in his definition limiting. I agree that images are an important feature of comics, but as I have mentioned before, I value images as they work in relation to alphabetic text. However, I am uncomfortable in arguing for the even mixture between the two as Harvey does, since there are many comics that value alphabetic text over images and vice versa.

Considering these two very different definitions, in my thesis I will use "comics" to refer to the following:

> Any form of sequential narrative that conveys meaning through interdependent images either in relation to alphabetic text or in the absence of alphabetic text to rhetorically bring about understanding of and identification with the narrative.

In addition to the considerations of image and text inspired by McCloud and Harvey, my definition pulls inspiration from Groensteen's use of "iconic solidarity" as a governing requirement for comics. "Iconic solidarity" refers to "interdependent images that,

participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated…and which

are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence in

prasentia" (*System* 18). I again have concerns about portions of this definition.

Groensteen's need for separate images threatens to exclude comic strips that play with

the representation of space and time against traditional comics formats, like several from

Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* collections, in which images are visually separated

by space, but are not broken apart into separate boxes in traditional comics fashion.

However, I do value the "interdependent images" element of this definition, as it requires

images to be related in some fashion, even if that relation is not obvious at first glance.

Unlike McCloud's definition, my definition deliberately highlights the potential

relationships between image and text, including the forms of comics that do not include

words.  My definition also highlights the fact that sequential pictorial storytelling that

does not include words functions as an exception rather than a rule, so comics that do not

include alphabetic text can be seen as strategically employing the absence of an expected

element. My definition allows me to encompass a wide array of sequential storytelling

into the definition, but I would much rather have a definition that is too broad rather than

too limiting.

For example, if I were to create a definition that focuses exclusively on image and

text together, I would be excluding excellent comics work, such as the comics of Jason, a

Norwegian artist who uses anthropomorphic animal characters and develops narrative

almost solely through expressive gestures in his imagery, eschewing words altogether

(Bell and Sinclair 9). Yet, even comics like Jason's require a consideration of alphabetic

text, as his work is often highlighted because he chooses to use imagery alone in his

work. For example, in *Comics and Sequential Art*, the book describes an example of Jason's work in the following terms: "The *lack of dialogue* enhances the stories' haunting and humorous tone" (Eisner 18, emphasis mine). Jason's comics, much as I argue is the case for other comics without alphabetic text, are explored through an absence of words and understanding that absence is just as key to his comics as understanding the presence of words is in more traditional visual-verbal comics.

Furthermore, Hatfield suggests that the absence of "words in a conventional sense" does not mean the absence of "written" text. He argues that "dialogue icons may take the place of words" and still lead to a similar tension between interpreting a verbal text alongside an image text (*Alternative* 40). Bechdel, for example, occasionally uses such techniques. At one point in the story, Bechdel describes her descent into obsessive compulsive disorder, detailing an increasingly strange and compulsory pattern of behaviors. One of these behaviors includes "recit[ing] a special incantation" when she fails to meet other obsessive behavior patterns. This special incantation is always drawn as a collection of small, zigzagged lines (Bechdel 136). Encapsulated in a text bubble, these lines function much like alphabetic text. Therefore, the absence of known alphabetic language in a comic does not challenge the focus on words and image together in a comics medium. In fact, it may actually strengthen the argument.

However, I do need to acknowledge that the act of creating a definition is a political move in comics studies, and one that has come under recent criticism that must be addressed. Hatfield argues that "definitions are not merely analytical but also tactical" (19). He claims that definitions' meanings "derive partly from aims specific to their original publication contexts" and reflect the tactical goals of the author who creates them

(Hatfield, "Defining" 20). My definition, which privileges visual-verbal rhetoric within comics in a thesis that relies on the importance of visual-verbal rhetoric in comics, is obviously no exception. To oppose such tactical moves, Hatfield delineates a movement within comics to avoid strict definitions in comics scholarship. He cites Samuel R. Delany, suggesting that "the search for airtight definitions is counterproductive, even self-defeating" and insisting on finding one strict definition for the medium may connote that comics are lesser than other mediums that have since accepted their lack of  full definition ("Defining" 21).

Horrocks has a different argument against comics definitions, arguing that by creating one definition for comics, even when the impulse behind that definition is to expand the boundaries of comics, the definition will always end up creating more boundaries (5). Those boundaries reflect an essentialist notion of comics and are "really just a set of values about what comics *should* be" (5). I acknowledge that my definition potentially does create a set of boundaries for what comics should be, but I find that that is a necessary and valuable characteristic for two main reasons. First, as Hatfield points out, even in comics scholarship that seeks to explore pluralities and conflicts, it is necessary to have a pragmatic working definition for comics in order to avoid confusion ("Defining" 26). Second, I have been very clear for my goals of "what comics should be" throughout my paper, and I make no pretense to hide those goals now.

Horrocks sees the potential boundaries in a definition as limiting, but I argue that they instead open up new areas of critical dialogue. Even Horrocks' article is a direct response to McCloud's definition of comics, and his argument has opened new discussions in other venues, like Hatfield's contribution to *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. I

present my definition with the knowledge that it has issues in breadth, as is common to many comics definitions, and use those issues as an invitation for further scholarly debate.

Graphic Novels and Graphic Narratives

Given the complex history of comics, specifically their association with children's literature and illiteracy, many comics scholars avoid the stigma of the term "comics" by avoiding the word entirely, opting instead to use the term "graphic novel." "Graphic novel" carries a different legitimacy than "comics." The term grew in popularity due in part to Will Eisner's use of the term to market his book *A Contract with God* to mainstream publishers (Tabachnik 13). When he was successfully able to do so, the term gained a degree of mainstream legitimacy. The term became especially prominent after the success of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, which won a Pulitzer Prize, has been generally praised by critics for its place among holocaust memoirs, and is usually labeled a "graphic novel" (Wolk 43-44).

However, this award-winning graphic novel also hurt the reputation of "comics." Critics seemed shocked to find themselves enjoying work in the comics medium, and distanced themselves from the "comics" term. Joseph Witek discusses the way that critics distanced themselves from comics when praising *Maus* in his article "Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw Comics." He quotes the review from *New York Times'* book review, which begins, "Art Spiegelman doesn't draw comics," as well as the *Village Voice* review which states, "*Maus* is not exactly a comic book, either; comics are for kids" (Witek). By focusing on *Maus* as a graphic novel, critics were able to distance the

work from comics themselves, creating a space where graphic novels are viewed as legitimate art and comics are still poorly drawn drivel for children (McCloud 3).  Hatfield points out that in current American language, the term "graphic novel" has "become a kind of totem, enjoying strong presence among publishers, booksellers, librarians, critics, fans, and scholars" (*Alternative* 153).

However, Hatfield and feminist comics scholar Hillary Chute both note that there are problems inherent in the use of the term "graphic novel."  Hatfield argues that the term "seems to imply a breadth and cohesion to which few graphic novels aspire, let alone achieve" (5). Chute notes more specifically that in her work with memoirs, the term graphic novel denotes a fictional focus that is not appropriate for the works she studies. She suggests that "graphic narrative" is a more appropriate alternative. Since "graphic novel" has become a sort of catch-all term that rarely applies to the texts it is used to describe, I will opt for "comics" as the broad term to describe the medium of work I study.  I will refer to "graphic novels" as a genre within that medium and only when the text I refer to is a novel-length fictional work or a collected volume of shorter fictional works.  I will use Chute's term "graphic narrative" for book-length works that are not fictional, such as graphic biographies or graphic memoirs, like *Fun Home*.

Now that I have fully defined what comics are, I am able to use the boundaries created by my definitions to highlight the key structural components and formal design elements of the comics medium that function rhetorically.  These components are unique to the comics medium as I have defined it and will be crucial for understanding my later arguments about *Fun Home.*

Structural Components of Comics

There are four key structural components that go together to create a comic: pages, panels, frames, and the gutter.  These terms are referenced regularly in comics scholarship, but rarely are they explained.  In fact, it is easy to find works that explain how to use pages, panels, and frames, but difficult to find clear definitions for each. Therefore, since I will be referencing these components and so will many of the scholars I cite, I will take some time to explain what these components are and how they work in the comics medium.

Two major structural components of comics are panels and frames. Eisner claims that "to deal with the capture or encapsulation of…events in the flow of narrative, they must be broken up into sequenced segments. These segments are called panels or frames" (39). Panels are images in comics, each usually representing "a distinct moment or process in time" (Eisner 45). Hatfield describes panels as "a constellation of discrete units" (*Alternative* 48).  While the units are placed together and share an element of iconic solidarity, they are also individual units. Panels can be confused with frames, which are the  lines or devices used to separate panels and which I will discuss in full shortly. Sometimes the two terms are conflated and many contemporary comics blend the two elements, but in traditional comics they are usually clear, separate elements.

Since *Fun Home* will be the focus of my study, it works as an excellent site to begin understanding how these structural components work in an actual comics text. For example on the first page of the narrative, there are three panels: the first is Alison holding her father's foot, the second is Alison being supported by her father in a game of "airplane," and the third is an aerial view of the airplane game (Bechdel 3). Note that

since *Fun Home* is an autobiographical work, and one of the main characters is a version of Bechdel, I will use three distinct identifiers to refer to different aspects of Bechdel and her representations of self much like Chute does in *Graphic Women*. I will use "Bechdel" to refer to the author, "Alison" to refer to the character visually depicted in the text, and "the narrator" to refer to the voice that narrates the book, usually as a reflective voice slightly removed from the narrative action.

The second important structural component in comics is the frame. Frames are the tools used to separate panels from each other and are often a rectangular box drawn around a panel. The term "frames" is less clearly articulated and sometimes frames are conflated with other structural elements like panels, as noted above. For example, Eisner claims that "in comics, there are actually two 'frames': the total page (or screen, in digital comics) on which there are any number of panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds" (41). Therefore, frames can function in multiple ways but still work as distinct elements that contain the narrative within the comics medium.

Understanding frames and their multiple uses is particularly important in appreciating meaning in comics. Eisner points out that "a frame's shape (or the absence of one) gives it the ability to become more than just a proscenium through which a comic's action is seen: it can become a part of the story itself" (45). In *Fun Home*, Bechdel most often uses traditional rectangular frames to separate panels. However, she also incorporates frames that work as part of the story. In one scene featuring Alison and Bruce, Bechdel actually incorporates frames within a panel. Using a perspective that lets readers look in through two windows to the inside of Bruce's study, Bechdel shows Alison and her father at work. Alison writes at a desk, while her father reads. The

framing here connotes that even in this potentially close parallel work, there is an element of separation between Alison and Bruce. In this case, the frames help tell the story.

The largest and most often overlooked element of comics structure is the page, which Eisner points out is in some ways a large frame itself. Jesse Cohn explains that it is easy to overlook the page as a unit in comics creation because "we lack a common language for discussing the characteristics of the page as a whole, making that invisible structure visible" (45). Hatfield describes the page through the French term, "planche…a term denoting the total design unit rather than the physical page on which it was printed" (*Alternative* 48). Hatfield notes that some comics creators explore the page in creative ways, while others focus their creativity on "the individual image-as-moment" (*Alternative* 48).

*Fun Home* provides an excellent example of creative page layout. In a two page spread often cited by scholars, the pages show Alison holding a photo of a young man in his underwear, a photo taken originally by her father and discovered by Alison after her father's death. The background of the page is undefined and Alison's hand, holding the photo, looms large in the bottom lefthand corner. The picture spreads across both pages as a kind of centerfold. Set in the middle of more traditional page layouts—a collection of rectangular frames meant to be read left to right and top to bottom—these pages stand out as unique.

By using page layout, Bechdel is here able to visualize her obsession with the photo, making it an obvious focus for the reader and using the centerfold-like focus as a way to provoke the sexual and aesthetic qualities of the photo. However, page layouts are not always so attention-grabbing, and this may be part of the reason their function is

"invisible" (Cohn 45). Eisner notes that even those artists who do not use page layouts in creative ways still must consider their use of pages in creating comics: "Pages are the constant in comic book narration. They have to be dealt with immediately after the story is solidified. Because the groupings of action and other events do not necessarily break up evenly, some pages must contain more individual scenes than others" (65). Bechdel, for example, had to deliberately consider the way she structured her more traditional pages in order for the two-page centerfold to work. Not only did Bechdel have to plan for the preceding pages and the following pages to break evenly to leave space for this specific layout, but since the layout also sits at the exact middle of its chapter, she had to plan the pages for the entire chapter to be structured around the centerfold.

The final structural element of comics is the gutter. McCloud describes the gutter as the "space between the panels" (66) and Eisner views it as the "non-space" between the panels (Eisner 51). Usually, the gutter is the white space on a page, although sometimes gutters take on the color of a page background. Like panel, frame, and page, the gutter works in unique ways to convey meaning, but that involves reader-responses that I will explain more fully in the next section.

Together pages, frames, panels, and gutters are the basic structural elements that construct comics. By understanding these elements, we can begin to explore the factors that theorists argue make comics unique and will help explain how Bechdel challenges constructions of gender in *Fun Home*.

Unique Design Elements of Comics

Different scholars point to different features that make comics unique, and taken together these views present a fairly comprehensive exploration of the key elements of the comics medium. The three key elements I will focus on in my thesis are visual-verbal relationships, time represented through space, and comics' ability to draw attention to themselves as representational and constructed. This is not a comprehensive list, but the elements on the list are broad and cover a wide span of why comics work differently from other mediums, as well as how they function as a form of rhetoric. In addition, they are the three components that are essential when understanding how Bechdel uses the comics medium to represent gender and sexuality, and I will refer to these design elements throughout my exploration of *Fun Home*.

As I have argued at some length, images and alphabetic text work together in comics to create meaning. However, I have not yet explored how those two components can function together in a text. Hatfield refers to the relationship between words and images as a visual-verbal tension. He says

> while the word/image dichotomy may be false or oversimple, learned assumptions about these different codes—written and pictorial—still exert a strong centripetal pull on the reading experience. We continue to distinguish between the function of words and the function of images, despite the fact that comics continually work to destabilize this distinction. (*Alternative* 37)

Hatfield suggests that visual-verbal tension arises because readers have conflicting ways of interpreting words and images. At times, cartoonists can play upon this tension, which "forces us to take heed of the role the reader must play in constructing meaning" in comics (*Alternative* 39). However, as Eisner argues, cartoonists can also choose to use

visual and verbal elements in cooperation, rather than playing them against each other (4). Thus, comics present a specific form of visual-verbal rhetoric and understanding the narrative of the comic comes in large part from understanding the rhetorical relationship between the visual and verbal components.

Bechdel works with both complementary and contradictory visual-verbal rhetoric in *Fun Home* and is remarkably adept at balancing the two. For example, during her first lesbian relationship, the narrator explains that "in the harsh light of my dawning feminism, everything looked different" (81). These words are accompanied by an image of Alison and her girlfriend, Joan, lying naked together in bed. Joan rests on her stomach, while Alison rests on her back with her legs looped over Joan's shoulders. Joan is reading from *James and the Giant Peach*; her words in a speech bubble read, "The walls were wet and sticky, and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling. James opened his mouth and caught some of it on his tongue" (81). In this panel, Bechdel uses visual-verbal rhetoric when the words from a children's book take on an obviously sexual nature when placed next to the image of two women in bed.  This reading challenges the meaning of Roald Dahl's words alone, but the image makes Bechdel's meaning obvious. At the same time, the image complements the narration. The words are not very descriptive in themselves, but their meaning is heightened and developed through the accompanying image. Identifying and understanding these two relationships between visual and verbal components are essential to understanding Bechdel's narrative and are specific to the comics medium overall.

Another element that sets comics apart is the relationship between time and space. Implied by the idea of "sequential art," comics use "multiple images in succession to

create narrative" (Versaci 14). Time is conveyed in comics using this sequential strategy. Drawing from Harvey, Hatfield points out that dividing a continuous narrative into static images is called "breakdown," and it is crucial to the comics medium (*Alternative* 41). Bechdel highlights this convention in a conversation between Alison and Bruce. Spread across two pages, each page contains twelve square panels of the same size. In the story, Alison and her father are talking in a car while they drive to a movie theater. Each panel shows them conversing in the car, and the twenty-four panels are almost identical, with the same background and the same positioning of characters (Bechdel 220-221). However, it is clear that time is passing in this sequence. The words of the conversation make the progression of time clear, but the convention of space as time in comics also suggests to readers that time is passing, because even though there is no movement to indicate events across time, the fact that the scene is broken up across multiple panels suggests time is occurring between and within those panels .

McCloud and Hatfield point out that there are many more complicated ways that time can be represented in comics. Hatfield says, "representation of time in comics can vary considerably: from precise breakdowns that depict a sequence of events in minute detail to single drawings that conflate a whole series of events in one panel" (*Alternative* 52). However, the sequencing of images is the most common way to represent time. Unique to comics is the fact that "in comics, because the still images are laid out before us, we are free to examine how each illustration moves to the next" (Versaci 14). Therefore, comics literally show the passing of time while capturing individual moments.

Theorists and readers of comics must also consider the gutter in relation to the time as space argument. McCloud argues that filling in the gaps in a sequence of images

to create a narrative event is "closure," more specifically described as "the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). He claims that readers must fill in the narrative gaps created by the gutter and supply the action(s) or image(s) that connect the panels (McCloud 65). In this way, "the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (McCloud 65).

Finally, comics draw attention to themselves as representations. Versaci specifically highlights this element, saying

> one can never completely escape into a comic book because its form—impressionistic illustrations of people, places, and things—reminds us at every turn (or panel) that what we are experiencing is a representation. While comics are very adept at engaging us with their creator's representations of the world, they never allow us to escape completely. (6)

Therefore, the images in comics are always heightened as representations. Chute connects this to the time-as-space element of comics, saying "a comics page offers a rich temporal map…[that] is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments" ("Comics as Literature?" 455). McCloud also focuses on the representative nature of comics, drawing a variety of representative images and then labeling them as what they are meant to represent but are not actually, such as "This is not a cow" under the image of a cow (26). McCloud argues that readers react to images differently based on how realistic they are. I will more fully explore this concept later in my thesis.

For now, it is important to note that the representative element of comics is particularly important to Bechdel's work. Bechdel painstakingly recreates drawn images of dictionary entries, book pages, family photographs, and other documents. These hand-

drawn recreations of real-life texts deliberately highlight the representational nature of the medium.

Conclusion

In review, comics are often a misunderstood medium, but they are a medium with unique qualities. In my thesis, that medium will relate to the following:

Any form of sequential narrative that conveys meaning through interdependent images either in relation to alphabetic text or in the absence of alphabetic text to rhetorically bring about understanding of and identification with the narrative.

Within that medium, there are some unique structural elements and uses of design elements that further comics as a rhetorical medium. Specifically, in my thesis, I will focus on the use of visual-verbal rhetorics in the medium, the way time represents space, and the way the medium draws attention to itself as representational and constructed. In the next chapter, we will set up a feminist methodology for examining comics, and later see how these three design elements, which are specifically important to *Fun Home*, lead to a reading of Bechdel's graphic narrative through a gendered lens, in which "representation" takes on new significance.

Chapter Two: Gender in Comics: Establishing a Feminist Methodology for

Understanding Gender Representation in Comics


Once we understand comics as a unique medium that uses unique formal

elements, there is room to make a productive connection between gender studies and

comics studies.  As Versaci points out, comics are self-consciously constructed. When

viewed through the lenses of Foucauldian feminism and performativity theory, gender

can also be understood as a constructed representation. This constructed format of comics

can therefore draw attention to the constructed nature of gender. However, before

exploring this connection further and how it works in *Fun Home*, it will be necessary to

examine the current state of gender studies in comics scholarship.

In this chapter, I will examine the need for a methodology to understand and

evaluate the representation of female bodies in comics. Then, I will use a combination of

radical feminist theory and postmodern theory to create a framework through which we

as readers can understand the cultural expectations for female bodies and representations

of female bodies, as well as how female-authored comics subvert and challenge those

expectations.


Gender and Comics

Comics scholarship has increasingly become a promising venue of exploration for

a variety of concerns about the representation of the self.  Many of the most successful

and best known graphic novels in recent years have been autobiographical: *Fun Home* is

among them, but other examples include *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Stitches: A*

*Memoir* by David Small, and *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. Hillary Chute argues that

autobiography is "arguably the dominant mode of current graphic narrative" ("Comics as

Literature?" 456).  Charles Hatfield also notes the importance of the exploration of self in

comics and argues that Art Spiegelman's holocaust memoir *Maus* signified "the

development of a new breed of cartoonists and comics writers, for whom comics were

above all an acutely personal means of literary expression" (*Alternative* xi).  Versaci, in

comparing prose memoir with graphic memoir, suggests:

> Like their prose counterparts, comic memoirs take a variety of shapes and forms,
> but comics are capable of demonstrating a broader and more flexible range of
> first-person narration than is possible in prose. In addition, while many prose
> memoirists address the complex nature of identity and the self, comic book
> memoirists are able to represent such complexity in ways that cannot be captured
> in words alone. (36)

It is clear that comics and autobiographical writing have developed a strong link, one that

scholars are actively exploring.

However, within this growing field, gender scholarship is largely absent.

Particularly missing is an exploration of representations of women's bodies. In fact,

current discussions of gender in comics studies are in many ways still very limited.

Hatfield refers to the "longstanding masculine bias" in the comics world and popular

culture essayist Douglas Wolk argues that females in comics are often presented as the

"stereotype of the top-heavy bombshell" (Hatfield *Alternative* 69; Wolk 70, 72).

Furthermore, in the comics industry, female cartoonists are often excluded from such

things as best artist lists, which Wolk laments since many female cartoonists, including

Bechdel, "are as good as it gets right now" (71). For Wolk, the problem is obvious, but he

only devotes a couple of pages to exploring the problem, settling for vaguely hopeful statements like, "Look at the best contemporary American cartoonists in five or ten or fifteen years…and I'll bet there'll be a lot more women among them" (71). Wolk's vague hopes are not exactly a useful theoretical position.

Perhaps the best known writer about comics and gender is Trina Robbins, author of three histories that document the place of women both in the comics field (such as in *The Great Women Cartoonists*) and on the pages of comics (such as in *The Great Women Superheroes*). Robbins' histories recover work by female authors in the comics field and situate female characters within a male-dominated comics history. However, these studies leave much to be desired regarding in-depth theoretical readings of the ways female characters and female bodies are represented.

For example, in *The Great Women Superheroes*, Robbins describes a common claim that Wonder Woman is a lesbian, as indicated by the fact that she often hugs her female companions.  Robbins rejects the claim by stating,

> Of course what…male writers [who criticize Wonder Woman] are not taking into account is that women do show their emotions, and do hug. On the other hand, American men are notoriously afraid of being considered homosexual, and never touch each other except when playing sports. (Robbins 11)

While this moment in her text begins a critical reading of gender in comics, her brief defense universalizes gender in a troubling manner.  Perhaps even more interesting would be a discussion of why it seems to matter so much to Robbins to prove that Wonder Woman isn't gay. While Robbins does an excellent job of reclaiming the place of strong women in the field and on the pages of comics, her analysis of what that means for the feminine gender leaves much to be desired.

Scholars in the field of comics studies are beginning to notice this gap in gender scholarship, specifically the lack of scholarship grappling with female representation. For example, feminist American studies scholar Laura Mattoon D'Amore states, "Scholarship about superhero comics has been overwhelmingly focused on maleness, and feminist analyses are only just beginning to appear." Even more tellingly, the comics field has recently seen the first two issues of a new comics scholarly journal called the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, published by Routledge. In its second year, the journal is already calling for two special issues, and the first of those issues was originally devoted to gender and superheroes. However, the issue, as currently scheduled to be published in June 2011, is now subtitled as only "Superheroes" ("Special Issues"). It appears that the scholarly field is noticing the lack of work on gender and seeking to fill the void. Yet, for this journal at least, there is still a lack of gender and comics scholarship being created. This also appears to be the case for the online journal *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, in which only two articles specifically focus on concerns of gender ("Archives.).

In the meantime, there are a very few scholars who specifically devote their work to gender and comics studies. While many scholars study comics as one facet of a broader area of interest, such as D'Amore using comics as a representation of American culture, Chute focuses entirely on feminist work in comics through a literature perspective. Chute, who was also the editor of the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue on comics that featured several scholarly articles on comics and gender, has recently published a book called *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Her book explores the work of five female cartoonists who have used the comics medium to

represent elements of their own lives. She argues that when comics represent not just female bodies, but female bodies as drawn by the very women those bodies represent, new elements of risk and potential complications are added to the question of representation.

Chute links the risk of representing the self and personal experiences specifically to the "ethics of testimony" in relating, valuing, and overcoming traumatic experience (*Graphic Women* 3). She dubs this the "risk of representation" and argues that all five women in her study (Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel) have each faced risks of representation with feminist projects that individually challenge perceived notions of female representation, including the potential for objectification, and challenging the porn versus not-porn discourse that seems inevitable any time a female body expressing sexuality is present.

Chute's book draws on the fact that there is an abundance of scholarship available on female imagery and female representations, even though that body of scholarship has thus far been rarely integrated into comics scholarship. It will now be useful to examine some of the branches of feminist scholarship relevant to Chute's work, since Chute is the primary feminist scholar in the comics field, and my work has been influenced in large part by hers. Furthermore, her work does an excellent job addressing the theories that inform reader expectations for what representations of female bodies usually, or at least often, do. Since my thesis will look at culturally constructed gender identity, understanding cultural expectations through a theoretical lens is necessary for my methodology.

Gaze, Objectification, and Oppression

Coming from a tradition of radical feminist scholarship, Chute considers the claims that representations of female bodies are oppressive and sexually objectifying. While Chute delves into several considerations of gender representation and uses many theorists from this branch of feminism, I will focus here on understanding what objectification is and how it is seen to function in Western culture. Objectification can be understood through gaze theory, popularized by Laura Mulvey, who uses psychoanalytic film theory to argue that since we live in a world

> ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (19)

In Mulvey's formulation, women are passive objects of sexual appeal to men. Men have the power to set sexual desirability, and women are expected to fulfill those desires.

However, if we seek to look for a theory of objectification that isn't limited to a heterosexual binary, the work of Foucauldian feminist Sandra Bartky is helpful. Bartky builds on the idea of gaze, linking male gaze to objectification. She describes sexual objectification as when a woman's "sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her" (26). Bartky does complicate gaze, though, by arguing that sexual objectification "involves two persons: the one who objectifies and the one who is objectified. But the observer and the one observed can be the same person" (27). Thus, because gaze, while still described as male in nature, can be performed by females, Bartky's version of gaze troubles the gender binary that Mulvey

sets up.  Bartky does allow that "male supremacist culture" creates the environment that oppresses women, but she also argues that women themselves are implicated in the continuation of female oppression (Bartky 25).

In Bartky's formulation of gaze, objectification becomes oppressive because women are trained to monitor and objectify themselves. According to her, women's bodies become a source of shame since they are never able to measure up to the ideal of attractiveness. At the same time, they potentially become a source of pleasure when women are able to use tools like exercise to discipline their bodies into a form that nears the ideal level of attractiveness. Even with the productive potential, Bartky claims that women receive the cultural message that "not only must [women] continue to produce ourselves as beautiful bodies, but the bodies we have to work with are deficient to begin with" (29).  This can ultimately lead to a suspicion on both the part of the oppressed and the oppressor that women are only useful for physical attraction and are not capable of roles beyond being attractive.

The link between psychology and objectification is further developed by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts. These authors argue that gaze is the "visual inspection of the body" (175). Pulling from Bartky's definition of sexual objectification, the authors claim that "when objectified, women are treated as bodies—and in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others" (175). Fredrickson and Roberts link sexual objectification to a collection of mental health risks, including self-conscious body monitoring, anxiety, and eating disorders (192, 194).  It is clear from this tradition of psychological study that female bodies and the viewing of female bodies are fraught with theoretical and practical problems.

This history bears directly on the study of comics. In the framework of psychological oppression, images of female bodies are often oppressive. Bartky refers to the "hopeless pursuit of a Vogue figure, [and] the look of an Essence model" as evidence of women's oppression (25).  Female imagery here is seen as a source for women to receive and internalize messages about the ideal female body.  Fredrickson and Roberts also suggest that most images of female bodies are oppressive because they "show that males are pictured looking directly at their female partner far more often than the reverse" (176).  This suggests that female images normalize the gaze and encourage women to readily submit to being gazed upon.  In addition, women are often portrayed as bodies or body parts rather than as full subjects. In an extension of real-life objectification, "visual media portray women as though their bodies were capable of representing them" (Fredrickson and Roberts 177). Again, this has a normalizing effect.

Female-authored life narrative comics enter at this point into the discussion of objectification, oppression, and pornography in interesting and complicated ways since, as Chute points out, the autobiographical work of female cartoonists "productively point[s] to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight" (*Graphic Women* 2).  Female-authored autobiographical works become the concrete representation of how these authors view themselves; therefore, there is a potential for comics to physically manifest female self-objectification.  For example, in Chute's book, she explores the work of Phoebe Gloeckner. Gloeckner uses her autobiographical comics to unpack her childhood sexual abuse, specifically the relationship she had with one of her mother's boyfriends as a teenager (*Graphic Women*

66). Gloeckner does not shy away from representing graphic scenes of her sexual abuse and often represents key scenes from her abusive pasts in multiple comics works.

Chute argues that Gloeckner's work is subversive because it deliberately challenges the male gaze.  In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*, in which the protagonist Minnie serves as Gloeckner's autobiographical representation, Chute says it is clear that "Gloeckner does not draw the exuberant presence of Minnie's body—crying, wrestling, running, flippantly naked, desiring, watching—as inscribed or trapped by a male gaze" (81). In fact, in a scene in which Gloeckner depicts Minnie and her mother's boyfriend, Monroe, getting dressed post-coitus, Chute argues that the depiction of Monroe as overweight, hairy, and "ridiculous," creates a challenge to the male gaze. She suggests that the gaze of the comic reader is aligned with Minnie's, and Monroe "is consistently pictured as himself looked at" (*Graphic Women* 83). Thus, "in the cases where male spectatorship is implied as an idea, Gloeckner undermines the concept of that expectation" (*Graphic Women* 81).  Instead of seeing a female body as an object, the viewer is presented with a male body.

It is true that Monroe is often gazed at, but Gloeckner is also present for being gazed upon. In the scene Chute focuses on here, the viewer sees both characters from behind.  Monroe struggles to pull on his underwear, testicles exposed.  Minnie is less exposed: facing away from the viewer, she is naked, but the reader can only see her buttocks.  However, she is still a focus of the image, her body taking up almost half the image just as Monroe's does, and while Monroe's body is drawn to be an object of disgust, Minnie's is not. In this image and others, Minnie's body is toned and lean, her skin looks smooth, and her hair, which Gloeckner draws with careful detail, is full and

glossy (*Graphic Women* 82). So even in scenes when Gloeckner resists the male gaze in some ways, her represented body is objectified, presented as an object of beauty ready to be gazed upon. Much like Mulvey argues, Gloeckner's body here suggests "to be looked-at-edness." My purpose here is not to blame Gloeckner for the abuse she suffered, nor is it to derail her attempt to sort through that abuse. However, even in this visual resistance to her victimization, Gloeckner's representations of self are co-opted by a self-objectification that manifests male gaze in how she represents herself. Furthermore, this version of objectification aligns with Bartky's definition, since Gloeckner has created this idealized representation of herself and put it on display.

If we unpack Bartky's theories even further, Gloeckner's work becomes even more clearly self-objectifying. Bartky connects her work to Foucault's claims that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (qtd. in Bartky 63). She then outlines three main kinds of discipline that create docile bodies: "those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration, those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (Bartky 65). Again, Bartky cites images (specifically those from magazines) as a primary source for women to receive cultural messages about idealized Western femininity, as images are a tool of the "fashion-beauty complex…a major articulation of capitalist patriarchy" (39). Therefore, within a Foucauldian feminist framework, female images can be understood as oppressive when used as a form of discipline to insist on docile bodies. Oppressive images are ones in which the agency of women is replaced or superseded by the cultural demands of femininity.

In light of Bartky's formulations for disciplining images, Gloeckner's images are oppressive, at least in part. Bartky claims that "normative femininity is coming more and more to be centered on a woman's body—not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance" (80). Since Gloeckner's work highlights her heterosexuality and her attractiveness, her work can be placed inside Bartky's conceptions of oppression. This is not to say that all female images that show female bodies as beautiful and heterosexual are oppressive, a concept that I will explore more fully below. However, Gloeckner repeatedly highlights both facets of her identity as key in how she represents herself, and the repeated nature of these elements becomes objectifying and oppressive. Therefore, in some comics, Bartky's definition of objectification can help us interpret how female cartoonists represent themselves, specifically through cultural expectations.

Oppression and Pornography

It is important to note that when imagery of female bodies shows nude female bodies and/or female sexuality, such as in Gloeckner's work, theories about female imagery in relation to oppression can also be linked to debates about pornography. As Drucilla Cornell points out in the introduction to *Feminism and Pornography*, the definition of pornography is highly contested and how an individual defines the term often relates directly to how offensive pornography is to that individual (Cornell 1). Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, two of the primary anti-pornography feminists, define pornography as the imagery of women's domination and abuse by men. Part of their definition includes when "women's body parts—including but not limited to,

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vaginas, breasts, or buttocks—are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts" (qtd. in Cornell 3). Dworkin and Mackinnon's definition here is almost identical to Bartky's definition for sexual objectification. By extension, pornography within Dworkin and MacKinnon's framing can be seen as oppressive. Dworkin argues that pornography is worse than psychologically oppressive; actually, it leads to the real-life abuse of women. Dworkin says, "there has never been a distinction between making pornography and the sexual abuse of live women that is taken as a truism by those who approach pornography as if it were an intellectual phenomenon" (28). Within Dworkin's framework, it is clear that pornography, or any text that presents objectified female bodies, can indeed be among the images that are oppressive to women.

However, as Chute points out in her examination of Aline Kominsky-Crumb's work, it is dangerous to label all images of female sexuality, even those that show female subordination in sex, as pornography. This is particularly because, even though the oppressive nature of pornography is contested, pornography is usually associated with female oppression. However, images of female sexuality, whether pornography or not, do not have to be oppressive. In speaking of Kominsky-Crumb's work, Chute argues that her depictions of sexuality, which are often labeled as pornographic, put "pressure on both romantic ideals (the 'unsavoriness' of sex that is evident in her comics) and also on culturally dominant notions (from both pornographic and romantic economies) about the victimhood and acquiescence of women" (*Graphic Women* 57). Therefore, an examination of female imagery that includes nudity and sexuality, as *Fun Home* does, requires a conscientious awareness of both the potential for female victimization and female empowerment.

Furthermore, in imagery that depicts queer sexuality, again as *Fun Home* does, debates about pornography gain a new dimension. Pornography, as we see in Dworkin's definition, is often defined through heterosexuality, which makes it difficult to situate queer sexual imagery within those definitions. Cornell points out that in lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) pornography, producers often object to being grouped with porn in general, because their work is "outside the heterosexual matrix of subordination" described by Dworkin and MacKinnon (5). In fact, LGBTQ pornographers often feel their work is targeted with harsher censorship "because their sexuality is so threatening to the heterosexual majority" (6).

Becki L. Ross argues that lesbian pornography "depict[s] sex between women who are focused on, and engaged in, sex with each other; their mutual pleasure is of paramount concern," even when images of domination, such as butch/femme relationships or lesbian sadomasochism, are present (271). She argues that lesbian s/m fantasy exposes the naturalized status of femininity and masculinity in ways that disrupt the power of heterosexualizing law" by providing elements of sexuality "that satirize conventional sexual and gender stereotypes" (271). Even though homosexual experience adds a new and important layer to the pornography debate, it is still important to resist the inherent oppressiveness of images showing female sexuality. While pornography may be oppressive, the heated debates over nude female imagery and sexual imagery shows that images can potentially oppress and repress female sexuality in addition to appearance, but they may also highlight sexual performativity in a productive and empowering way.

We see here that while the radical feminist lenses of gaze, objectification, and oppression, as introduced by Mulvey and Bartky, and those lenses' link to pornography

debates, help us understand mainstream cultural conceptions about female bodies, the theories do not fully explain how gender and sexuality work, both in Western culture and in female representations within Western culture. Specifically, Ross' work with lesbian pornography introduces queer theory, as understood through a lens of performativity. To understand female imagery within queer and gender studies, we must move away from Chute's theoretical frameworks, and examine gender through a postmodern lens.

Culturally Constructed Identity and Performativity

If we incorporate gender theory and performativity into our discussion of female imagery, it becomes clear that images of female bodies not only have the potential to give women messages about how to be the ideal woman, they also can implicitly argue that female-sexed bodies *must* be associated with feminine gender and heterosexuality. Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* continues to be a key source in allowing scholars in gender studies to understand how Western culture insists on the connection between sex, gender, and sexuality. In the book, Butler proposes that gender is not a natural category, but is rather a cultural construction linked to biological sex in order to normalize the construction. Butler begins *Gender Trouble* by explaining how focusing on females as the subject of feminism assumes the presence of a gender category that is natural or essential. However, the category is actually created by hegemonic discourses. Butler argues that the problem with focusing feminism on a female subject is that "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (4). In fact, all female (and male) subjects are discursively constituted by Western hegemonic culture. While our culture has become

accustomed to assuming that gender is created by biological sex, "gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler 9).

In Butler's theory, gender is linked to sex as a justification for its binary construction, but that link is also a cultural construct. Butler claims the unstable link between gender and sex requires gender to be constructed as opposite from the other gender: a male is only as male as he is not female, and vice versa. This distinction also requires a compulsory heterosexuality where attraction between members of the opposing sexes helps to establish gender difference (Butler 30).

Returning to the ideas presented by radical feminist scholars, Butler's theory enriches the psychoanalytic theories of objectivity by challenging the cultural distinction between men and women. However, challenging that distinction does not necessarily put gender theory entirely at odds with Foucauldian feminism. In fact, the two can be complementary. Bartky argues that feminists are defined by their desire for change, moving toward equality between genders as what should be. To that end, she argues, "As long as [women's] situation is apprehended as natural, inevitable, and inescapable, women's consciousness of themselves…is not yet feminist consciousness" (Bartky 14). However, as Butler points out, feminist consciousness is just as endangered by the belief that the boundaries of gender and gender's connection to biological sex are natural. In both cases, cultural normalization is a powerful force to be challenged and resisted. While gender-theory-conscious feminism cannot accept "women" as one category, it can still address the problems inherent in oppression based on the association between

biological sex and gender, and the inferiority then assigned to the feminine gender associated with female sex.

While the connection between Foucauldian feminism and Butler's gender theory is clear here, the connection does not explain gender theory's role when examining oppression through imagery. The connection between Butler's theories and female imagery is best explored through the other important element of Butler's theory: the concept of performativity. Butler argues that bodies have no inherent identity, but our society punishes people who do not fit into gender expectations. Cultural expectations become especially problematic when Butler reveals that gender, as our society constructs it, is "an ideal that no one *can* embody" (176). Therefore, individuals do their best to convincingly *perform* gender, in an effort to create at least the appearance of a socially appropriate identity:

> In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (173)

Gender is then not natural or essential. In fact, without the performance of gender, gender would not exist.

Butler argues that an individual can only have a gender by performing it, which involves understanding and repeatedly modeling the acts, gestures, and desire that culturally "prove" the existence of that gender (178). However, the repetition of gender performance also legitimizes the performance: it is at once reflective and constitutive (Butler 178). Butler's theories then help us understand the expected gender norms for

Western culture. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to gender performances and sexuality that exist outside of those ideals and the heterosexual matrix, often in resistance to those ideals, as "queer." Bechdel's gender and sexuality performance can then be explored as queer, since as we will see in the next chapter, her identity is often formed in resistance to Western norms.

Performativity better helps us understand how images of gender and sexuality can at times be subversive in a way that radical feminist lenses cannot. Chute argues that the dual nature of female cartoonists as both the individuals who view and represent themselves has the potential to allow women a certain level of agency in presenting models of non-normative sexuality as both lived and normal experiences. In describing the work of Kominsky-Crumb, who regularly depicts her own non-normative sex life in her work, Chute argues that she "narrates a sexual life that includes but is not limited to or determined by an 'objectification' and 'subordination' that she 1. finds pleasurable and 2. chooses herself how to represent" (*Graphic Women* 54).

While Kominsky-Crumb's depiction of sexuality may seem to be linked to Gloeckner's, Kominsky-Crumb specifically resists objectification by representing herself as non-idealized. In part, this is through the style of her work, which Chute describes as employing "a thin, wavering line, and her panels, while much of the drawing lacks realistic detail, are regularly crammed and crowded" (*Graphic Women* 31). With this lack of artistic focus, it is unsurprising that Kominsky-Crumb's depictions of herself can often be described as aesthetically unappealing. In this case, Kominsky-Crumb's imagery does not create a docile body. In fact, her images can be argued to do just the opposite. As we see in this example, female cartoonists' agency complicates their roles as sexualized

objects by challenging discourses that link female sexuality to pornography, and then link pornography to victimization.

However, Kominsky-Crumb goes further than appearances to destabilize cultural expectations. Kominsky-Crumb's visual representations of herself suggest that she does not *perform* femininity within culturally inscribed norms. Chute points out that she "demonstrates her unflinching focus to the messiness of bodies," using her body as the primary example (*Graphic Women* 38). Kominsky-Crumb draws representations of herself, among other things, sitting on a toilet and popping a zit (*Graphic Women* 38, 47). While feminine individuals may do these things, they are culturally expected to do so privately. Butler's theory then helps us understand that when Kominsky-Crumb uses her visual representation of herself to flaunt these behaviors, she challenges cultural expectations through performativity, and this lens furthers our understanding of how readers can and should evaluate the subversive nature of comics images.

With this understanding of gender as performance, female imagery becomes a source of messages about how to craft one's body into the ideal female specimen, both under the male gaze and within the Western construction of femininity. However, it can also be a site in which women can see depictions that encourage resistance to cultural norms. To understand then how performativity functions within comics, we must turn to an examination of how comics audiences read and react to comics.

Audience Reception of Comics: *Archie* as Example

In regard to comics as a site of female imagery, there is precedent that establishes comics as a resource for learning how to perform gender and sexuality. Art historian

Sheri Klein has brought attention to the fact that comics are one of the locations where individuals within our culture get ideas about the ideal female gender. When looking at historical examples, Klein says, "the images of women…tell us what femininity and sexuality were supposed to be in the time and place that they were created" (62). However, this same concept can be applied to modern examples. In an article called "Breaking the Mold with Humor: Images of Women in the Visual Media," Klein turns her focus from more traditional art such as paintings, to a more recently examined form of imagery: comics. She says, "mainstream comics…contribute to the construction of superficial images of women in the media" (Klein 63). Note that Klein identifies the information that comics provide about women as superficial, but for Butler, all gender is superficial.

Here we face competing definitions of superficiality. While both involve aspects of surface-level identities, Klein seems to believe that "woman" is still an inherent category that should include more than the stereotypical depictions of that category that comics often provide. However, Butler's work suggests that those stereotypical depictions are exactly what make gender possible. Individuals who know female stereotypes can recreate those stereotypes, and thus constitute their own gender. If we consider comics as a place to learn what femininity and sexuality are supposed to be, comics are then a location to examine how culture disperses information to individuals about cultural gender norms, potentially even as stereotypes, and how those norms should be performed.

Education professors Bonny Norton and Lyndsay Moffatt have done an enlightening study on the way adolescent boys and girls form cultural ideas about what

gender should be, based on their reading of the *Archie* comic series. I must take a moment to acknowledge that I will focus on this study as a key example in this chapter, primarily because this is an unusual study in the field of comics. It is rare for theorists to consider the effects comics have on their audience, even rarer for those theorists to consider those effects in terms of gender as Norton and Moffatt do here. While I hope there will be more examples in the future, for now this study must serve as disproportionately useful for how we understand the potential for comics to affect their readers.

For those unfamiliar with the *Archie* comic series, a little background information will be useful. Set in a fictional high school where the characters have remained for decades, the main plotline of any *Archie* or *Betty and Veronica* comic book is always the problematic love triangle between the three main characters: Betty, Veronica, and Archie, who claims both Betty and Veronica as his girlfriends.  The inherent love triangle leads to constant disputes between Betty and Veronica over trying to get Archie's attention.  There are no continuous storylines.  Instead the comic compiles multiple plots that revolve around the disputes between Betty and Veronica over Archie.

Moffatt and Norton's study of *Archie* comics and their effect on readers suggests that Betty, Veronica, and their relationship to Archie already help enforce and construct Western gender ideals.  In their study, Moffatt and Norton had students read a specific story from an Archie comic.  In the story, Betty travels through several well-known fairytales and provides modern solutions for their problems. For example, she hands Miss Muffett a can of bug spray to deal with the spider that scares her.  At the end, Betty takes on the role of Little Red Riding Hood. When the Woodsman (in this case, Archie, of

course) approaches Grandma's cottage to save Betty from the Big Bad Wolf, it turns out that Betty has already saved herself, "having flipped the wolf out of bed, and proceeding to trounce him" (Moffatt and Norton 109). Betty rejects Archie's offers of assistance, pointing out that she has clearly handled the situation. However, Veronica then shows up, wearing a sexy version of the Little Red Riding Hood costume, and asks Archie to save her from the scary wolves prowling the woods. Archie and Veronica then leave arm in arm and leave Betty by herself (Moffatt and Norton 109).

In light of Bartky's formulations for disciplining images, the final images in the story are certainly oppressive. In the final pages, Veronica clearly models heterosexual appeal and idealized appearance, wearing clothing that heightens her sexuality. Her language also heightens her sexuality and willingness to appeal to a man. When asking Archie for his help, the Moffatt and Norton note that "a musical note in Veronica's speech bubble implies that Veronica has delivered her entreaty to Archie in a sing-song voice" conveying a sense that "Veronica is not really scared, but that she has used her request as a ploy to gain Archie's attentions" (110). In this series of panels, the verbal language reinforces the visual language to reveal Veronica's adherence to gender expectations.

Since Bartky formulates her argument through a concept of discipline, there must also be a punishment for failure to follow disciplinary procedures. She says that a woman who fails to fashion her body to cultural expectations "faces a very severe sanction indeed in a world dominated by men: the refusal of male patronage. For the heterosexual woman, this may mean the loss of a badly needed intimacy" (76). This exact sanction is modeled at the end of the fairytale, when Veronica is chosen by Archie for her

heightened sexuality, and Betty, who has chosen not to be overtly sexual in her appearance, is left alone.

Moffatt's and Norton's conclusions indicated that the participants, who were fifty-five students of mixed genders in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades, developed clear beliefs in terms of the construction of gender and sexuality when reading the comic. These conclusions match neatly with Butler's theories that gender distinction requires a compulsive heterosexuality when they discuss their findings on the construction of sexuality: "In every instance, they [the study participants] depicted sexuality as de facto heterosexual" (115). As one of the participants named Dave succinctly stated, "Archie comics tell you that girls go out with boys and boys go out with girls" (qtd. in Moffatt and Norton 118). Much like Butler predicted, the children who come into contact with universal forms of gender inherently link those genders to compulsory heterosexuality.

It would be dangerous and unintelligent to broadly apply Moffatt and Norton's findings to every comics reader. The two are working, after all, with a very limited sample of participants that cannot possibly be said to stand in for every reader of comics in the Archie universe, let alone all readers of all different comics. However, Moffatt's and Norton's findings successfully argue for the *possibility* that comics have real-world effects, a possibility that should not be ignored. In this case, the possibility suggested by their study is that readers who exist in a culture where binary genders are universalized will pick up on those messages from artifacts of that culture and repeat them back as their own ideas when asked. However, while Moffatt and Norton's study shows that comics may at times be oppressive, work like Kominsky-Crumb's, and as we will later see,

Bechdel's, argue that there are many reasons not to dismiss comics overall as completely reinforcing cultural norms.

Audience Reception of Comics: Who is Reading and Why Is It Important?

As I noted before, audience studies are underdeveloped in comics studies, yet crucial to understanding how performativity works in comics and how comics function as a field. Comics are primarily understood as a medium designed for male readership. For example Douglas Wolk claims that women who buy and read comics are seen by their male comics fan counterparts as performing their gender incorrectly. Wolk refers to the "annoyingly male world" of comics, and argues that because comics has an aura of "males only," it continues to exclude women from that world. While he suggests that this male-only pattern is changing, a "woman in a comics store is an anomaly…either she's performing womanhood wrong, or she's performing comics reading wrong" (Wolk 70).

However, there are more hopeful studies that suggest that the comics readership is expanding. For example, in *Wilson Quarterly*, Ken Chen observes

> the audience for comics has consisted primarily of college-to-middle-aged males interested in tales about grown men punching each other. But that readership is broadening to include women, children, and other Johnny-come-lately fans, thanks to a wave of movie adaptations (*Sin City, Ghost World*) and award-winning books (*Persepolis, Fun Home*). (98)

Here is it particularly important to see that Chen cites *Fun Home* as transgressing audience boundaries. In fact, the book was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Memoir, was listed on multiple bestseller lists, including the *New York Times'*, and was named *Time* magazine's #1 Book of the Year in 2006. Therefore, we can see that *Fun Home* in particular is expanding its audience to include both male and female

readers, and it is important to consider how a book that so deliberately works to subvert gender expectations affects its readers.

It is interesting to use Chute's work in a discussion of audience response here. Chute repeatedly takes care to highlight the feminist project of comics through their relationship to the female bodies of their creators. In speaking of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, a graphic novel often credited as being among the first significant comics autobiographies, Chute claims the text "delves into and forcefully pictures non-normative sexuality, and, for this reason, we may see how autobiographical comics at its outset lends itself to feminist concerns about embodiment and representation" (19). In fact, Chute refers to bodies and embodiment on a regular basis. She praises Kominsky-Crumb's work for its ability to challenge "expectations for representations of women's bodies" (44). She even describes comics themselves as "a *procedure of what I am calling embodiment*" (Chute 193). Bodies and embodiment weave their way throughout Chute's entire text. Yet, she explores embodiment almost entirely as it relates to the creators of the comics, not as it relates to the readers of the comics.

I find this lack of connection to the audience strange in light of the important connection between comics creators and comics readers. Chute herself points out that "comics as a form requires a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation" ("Comics as Literature?" 460). She is not the only author to note the connection. Eisner describes a complicated relationship between comics creator and comics reader. He also suggests that comics cannot work as a medium without cooperation between reader and author: "In all forms of comics the sequential artist relies upon the tacit cooperation of the reader….Indeed, it is this very voluntary cooperation, so

unique to comics, that underlies the contract between artist and audience" (41). In this formulation, comics creators have a responsibility to their unknown readers to create a comic that those readers can interpret. However, the success of the comic still requires the active participation of the reader.

McCloud further explains the relationship between reader and comic (69). He assigns a level of agency to the audience, stating that the reader is an "accomplice" who participates in making meaning with the creator (68). Returning to his idea of closure, McCloud argues that "closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary" (68). He also states that "if readers are particularly aware of the art in a given story----then closure is probably not happening without some effort" (91). In other words, the more complicated the artwork, such as the realistic depictions of photographs in Bechdel's work, the more work a reader has to put into understanding the events of the comic. This description highlights the fact that reading comics is in fact work. Readers are not passive recipients of information in the comics world; instead, they are active participants in making meaning, and meaning cannot happen without their active involvement.

Chute then seems remiss in not addressing the effect of her interpretations of female representation on the readers of these comics. If the female authors she studies successfully face "the risk of representation," that suggests that their accomplishment would affect readers who have read and will read the works of those female authors. Norton and Moffatt's study suggests that the messages about gender and sexuality in comics have a strong effect on comics audiences. However, their study also clearly

shows that those effects do not always challenge gender normativity in the way that feminists or gender theorists might hope they do.

On the other hand, Norton and Moffatt's study does not fully account for the role of the reader as an active participant in comics meaning-making. The participants in their study seem to passively report on the messages given in the *Archie* comic rather than actively constructing meaning. Their study could easily be linked to Angela E. Hubler's critique of assumptions about adolescent readers. Hubler claims that sex-role theorists "assume that encoded textual messages are straightforwardly decoded by essentially passive, naïve readers." (89). In response to that assumption, she claims, "this reductive model of the process of reading and interpretation fails to recognize agency on the part of the readers" (89). Hubler's critiques focus on the relationship between sex-role theory and prose fiction. Consider then how much more powerful her critique becomes in relationship to comics, where reader agency is crucial to the success of the medium. Norton and Moffatt's findings, then, can potentially be understood as a willful choice on the part of the comics readership to identify with the characters found in comics. I will explore this further in my next chapter.

Subversive Comics Format

If we accept that because of the active role of the comics reader, a comics audience is just as likely to find ways to criticize "cultural fictions" as they are to accept them, we can return to Butler to better understand the subversive potential in comics. Butler ends *Gender Trouble* with the possibility for subverting gender expectations. She suggests that

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity….the abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground.'" (179).

Again, Butler is not entirely clear about where we can identify these stylized repetitions. Instead she asks the reader to consider

> What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire. (177)

Versaci's focus on comics as a self-consciously constructed medium suggests that comics are the perfect medium to challenge the normalization of representations. He states, "one can never completely escape into a comic book because its form…reminds us at every turn (or panel) that what we are experiencing is a representation. While comics are very adept at engaging us with their creator's representations of the world, they never allow us to escape completely" (Versaci 12). He then argues that "those representations can be surprising and subversive" (12). Thus, when combined with comics theory, representations of female bodies become heightened as representations. If we turn to *Fun Home* again for examples, we can see how these layers of constructions and representations challenge normativity. In one scene, Bechdel includes an image of her first-grade photo. So in this instance, the reader sees a drawn representation of a photo that visually represents an individual whose attire indicates she is representing and performing aspects of a culturally constructed gender ideal (Bechdel 34). When read critically, this image seriously complicates gender as natural. I will unpack other, more substantive examples of images from *Fun Home* that self-consciously destabilize cultural constructions in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

Furthermore, Butler suggests that in order for something to challenge the normalization of gender, it would need to have an element that reveals the temporality of those representations. Remember from the previous chapter that comics use a unique narrative construction in which panels are arranged sequentially to form a narrative that links individual points in time with a continuous story arc. As Versaci says, "A comic in addition to unfolding temporally, also exists 'all at once' and this existence is a feature unique to this medium" (16). So comics, unlike other mediums of storytelling, show both static pieces of time and the narrative movement of time.

This unique feature of comics means that readers can immediately view the individual moments of time as well as how they fit into an overall narrative. In effect, comic book pages create a miniature visual genealogy of events. In the next chapter, we will see this demonstrated in the way Bechdel's relationships and her portrayal of gendered behavior are not normalized. Each of the individual panels representing an aspect of Bechdel's identity or relationship to others could be taken as a normal or normative state of being, but the comics medium requires that panels be understood not only individually but also in relation to all other panels. Bechdel's non-chronological structure makes it even easier to see how individual points in time seem to stand alone, but are actually shaped by a continuation of previous moments. Therefore, comics can challenge gender normativity through the content of the images and through the format of the medium itself.

Methodology Review

As we have seen in this chapter, representations of female bodies have been underexplored in comics studies. Although comics scholarship is beginning to fill in this notable gap, we must still work to find ways to examine and understand representations of female bodies in comics scholarship. Therefore, I have used this chapter to establish a methodology coming from two very different traditions of feminist scholarship: radical feminism and postmodern feminism. Although these two branches of feminist scholarship are very different in how they view the female body, they are both excellent lenses through which to understand that female bodies and how they are represented do matter. They also give us a methodology to explore representations of female bodies within Western cultural expectations, locating the places where these representations serve to further or serve to subvert those expectations.

Through the use of gaze theory and Foucauldian feminism, we can understand how the primacy of the male gaze, which as we have seen is still at work in the popular reception of comics, can objectify and oppress a female body as an object. We can further understand this issue of objectification to link directly to scholarly debates about pornography, and any responsible study of the representations of nude female bodies and female sexuality must consider these debates in considering how imagery of female bodies can be co-opted into an oppressive, pornographic lens. However, we must also use these radical feminist lenses to consider spaces where female cartoonists use images of female bodies to resist the cultural expectations that they will be objects rather than subjects.

Finally, by folding in performativity theory, we can add a lens that specifically helps us understand how queer identities that don't fit into the gender binaries that often gird radical feminist scholarship, and that Bechdel's work resists, can challenge and subvert cultural expectations for gender and sexuality. Through this framework, we can also begin to understand how comics texts can affect their readers, and how that effect can in itself be subversive. We also begin to see how comics format can complement or complicate our readings of female body representations.  In the next chapter, I will use this feminist methodology to explore some key representations of Bechdel's autobiographical representations and examine how comics theory can further bring attention to the way those representations are subversive.

Chapter Three: Gender in Fun Home: Sexuality and Performativity as Sites of Cultural

Resistance


*Fun Home* shines in its capacity to challenge expectations.  Much like *Maus*, *Fun Home* is a graphic narrative that takes non-comics readers by surprise with its poignancy and depth.  Tellingly, in her review of the narrative for *USA Today*, Deirdre Donahue claims "Perhaps comic book devotees are right. The great writing of the 21st century might very well be found in graphic novels and non-fiction….Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* is an astonishing advertisement for this emerging literary form."  The book has challenged boundaries for what comics are expected to do, and in this sense, it is unsurprising that the book would internally provide challenges to what gender and sexuality can, and should, be.  Bechdel and her father's exploration of sexual and gender identity play important roles in this narrative, and those explorations challenge cultural norms through both format and content. Utilizing the methodology from the previous chapter, we can see how Bechdel's text functions within discourses of Foucauldian feminism, pornography, and performativity to subvert Western expectations for gender and sexuality.


Queer Identities

While *Fun Home* is in some ways a "coming out" story, since much of the narrative circulates around the event of Alison realizing she is a lesbian and her

subsequent coming out to her parents, the genre is complicated by her mother's revelation that Bruce Bechdel, Alison's father has had relationships with men. Bechdel originally comes out to her parents in a letter. The narrator says, "The news was not received as well as I had hoped. There was an exchange of difficult letters with my mother./Then a phone call in which she dealt a staggering blow" (58). In a jagged conversational bubble, depicting the electronic quality of a voice coming through a telephone, Bechdel's mother says, "Your father has had affairs with other men" (Bechdel 58). As Alison reacts with shock, the narrator calmly reflects, "I'd been upstaged, demoted from protagonist in my own drama to comic relief in my parents' tragedy./I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit" (58-59).

It becomes clear throughout the narrative that Bechdel's sexual discovery is always linked to the revelation about her father, Bruce. In part, this is explicitly stated by the narrator. As Alison's father died only four months later, hit by a semi-truck, she has a hard time not seeing a "cause-and-effect" relationship between her revelation and her father's death. The narrator wonders "If I had not felt compelled to share my little sexual discovery, perhaps the semi would have passed without incident four months later" (Bechdel 59). This conversation with her mother also clearly develops an important identity dynamic for Alison in the book: "her father is her collaborator *and* her biggest inhibitor" (Chute *Graphic Women* 193). Alison's quest for self that is simultaneously pushed and reined in by her father will become a focus for Alison's exploration of gender and sexual identity.

Resisting Docility: *Fun Home* through Foucauldian Feminism

In *Fun Home*, psychological oppression as described in Bartky's framework is represented primarily through the representation of Alison's father. Keep in mind that Bartky describes oppression through a psychological lens, and oppression is both external and internal. She says, "To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise harsh dominion over their own self-esteem" (22). This duality of oppression plays out in interesting ways in *Fun Home*. If we consider oppression as manifested by docile bodies, then there are many times in the text where Alison seems to resist oppression.

Sometimes we see this resistance manifested in subtle visual cues. Returning to the conversation on the phone between Alison and her mother in which Helen outs Bruce, we see the scene is *implicitly* a key scene in the story. Chute points out that Bechdel recursively returns several times in the narrative to this phone conversation, particularly a point where Bechdel's mother reveals that Bruce had an affair with Bechdel's childhood babysitter, Roy (Chute *Graphic Women* 183). The recurring image shows Alison laying on her kitchen floor, phone pressed against her ear with one hand, the other hand cradled defensively between her thighs. Alison herself lies curled in the fetal position, and the image is drawn from above. In the first iteration of the scene, Bechdel is surrounded by a masculine plaid shirt, a sketchpad, and *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*—one of the lesbian texts that Bechdel reads to further understand and solidify her queer identity (Bechdel 59).

The scene has clear importance to Bechdel, as it is featured on multiple pages, although each time the image is slightly altered with a different panel size and vantage point revealing more or less of Alison's surroundings (Bechdel 59, 79, 211). However, it also seems to be a troublingly vulnerable moment for Alison, and her surroundings provide a certain protection in her own newly established identity even as the stability of her reality is challenged by her mother's revelation about Bruce. Thus Bechdel's physical representation of herself uses visual rhetoric to resist the kind of dominion over her self-esteem that Bartky argues is key in psychological oppression. By surrounding a depiction of her vulnerability with visual manifestations of her identity that exist separately from her father, such as the sketchpad, and from cultural expectations of femininity, such as the masculine shirt, Bechdel suggests that her identity is free from psychological oppression. She is vulnerable in these images, but not dominated.

This resistance to oppression is more explicit in several scenes between Alison and Bruce. Alison's and Bruce's sexual identities are often explored in relation to each other, or, as the narrator puts it, as "inversions of one another" (98). Life narrative scholar Julia Watson points out that "inversions" here is a term both to reference "the derogatory psychoanalytic term of the early century [for homosexuality] that Proust used, but also as inverted versions of each other in the family" (39). She argues that the narrator "presents Alison's rejection of femininity as a compensation for her father's lack of manliness, and his insistence on her dressing and acting 'feminine' as a projection of his own desire to perform femininity" (Watson 39). This dynamic is presented several times throughout the text and functions to challenge gender through content in the narrative.

Returning to the Foucauldian feminist framework provided by Bartky, recall that Bartky suggests gender is policed externally, and then that external policing is internalized.  In *Fun Home*, we see that external policing of gender in Bruce's relationship to a young Alison. The narrative shows several scenes in which Bruce tries to police Alison's appearance to enforce gender expectations.  In a scene where Bruce and Alison are both dressing up to prepare for an unspecified event, Bruce critiques Alison's dress, saying, "You can't go out to dinner like that. You look like a missionary" (Bechdel 98). He also insists that she wear pearls. When she refuses, Bruce yells, "What're you afraid of? Being beautiful? **Put it on**, goddamn it!" Alison responds by bursting into tears, and crying, "Leave me **alone!**" (Bechdel 99). Here, the implication is not only that Alison should want to look beautiful, but sexy as well, not like "a missionary."  Although Watson and the narrator suggest that the impetus is for his own benefit, Bruce tries to enforce an objectified appearance in his daughter.  Alison resists, both in this scene and others. Thus, Alison does not internalize the external gender policing in this scene, and gender normalization is resisted. Alison also resists becoming a docile body, and in this case the punishment in place is her father's censure.

In addition, Bechdel's use of visual rhetoric in her depiction of Bruce in this scene challenges the reader's ability to fully accept Bruce's censure as appropriate. In the panel in which Bruce swears at Alison, his features are distorted in anger. Even though Bruce is usually depicted as frowning, in this scene his brow is furrowed and his face is shaded to denote discoloration that is not usually present in his features.  His anger is exaggerated to such a degree that he appears monstrous.  Thus, his censure is monstrous by extension, and the reader is encouraged to identify with a more sympathetic depiction of Bechdel,

who even as she resists Bruce's censure is shown in tears, the only time in the text in which she shows such an emotional response. Thus Bruce is presented as overbearing, and his discipline of Alison's resistance to expressions of femininity, even though culturally appropriate, are challenged as valid by Bechdel's visual rhetoric.

In earlier scenes, Bruce's policing of Alison's gender is less fraught with emotion, but no less frustrating to Alison. Early in the book, the narrator defines herself and her father through a series of opposites: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian./Modern to his Victorian./Butch to his Nelly./Utilitarian to his aesthete" (Bechdel 15). In the image accompanying "Butch to his Nelly," a young Alison stands in front of her father wearing a striped long-sleeve shirt covered by a jumper dress. She argues, "Who **cares** if the necklines don't match?" (Bechdel 15). He responds by pointing to an unspecified location in the background with the stern command, "Yellow turtleneck. **Now.**" (Bechdel 15). In this scene, Bruce tries to discipline Alison's body into a femininely ornamented surface (Bartky 65). Alison resists feminine dress, but her father enforces it. However, this panel is not accompanied by the results of Bruce's censure. In the breakdown of this narrative arc, only the moment of oppression is represented, and without any accompanying discipline or submission to the oppression, Bechdel leaves room for resistance. Although Bruce's parental and masculine authority may have prevailed, there is the possibility that Alison continued to refuse to change. In addition, the panel is split in half: on the left side, the reader sees Bruce as the administrator of oppression, and on the right side Alison resists. They are visually depicted as equals, Bruce's apparent authority challenged by the fact that he crouches as Alison stands, and their representations take up a similar amount of space. Thus, Alison again resists oppression.

Complicating Gaze in *Fun Home*: Layers of Desire

Gaze is also important to understanding how Bechdel challenges expectations for femininity and sexuality. Bechdel creates an awareness of gaze through her use of page layout. The only two-page layout in the entire book is the centerfold image of Roy the babysitter, first described in chapter one. This unique layout serves to show Alison's sense of confusion in her various reactions to discovering the photograph. Without any discernible background, the pages mirror Alison's own disorientation at finding the photo. However, the use of the familiar centerfold format gives the reader a frame of reference through which to understand the image.

The centerfold format normalizes the picture as a site of sexual and aesthetic interest, but whereas the traditional Western centerfold is of a female image presented for a male gaze, this centerfold is filtered through a series of non-normative gazes. Originally, the photography was taken to show a male object under a queer male gaze. However, in this re-presentation by Bechdel, the image of a male object is being re-viewed by a queer female gaze. Furthermore, as Watson points out, "it reminds us of our complicity as viewers in this intimate glimpse, as our hand holding the book overlaps [Alison's]" (41). Since this graphic narrative received such a popular reception, we can safely assume that readers used a variety of personal filters of gender and sexual desire through which to view this image. Thus, the image resists being adopted into cultural expectations for sexual objectification because the object is not the expected female object, nor is the gaze a heterosexual male gaze, at least not exclusively. In fact, the gaze

is complicated each time a different reader views the image, and Bechdel deliberately reminds us of that fact.

In this image of the Roy centerfold, Bechdel also uses the structural components of comics to resist oppression and objectification. She does away with the gutter altogether, drawing her own text boxes of narration around the picture, silencing the reader's interpretation in favor of hers. The narrator describes the picture's aesthetic beauty as "an ethereal, painterly quality" and says, "In fact, the picture is beautiful." Yet, she also wonders, "But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged?" (100). Through her use of visual-verbal rhetoric, readers are not only implicated in Bechdel's voyeurism, they are arrested by her interpretation of the image rather than allowed the space to make their own.

Like Bechdel, then, we see this image as beautiful, even as it is troubling, but we are not allowed to fully reject the image or the uncomfortable sexual objectification the image presents. Thus, the reader cannot normalize the narrative into their own cognitive framework, either fully condemning or enjoying the image. Bechdel here enforces an uncomfortable validation of non-normative sexuality and gender through her formatting choices, ensuring that readers will see the ways she challenges Western constructions of gender and sexuality. However, it is important to note that in rejecting the condemnation of her father in this scene, neither Bechdel nor the reader is allowed to feel fully comfortable with this expression of her father's sexuality, even as she highlights the multiplicity of desires at work. This will be further explored in the next chapter.

*Fun Home*'s Queer Sexuality within Feminist Pornography Debates

Even though Bechdel resists psychological oppression through the Foucauldian feminism framework, Bechdel at times wavers between reifying cultural constructions and challenging them when we begin to examine *Fun Home*'s place within feminist discourses of pornography. It is especially necessary to examine *Fun Home* through the lens of pornography, because Bechdel's imagery depicts explicit queer sex and sexuality. At times, this has caused individuals to perceive it as pornography, such as when Marshall, Missouri's public library received a request to remove *Fun Home* from the shelves since the patron saw it as "inappropriate." When *Fun Home* was reshelved in 2007, it was moved from teen fiction to adult fiction (Chute *Graphic Women* 257 n43). This reshelving indicates that some of the resistance to the sexual imagery relates to the misperception that comics are a juvenile medium, but it also indicates that the censorship of *Fun Home* as pornographic is very real for this text.  Therefore, we must examine how *Fun Home* functions within feminist pornography debates.

At times, these sexual images easily resist Dworkin and MacKinnon's definition of pornography, and by extension, Bartky's definition of objectification, by associating the sexuality with people, rather than simply body parts. Recall that both Bartky and Dworkin and MacKinnon take issue with images that reduce women to body parts rather than entire bodies with attached and intrinsic desires that function separately from those desires the male gaze would attach to them.  However, some of the individual images do not seem to avoid objectification/pornography, such as two panels that show Alison performing oral sex (Bechdel 214). In the two images, Alison is given personality and

agency, but the other woman in the image is only shown from right above the navel to mid-thigh.  Her body appears almost as a prop for Alison's sexual discoveries.

However, these two images also exist within a narrative that gives the other woman agency. For example, her name is Joan and in the first image of their lovemaking scene, Joan is shown more fully, and is positioned in her own room that has a "LESBIAN TERRORIST" t-shirt hanging on the wall, along with a sign that says, "KEEP YOUR GOD OFF MY BODY" (Bechdel 214). A tag between the images labels the two items as "(From a recent one-woman protest against some visiting Christians)" (Bechdel 214).  It is clear within this sequence that Joan is more than just a body.  However, since, as Versaci points out, comics both unfold in a narrative and exist as individual images "all at once," this broader narrative gives Joan an agency that sits uneasily in relation to the two images at the bottom of the page (Versaci 16; Bechdel 214).

On the other hand, we must remember that queer sexuality is difficult to place in discussions of objectivity that exist within a heterosexual matrix. Lesbian feminist Biddy Martin presents a view of lesbian sexuality within feminist theory that validates the images of sexuality in Bechdel's work.  In speaking about a spectator's negative response to a homosexual presence in a St. Patrick's Day Parade, Martin argues that gay and lesbian individuals are seen as

> acceptable as long as we don't demand a visible place among normal folk….We are not always confronted with direct, coercive efforts to control what we do in bed, but we are constantly threatened with erasure from discursive fields where the naturalization of sexual and gender norms works to obliterate pluralities." (95)

She then argues against feminism that "continue[s] to make insidious arguments about women's sexuality that close off, rather than open up, curiosity about our desires, fantasies, practices and pleasures" (95). Martin here speaks of curiosity about queer

sexuality in straight individuals.  Rather than fetishizing queer sexuality, or essentializing it as an unnatural behavior, queer theory seeks to open up a plurality of queerness and queer sexuality, encouraging curiosity about that plurality in straight audiences.

Bechdel's scenes of sexuality openly depict lesbian sexuality, refusing to cover up her sex life that exists outside normative expectations of sexuality.  Much like Martin argues for, her images open up curiosity about lesbian desires, and also depict how rewarding Bechdel's own curiosity has been for her. This expression aligns with Chute's arguments about the value of depictions of non-normative sexuality as real, lived experience in the work of Kominsky-Crumb. Specifically in relation to Bechdel's series *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home*, Chute argues,

> "One may understand both works as feminist not only in how they claim a space for openly sexual female bodies—especially queer bodies that have been marginalized and pathologized—but also specifically in how they explore subject constitution in mutually inflected private and public spheres" (*Graphic Women* 177).

As with Kominsky-Crumb's work, Bechdel's representations of sex cannot easily be incorporated into discourses of oppressive pornography, since her sexual experiences deliberately challenge cultural expectations of femininity and heterosexuality.

Rather than hiding her lesbian sex life, Bechdel places it on full display, showing it as a source of comfort as she faces her family's disintegration shortly before her father's suicide (Bechdel 215, 224). This depiction of sex as comfort rather than pornographic desire resists expectations of sexuality as pornographic and exclusively heterosexual. Furthering the connection between sexuality as resistance in her work and Kominsky-Crumb's, Bechdel herself notes the influence that Kominsky-Crumb has had on her drive to "be as honest as [she] can, especially about sexual stuff" (qtd. in Chute, "An Interview" 1012). Her images of fulfillment in queer sexuality exist as a stark, visual

challenge to her parent's culturally conditioned responses that suggest her lesbian identity is merely an "experiment" or "choice" (Bechdel 77). Also, the support system depicted in her sexual relationship with Joan is complemented by Joan's support after her father's death when she accompanies Alison to Bruce's funeral. Therefore, her relationship to Joan includes sex but is not limited to sex. In addition, the depictions of sex are not limited to a pornographic representation of objectified bodies, but rather a relational expression of support and love between two female subjects.

Bechdel's depiction of sexuality is also subversive because the sexual aspect of her relationship with Joan is presented as an important aspect of their relationship that must be pictured alongside the other elements in order for the relationship to be fully revealed. In Chute's discussion of Gloeckner's sexual imagery, she argues that the gendered binary between public and private is troubled by the "role of the visual in memoir" (*Graphic Women* 78). This is a prime example of how Bechdel refuses to suppress the private moments of her relationship with Joan, using the visual aspect of her graphic memoir to do so. Bechdel's depiction of the layers in their relationship challenges Bartky's version of public sanction for refusal to submit to Western body discipline. Rather than a loss of queer intimacy, this relationship presents homosexual intimacy as a *gain*, one that is fulfilling on both a sexual and friendship level.

However, this expression of blissful sexuality at times feels forced. There is a quality of romantic perfection in Alison's depicted relationship with Joan that is absent in the rest of Bechdel's book. In fact, it is this exact kind of romantic perfectionism that Bechdel fights in representing her relationship with her father. In her depiction of her relationship with Joan, Bechdel portrays only the positive, ignoring any potential

struggles or difficulties. In a book so rife with conflict, the omission is odd and troubling. Perhaps she presents a perfect version of her first relationship to highlight the salvation she found in her burgeoning lesbian identity during the time when her parents' marriage was falling apart and her father eventually committed suicide. However, this perfected version of their relationship loses some of the poignancy found in the loss and absence in the rest of the book.

Joan's body is the only body we see Alison really come into contact with in the narrative. In fact, the narrator highlights this lack of physical affection in her family: "We were not a physically expressive family to say the least" (19). She then recounts the one time that she tries to show her father physical affection, and it turns into an awkward kiss on his hand that causes her to run "from the room in embarrassment" (Bechdel 19). Chute describes this absence of physical touch as "gapingness." In one scene in the narrative, Bruce calls Alison in to help briefly with preparing a body for a funeral. In the scene, Alison enters as a shadowy presence at the far right of the top panel. Her father stands at the center, his face obscured by a surgical mask and partially cut from the panel. The primary focus of the image is a cadaver. It is shown naked and a large triangular section of its abdomen is missing, showing a glimpse of ribs and backbone within (Bechdel 44).

About this image, Chute says, "The absence at the center of the body—its gapingness—is what shocks. And this bodily gap is underscored by, and itself amplifies, the conspicuous gap between father and daughter appearing exactly over (and, in effect, doubling) this space of fleshly absence" (198). Her physical relationship with Joan stands in direct contrast to the lack of physical affection in her family. This untroubled

relationship then seems to work only to highlight the failings in her relationship with her family, particularly her father, rather than as a realistic portrayal of their relationship. Therefore, in some ways Alison's sexual relationship seems to exist outside a pornography discourse entirely, instead better explored through a fiction versus truth debate common to texts viewed through an autobiographical lens.

However, if we do seek to understand how these idealized images of sexuality challenge feminist claims that images of sexuality are pornographic and therefore oppressive, an understanding of Bechdel's use of format as visual-verbal rhetoric is essential. Bechdel's most effective use of format as rhetoric is pervasive throughout the book in that Bechdel co-opts the gutter. While the gutter is usually white space, the non-narrative between the narrative panels, most of this book's narration occurs *in* the gutter. Therefore, Bechdel takes the space traditionally left for reader interpretation and co-opts that space to hold the reader in her interpretation of the story's visual depictions. In speaking of closure in comics, multimodal linguist Mario Saraceni claims that texts are held together by "relatedness." In order for closure to work, readers must ask themselves, "How does this passage relate to the text?" (Saraceni 169). Saraceni posits, "In order to find an answer to this question he or she will have to look both in the text and in their mind" (169). Therefore, readers must interpret the narrative through the narrative on the page, but also through the filter of their own experience, much as Eisner argues.

Saraceni further claims, "relatedness is not exclusively a property of the text, but also something that the reader *assumes* to be there," and "in the absence of textual clues, the relatedness between text units relies entirely on the reader's input" (Saraceni 175). This description may more clearly explain how readers in Moffatt and Norton's study

found normative heterosexuality without any clear clues as to why: they *assumed* it was there, so it was there. However, Bechdel does not leave room for her readers to make this kind of assumption. While the vertical gutter in this narrative is still comprised of the traditional white space, the horizontal gutter is almost always co-opted by the narrator's text.

In some cases, this does away with text-free gutters altogether, like in the page showing Alison and Bruce together in his study (Bechdel 86). In other cases, where vertical gutters are present, Bechdel more subtly co-opts the reader's interpretations. If we return to the images of Joan and Alison's first sexual experience together, not only is the horizontal gutter controlled by narration, the move from the lefthand bottom image to the righthand bottom image is also controlled by narration (Bechdel 214). The vertical gutter is blank, but the second image has more text, and thus the vertical gutter, and more importantly, the reader's input, is disrupted by Bechdel's narration. This steers the reader toward Bechdel's interpretation of the images rather than leaving space for the reader to include their own. Therefore, the images of sexuality cannot be divorced from the story, and thus the subjectivity of the characters. So even if we view this scene as potentially pornographic, the narrator challenges our ability to read the scene as pornography.

Performativity as Resistance

Bechdel highlights performativity in her narrative, and the importance of performativity as a site of resistance weaves its way throughout her whole book. For example, the image where Alison resists Bruce's command to go change clothes is placed within the chapter titled "Old Father, Old Artificer," which introduces Bruce in relation

to "his monomaniacal restoration of our old house" (Bechdel 4).  Here Bruce is described

as a master of appearances: "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make

things appear to be what they were not./That is to say, impeccable" (Bechdel 16). Within

this environment, Alison's appearance becomes one of the tools Bruce uses to construct a

perfect reality. Her gender performance is as carefully crafted by him as the "perfect"

home they live in, much like Bruce's identity as "an ideal husband and father" is crafted

(Bechdel 14, 17).

Here Bruce's gender identity as perfect husband and father is linked to the

success, in part, of his children's perfectly performed identities. As the narrator says,

"When things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family./Or at

least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit" (Bechdel 13).  We can also see here

how performativity ties into Bartky's theories of domination. She says, "we are born

male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement"

(Bartky 65). Thus, Bruce enforces Western gender expectations on Alison in an effort to

further contribute to his own identity construction. Her feminine gender performance is

one more artifice he constructs to be perceived as ideally masculine.

Bechdel herself exposes her father's perfection as a fiction. The narrator says that

the house's decorations "were embellishments in the worst sense./They were lies" (16).

She also asks, "Would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" (17)

While the question goes unanswered in the text, the suggested response is that no, of

course he would not.  By linking her gender performance to the overall performativity in

her family, and then exposing her family's imperfections, Bechdel also exposes her

feminine gender performance as false.

Butler argues that performative acts "produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body" (173). She claims that "such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler 173). Therefore, Bechdel is only as feminine as she appears to be, wearing the appropriate attire that in later years presents her as an object of beauty and sexual desire. Furthermore, in *Fun Home*, Bruce is only as ideal a father as he appears to be, which in part includes presenting the image of perfect children to the world. Bechdel links her gender performance as perfect daughter to her father's need for perfection, and both she and Butler make it clear that these intertwined performances reveal a false form of perfection, generally one that is culturally constructed but that does not actually exist.

Performativity holds a special role for this text. Bechdel posed for each and every panel in the shot containing bodies (Chute *Graphic Women* 200). In a classroom scene with multiple students sitting in chairs, Bechdel took multiple images, taking turns embodying each of the student roles. In a promotional DVD for the book, she specifically mentions having posed as both her parents in a panel where they have a fight as "really interesting" (qtd. in Chute, *Graphic Women* 200). Chute says, "Bechdel repeats her parents' role, both at a figurative level and at a literal visual level…and in her re-creation her body is never separate from their bodies: she performs their postures, remakes the marks they made" (*Graphic Women* 200). She even re-posed for panels for which she already had a photograph (*Graphic Women* 200). There is a sense from this method that posing in multiple roles, this quest of embodiment, was essential to her creation of the

book. In some ways, Bechdel's process of creation challenges each of the individuals in the book as a construction, an identity to be performed. The process of creating the book itself challenges normalization, just as the content of the book does.

Bechdel explores sexuality as well as gender, and her refusal to adopt a normative gender identity links directly to her refusal to adopt normative heterosexuality. Butler suggests that "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" (173). Bechdel certainly challenges this "obligatory frame" in the way that she embraces and validates queer sexuality in both her own life and her father's. By positioning her coming out story in relationship to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Bechdel is able to present her budding queerness as an odyssey, with her at the center as its hero. In a scene depicting her first queer sexual experience, the narrator says, "In true heroic fashion, I moved toward the thing I feared. Yet while Odysseus schemed desperately to escape Polyphemus' cave, I found that I was quite content to stay here forever" ( Bechdel 214). In the two images below these captions, Alison is shown with her head between another women's legs. In the first, she looks somewhat tentatively at the naked body before her. In the second image, she has closed her eyes and moved closer to perform cunnilingus. Her embrace of lesbian sexuality is then positioned as a heroic action, one that triumphs over sexual norms, embracing personal desire.

Bechdel further challenges cultural expectations by embracing terms of queer identification and performing the associated identity, particularly the masculine identifier "butch" (Bechdel 15). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points out that for some the use of these

terms seems to reify heterosexuality by establishing heterosexual roles (butch for masculine and femme for feminine) within lesbian relationships.  However, she says "the terms *queens*, *butches*, *femmes*, *girls*, even the parodic reappropriation of *dyke*, *queer*, and *fag* redeploy and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity" (Butler 156).  Butler carefully points out that

> the structuring presence of heterosexual constructs within gay and lesbian sexuality does not mean that those constructs determine gay and lesbian sexuality...but they can and do become the site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality. (158)

Much as her narrative challenges negative conceptions of queerness, Bechdel's terminology does as well. In speaking of this passage from Butler, Martin argues, "It is to conceive of the only apparent divide between [homosexuality and heterosexuality] as arbitrary and unstable; it is to imagine heterosexuality and homosexuality in a relation of co-implication" (105).  For Martin, to posit heterosexuality as "an absolutely separate identity" from homosexuality is "complicit with the repressive, even deathly operations of normalization and exclusion, even of lesbians' own fantasies, pleasures and practices" (105). Therefore, by Bechdel's open desire to express masculinity, she challenges normalizations of heterosexuality, as well as normative conceptions of Western gender.

Performativity through the Comics Medium

Bechdel further incorporates subversive performativity by incorporating the visual-verbal rhetoric of comics format to challenge gender and sexual normativity.  Her book is organized into themes, rather than presented chronologically, so readers are constantly required to close the gaps in the text in order to make meaning.  On one page in the narrative, Bechdel presents three different points in time, and the reader must rely

on visual imagery to understand the temporal sequencing (45). Specifically, Alison has three different hairstyles—a mullet, a short bob, and a much shorter, masculine haircut—to establish the order and where they fall into the timeline that Bechdel has established visually throughout her work (45). As Versaci argues, these images exist in narrative, but also show the individual points of the narrative all at once.

In this case, visual-verbal rhetoric works to both stabilize and destabilize: the reader is destabilized in chronology but stabilized in understanding the temporal shifts by the multiple representations. This stabilization is aided by narrative cues such as, "For years after my father's death…" (Bechdel 45). This page then serves to show that these images work together to challenge a normative version of Alison. Much as Bechdel herself exists in a fragmented identity—the author, the narrator, and the character—the character Alison is fragmented by panels and framing and the temporal shifts in the narrative. Even as the piece works as a whole to create a more complete version of Bechdel, it serves to break the reader's understanding of her into unique and specific versions based on time and location in the narrative. Therefore, her identity is rhetorically situated in the narrative, and it is difficult to normalize Bechdel as a character, through which the format challenges the cultural project of normalization as a whole.

Bechdel similarly entwines performativity and visual-verbal rhetoric when she employs an unconventional use of conventional formats in the only scene where she and her father discuss their mutually queer identities. This conversation covers two pages of the narrative, and these two pages are the only instance in the entire narrative that consist of a traditional comics page layout: as I described in Chapter 1 identically sized square

panels fill both pages, in a three by four pattern, and all images and texts are neatly

contained within the frames, leaving clear gaps between panels. Watson presents this

format as a "visual match for two central aspects of the lesbian coming out story" (44).

Using a description from Martin, she focuses on two "parameters: the specific and

intimate disclosure of originary experience to a sympathetic listener; and the circulation

and publication of coming-out stories in activist magazines and journals" (Watson 44).

I like this interpretations' focus on the intimacy of the scene, as this is clearly one

of the most intimate moments that Alison shares with her father. However, I argue that

this format serves another purpose, one not necessarily at odds with Watson's

interpretation. This scene should by all counts be an unusual one: father and daughter sit

together and somewhat haltingly share their queer identities and their attempts to adopt

non-normative gender roles with one another (Bechdel 220-221). However, the

traditional page layout here suggests that for this family, where so much has been

covered up by ideals and attempts at perfection, this is the first and only normal

conversation Alison and Bruce share. Therefore, traditionally non-normative gender and

sexuality are framed through traditional page layouts, lending the non-normative an

aspect of the normal. In this case, normal functions as culturally valid.

In conjunction with Watson's reading then, this format validates the coming out

experience, and more specifically, this particular coming out. There are certainly

troubling implications for this validation, since Bruce's queer relationships are often with

his underage students.  However, the fact that their queer experiences are both framed as

valid, even though their queer identities are very different, resists essentializing queer

experience. Thus, Bechdel's use of format here serves to resist and subvert both heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Conclusion

Seen through the methodology I presented in Chapter 2, it becomes very clear that *Fun Home* resists and subverts cultural expectations for gender and sexuality. Through a Foucauldian framework, Bechdel uses visual-verbal rhetoric to resist becoming a docile, feminine body, validating queerness. Bechdel further represents queerness through her use of visual-verbal rhetoric to challenge cultural concepts of female objects submitting to the male gaze. This relates directly to her graphic depictions of queer sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and female victimization in pornography and open up room for curiosity in how readers see queer identity. However, her strongest subversion of cultural norms comes through her engagement with the way she uses comics format and her unique method of production to draw attention to identities as constructed and performed.  Thus this text works uniquely to challenge and undermine gender and sexual normativity, validating non-normative sexual experience as a hero's quest. In the next chapter, we will see how Bechdel's use of embodied texts further allows her to use representation to challenge essential versions of sexuality and gender.

Chapter Four: Embodied Archives: The Function of Queer Archives as Embodied Texts

in *Fun Home*

As we have seen in previous chapters, Bechdel's representations of female bodies

argue for the validity of non-normative sexuality and gender. However, representations of

female bodies are not the only representations that function rhetorically in *Fun Home*.

The other often-discussed and incredibly important aspect of *Fun Home* is Bechdel's

choice to draw representations of multiple documents to create an in-text archive.

Bechdel's text includes reproductions of

> family photographs, a police report, diary pages, court documents, calendar pages,
> newspaper headlines, a strip of photo negatives, handwritten and typed letters,
> book covers, historical images, an obituary, passports, a poem in typescript,
> dictionary entries, a college course catalog, several maps, pages from half a dozen
> novels, a Charles Addams cartoon, and more. (Rohy 342)

What this archive does and how it functions is a debatable subject. However, if

we see Bechdel's work as a space where she explicitly challenges sexual and gender

normativity, then the archival features of *Fun Home* continue this work. By drawing upon

her archive as part of a tradition unique to queer communities, we can understand

Bechdel's *Fun Home* archive as a way in which she breaks down binaries by embodying

multiple identities, continuing to validate the non-normative by placing personal

documents next to public, and assigning equal weight to canonized texts as to non-

canonized ones. Furthermore, the archives work to better explain Alison's queer identity

in relation to both Bruce and Helen, and specifically use visual rhetoric to challenge the reader's perception of the text.

The *Fun Home* Archives

Traditionally, archives can be viewed much as Valerie Rohy describes them in "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*." Rohy says, "Broadly construed, an archive is any mechanism for collecting and preserving information, including documents, computer data, audio recordings, objects, and historical artifacts" (341).  However, archives serve specific roles within specific communities.  Within the comics world, archives collect "forgotten artifacts and ephemera of American popular culture, items that were never meant to be collected….these are collections organized by invisible grids, by individual desires, by the accident of geography or inheritance" (Gardner 787).  In some ways, Bechdel's archive serves this function.  Her collection's offerings of diaries, doodles, and letters, while important to Bechdel as an individual, do not seem to be the type of items that were meant to be collected and then publicly viewed.  Yet, the personal nature of many texts in her archive is exactly what makes her work a perfect fit for the comics medium, since the value of this archive can only be seen in relation to the "individual desires" and lived experiences of Bechdel.

Here we begin to see how this archive calls for a blending between the narrative of Bechdel's real life experience and the representation of that life experience in the text. Paul John Eakin, autobiographical writing theorist, argues that "published autobiographies [are] only the most visible, tangible evidence of the much larger phenomenon…the construction of identity that talking about ourselves and our lives

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performs in the world" (x). Seen in this light, *Fun Home* itself is an archive of Bechdel's

life, through which representations of texts important to Bechdel's life serve as evidence

that Bechdel is both linked to the characters of Alison and the narrator, yet not the same.

Even though Alison serves as an avatar for Bechdel in the text, at times the connection

between the two is heightened by the archive; at times the archive serves to separate the

two. In both cases, the archive works to construct a subversive identity that challenges

normalizing narratives. To understand how that actually occurs in the text, let us begin

with how Bechdel queers the binary between public and private texts.

Queering Binaries: Public and Private Texts

Rohy argues that "the notion of the queer archive blurs the distinction between

private and public cathexes" (341). In some ways, queer archives actively queer the

binary between public and private, and Bechdel does this in *Fun Home*. For *Fun Home*

specifically, the archive "opens a private collection to public attention without assuming

the limits of that public—without, that is, presupposing whose history beyond the

author's it may represent" (Rohy 341-342).  Bechdel certainly does open up private

collections, specifically in her drawn representations of her own diary entries and

representations of her father's letters to her mother while they were dating. For Chute,

this exposing of the private aids the purpose of the book: "it is a book about ideas about

what happened to Bruce Bechdel, and arriving at a collection of ideas about what

happened to Bruce Bechdel through an intense engagement with archival materials"

(*Graphic Women* 180).  Rather than trying to create a cohesive narrative or absolute truth

about her father's identity, Bechdel allows the archive to reveal the complexity of

Bruce's identity and to highlight what Chute refers to as the "gaps" in Bechdel's past (*Graphic Women* 180).

The personal elements in Bechdel's archive are not enough, though, to see all aspects of Bruce, his relationship to Alison, and the Bechdel family dynamic overall. As Butler and Eakin argue, identities are culturally constructed and the cultural texts that inform Bruce's identity are just as important as the personal texts that reflect that identity. This is why Bechdel balances personal documents with public texts, specifically the literary works that structure the narrative. The narrator in *Fun Home* reports

> I employ these allusions to [Henry] James and [F. Scott] Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms./And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison. (Bechdel 67)

In an interview with Chute, Bechdel describes her parents as "both very critical people. Not necessarily in a bad way, just very discerning people. Especially about literature. They were both English teachers, after all" ("An Interview"1008). Thus, these public texts take on a personal importance in how Bechdel understands and explains her family.

While many readers and critics of *Fun Home* cite its literariness, specifically its inclusion of canonical texts, as the reason Bechdel's text supersedes the popularity of many graphic novels, it is not these canonical texts in and of themselves that are of value (Chute *Graphic Women* 180). Instead, it is the way Bechdel uses those texts to illuminate her relationship to her family members, specifically her father. For example, Bechdel uses both public and private texts in relating her father to Fitzgerald. The narrator explains, "Gatsby's self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father's" ( Bechdel 63). On this page, the narration is portrayed next to drawn representations of letters written from Bruce to Helen, revealing a

"Fitzgeraldesque sentiment," and the letters are drawn in panels that exist alongside panels showing representations of Bruce reading *The Far Side of Paradise* (Bechdel 62-63). This public text takes on a personal significance when paired with the letters, and this personal significance even further blurs the lines between public and private.

Bechdel often underscores that she is blurring the boundary between public and private texts through her visual rhetoric, much like we see in the scene with Bruce compared to Fitzgerald. Texts that could be easily categorized as public and private are often featured on the same page together, such as in the second chapter in which one panel contains a recreation of a page from Camus' *A Happy Death*, a recreation of a page from a birding guide, and a recreation of the note Bechdel received from her college notifying her to call home after her father's death (28). The positioning of multiple texts together within the narrative also serves to position *Fun Home* as appropriate to the comics medium. Watson argues that *Fun Home*'s "dazzling textual collages of drawn objects often interact to form a kind of meta-commentary on the comic page as a site of intertextuality" (32). Indeed, the archival texts that Bechdel uses do at times overlap each other. She deliberately highlights this overlapping in a scene in which Alison is shown doodling in her father's copy of *Ulysses* (Bechdel 209).

Here a public text relating to Bruce's identity is directly conflated with a private text relating to Alison's identity, and this overlapping serves both as the meta-commentary Watson describes but also a visual metaphor for the overlapping identities between Bechdel and her father and the overlapping importance of the public and private spheres in shaping those identities. We will return to how the queer archive functions further in their relationship later in this chapter.

Queering Binaries: Canonical Texts and Non-Canonical Texts

While the visual relationship between public and private texts is an important part of the project of the queer archive, the specific inclusion of literary texts also serves to queer history, rewriting queer voices into historical narratives. Rohy suggests that in queer communities, "the remedy for repression is an *ad hoc* ethic of disclosure" (343). Therefore, queer archives seek to re-envision history to disclose hidden queer historical narratives. *Fun Home*, which works to disclose Bruce's hidden queer life, fits in well with this goal. Ann Cvetokovich describes *Fun Home* as a book that makes "public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful" (111). Seen in this light, Bechdel's archive can very well work as a queer archive. The inclusion of it in her narrative works to destabilize a heterosexual history, bringing in queer voices and tying them into larger historical contexts.

Cvetkovich points out that even within the literary texts Bechdel uses, the public and private binary is deconstructed, as Bechdel creates a canon of her own life, one that positions "Joyce and Camus and Proust and Fitzgerald" alongside "Colette, Sylvia Beach, Virginia Woolf, and Radclyffe Hall, but also a feminist canon that includes *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, Olga Brouman, Adrienne Rich, Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, Rita Mae Brown, and Jane Rule (but also, adding a queer touch, Cecil Beaton!) (122). Cvetkovich argues that *Fun Home* ends with the possibility of "rewriting history, including the canon of male literary heroes that her text continually invokes" (125-126). In other words, if the canon can be seen as a form of Western history, Bechdel's archive reformats that canon to better represent her personal queer history.

Watson refers to Bechdel's version of the canon as "a counter-archive of modernist reading" that validates queer experience (34). In this way, Bechdel furthers the destabilizing work of *Fun Home*'s queer archive by performing a historical revising while challenging the specific value of canonized Western literature as a collection of universally valuable public texts, literally rewriting them into the personal with new textual companions. She breaks down binaries by valuing the non-literary text alongside the literary, and while this is not explicitly a goal of the queer archive, it does tie into destabilizing culturally established constructions.

If we return to Eakin's claim that narrative is itself constructive, and autobiography reflects that constructive narrative, then Bechdel's autobiography that features queer voices as a part of her personal story re-constructs historical narratives. Therefore, not only is Colette positioned as equal in importance to Joyce, but the stories found in Alison's diaries are just as important as those published texts. In this way, Bechdel re-values queer voices within a larger historical narrative that does not minimize or erase experience outside the Western, male canon.

Queering Binaries: Embodied Texts

Perhaps most importantly in understanding *Fun Home* as a site of non-normative gender performance, Bechdel's use of queer archive strategies allows the archive to become a way she can perform a queer identity. Rohy refers to "the queer archive as a technology of identity" (354). Thus, Bechdel can use an archive that blends public and personal and challenges Western histories that exclude queer voices to both perform and create a culturally non-normative identity. However, as Cvetokovich points out,

Bechdel's validation of her father's past that is "tied to what some might see as shameful sexual histories," particularly her father's attraction to teenage boys and his repression of his sexuality, resists a homonormative representation of queer identity (111, 112). Bechdel "carries the responsibility of not continuing to closet [Bruce], even if revealing his questionable sexual behavior casts doubt not only on her own sexuality but also that of gay people more generally" (Cvetkovich 118).

As we saw with the Roy centerfold, at times the archive serves to validate certain aspects of her father's queer identity, even as Bechdel does not seem entirely comfortable in doing so. However, her archive also counterbalances that validation, allowing cultural texts to speak into her narrative as well, further avoiding an essential queer identity. For example, Bechdel admits that part of her father's queer story involves getting arrested for picking up underage boys and buying them liquor. She does so by recreating the police report that describes Bruce as picking up a seventeen-year-old boy and buying him beer (161). The narrator further reflects, "His legal entanglement seemed like a technicality to me. But I didn't know then that 'furnishing a malt beverage to a minor' was the least of his troubles" (175) By combining her validation of so many aspects of Bruce's identity with these voices of cultural dissent, Bechdel suggests that even though she supports the queer identity of her father, and herself by extension, there are still behaviors within his identity that she cannot fully support, nor does she feel like she should. She cannot blame Bruce for his actions herself, but she lets other voices in to subtly admit that there are problems in fully lending validity to his behaviors. This distinction goes even further in destabilizing a universal queer identity, so even as Bechdel performs a queer identity in her archive, that identity is not performed in a normalizing or universalizing manner.

We can understand Bechdel's archive as performative even better if we return to Chute's concept that comics are embodied texts. Chute argues that Bechdel's process of meticulously recreating texts, which for the sake of pure depiction could more easily have been scanned onto the page, reveals "a kind of obsessive embodiment. By embodiment, I mean to point to what is both peculiar to comics—a traditionally hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page—and what is specific to Bechdel's text" (*Graphic Women* 183). Here Chute seems particularly fascinated by Bechdel's act of recreating handwriting, a process that in some ways forces Bechdel to embody multiple personas, including her father and herself at various stages of her life ("Gothic Revival"). Much like Bechdel's process of posing for her panels, Bechdel insists on embodying the identities of the creators of her archive, whether herself or others, as she recreates those texts for *Fun Home*. Again, this plays into Bechdel's attempt to destabilize culturally constructed identity, as Bechdel reproduces the surface acts Butler describes of performed identity for individuals known and unknown, reproducing the texts they have created as aspects of their identity performances.

Queer Archivists: Bruce and Alison

Bechdel's use of queer archive as a technology of queer identity also works to highlight the importance of queer identity in the relationship between Alison and Bruce. Watson argues that "*Fun Home*, as an origin story, makes a genealogical connection between Alison's efforts at parental management and pleasure in visual record-keeping and her father's compulsive personality" (32). The inclusion of the archive both reveals that Bechdel is an archivist, as well as depicts her collection of the archive. Bechdel's

drawings of herself writing in the diary, alongside her recreation of the diaries' pages,

both point to her lifelong job as an archivist. However, *Fun Home* also reveals Bruce as a

kind of archivist. Bechdel specifically devotes attention to her father's library, featuring

flocked wallpaper and velvet drapes, in addition to a large bookcase (60-61). If Bruce is

a man who prefers "fiction to reality," then the books in his library serve as an archive of

his ideal fictional life, a source he can turn to in order to seek inspiration to create his

ideal self (85).

  Libraries also hold a special archival value as Alison first learns about queerness

in a library, and then uses library books to help understand that identity. Alison's use of

the library as a source of knowledge in defining her lesbian identity ironically mirrors

Bruce's use of his own library as a source of knowledge about how to fake the perfect

husband and father personality he has constructed. As Rohy argues, "queers are liable to

an intense library cathexis" in which readers "*themselves* become reflections of their

archives, as queer texts constitute the reading subject in their own image" (355). The

connections between Bruce and Alison as archivists, Alison as an openly queer archiver

and Bruce as a repressed one, are deliberate. Rohy contemplates: "Perhaps this is what

queer genealogy looks like: not the accidental genetic relation of lesbian daughter to

bisexual father but the strands of identification and disidentification—gendered, literary,

aesthetic, archival—that engage the two in endless conversation" (349). Thus, the

connecting nature of their archives, although they ostensibly serve different purposes,

further explains and reveals how Alison's and her father's identities overlap in mutual

queerness, even as it distinguishes between the difference in those identities.

Archivist and Anti-Archivist: Alison and Helen

While the archive connection between Alison and her father serves to underscore their interconnected and inverted identities, it also serves to separate Alison from her mother. Throughout the text, we see Alison distancing herself from Helen. Bechdel contemplates that her moments from childhood with her father seem far more real and important to her than her moments with her mother. In remembering such seemingly trivial childhood moments as bathtime, the narrator depicts only the moments with her father as important, reflecting, "my mother must have bathed me hundreds of times. But it's my father rinsing me off with the purple metal cup that I remember most clearly" (Bechdel 22). She also considers that it is hard for her to remain angry at her father for being so flawed, "partly because the bar is lower for fathers than for mothers" (Bechdel 22).

While the narrator does not go into any depth on why that is, it's clear that Helen is not valued in the story the same way that Bruce is. This dynamic is visually depicted as Alison and Bruce are linked through their overlapping archives, but Alison and Helen do not have the same kind of archive. There are moments when they relate via archived texts, but as we will see later, this archive functions very differently. The visual absence of archival connection is almost as powerful as the presence of the connection between Bruce and Alison, especially since Helen is only a marginal figure in the story, often excluded from family moments (Bechdel 110). Her lack of importance in the text, at least in comparison to Bruce, is found in both the narrative and the archive.

Bechdel consistently portrays her mother as distant and foreboding. Visually, her mother is depicted with stark lines about her mouth, consistently tense and pinched

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looking. Her eyebrows are arched in a constant state of superiority, and she is usually frowning. Helen seems to feel trapped in her own family: she is often seen smoking when speaking with other family members and seems detached from her family. Furthermore, Bechdel makes it clear that Alison feels detached from her mother growing up. In a scene where Alison is helping her mother run lines for a play, Alison quotes Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "I have lost both my parents" (158). While this use of the archive could be expected to create a connection like we see between Bruce and Alison, in this case, it does just the opposite.

In the story, Bechdel draws Alison seated across from her mother, so this quote becomes a poignant commentary that even though her father becomes physically absent from her life upon his death, Alison feels the absence from both her parents, registering no emotional connection to her mother. In addition, Bechdel draws Helen seated across from Alison in this scene, although she situates Helen in her own panel, separated from Alison's panel by a vertical gutter.

The quote specifically indicates that even in her mother's physical presence, Alison felt absence. She explicitly states this later in describing her mother's response to her worsening obsessive compulsive disorder: "My mother apparently decided that giving me some attention might help, and began reading to me while I had my bath. But it was too much, too late./I was so consumed with anxiety that she would stop, that I couldn't enjoy it" (142). Bechdel makes it clear in the narrative that she and her mother are not connected by similarly lived experiences. Even though they are biologically linked, that connection does not impact her construction of identity in the same way as her relationship to Bruce.

This becomes specifically clear in how Bechdel separates her mother from her own queerness, contrasting the separation to the overlapping queer identity she shares with her father. In using the queer archive to contrast her relationship with her father to her relationship with her mother, Watson says Bechdel imputes "to [Bruce] an intriguing gay subjectivity that she does not extend to her mother" (41). In the rare instances when Helen and Alison are connected by an archive, the results are damaging. Describing her mother's reaction to her coming out, Bechdel actually recreates the letter she received from her mother as a response, which says, "I imagine that, if in the long run, your choice turns out to be a serious one, I could live with it, but I truly hope that this does not happen" (77). The narrator reflects, "As disapproval goes, I suppose it was rather mild./Still, I was devastated" (Bechdel 77). While this letter is recreated as part of *Fun Home*'s archive, this text is destructive to Alison's queer identity, as opposed to the co-constructive archive shared by Bruce and Alison.

Helen's reaction seems to stand in for broad cultural response to coming out, relegating Alison's identity to a choice, and a potentially temporary one at that. Helen does not seem to understand or care to understand the magnitude of Alison's revelation, and even though the distant response reflects the cold and absent woman that Bechdel has represented Helen as, Helen's response is no less detrimental. Furthering the separation, Helen is the one who distributes Bruce's library after his death, effectively destroying his archive (82-83). Here we see that Helen clearly does not work as an archivist; in fact, in some ways she is the anti-archivist, a position that opposes her directly to her daughter and husband.

Furthering the Archive: Life Narrative and *Fun Home*

These contrasting narratives then serve as the official story of *Fun Home*: Alison, and by extension, Bechdel, is linked to her father in intertwined, or inverted, queer identities, but Alison and her mother lead separate lives not joined by any common goals, interests, or patterns.  Alison and Bruce are queer archivists; Helen is not. However, the dichotomy presented within the book does not seem to hold up outside it. When comparing the archive within *Fun Home* to the archive created by Bechdel's interviews about *Fun Home*, as the related nature between Bechdel's life narrative and Alison's depicted life narrative allow us to do, it becomes clear that the distance Bechdel represents from her mother is strategic.

While in some places in an interview with Chute, Bechdel describes her mother's initial reaction to her writing of *Fun Home* as the cold response one would expect from the *Fun Home* version of Helen, that reaction does not hold through Bechdel's life experience. "At some point," Bechdel says, "[my mother] told me she was going to have to cut me off from any further information about my father.  She felt betrayed—quite justifiably so—that I was using things she'd told me in confidence about my father" ("An Interview" 1006).  However, this is not Helen's only response. Contrary to what the reader might expect, Bechdel says "[My mother's] initial reaction, I think, was to laugh. She just thought it was absurd. She didn't ask me not to do it, which I was really grateful for" (Chute "An Interview" 1006).

This laugh could be seen as derogatory and destructive, much like her letter to Alison, but Helen ends up supporting the project in a surprising way:

> A year or so later [after the decision to cut me off], she gave me a box of letters
> that Dad had written her before they were married. My mom's a bit of a mixed-

message person—but maybe she gave me the letters as a counterweight to other things she'd shared with me. (Chute "An Interview" 1007)

Although the act may be in some ways self-serving, Helen comes through as an archivist herself, one whose contribution directly furthers the queer archive in *Fun Home*. Outside the text, Bechdel's relationship with her mother is far more complex than is represented in *Fun Home*, a blend of cold criticism and somewhat detached support that seems remarkably alike that of Bruce in the narrative.

There are moments in the text that hint at this complicated background. For example, Bechdel's use of photographs sometimes challenges her depiction of her mother in the story. Bechdel recreates a passport photo from the trip Helen took to Germany to marry Bruce. In the picture, Helen is young: she half-smiles pleasantly at the camera, and there is a softness to her features decidedly absent from Bechdel's depictions (71). While the difference in representations can be written off to age, the photo illustrates that Helen is, like Bruce, a complicated individual whose identity cannot be so neatly bracketed into one category, such as "disapproving mother." Watson argues that the photos scattered throughout the text and beginning each chapter serve as "visual evidence" of the family's history, but they also create "a distance from [their] function as official history by reading photos for their transgressive content" (38). Thus, the photos actually raise questions "about the nature of visual evidence" (Watson 38). At the same time, Rohy argues that "in *Fun Home* the visual reproduction of objects seems to offer an authenticity beyond the power of rhetoric, a potential to signify what 'really happened'" (351).

Taken together, this returns us to Chute's interpretation of the book: *Fun Home* is not about knowing, but about ideas. The "I think" that literally peppers Alison's diaries, and even shows up in Bechdel's interview with Chute, figuratively manifests itself in the

other archival representations, showing that the "official" history and Bechdel's interpretations are just two possibilities for the Bechdel family history. Bechdel's commitment to possibility then leaves room for plurality, again disallowing essentialism within the text, even from Bechdel's end. Helen's identity and relationship to Bechdel are subtly hinted at as just as complex as Bruce's, but this is ultimately a book about queerness—not limited to sexuality, but extended to destabilizing binaries and essentialisms more generally—and Helen's role in the Bechdel family drama is limited so that Bechdel can focus on and expand the role of her father. The use of the queer archive is one of the key ways Bechdel achieves this focus.

Reader Identification

However, in presenting this queer archive, Bechdel also opens up the potential to involve and implicate the reader in queerness.  If visual depictions of queer sexuality can open up curiosity as Martin argues, then this archive, which Bechdel connects to both masturbation and lovemaking with Joan—making it a very present part of her sexuality— can further open up reader curiosity (76, 80, 81).  In addition, this text can potentially function as a place of identity constitution for some readers. In providing representations of the key texts that allowed Bechdel to identify herself as a lesbian and then fill in the gaps to understand what that lesbian identity meant, Bechdel provides a technology of queer identity for her readers, one which can potentially help readers see queerness in themselves.

McCloud has a theory of identification that can help us understand why readers would respond to representations of gender and sexuality in comics through a theory he

calls "amplification through simplification" (30). In this theory, McCloud describes the way that comics artists use abstract imagery to "focus on specific details" (30). He says, "By *stripping down* an image to its essential '*meaning*,' an artist can *amplify* that meaning in a way that realistic art *can't*" (30). McCloud's theory becomes particularly relevant to our examination of Moffatt and Norton's study when he says "Another [ability of cartoons] is the *universality* of cartoon imagery. The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to *describe*" (31).

McCloud illustrates his assumption by showing a progression of drawn faces, moving from a photorealistic drawing of a male face to a stereotypical smiley-face cartoon, which doesn't represent any obvious person. McCloud argues that the smiley face on the end is a more universal image that allows others to attach their personal identity to the image, whereas a more realistic image separates itself from the viewer as a representation of someone else. McCloud bases his theory on his belief that people keep an image of themselves in their mind that is really just "a sketchy arrangement…something as *simple* and as *basic*—as a *cartoon*" (36). Thus, when readers read comics, they identify the cartoon faces as images of themselves (McCloud 36).

There are certainly complications to McCloud's theory of universality. For example, what if a reader has some kind of abnormal facial feature, like a missing eye, that prohibits that reader from identifying with "universal" two-eyed images? That reader is certainly outside McCloud's universal identification, and this is just one very superficial example. There are many potential scenarios for times when McCloud's theory does not hold up. However, if we consider the way that Butler's theories of

performativity align with McCloud's theories of identification, we can see how readers

could be lured by these "universal" images.  Remember that in Butler's theory of

performativity, gender is not essential but must be performed: "There is no gender

identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by

the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). In this sense, "gender is always

a doing" (Butler 33). Now, recall that Butler also argues that subjects who desire to

perform their best version of a culturally ideal gender will be looking for cues to help

them know what "words, acts, gestures, and desires" can help them create the illusion of

that gender (Butler 73).

When individuals are trying to align themselves to a universal ideal, unattainable

and constructed though it may be, those same individuals may be predisposed to seeing

cartoon faces as a useful social clue that can help them align themselves to the

"universal" gender they wish to perform.  Perhaps the individual's desire to find a

universal truth in the face of contradictory gender messages may also help them be

willing and excited to read a cartoon face as their own. However, for cartoonists who

present subversive representations of gender and sexuality, readers may come to

understand and identify with queer identities that resist universality. Understood through

McCloud and Butler's theoretical lenses, it is clear that readers must make choices in

how they interpret comics to come to conclusions about the bodies represented and how

those representations relate to their own lives.

Within McCloud's theory of identification, Bechdel seems to make such

identification possible through both the representation of cartoon individuals, which are

simple enough to be reduced to such interpretations as "stiff illustrations [that] merely

reiterate the text," and the re-creation of archival texts that, as we have seen, function as crucial elements of identity (Chen 100). Since Bechdel specifically resists the kind of universal identity described by McCloud or the universal ideal described by Butler, Bechdel is able to use the convention of identification in the comics medium, but subvert those expectations.

Returning to discussions of the archive, we can see how Bechdel encourages identification with her story. Jennifer Lemberg argues that "Bechdel reminds us that it is in the space between existing visual images and familiar storylines where we make meaning of our individual lives" (130). This relates back to Eakin's concept of narrative identity, in that "we do not invent ourselves out of whole cloth….Instead, we draw on the resources of the cultures we inhabit to shape them, resources that specify what it means to be a man, a woman, a worker, a person in the setting where we live our lives" (22). This could certainly be extended to queer identity. In defining queer identity formation in relation to reading queer archives, Rohy says, "what appears as a moment of discovery is really a moment of invention, which retroactively creates the subject as *having always been* inverted, gay, deviant, queer, Uranian, trans, lesbian, or homosexual" (355). Bechdel's archive opens up space for these moments of identity invention. Notice that even though Bechdel's queer archive can function as discursively constitutive, much like culture itself, Rohy's language deliberately leaves room for this form of identity construction to remain non-normalized, much as Cvetkovich argues that it does.

This is of course not to argue that every reader of *Fun Home* will identify with a queer identity. However, *Fun Home* does force readers to confront queerness, and opens space for identification and understanding. Bechdel uses her embodied archive to

deliberately challenge universalized sexuality as a natural entity, instead highlighting it as a cultural construction. This project then creates a possibility for male and female readers alike to learn to value culturally non-normative beliefs about gender and sexuality, or to at least understand that binary gender and the attendant compulsory heterosexuality is not essential, but is rather constructed.

Conclusion

Thus, the queer archive furthers Bechdel's project of destabilizing cultural norms, both for herself and for the readers of her book.  In the archive, we see Bechdel breaking down binaries, both between public and private and non-literary and literary texts, a task that reflects her goal to queer the binaries between masculine and feminine and homosexual and heterosexual.  She also continues in the queer archivist project of rewriting historical narratives to include queer voices, as we saw in her blurring which texts matter in historical narratives to include texts of official public value, like those in the canon, with those that represent marginal voices, like her own diaries and the feminist and queer literature she archives. The archive continues the work of challenging heteronormativity with Bruce's and her queer archive, but also presents the possibility that even as queerness as *identity* should be validated, not all *behaviors* by queer individuals can or should be fully accepted.   Furthermore, Bechdel's work is not content to merely stay on the page, but works to challenge the reader's perception of literature, history, and self-identity, using visual rhetoric to draw the reader into her archivist project.

Chapter Five: Queer Theory in the Undergraduate Classroom: *Fun Home* as a Tool for

Challenging Cultural Normativity


Throughout my paper I have argued that *Fun Home* works to destabilize and de-

normalize cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, particularly using

performativity theory as my lens in which to do so.  I have also suggested that viewing

this text through the performativity lens may have benefits for the reading audience.  I

would like to close my paper then with some reflection on how I see *Fun Home* as useful

for my own work, thinking of myself as a teacher-scholar, and by extension, for my

students. Studying *Fun Home* provides specific benefits to a classroom, particularly to a

composition classroom where a teacher hopes to destabilize heteronormativity but has not

focused primarily on queer theory. It also provides benefits to me as a teacher who is

invested in queer theory but identifies as straight.  While there are definitely potential

conflicts in introducing queer theory into a classroom, and *Fun Home*'s validation of an

adult male who engaged in sexual relationships with adolescent males is certainly

problematic, *Fun Home*, and more generally the comics medium, can help teachers

grapple with the classroom as contact zone.


Queer Composition Class

In thinking about composition and queer theory together, there are many reasons

that the two work well together. Scholars have argued that composition as a site of

identity exploration lends itself well as a place to incorporate queer theory for a broad

student populace. There is a sense from multiple scholars that queer theory is useful for

students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transsexual, and/or queer

(LGBTQ) as well as for students who feel they fit into normative sex and gender

expectations. For example, in "Writing InQueeries: Bodies, Queer Theory, and an

Experimental Writing Class," Michel Boucher and Jennifer DiGrazia argue that

> the tendency to keep queer classroom material inside not only a specific
> classroom, but specific departments, particularly Lesbian/Gay and Women's
> Studies departments…suggests a failure to recognize that we can use queer theory
> in the writing classroom as a way to explore and challenge the various identities
> that we as students and scholars embody and the power that accrues to them. (28)

They point out that an "unnamed ordering" of culturally constructed ideas "is evident in

the assumptions that support students' essays" with the implication that as teachers, we

should be helping students understand and unpack those assumptions (28-29).

Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace further reference the work of Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick to argue that queer studies are useful for a general audience and

resist the view "that problematic constructions of sexual identity are an issue only for

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered/transsexual (LGBT) people rather than a

problem that must be addressed for the benefit of society in general" (W301). They argue

that "unpacking the problematic ways American society deals with sexual identity has the

potential to help all of us to understand not only how we are positioned in society but also

how we contribute to the positioning of others for good or ill" (Alexander and Wallace

W301). Thus, since composition can be a space where we call students to critical thought,

to call them to critical thought about their gendered and sexual identities and how they

view others' gendered and sexual identities is productive, useful, and makes sense within the goals of a composition program.

In fact, some scholars argue that refusing to bring queer theory into a composition classroom may be tantamount to encouraging heteronormativy. Amy E. Winans argues, "The notion that sexuality and sexual difference are peripheral topics that have no real place in the classroom ignores the fact that both are already present there and that failing to address them supports and validates an unquestioned heteronormative environment" (Winans 106). Furthermore, in the introduction to the NCTE collection on queer/ gay and lesbian studies in the English classroom, William J. Spurlin comments,

> Many English faculty, despite a wealth of new scholarship in queer studies, often downplay the homosexuality of canonical authors, remain unfamiliar with contemporary gay and lesbian authors, do not create adequate spaces in classroom discussion for lesbian or gay readings of texts to emerge, and do not adequately sustain classroom discussion on the politics of sexuality as it comes up in student writing. (xviii)

Spurlin argues that such an exclusion regards discussions of queer experience as unnecessary in the English classroom, reifying cultural constructions of individuals as naturally heterosexual.  Therefore, for scholars and teachers who value destabilizing cultural norms, finding a way to introduce queer theory into their classroom is incredibly important.

Classroom as Contact Zone: Student Resistance to Queer Theory

There are potential problems and dangers for introducing queer theory to a classroom. DiGrazia and Boucher point out that even when they taught a class where most of the students identified as sexually or gender queer in some way, those students were unfamiliar with the vocabulary associated with queer theory (31).  DiGrazia and

Boucher had to spend significant time then unpacking dense theory and explaining such elements as sex/gender distinction before students could truly engage with the material in their course.

Such setbacks, though, pale in comparison to teaching experiences like those described by Danielle Mitchell. In designing a first-year composition course based on introducing queer theory, Mitchell faced actual physical danger. Mitchell designed her course at a two-year rural college where "expectations of normality and the fully acceptable dictate[d] heterosexual subjectivities and heteronormative policies" (26). At this college, Christian ideals about queerness as sinful and immoral were firmly entrenched, and Mitchell also faced pushback from students who felt studying queerness challenged their own straight identities. In her article "I Thought Composition Was About Commas and Quotes, Not Queers: Diversity and Campus Change at a Rural Two-Year College," Mitchell describes a scene in which in pushing a student to reconsider a thesis statement, he took personal offense and physically charged toward her yelling, "I don't like gays; they're not normal!" (qtd. in Mitchell 39). In this instance, even though Mitchell chose not to come out to her students, the student's reactions to queer subject matter placed her in at least one physically threatening situation.

Sometimes in a composition classroom, this violence and aggression students feel toward queer identity may be manifested in writing rather than physical acts. In his article, "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone: Assessing Homophobic Student Writing," Richard E. Miller describes the classroom as a "contact zone" as constructed by Mary Louise Pratt: "a social space 'where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other

often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power'" (235). Mitchell describes her queer theory class similarly as "a critical zone of cultural contact" (23).

As evidence that queer theory in a composition classroom can create a contact zone of this sort, Miller examines an infamous student essay called "Queers, Bums, and Magic" introduced to the composition community at large via paper presentation at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication (236). The student essay describes a troubling trip to San Francisco, in which, among other disturbing elements, the author describes how his friends and he drunkenly urinated on a wall, only to discover that the wall was in fact a homeless man. The student essay then describes how the writer and his friends beat the homeless man, leaving him for dead. In addition, the student essay is full of homophobic rhetoric, such as referring to San Francisco as "San Fagcisco" and referring to "the queers" as members of "the lowest class" of people (Miller 236). While not as immediately threatening as Mitchell's example, the essay described in Miller's article again shows a dangerous potential for violence and physical intimidation in association with queerness.

Cultural and gender studies scholar Mario DiGangi warns that students may react strongly to the introduction of queer theory into the classroom, as we see in the examples above, because "teaching openly about same-sex desire may strike students as flagrantly political, not only because homosexuality is a controversial subject but also because teaching controversial subjects powerfully debunks the myth of pedagogical objectivity" (Digangi 161). However, Miller argues that teachers should still engage in these kind of challenging discussions because in composition classrooms, "the conflicts that capture and construct both the students and their teachers become the proper subject of study for

the course" (242).  Acknowledging that students and teachers will probably approach

discussion of queer texts from different perspectives, Miller's construction of the

classroom as a contact zone also highlights the unequal power relations between student

and teacher, and suggests that teachers who want to introduce queer theory into the

classroom need to be especially aware of these power relations and address them in

conscious and responsible ways.


Disrupting Classroom Hierarchies: Power in the Contact Zone

In reflecting on the time spent lecturing about queer theory, DiGrazia and

Boucher ponder the existing power relations in their experimental writing course,

wondering, "What do we do with issues of authority in a queer classroom?" (31).

DiGrazia and Boucher question the "assumptions of authority that remain in a dynamic in

teacher/student relationships," hoping to give students authority over their own work

(31).

As DiGrazia and Boucher point out, issues of authority become especially

important to consider in classrooms addressing queer theory, and if teachers set up a

binary in which academics are right/students are wrong, then the very project of queer

theory is diminished if not completely derailed.  However, it is incredibly easy to set up

the binary of right/wrong in discussions about queer identities, since students often

approach discussions of queerness through the lens of gay marriage debates, which have

been politically structured to be binary arguments.

Even more importantly in considering how students enter discussions of queer

texts, DiGrazia and Boucher's term "authority" does not serve to highlight the dynamics

of power as brought up by Pratt's concept of the contact zone. Power relations become especially important in situations in which students perceive teachers as furthering a personal agenda, as DiGangi argues they might in queer theory discussions. Dqnielle Mitchell describes an incident in which a student anonymously slipped her a copy of the *New Testament*, which she reads as a challenge to her introduction of queer theory into the classroom (39). However, the student's choice to act anonymously rather than openly addressing conflicting beliefs suggests that the student was aware of both the power relations of the classroom and the personal stake Mitchell had in introducing queer theory into the classroom.

The *New Testament* potentially serves to reinforce the discourses of fear and hate the Christian community is capable of producing in relation to queerness, and reinforce cultural norms. Spurlin reminds us that Butler says, "sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender," and this anonymous delivery to Mitchell may very well have been a student's attempt to do just that (xvii). But because the student does so anonymously, we can clearly identify Mitchell's classroom as a contact zone in which students perceive power existing with the teacher. However, Mitchell's discussion of the event indicates that she felt students were backed by a certain discursive power, and in situations where most students in a classroom are homophobic, students may very well hold power they do not realize they have.

Miller acknowledges the problems with hateful and homophobic rhetoric like that found in the "Bums, Queers, and Magic" essay or in the anonymous delivery of a policing text, but also argues that teachers are faced with an incredible challenge in negotiating and respecting the difference between "where students are, rather than where

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one thinks they should be" (248). He says, "The challenge, for teachers who are interested in teaching rather than indoctrinating their students, is to learn how to respond when such potentially threatening material makes its way into the classroom" (246).

This is certainly a challenge that I have come across in my own classrooms. In introducing a text on "ghetto parties" to facilitate a discussion of race and racism into my classroom, I worried that my students would be disrespectful of each other, that they would potentially bring in racist home discourses, or that they would become resentful at being brought into difficult discussions that could potentially implicate them as racist or ignorant.  I was surprised to instead discover that both of the classes I taught race-related material to this semester felt that racism no longer existed and that stereotypes were unproblematic because they didn't actually hurt anyone. Based on my own experience and scholarly work, I obviously disagreed.

While this kind of student response, which is most likely based on privileged experience—as is usual in a Colorado college classroom, my students are overwhelmingly white—is not as immediately or deliberately offensive as the student essay from Miller's article, it still required me to balance my knee-jerk reaction to immediately "correct" student responses with my desire to respect student's beliefs, flawed as I may perceive them to be. Miller argues that

> reimagining the classroom as a contact zone is a potentially powerful pedagogical intervention only so long as it involves resisting the temptation either to silence or to celebrate the voices that seek to oppose, critique, and/or parody the work of constructing the knowledge in the classroom. (251)

Similarly, Digangi argues that "treating homosexuality as a legitimate subject of classroom discussion does not mean preaching or propagandizing…but challenging students to confront, articulate, and question some of their  most deeply held assumptions

and beliefs" (Digangi 164). The question then becomes this: How does a teacher respect where a student is, while still challenging him or her to question "deeply held assumptions and beliefs?"

Miller suggests that rather than dismissing student response "it seems much more important to me to produce a classroom in which part of the work involves articulating, investigating, and questioning the affiliated cultural forces that underwrite the ways of student thinking" (Miller 243). As a teacher, I see comics as a way to highlight those cultural forces at work, while packaging the discussion in a way that students find unthreatening. While *Fun Home* is not the only comics text through which a teacher can do this, I argue that in my experience, because of Bechdel's deliberate exploration of identity for both Alison and Bruce, it is a text that effectively engages students in a discussion of queerness.

Comics in the Contact Zone

If we as teachers seek to turn our classroom into a contact zone between cultural normativity and performativity, comics, and particularly *Fun Home*, can become an excellent tool to facilitate classroom discussions. Putting a text in the middle of discussions that will most likely involve conflict potentially defrays some of the personal investment about the topic, allowing for discussions about the specifics of the text rather than highlighting individual identity as a text for study.

Here it is important to note that my identity as a straight woman will probably make my discussions of queer theory with my students very different from those of many of the scholars and theorists I have cited thus far. While my students are aware of my

culturally normative sexual identity—I wear a wedding ring and occasionally refer to my husband in class—my students will probably not see this as an incursion on their beliefs. Digangi argues that even though the "normalness" of heterosexuality is just as constructed as the offensiveness of queer sexuality, students do not register it in the same way. He says, "It may take less naturalized topics such as homosexuality to alert students to the production of knowledge as inevitably an ideological and intellectual endeavor" (Digangi 161-162).

Students often see teachers who are openly queer as making political moves. For example, queer activist tatiana de la tierra describes students' responses to her coming out as everything from "Why does everything in this class have to be gay?" to the more hateful, "It seems that you want to convert some of the students into what I call 'gayism.' p.s. nice try!" (qtd. in de la tierra 183). By being seen as "normal," straight teachers like myself may be able to sidestep some of these criticisms. The use of *Fun Home* may also provide a buffer for queer teachers who want to introduce queer theory to the classroom without coming out. In either case, though, it would be naïve to assume that being straight or keeping sexuality private will negate all homophobic responses, especially when introducing a text like *Fun Home* that is in many ways a coming out story that validates multiple versions of queerness, a problem for class use that I will discuss more in the next section.

Comics are in some ways the best kind of text available for such a potentially difficult discussion. While I strongly oppose the concept that comics are an "easy" text to read, there is still popular perception that they are easy. When introducing a concept that has the potential to be difficult even for engaged and respectful students, a non-

threatening medium like comics may diffuse some of the tension. Along these lines, Botzakis argues that comics have a valuable place in the classroom: "Comic books may not be a silver bullet, but used mindfully, with an eye to students and their contexts, they may be powerful resources for sparking student interest and learning" (Botzakis 58). He suggests that because they incorporate images, students may want to engage with comics in a way that they don't engage with purely alphabetic texts.

English professor Allen Webb and one of his students Brandon Guisgand further link the appeal of multimodality as a way to engage students in discussions of race. They say, "A multimodal approach, which is developed not only by text but also in images, pictures, and film, is especially enriching and synergistic in the investigation of racism" (Webb and Guisgand 120). They argue that graphic novels help students frame discussions of identity through visual-verbal modes they are familiar with, framing the uncomfortable within the comfortable. While discussions of racism are not the same as discussions of queerness, the two topics require students to grapple with issues of identity that have similar histories of marginalization. Therefore, comics may work to enrich discussions of queerness and queer theory in a similar way to Webb and Guisgand's class on racism in literature. Let us then think about the advantages and problems in using *Fun Home* as a text that can bring queer theory into a rhetoric and composition classroom.

*Fun Home* in the Classroom

As I have referred to before, *Fun Home* is a potentially problematic text to introduce to an undergraduate classroom.  Including scenes of graphic sexuality that have been labeled as pornographic and validating Bruce's queer experiences that include

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disturbing age and power dynamics, *Fun Home* may actually heighten homophobic responses in some students. This is not a concern that teachers should take lightly as the engaging potential of the comics medium only goes so far. For this reason, it is important for teachers to consider which parts of *Fun Home* will be most appropriate for their students, and this may depend on such factors as age, maturity level, previous classroom exposure to queer texts, and how a discussion of *Fun Home* fits in with other texts discussed in the class, among many other material concerns.

It will also be up to individual teachers to decide how to frame a discussion of *Fun Home* within their class. In my experience, guest facilitating an upper division undergraduate class focused on rhetoric, Chapter 1, "Old Father, Old Artificer" worked very well as a classroom text. This chapter introduces *Fun Home*, giving the students a sense of both Alison and Bruce as characters. Because the class is focused on rhetoric, I originally framed the discussion through an examination of visual and visual-verbal rhetorics, bringing in ideas of visual rhetoric as enthymemes, which paired well with a discussion of closure in comics. However, because in this chapter Bechdel highlights Alison's struggle with acting feminine and introduces Bruce's sexual relationships with teenage boys through interesting visual and visual-verbal rhetorics, the class lent itself to discussions of queer theory (Bechdel 15, 17). In addition, because Bechdel draws the young Alison as very androgynous, some students had thought the child in the text was a young boy, and this led to discussions of how gender is constructed visually both in the text and in life.

Furthermore, students in the class experienced surprise that they were unable to fully condemn Bruce, even as he is often displayed in this chapter as tyrannical and his

queer identity is framed as problematic. Students used their own personal lives to respond

to the text, their responses to Bruce related to their identities as children in relationships

with troubled fathers, or as parents who struggled to be perfect.  Students also reacted

well to the subtlety in the text.  While students unfamiliar with comics expressed comfort

with the book through the fact that it has lots of narrative text, in some ways much like a

traditional alphabetic text narrative, by pairing a reading of *Fun Home* with Chapter Two

from McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, students were able to move beyond the

alphabetic text to seeing how the visual rhetoric worked in the graphic narrative, both

complicating and complementing the text as I have discussed in previous chapters.

Students wrote about these connections in a prompt at the beginning of class, and we then

verbally unpacked their conclusions in class discussion.

　　　*Fun Home* then has the potential to serve two specific roles, based on the ways

students identify themselves as either straight (and comfortably gendered within Western

gender norms), or queer (either in terms of gender or sexuality).  I realize that by thinking

of students within these two separate groups, I run the risk of reifying the kind of binary I

have resisted throughout my whole thesis. However, I set this up not as a natural or

essential binary, but rather recognizing that within our culture, most of our students will

set themselves along this binary, and, as DiGrazia and Boucher point out, even students

who identify as queer often do not have the theoretical base to extricate their identities

from the hetero/homosexual binary structure. This binary then reflects back to student

perceptions, ones that I would of course hope to trouble in a classroom setting.

　　　For students who identify as straight, I see *Fun Home* as providing a space to find

a validating example of queer identity. Because this book so carefully unfolds Bechdel's

identity within multiple cultures—lesbian, feminist, the Bechdel family, undergraduate—

Bechdel cannot be simply reduced to her queer identity. Even as she argues for its

importance in her life, it is not her whole life, nor is uncovering her queer identity her

whole story. In some ways then, Bechdel/Alison/the narrator are able to provide a

representative of queer identity that "would otherwise remain an abstraction" (Kopelson

18). It is important, though, to reiterate that Bechdel specifically avoids establishing "a

real and stable gay/lesbian identity" (Kopelson 18). In addition to positioning her own

queer identity in the context of her father's very different queer identity, Bechdel

sometimes deliberately highlights difference within lesbian identity. For example, in *Fun

Home* when Joan invites Alison to see a lesbian-feminist singer in concert, Alison thinks,

"Lesbian **singers**? These people are weird. Maybe I'm not a homo after all" (213).

Students will get to see Bechdel's queer identity as representative, even as Bechdel resists

being *the* representative of queerness.

Even more importantly, because Bechdel so deliberately refers to the nature of

masculinity and femininity as constructed and performed, she draws attention to the fact

that "specific *acts* of gender and sexuality become (mis)perceived as the general *facts* of

gender and sexuality" (Kopelson 18).  Thus, even students who identify as straight may

come to see that aspects of their identity are not so easily separated from cultural

expectations as they may expect.  Alexander and Wallace argue that

> paying attention to queerness provides unique opportunities to engage with
> students in challenging discussions about how the most seemingly personal parts
> of our lives are densely and intimately wrapped up in larger sociocultural and
> political narratives that organize desire and condition how we think of ourselves.
> Queerness helps us see important connections between our personal stories and
> the stories that our culture tells about intimacy, identity, and connection. (W303)

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*Fun Home* is an excellent narrative for this kind of queer project because it already ties personal narrative into the sociocultural and political narratives, inviting readers, in this case students, to do the same with their own lives. Furthermore, by presenting her Alison representation as multi-faceted, the queer aspects of Bechdel's identity may not be so threatening or intimidating to students who identify as not-queer. As I saw in my classroom experience, students easily identified with Alison, and even though many felt the text resisted their attempts to identify with Bruce, they often identified with the relationship between the two characters.

The other group of students that benefit from bringing *Fun Home* into the classroom are students who identify as queer, or at least not heteronormative. Alexander and Wallace point out that "5 to 10 percent of the population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or transsexual" (W301). Therefore, I feel it is important for me as a teacher to be aware that even though I am often unaware of my students' sexual and gender identities, there is a very real possibility that there are students in the class whose queer lives and experiences are usually marginalized and erased in the classroom. In addition, since I teach mostly eighteen-year-olds who are experiencing their first year away from home, I often witness students in the process of forming adult identities, and I expect that while many students are not quite comfortable identifying themselves as LGBTQ, many are beginning to find that "straight" doesn't quite describe their identities either. Bringing in *Fun Home* to the classroom creates a space for students to see queer experience validated and celebrated, in a way that does not require any student to identify or out themselves to their peers if they are uncomfortable doing so. However, it also opens dialogue in which students can bring up their queer identities into the classroom in

a way that high school English teacher Jim Reese argues queer and lesbian students are often not able to. He says, "Most students are energized and motivated by the thought of sharing their original ideas. In suppressing their responses, however, lesbian and gay students learn a sad lesson about their sexual identity: neither the teacher nor their classmates will acknowledge it" (141). Introducing texts like *Fun Home* helps avoid the exclusion of queer students from class discussions.

Conclusion

    *Fun Home* as a text that rhetorically engages in feminist and queer representations of identity, highlighting them as representations through the comics medium, presents a powerful argument for subverting cultural gender and sexual normativity. The story validates queerness, as well as models the powerful narrative capacity of the comics medium. Even though gender has been underexplored in comics studies, it is clear from my examination of *Fun Home* that comics represent gender in surprising and subversive ways. Thus, Bechdel's work on *Fun Home* makes it apparent that comics are valid sites of scholarly study, especially when they are valued and studied for the elements that make them unique.

    In the future, comics scholarship should continue to expand within gender and queer studies. Texts like Bechdel's *Fun Home* model the subversive potential in comics work, and even though scholars like Chute, myself, and others are focusing on female life narratives, there is still much to be explored in this genre. Even within my extended examination of this text, I have failed to fully explore the narrative's value as an autobiographical text, let alone its value as a text that encourages readers to grapple with

multiplicities of identity. Furthermore, as D'Amore points out, superhero comics studies are also lacking feminist and queer scholarly examinations, and the way that cartoonists like J.H. Williams are re-envisioning female superhero characters like Batwoman invites new avenues of scholarship in this genre.

Perhaps even more importantly, comics scholarship needs to continue expanding its exploration of reader response and audience studies. Norton's and Moffatt's study opens up interesting scholarly inquiries, but with such a limited sample of comics readers to study, their work is hardly comprehensive. Yet the work of comics theorists like Eisner, McCloud, and Chute argues powerfully for scholarship designed to better understand how the theorized "contract" between comics creators and comics audiences works in readers' perceptions of the characters in these texts.

While my last chapter presents some possibilities for how *Fun Home* can be used to benefit an undergraduate classroom, this is again only one possibility, and in the future, I hope to see an increase of academic work that helps scholars better understand how comics could be used in the academy, divorced from the stigma of the juvenilization of the medium and the historical devaluation of comics literacy. Comics authors and cartoonists are creating exciting work with multiple possibilities for scholarly avenues of study; it is my hope that continuing scholarly work in comics studies will take advantage of those avenues, specifically in interpreting representations of gender and sexual identity.

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