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### Graphic and Textual Representations of Queerness in *Fun Home*

On the first page of *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel depicts herself as a child, wearing loose fitting pants and a basic striped t-shirt, playing with her father. This outfit, in combination with her short haircut, gives her an androgynous look.<sup>1</sup> In the coming pages, Bechdel draws Alison next to other girls her age who present as more stereotypically feminine, with long hair and girlish skirts and blouses.<sup>2</sup> Through the drawings, Bechdel thus begins to portray herself queering gender from a young age. These images prompt the reader to engage with queerness from the beginning of the graphic novel, before young Alison questions her own sexuality and before the text explicitly alludes to it. Throughout the entirety of the graphic novel, words and images combine to construct an understanding of queerness. In some sections the graphic and textual elements complement and build upon one another, while in others the images provide a context or way of understanding completely separate from that contained in the text. Whether they are complementary or contradictory, the varying depictions of sexual identity and gender expression in the drawings and text of *Fun Home* create a fuller, more dynamic understanding of Alison and her father while engaging with a wider conversation about queer representation.

Alison's androgynous appearance evolves throughout the graphic novel. One flashback shows Alison getting lunch with her father as a young girl when, for the first time in her life, she sees a masculine presenting woman.<sup>3</sup> The images and the text play off of one another in these panels as Alison promises her father she does not want to look like "the truck-driving bulldyke"

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (New York: Mariner Books, 2007), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 5

<sup>3</sup> Bechdel, 118.

despite watching her with big, hopeful eyes.<sup>4</sup> Bechdel explains in the textboxes the significance of this moment for young Alison, noting that she “recognized [the woman] with a surge of joy” and that the image of female masculinity “sustained [her] through the years.”<sup>5</sup> Bechdel recounts this moment of her childhood in an interview on NPR, confirming that the scenario, including the location and her father’s comments, are depicted in *Fun Home* as they actually occurred.<sup>6</sup> In the interview Bechdel expands on how striking and meaningful it was to see the “burly woman with short hair and men’s clothes.”<sup>7</sup> As Alison gets older, she begins to consciously bend gender.

While much of the physical representation of Alison and her father is visual, such as the playful opening scene, there are key parts of the graphic novel where the text and the images comment upon one another to construct a physical queerness. On pages 96 to 99 Bechdel shows Alison growing up arguing about gender expression with her father. The text and drawings combine to show one such argument when Alison’s father clips her short hair back with a barrette: the drawings depict Alison getting upset and fiddling with the barrette while the text adds that, to Alison’s pleasure, her cousins nicknamed her “Butch.”<sup>8</sup> On page 35 Bechdel comments that in her first-grade photo she was “Wearing a black velvet dress [her] father had wrestled [her] into” and that she “appear[ed] to be in mourning.” These comments indicate that already at six years old she was uncomfortable wearing feminine clothes. In the picture Alison is wearing the same barrette that her father forces on her in the later scene, though there is no mention of it in the text.<sup>9</sup> As she gets older, Alison continues to tussle with her father about her

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<sup>4</sup> Bechdel, 118-119.

<sup>5</sup> Bechdel, 118-119.

<sup>6</sup> NPR, "Lesbian Cartoonist Alison Bechdel Countered Dad's Secrecy By Being Out And Open," (August 17, 2015), accessed December 6, 2016, <<http://www.npr.org/2015/08/17/432569415/lesbian-cartoonist-alison-bechdel-countered-dads-secrecy-by-being-out-and-open>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bechdel, 96-97.

<sup>9</sup> Bechdel, 35.

physical appearance; he “want[s] the velvet and pearls” and so tries to force them on her while Alison scoffs and defiantly opts instead for the “least girly” dresses she can find.<sup>10</sup> In her interview, Bechdel tells NPR that those fights defined her childhood from as early as she can remember. She explains that she “felt very powerless... like [she] was living some kind of lie.”<sup>11</sup>

Once she leaves home, Alison does not have to worry as much about her physical appearance. When Alison finds out her father has died, she is wearing a wrinkled plaid button-down, a stereotypical item and symbol of pride within the lesbian community.<sup>12</sup> To add to the aesthetic, her sleeves are rolled up unconcernedly to her elbows. These drawings present Alison as casually masculine. After college, when Alison moves to New York City, she presents as even more masculine.<sup>13</sup> In one scene on page 107 Alison wears men’s shoes and wonders if she could “pass the three-articles-of-women’s-clothing rule” from three decades earlier. The images show her embracing her queerness on the subway and in lesbian clubs while the text adds historical context.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Alison’s increasingly masculine gender expression, her father is never able to present himself in the more flamboyant manner he would like. Instead, he feels a constant pressure to perform masculinity. Though he works tirelessly to fill the heteronormative role of a father, there are moments where his facade cracks. On page seven Bechdel depicts her father laboring on their home, “martyred,” as a queered Jesus Christ carrying a banister on his shoulder and wearing short, cut-off jean shorts.

After his death, Alison’s father’s queerness became more visible. On pages 100 and 101 Bechdel includes a full, two page drawing of Alison’s hand, holding out a photo she found of

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<sup>10</sup> Bechdel, 98-99.

<sup>11</sup> NPR, “Lesbian Cartoonist Alison Bechdel Countered Dad's Secrecy By Being Out And Open.”

<sup>12</sup> Bechdel, 45-57.

<sup>13</sup> Bechdel, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Bechdel, 107.

one of her father's lovers. The boy in the photo is their "yardwork assistant/babysitter, Roy," laying almost naked in bed.<sup>15</sup> The fold in the book cuts and obscures the photo, adding to what Bechdel describes as a "low-contrast and out of focus" drawing.<sup>16</sup> The image is inaccessible for the reader as it is for Alison. Julia Watson explains that the way "the twice-life-sized fingers on a left hand" hold the photo out "reminds [readers] of our complicity as viewers in this intimate glimpse, as our hand holding the book overlaps hers."<sup>17</sup> However, in contrast with much of the graphic novel, on this spread the text tells most of the story. The image of Roy sprawled out like a model in tight underwear portrays a specific, nearly feminine male queerness, but Bechdel uses text boxes over the drawing to convey a spanning backstory.<sup>18</sup> Bechdel describes the trip Alison, her brothers, their father, and Roy took to the beach in New Jersey, and digs into her father's mind, asking why he kept the photo.<sup>19</sup> The last text box on the page describes the photo as "evidence" of her father's double life, positioning Alison as a detective.<sup>20</sup> This dynamic reoccurs throughout the graphic novel, in particular as Bechdel depicts Alison coming out as a lesbian.

Throughout the graphic novel, Bechdel's drawings and text play off of one another to portray closetedness, to tell her own coming out story, and to comment on the meaning of coming out in the construction of queer identity. Bechdel positions Alison in contrast with her father, who was also gay but never came out despite having male lovers throughout his life. Watson explains that Bechdel depicts "Alison's own adolescent coming of age as always a coming-out story," noting how she complicates that trope of queerness and the relationship

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<sup>15</sup> Bechdel, 100-101.

<sup>16</sup> Bechdel, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Julia Watson, "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Biography* 31, no. 1 (2008): 41.

<sup>18</sup> Bechdel, 100-101.

<sup>19</sup> Bechdel, 100-101.

<sup>20</sup> Bechdel, 101.

between Alison and her father by “imagining the story her father did not, could not, tell his family.”<sup>21</sup>

On pages 74 and 75, Bechdel depicts and narrates how she came out to herself, first happening on the definition of “Lesbian” in the dictionary when she was 13 and later reading stacks of books with queer themes during her first year of college. In this passage, the drawings and text combine to add a depth of understanding to Alison’s discomfort as she comes to terms with her identity. Bechdel draws Alison wearing a long trench coat with the collar popped up as she browses the library stacks, as if to hide her face.<sup>22</sup> The visual of the big trench coat evokes the image of a spy or a detective, showing Alison in a stealthy but hungry search for knowledge; she is undercover, not yet comfortable with her lesbian identity, diligently learning more about herself and the gay community.<sup>23</sup> Alison uncovers her father’s queerness the same way she discovers her own. She pieces together evidence that her father was gay until he is ultimately uncloseted in death. Alison’s facial expressions in this library passage complicate the emotions the text conveys. When she first learns the definition of “Lesbian” as a young girl, Alison looks nervous and concerned.<sup>24</sup> Bechdel juxtaposes that young expression with one that is alert and serious about her queer research as a college student. Bechdel shows Alison’s studious expression with a large exclamation point, downturned eyebrows, and a small mouth. Finally, as she is taking books off the shelf and paying for one at the checkout counter, Alison appears uncertain. She looks out of the corner of her eye, as if pretending to be nonchalant, worried that somebody might be watching her.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Watson, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Bechdel, 74-75.

<sup>23</sup> Bechdel, 74-75.

<sup>24</sup> Bechdel, 74.

<sup>25</sup> Bechdel, 75.

The text explains that Alison had “been having qualms” about her identity since she was 13, and implies that she drew inspiration from the books she read to move past her discomfort.<sup>26</sup> However, the images provide a nuance that characterize Alison and make her discomfort, easily generalized to that felt by much of the queer community, shockingly familiar and unavoidable. Her expressions are recognizable and relatable; they encourage empathy from the reader in a way that Bechdel’s colder, more factual textual account of “trolling the public library, heedless of the risks” does not.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the drawings in this passage include the text of the dictionary entry she read when she was young and the titles of other books in the library. Drawings of Alison’s facial expressions and body language change dramatically to show her growing up and becoming more comfortable with her sexuality. The images of her nervousness in the library are juxtaposed with images of Alison reading aloud during sex, laughing and fully embracing her lesbian identity.<sup>28</sup>

The text and images in *Fun Home* combine to honestly and explicitly depict lesbian sex. On page 214, Bechdel depicts the first time she performed oral sex on her college girlfriend, Joan. The text compares the experience to the Odyssey, explaining that “In true heroic fashion, [Alison] moved toward the thing [she] feared/ yet while Odysseus schemed desperately to escape Polyphemus’s cave, [she] found that [she] was quite content to stay here forever.”<sup>29</sup> Combining this text with explicit drawings, Bechdel clearly indicates the “cave” Alison is happy to stay in is her girlfriend’s vagina, constructing a narrative about the nervousness and excitement of having sex for the first time. Three cells visually depict Alison between her girlfriend’s legs, slowing

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<sup>26</sup> Bechdel, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Bechdel, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Bechdel, 80-81.

<sup>29</sup> Bechdel, 214.

down the action and building tension to match the nervousness Alison feels in the scene.<sup>30</sup> The scene does not shy away from the intimate details of lesbian sex, even showing Joan's thick pubic hair. The sex scenes in *Fun Home* are essential to the dynamic narrative of queerness that Bechdel creates.

The construction of queerness throughout *Fun Home* is highly intentional. Bechdel's images and text build upon and complicate one another in a depiction of queerness that matches the narrative structure of the graphic novel: a non-linear "pattern of returns and reversals punctuated by the rhythmic movement of self-questioning and self-commentary."<sup>31</sup> Heike Bauer articulates how graphic novels have the unique ability to break down tropes surrounding queerness, using "the interplay between verbal and visual representation" to create more "multidimensional meanings" and invite the reader to empathize on a deeper, more complicated level than text alone might inspire.<sup>32</sup> Though Bechdel depicts her own life and her own reality in *Fun Home*, she enters into a conversation about queerness and, as Bauer argues, brings queerness "into the literary mainstream."<sup>33</sup> By popularizing queerness, Bechdel accepts a degree of responsibility. Because people tend to homogenize underrepresented groups based on what they see in popular culture, a mainstream depiction of queerness as portrayed by a queer woman has the powerful ability to shape how society views the queer community. Lisa Kron, a lyricist who adapted *Fun Home* into an award winning Broadway play, comments on this power, noting that she was "worried" about authentically "portraying butchness" on the stage.<sup>34</sup> She explains that for queer people "gender expression has meaning" but in mainstream society "it's very difficult

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<sup>30</sup> Bechdel, 214.

<sup>31</sup> Watson, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Heike Bauer, "Comics, Graphic Narratives, and Lesbian Lives," *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature* (2015): 221.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>34</sup> NPR, "Lesbian Cartoonist Alison Bechdel Countered Dad's Secrecy By Being Out And Open."

to grasp” and “has often been expressed as a stock character of ridicule.”<sup>35</sup> Kron felt the importance of her job in transferring Bechdel’s narrative to Broadway where it could reach an even wider base. By carefully sorting through her past, choosing which memories and images to include and how to plot them in a multidimensional coming of age story, Bechdel “refus[es] a conventional coming-out narrative,” instead using text and drawings to portray an honest look at queerness as it is embodied by her younger self and her father.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Watson, 42.

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