

# Queering the Family Album: the Re-orientation of Things in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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**Abstract** Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006), is one woman attempt to understand and recapture her father after his untimely death. The memoir focuses on his existence as a closeted gay man living in a small Pennsylvania town, the dysfunction of his family life, and as the memoir progresses, Bechdel explores her sense of psychic connection to her father based on her own identity as a lesbian. This essay explores Bechdel's representational practices, in particular the methods she uses to link family, sexuality, and emotion to autobiography. She uses representations of things, especially her drawings of photographs and interior décor, to imbue her memoir with both veracity and emotionality; meanwhile she uses narrative, drawing, and photographic discourses to queer what Marianne Hirsch has coined "the familial gaze." In showing us hand-drawn snapshots of the private interior of the Bechdel family home, and in revealing the secrets contained in the pictures and drapes and antique chairs, Bechdel destroys what can loosely be called "the familial pact." By this Bechdel tries to transform private suffering related to family and sexuality into a text for public consumption; her subjective experience is given representation as a means for eliciting emotion on a collective scale. In short, The paper discusses the implications of this memoir's particular politics of emotion and its potential to queer representational practices related to autobiography and family, allowing us glimpses into new possibilities for self-representation.

**Key Words** *Fun Home*; queer studies; autobiography; photography

Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006), is one woman's attempt to understand and in a sense recapture her father after his untimely death, a death Bechdel claims was suicide. In grappling with her father's ghost many years later, the memoir focuses on his existence as a closeted gay man living in a small Pennsylvania town, the dysfunction of the Bechdel family life as a result of this, and, as the memoir progresses, Bechdel explores her sense of psychic connection to her father based on her own identity as a lesbian. Having received near-universal praise from book critics, academics, and general readers, *Fun Home* is one of the most celebrated American memoirs, graphic or otherwise, of the past 5 years. The growing body of secondary literature about the book likens it to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as a unique contribution to contemporary autobiographical graphic art and

literature. This means that its literariness has allowed it to surpass the seemingly low designation of comics, and enter into the more gentrified terrain of graphic art and graphic narrative more generally.

Bechdel has been a cartoonist for well over two decades. Her long-running *Dykes to Watch Out For* is a truly funny comic strip infused with tongue-in-cheek commentary from a progressive left perspective, yet its status as an alternative comic strip means that *Dykes'* popularity has generally been limited to its target audience. While *Fun Home* also foregrounds queer identities, there is something about this graphic memoir that has catapulted it out of the specialty gay market and into the mainstream spotlight.

The general public of readers is not particularly known for its embrace of gay narratives, and many reviews I have come across, both professional reviews and reader reviews posted on the internet, often go to some length to point out that *Fun Home* is powerful despite its focus on homosexuality. While *Time* magazine named *Fun Home* the best book of 2006, the magazine makes sure to proclaim, "Forget genre and sexual orientation; this is a masterpiece about two people who live in the same house but different worlds, and their mysterious debts to each other" ("10 Best"). What I argue in this essay is quite the opposite; that it is the queer gaze at the very center of the text (literally and figuratively, as I will explain later) that is key in establishing this graphic memoir's connective or empathetic power. Queer is not simply an aspect of the text that describes the sexual identities of Bechdel and her father Bruce. As I will argue, Bechdel queers many aspects of both comics and autobiography as a way to engage readers, to pull us into her world. Most of the literary criticism and review essays about this graphic memoir focus on homosexuality as a theme in the text, but very few critics have examined queerness as a particular artistic strategy. This essay looks at Bechdel's queer strategies, that is, how her artistic methods re-work and expose the ideologies of the family, especially in the way the family is represented in photographs and interior space.

In this vein, I focus on Bechdel's strategic placement of family photographs within the text, rendered by hand, as well as on her drawings of the family home, the interior décor in particular. I argue that these images of things function as material emblems that deconstruct and queer the familial archetype, the myth of the patriarch in particular, and in playing simultaneously on the extremely familiar and the extremely uncomfortable within the realm of the family home, strike a deeply uncanny chord. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel brings the dead back to life, in a sense, as part of Bechdel's project is an act of ventriloquism: putting words into the mouth of the dead, giving animation to the inanimate, both in the representations of her father and in the world of things surrounding the Bechdel family. This project of re-animating the dead, in fact, is expressed quite simply in the book title, for *Fun Home* is the nickname of the Bechdel family business, short for funeral home.

To paraphrase cultural and literary critic Bill Brown, Alison Bechdel is able to do fascinating and surprising things with things. A self-professed obsessive—"I'm the most anal-retentive person I've ever met" (qtd. in Chute, "An Interview" 1007)—with a strong penchant for archiving, Bechdel draws from her personal archive to cre-

ate the sensation of authenticity in comics format. In frame after frame, she faithfully copies her own childhood handwriting, her father's handwriting (a very painstaking process, she mentions in the Chute interview), type-written letters from her father with spelling and alignment mistakes, long passages from important books, local maps, visual details of the family home interior, and family photographs. This selective archive of things crowding each frame establishes Bechdel's veracity as memoirist. In *Fun Home*, "the autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 7) is in many ways forged by a reader's engagement with representations of Bechdel's things, things that Ann Cvetkovich calls "memorial talismans that carry the affective weight of the past" (120). Cvetkovich argues that by drawing by hand and not simply scanning such things into the text, Bechdel imbues these things with an intense emotionality that adds a kind of witnessing dimension to them; they do not merely serve as information for the reader, but also as affective and thus connective sites of identification.

In what Brown has named "thing theory," he advocates for literary critics to formulate a history of things, and in particular a history in things, that produces new forms of knowledge and desires, that defies containment and definition, and that gives us glimpses as to how "things might be other than what they are" or appear to be (10). Thing theory and queer theory intersect and share certain interests, especially in the way that these theories are not meant to function merely as explanatory tools, but more as activating tools. Brown's "thing theory," like queer theory, looks for moments of disruption when artists and writers are able to "misuse" an object and its representation, to "re-objectify" that object as a way to "clear the dust away," to snap us out of habitual forms of seeing that blind us to the slippages and contingencies of everyday life (10). Thus, also as in queer theory, the purpose of such a form of reading is to catalyze a subject but not contain it (3). It is my contention that Bechdel's handling of things in *Fun Home* queers conventions of both autobiography and comics in this way, allowing us glimpses into new possibilities for self-representation.

While Brown's thing theory calls attention to representations of things such as dolls, paperclips, stones and glass, Bechdel draws on one of the most interesting and liminal of familiar objects. A photograph is a fascinating object, especially in its materiality. Like a chair or a doll, a photograph is an object or thing to hold and display, yet its constitutive ideologies are more obvious. The traces of life and light that are contained in the photograph render it one of the most uncanny of all objects.

In *Fun Home*, each chapter title plate is a drawing of a photograph that actually exists, and more photographs of the Bechdel family are included in individual panels. Importantly, Bechdel calls attention to the thingness of the title plate photographs, for she draws photo corners, as if the photos are still in place inside a Bechdel family photo album, perhaps suggesting that the book you are holding in your hands is that album, that *Fun Home* is a new form, what an album could be, consisting of memory, emotion, artistry, and archive.

Bechdel carefully differentiates the title plate photos, as well as some of the photos that appear in the course of the narrative, from the main body of comics. While slightly cartoonish due to the fact that they are hand-rendered pen-and-ink illustrations, they are nevertheless more real looking than the character drawings in the main

body of the text. The drawings of photographs communicate a kind of seriousness in their realism, and serve as a *memento mori* for the lost father. The sense of mourning elicited by these photos is achieved stylistically through contrast; that is, the realism of the photo drawings acts as a “disruptive force” and as “the unassimilable real” within the memoir (Cvetkovich 117). According to Bechdel herself, this disruption is necessary in order to “continually [ground] the story—reminding readers that it really happened, that the characters are real people” (Tison). As a result of this intention, the Bruce Bechdel in the photograph drawings and the cartoon version of Bruce Bechdel in the sequential narrative appear almost as two different people, and it is in the gap between these different versions of Bruce (the gap literalized visually by the gutter or by the turning of a page) that a sensation of discomfort resides. Yet this is a memoir, and the real person is signified by a drawing, or rather a multiplicity of drawings, an uncanny signifier of the dead man himself, but perhaps even more so, the various drawings of Bruce are really autobiographical avatars (Whitlock) of Alison Bechdel, the artist-storyteller-daughter. What this gap reminds us of is that the real Bruce Bechdel exists only as an un-representable ghost haunting the gutters of the comic book, a paratextual presence invoked through a continual reminder of his absence. Bechdel literalizes Barthes’ claim that “Death is the *eidos*” (15) of the photograph: in the title picture for Chapter 2, “A Happy Death,” with her rendering of a photo not of Bruce himself but of his grave, his name partially concealed by flowers. In a very real sense, this is Bruce Bechdel.

In a crucial moment in the first chapter of the text, Bechdel uses the family photograph to depict Bruce’s attempt at control over the Bechdel family image. His photographing of the family is contextualized by a caption that echoes Marianne Hirsch’s claim that the family photograph is instrumental in building the ideology of the family, in particular in its gesturing towards “[reducing] the strains of family life by sustaining an imaginary cohesion” (7). With Bruce taking a picture of his wife and three children on the steps of their home, Bechdel’s caption reads: “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they are not. . . That is to say, impeccable” (16). Already indicating a rupture in the image of the cohesive family, Bechdel then queers this moment almost immediately. The next frame shows the Bechdel family at church, Bruce surreptitiously eyeing an altar boy, with the caption: “But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (17). This line is delivered matter-of-factly, but its effect is explosive. This moment is not simply a revelation of same-sex desire, but one that borders on what many readers would consider criminal deviance, an issue Bechdel complicates throughout the text, first indicated here with a Wildean allusion that adds a strangely ironic twist to this shocking revelation. Not only is the secret at the heart of this family revealed up front, but such a revelation positions queerness right in the center of the family. This is an almost instantaneous subversion of the power of the father, achieved by exposing familial cohesion as an illusion created in large part by the things of family life, with Bechdel performing this deconstruction by de-mystifying the photographic process itself, using comics to make visible what appears invisible in the family snapshot.

By continually incorporating the photograph into this graphic memoir, Bechdel

transposes some of the qualities of the family album into comics format and vice-versa. By shuttling between and layering photographic and comics methods, it is as if the text is always pulling the reader in different directions, between the photographic real and the graphically comic. But Bechdel ultimately meshes comics and photographic discourses, revealing both not so much as possible signs of reality per se, but as routes towards expressing emotional truth and affective experience. The use of language or captions, which is such an important (though not axiomatic) genre aspect of comics, allows Bechdel to clearly question the factuality of the photograph. As in the example above, through captioning she reveals that truth does not reside in what is depicted in the family photo album; rather, what is true is usually what photographs attempt to conceal. Further, what is concealed is often woundedness and trauma, a kind of truth that is less about factual evidence and more about subjectivity and emotion. Here the comics form has a particular role to play in representing affective experience, particularly when it comes to the style of the author's line drawing: "In the graphic narrative. . . the presence of the body, through the hand, as a mark in the text. . . lends a subjective register to the narrative surface of comics pages that further enables comics works to be productively self-aware in how they 'materialize' history" (Chute, "Comics" 457). In other words, while Bechdel is clear about amassing factual, archival evidence to produce her memoir, the graphic form itself continually communicates the subjective and affective dimension of these pieces of evidence.

On the other side, by using photographs and the family album as the foundation for much of her drawing, she opens the way for the comics format to produce the same kind of emotional impact so often evoked by photographs, imbuing her graphics with the same sense of uncanniness and nostalgia that a photograph is able to communicate. That is, as Barthes has so convincingly argued, photographs are potentially intensely emotional things, able to place the viewer into a vulnerable position, one of affective engagement with the image, embodied in the image's potential for producing a feeling of woundedness, what he calls the photograph's *punctum* (27). Thus photography and comics meet in *Fun Home* along the axis of emotionality, so that ultimately each discourse reinforces the other, creating multiple emotional entryways into Bechdel's story. Once she has pulled us inside this world, Bechdel politicizes affective experience through her queer moves, rendering *Fun Home* a memoir that meditates not just on the emotions of family life, but also on the politics of emotion.

Nancy Miller says about *Fun Home* that "[t]he tangled relation of self to family stories and settings is illustrated with extraordinary complexity," and then uses Bechdel's text as instrumental for formulating her main argument regarding autobiography as a specific genre:

Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the "autobiographical pact." Not the exception but the rule. Put it in another way, in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose. (544)

Miller deliberately allows for ambiguity and slippage in regards to who these “others” are: on the one hand she refers to the others within the memoir, in this case, to Bechdel's relation to other family members, her father in particular. But Miller indicates that the others here are also the readers, for through identifying with the narrator and her things we, too, become emotionally entangled within the family drama: “the reader. . . is the autobiographer's most necessary other” (545). Thus Miller positions the reader, the object of address, as the privileged other. In this statement, Miller addresses the memoir's particular politics of emotion: by pulling the reader into a “web of entanglement,” it renders the private emotions linked to family life a relational and collective experience. As I will discuss later, this move from private to public revelation radically transgresses the implicit familial imperative to maintain silence, especially around issues of queerness. But it is also this slippage between the internal familial relations depicted in the text, and the reader-response aspect of autobiography, that Miller's formulation touches upon photographic relationality, for the photographic familial gaze is, like the autobiographical conditions mentioned here, produced by both forms of inter-relationship layered one upon the other: internal and external dynamics of the gaze at play.

Significantly, in the panel following the revelation of her father's desires, Bechdel reconfigures the family photograph and therefore the family dynamic she has set up thus far. Young Alison now stands where father stood taking a snapshot; she becomes the one with the camera in her hands, thus she seems to be saying that she is taking things back from the “old artificer”—the Joycean term she applies to her father (17). In the sequential reading of the chapter, this panel comes across subtly yet powerfully: it is a clear sign of the daughter reinterpreting the things of her family's life; it is a very bold wresting of control. In general in *Fun Home*, Bechdel takes the things of her family and inserts them into “an alternative economy” from that of her father, one that is “an intensely private and privatizing reorientation of value,” and yet, interestingly, she turns this notion of privacy on its head at the very same time as she claims it (Brown 20). Throughout the text Bruce is framed as attempting to control the outward image of the family through photographic imagery and his complete control over the aesthetics of the family home; this, Bechdel shows, was his way of manipulating the surface of things in order to hide in plain sight. It is Bechdel who literally handles things differently, transforming her own private universe into public spectacle through drawing and through outing. Orientation becomes a key factor here in relation to the re-interpretation and re-signification of things, and not just in terms of sexual orientation; rather, Bechdel's text activates and exposes the contingency and situationality of things, how things, like language and images, can be taken out of their habitual uses and spaces to be made anew, made critical and affective, and perhaps most importantly, made queer.

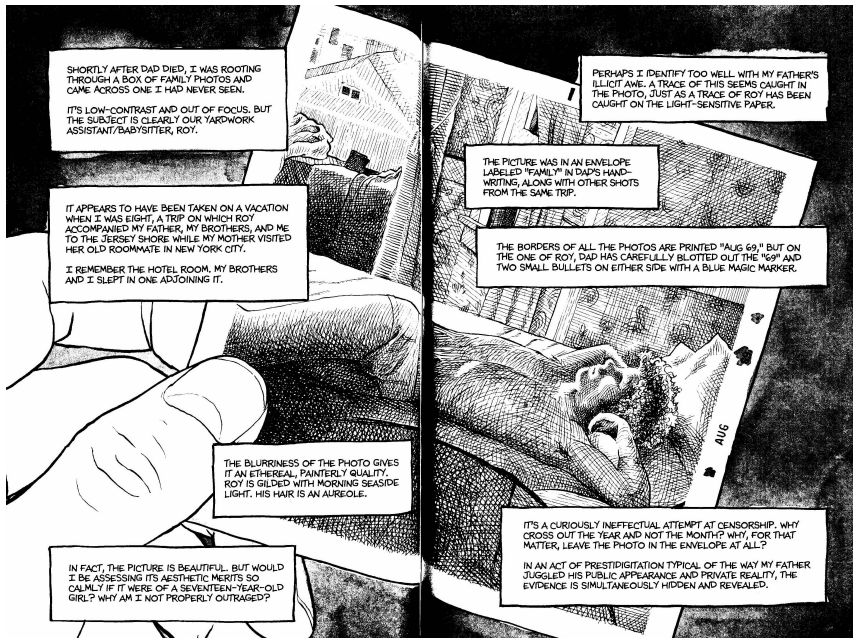
Hirsch argues convincingly that the myth of the family is constituted by an exchange of gazes, what she calls “the familial gaze,” which is a kind of web of inter-relationship or visual narrative told through photographic juxtaposition: “...the family is in itself traversed and constituted by a series of ‘familial’ looks that place different

individuals into familial relation within a field of vision” (53). But interestingly, she does not theorize one of this field’s most obvious imperatives, that of reproducing heterosexuality. A field in this sense is defined not just by what is included within the exchange of gazes, but also by what falls outside or is excluded from such a field, and it is very often queerness that is excluded from the familial gaze; Bruce is very careful to arrange the image of his life to enact this exclusion, though, and especially through his daughter’s intervention, he ultimately fails. Sara Ahmed sees family photographs—whether placed on the wall or in the album—as objects that “measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift,” and furthermore, that familial photographs “do not simply record or transmit a life; they demand a return” (559). In this formulation, family photographs are not simply objects for display, but are used as a means towards the reproduction of heterosexuality, the familial gaze imploring one to continue the family line in an orderly (i. e. straight) fashion. It is this heterosexual imperative, linked to the imperative to silence I briefly mentioned, that Bechdel queers in *Fun Home*, and there is no better illustration of this queering dynamic than the two-page spread that constitutes *Fun Home*’s centerpiece.

The centerfold of *Fun Home* is just that—the image of a semi-nude person, in this case a young man, spread across two pages and placed at the very center of the book. The young man depicted is Roy, the Bechdel children’s babysitter, and the photographer is Bruce. Bechdel, again, draws an actual photograph, in fact the photograph which she claims inspired the entire book project (Chute, “Interview” 1005). She again uses captions and comics methods to contextualize this photograph and to draw us into her world, and in this particular case, one important piece of her drawing serves to position us, the readers, the privileged others, into multiple subject positions and gazes vis a vis the text. Coming up from the bottom left corner is the drawing of a hand grasping the photograph, and it is the drawing of this hand—positioned almost exactly where a reader’s hand would hold the book—that Bechdel ingeniously creates a site of affect and palpable, physical connection between reader and image/text.

The most obvious reading of this hand is that it is Bechdel’s own, as she explains in the first caption the circumstances that led her to discover the picture; Cvetkovich, for example, reads the hand in this way “This aligns us with Bechdel’s own surprised and perplexed gaze, a gaze easy for us to slip into, as it is Bechdel who we have been following throughout the tale thus far. However, I think this image of a hand is much more ambiguous” (115). Another way to imagine the hand is that is Bruce’s, and we are gazing at the beauty of the young man much as he would have done; in a sense, we are sharing his erotic and queer gaze. But the fact that our hand rests in the same position as the drawing renders this an image of our own hand as well—as a kind of repetition or echo—demonstrating our kaleidoscopic complicity with Bechdel’s and Bruce’s queer gazes. This a graphic show of our role in the “web of entanglement” that Miller suggests is foundational to the efficacy of autobiography, made manifest at a very queer reading moment.

Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics* that the more cartoonish and abstract faces are drawn in comics, the more the reader imagines him or herself “in-



side” the frame so to speak, pointing to the way in which comics interpolates a reader into the visual world on display (36 – 7). Yet faces, even the most abstract, are still other and distant. By drawing just a hand, Bechdel arguably allows us to place ourselves into the frame to an even greater degree, for there is no other we can definitively locate; it is a likeness of our own hand, at the exact same time that we imagine it to be Bechdel’s and Bruce’s as well. Such a move paradoxically calls attention to the thingness of the book itself—the weight in our hands and the feel of the page are highlighted when we become aware of our own hand, our own bodily position in space. That is, we become aware of our position as reader and, simultaneously, we are entangled in the world of the text; we are both outside and inside, both ourselves and other. And it is particular to touching, to the tactile realm, that the slippage between inside/outside becomes understandable, for to touch is always, also, to be touched; there is a reciprocal dynamic at work, one that bridges visibility and tactility, or seeing and feeling. While Chute pays attention to the tactile or haptic elements of *Fun Home* in her book *Graphic Women*, like Cvetkovich she keeps her analysis focused on how tactility functions within the text, as a form of connection between the artist and her representations (197 – 200). What I am suggesting is that the haptic moments also constitute a palpable form of readerly address, where the internal gaze constructed in the text meets the external gaze of the reader through invoking the hand, creating the conditions for affective forms of reading. So in invoking touch, then, Bechdel is not only trying to touch and thus recapture her father by repeatedly drawing his body, she is also touching us; we are also absorbed into the author’s reach.

This queer, palpable moment of moving into tactility is one that Bechdel repeats several pages later in the text. What strikes me as particularly interesting is that a



drawing of a hand grasping a photograph occurs at moments in the text when queerness is actively acknowledged. On page 120, Bechdel draws a photo of her father as a young man wearing a woman's bathing suit, another one of him sunbathing in which she wonders if the photographer was his male lover, and a third picture of herself as a young woman, looking quite butch. Each of these photo-drawings depicts a hand holding the photo's edge. Again, this is a representation of the way in which readership works; our hands, which echo Bechdel's images of hands, become the link through which we see and feel things queerly in *Fun Home*.

WHAT'S LOST IN TRANSLATION IS THE COMPLEXITY OF LOSS ITSELF. IN THE SAME BOX WHERE I FOUND THE PHOTO OF ROY, THERE'S ONE OF DAD AT ABOUT THE SAME AGE.



Bechdel acknowledges that on this page she is making a comparison between her and her father's sexualities through photographic juxtaposition, that is, through the familial gaze: "The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces—it's about as close as a translation can get" (120). Thus Bechdel reformulates and queers the familial gaze; family photographs do not follow the pattern of the heterosexual imperative. These images certainly contribute to the child's formation of sexuality, but a sexuality which Bechdel describes

as a “translation,” not a reproduction. There are no straight lines of reproduction here, only approximations and subterfuges; that most of these photos were found in a box labeled “Family,” including the picture of Roy, emphasizes Bechdel’s (and arguably her father’s) deliberate queering of the photographic familial gaze. And by incorporating the reader into the familial web of looking and being looked at (and touched), Bechdel begins the process of breaking down what textual representations of family mean.

Much like Bechdel’s re-orientation of the family photograph, her drawings of the interior décor of the Bechdel home function in a similar manner. That is, decorative objects also act as things that both represent what they are (drapes, lamps, wallpaper, etc.) and take on meanings that resonate far beyond their immediate function as things; their meaning is not contained within the representation itself. As I have already mentioned, most of the household objects and the arrangement of these objects are a product of Bruce’s aesthetic control over the family environment. This control over the décor is even more powerful than his control over the photographic image of the family. One of the very first things we learn about Bruce is his obsession with decorating and restoring the family’s Victorian-era home: “His greatest achievement, arguably, was his monomaniacal restoration of our old house” (4). The result of his endeavor appeared magical in the eyes of young Alison: “The gilt cornices, the marble fireplace, the crystal chandeliers, the shelves of calf-bound books—these were not so much bought as produced from thin air by my father’s remarkable legerdemain” (5). But this obsession with beauty and perfection came in the form of total control; when the child Alison protested against the wallpaper he chose for her room, “But I hate pink! I hate flowers!” Bruce’s response was simply, “Tough tittie” (7). At the same time, Bruce’s obsession with décor and household aesthetics more generally, a feminine and thus suspect obsession, always threatened to undermine his performance as a straight family man; even the young Alison saw this: “Of all his domestic inclinations, my father’s decided bent for gardening was the most redolent to me of that other, deeply disturbing bent” (90).

In *Fun Home*, the things of the Bechdel house are not simply signs of class status and consumption, or some kind of simple signifier of taste, or even, as in the example above, an oblique reference to the gender queer lurking in the Bechdel family home. Instead, things, as drawn by Bechdel, take on a kind of phenomenological function; they are the necessary background that Bechdel must return to in order to map out and re-orient familial space. She retrieves these things from her past, and while in one sense copying them (and as she mentions in interviews, relying heavily on old photographs to do this), she does more than this: in terms of their significance and resonance, she repositions familial things by drawing them while still remaining faithful to the form and organization of the things themselves. That is, she shows her readers how Bruce organized the image of the family and the rooms they inhabited, but through comics—fragmenting and arranging these personalized copies in time and space along graphic axes, and contextualizing these drawings with a personal narrative—she is able to activate these emblems of familial life, imbuing them with life and movement; things become facilitators of complex affective experiences for both

creator and reader. By reclaiming her own past through her management of things, Bechdel's text provides a very powerful example to her readers of just how to do this; this activating principle at work can thus be considered a form of empowerment, one purposely made accessible to her readers, and this is definitely part of the book's overwhelmingly positive reception.

Ahmed reminds us that the family home is the primary site of habit, and just like the demands made by family photographs, this primary familial site is the necessary background from which heterosexuality is the intended effect of the organization of space: "heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, of how objects are arranged to create a background" (558). Furthermore, the interior space of the house is like a stage, and the family that inhabits that space is always on show to a certain extent within that space. The interior, or private, is a kind of practice ground for the public face of the family; in domestic space, what has been categorized as public and private is in reality blurred and often indistinguishable. Bechdel reveals the reality of this liminality, turning family secrets outward, revealing what lurks in the folds of the drapes, in the gilt of the cornices, in the smiles of the photos. What I want to suggest is that this re-orientation, this turning outward, this queering of private and public Bechdel constantly toys with in the pages of *Fun Home*, also represents a violation of the family. And like the "web of entanglement" Miller discusses, this violation, I argue, is foundational to the efficacy of this autobiography.

While Bechdel invites us into the intimate realm of family emotion, she establishes trust with her readers not merely through a kind of complicity of gazes and the sharing of secrets, but that veracity is also established through Bechdel's violation of the family pact. By this phrase I mean the implicit directive to maintain silence, to keep family secrets just that. Instead, if what we are given is a new kind of family album, it is from the perspective of the rebellious daughter shouting family secrets from the rooftop. Bechdel transforms private suffering into a text for public consumption, and her subjective experience is given representation as a means for eliciting emotion on a collective scale. In a sense, she forfeits her nuclear family for the sake of us, the readers, numerous and invisible and imagined. *Fun Home* is at once a breathtaking act of betrayal, and an open-armed, extended invitation to share in her world; there is, in my mind, something very queer in this balance between betrayal and invitation. It is interesting that the book is dedicated to her mother and brothers, to whom she writes, "We did have a lot of fun, in spite of everything" (iv). In the acknowledgements that follow the last page, she thanks them again "for not trying to stop me from writing this book" (234). These paratextual addresses come across as apologetic and defiant at the same time, and as readers we perhaps trust Bechdel more because of her willingness to betray these people, as the reader is in turn framed as a kind of confidante, pulled into the web of revelations and connections yet still separate from it.

This sense of violation is also, I think, an inherent part of the book's project in terms of its handling of things. To take the habitual forms of family filiation—in this memoir expressed through a return to the family's things—and point them in new di-

reactions, giving them a new spin, is in itself an act of violence or violation; in this particular case, Bechdel violates the order of the father. To queer representations of the family, to queer familial space and imagery, is to expose the family as oriented in the first place; one of the ways that heterosexuality holds onto the image of itself as normal and natural is precisely by obscuring the fact that is produced and constructed through the orientation of things, spaces, and people (Ahmed). To expose the contingency of all things and identities is to queer them; and with exposure comes the possibility for deconstruction and critique. In *Fun Home* Bechdel's politics of emotion goes to the heart of familial things and shows how to transform these things into points of connection, affect, critique, readership, and knowledge. There is a certain intimacy established with readers in violating the familial pact, as we are invited, in fact wholeheartedly encouraged, to peer deep inside the fun home. Filiality is thus transformed into a question of readership: to whom are our loyalties directed? Why should we keep secrets as a form of honoring the nuclear (and heterosexual) family? In the same vein, why maintain a line between public and private forms of family and feeling? Perhaps it is Bechdel's own queer identity that has given her the courage to step outside the familial pact and expose its constitutive ideologies by re-orienting the things that define it.

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