

11 Alison Bechdel and the queer graphic novel

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It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. The most sturdy nouns faded to faint approximations under my pen. My *I thinks* were gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified.

(Bechdel 2006: 141–142)

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each 'element'-phoneme or grapheme-being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.

(Derrida 1981: 26)

Author of the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), artist, writer, and archivist Alison Bechdel subverts both form and content with her cartoony image-word pairings and her unique combination of humour, self-deprecation, and critical reflection. Born in 1960 and raised in rural Pennsylvania, Bechdel was drawn to art and literature from a young age, demonstrating an early talent for cartooning that she later parlayed into the syndicated comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008). In following the lives of a group of lesbian-identified women in a medium-sized, unnamed US city as they negotiated relationships, career, and contemporary politics, this long-running comic strip made significant contributions to representations of lesbians in popular culture.¹ In 2006, Bechdel published her first book *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, a graphic memoir framed through literary classics that details her early life and her fraught relationship with her father.² One of the primary aims of the memoir seems to be an attempt to uncover if her father's death may have actually been a suicide, a process that she undertakes by gathering and visually reproducing circumstantial evidence. Despite its comic-book nature, *Fun Home* is highly literary and innovative. Moreover, Bechdel also subverts the idea of autobiography in her intertextual dialogues with modernist literature, feminist theory, and complex psychoanalytical concepts. Indeed, in this joining of the comic strip with high-quality prose, it forces

us to question our assumptions about content, genre, and form, while also asking us to consider what is deemed a ‘classic’ or what is included in the literary canon. Indeed, in its combination of traditionally ‘high art’ with ‘low art’, *Fun Home* troubles – or perhaps queers – categories.

As will become clear throughout this chapter, *Fun Home* forces larger questions about inclusion and exclusion, not only with respect to literary canonization but also in terms of social marginalization. Hillary Chute (2008) writes of the rich tradition that female graphic novelists like Bechdel are currently establishing through a focus on themes like childhood and sexuality that are often relegated to silence. She writes that these writers/artists exemplify ‘how graphic narrative can envision an everyday reality of women’s lives, which, while rooted in the personal, is invested and threaded with collectivity, beyond prescriptive models of alterity or sexual difference’ (Chute 2008: 459). Chute goes on to elaborate on the significance of this work: ‘In every case, from the large-scale to the local, graphic narrative presents a traumatic side of history, but all these authors refuse to show it through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice’ (ibid.: 459). Graphic novels are, then, well positioned to make significant political and creative contributions that reformulate identity, visibility, and voice.

Through a brilliant combination of word and image that reimagines what literature is and could be, Bechdel engages in a genealogical project to dig up her own past. This process is done through a labyrinthian, non-sequential narrative that continually revisits and revises her childhood memories, telling and re-telling both mundane and remarkable events of her upbringing and relationship with her parents and siblings. Early on, Bechdel presents glimpses into what she retrospectively perceives as her dysfunctional family: Alison’s father Bruce, a high-school English teacher and amateur curator, cultivates a domineering yet emotionally distant atmosphere that we later learn may be belying his struggle with homosexuality or bisexuality. (In addition to obsessively restoring the Victorian home in which they live, her father also runs the town’s small funeral home, from which the text humorously takes its title ‘Fun Home’.) Meanwhile, her mother Helen, also a teacher, seems to cope with her husband’s micro-managing and sexual indiscretions by throwing herself into her artistic endeavours, particularly her acting roles in small community productions. In looking back, Bechdel presents a portrait of an artistic yet isolated family, each individual left to fend for themselves. Referring to her parents’ focus on their own creative work, she writes:

Their rapt immersion evokes a familiar resentment in me [...] It’s childish, perhaps, to grudge them the sustenance of their creative solitude. But it was all that sustained them, and was thus all consuming. From their example, I learned quickly to feed myself. It was a vicious circle, though. The more gratification we found in our own geniuses, the more isolated we grew. Our home was like an artists’ colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits.

(Bechdel 2006: 133–134)

Against the comic-style visual backdrop of Bechdel’s coming-of-age is the detailing of her coming out as a lesbian, a process that occurred alongside the revelation that her father also had same-sex relationships throughout his life. Although clues to her father’s desire for men and boys were revealed when she was in college, Bechdel was spurred to

begin writing and drawing the memoir upon encountering a photograph taken by her father decades earlier. In an interview, she stated that:

In many ways photographs really generated the book. In fact the whole story was spawned by a snapshot I found of our old babysitter lying on a hotel bed in his Jockey shorts [...] It was a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn't start working on the book then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It's literally the core of the book, the centerfold.

(quoted in Chute 2006: 1005–1006)

In her search to understand her father and her relationship with him, Bechdel worked on the book for seven years, returning to other photographs, letters, novels, and documents to laboriously and painstakingly reconstruct these archival documents in the form of her drawings.³ Each of *Fun Home*'s seven chapters opens with a graphic recreation of a photograph and is then organized around a different book or author. Intertextuality is a hallmark of the text, as she engages with a number of modernist novels and cites a number of classic works, including Albert Camus's *A Happy Death*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, Henry James's *Washington Square*, and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. She also demonstrates the impact that feminist and lesbian writings have had on her as well, as we see her recreating the novels she herself read to come to terms with her own sexuality, citing writers like Adrienne Rich, Anaïs Nin, Kate Millett, Colette, Virginia Woolf, Ruby Mae Brown, and Radclyffe Hall.

How to read a graphic novel: *Fun Home*

As we will see in *Fun Home*, graphic novels generate new and alternate meanings through a constant juxtaposition of two symbol systems: discursivity and visuality. They are able to experiment with form and content in their unique and constantly changing arrangements of words and visuals, creating different forms of signification than could other forms of literature. They are also able to spatially play with different temporalities, layering past, present, and future in a single panel or page. In graphic novels (sometimes called comics), the reader plays an active role in making meaning. Hillary Chute elaborates:

Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal – or use one simply to illustrate the other – but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning.

(2008: 452)

Indeed, reading a graphic novel is not a passive process, as the reader is drawn into the iterative construction of the visual and written elements.

While writing may seem to have a certain authority, in a graphic novel it is a combination of caption, speech balloons, and image that together shape the narrative. Often, the words confirm and further what is contained in the image, but not always, as the words

and visuals may at times contradict one another. Indeed, the power of graphic novels lies in that they do not always coalesce; in fact, the words may claim one thing, and the image may tell us something else. Graphic novels also uniquely play with absence and presence, as the blank spaces (also called gutters) around the separate panels communicate meaning as well. But through this element of emptiness, graphic novels also point to the limits of representation. Furthermore, as I will show in my analysis of *Fun Home*, the difficulties or problematics of strict dichotomies like absence/presence or fact/fiction may be made more apparent through the medium of the graphic novel.

Given this constant movement between the various elements of the text, how might we go about reading and analysing this form of literature? Just as in other modes of storytelling, we cannot ignore elements like plot, dialogue, tone, style, and character development, but in the graphic novel, we must also pay attention to visual features (e.g., form, colour, shading, fonts, blanks) and what they may indicate about plot and content. Questions worth considering when reading a graphic novel include the following: What do the captions say? How do they confirm or contradict the images? How is dialogue represented? In what ways do speech balloons further the narrative? How do the panels physically fit together? What is the size and shape of panels communicating? How might we interpret gutters and empty space on the page? How might meaning change if we were to read a page's panels in a different order?

Graphic narratives cannot be read without a complex back-and-forth process wherein we move between all the distinct yet mutually constitutive elements of the story. As we will see below, *Fun Home* exemplifies a complex interplay between genre and form, with each having something important to say to the other. Bechdel's choice of form seems particularly suited to an archival exploration of understanding her past and her relationship to her closeted father, upon which Valerie Rohy elaborates: 'efforts to reimagine queer history have sought, albeit in different vocabularies, to resist teleology, linearity, causality, and the pose of epistemological mastery in favor of nonidentity, plurality, circularity, and the nonsequential narrative' (2010: 343). In its non-linear approach, the text moves back and forth between past and present, but also moves between Bechdel the writer and her younger self, Alison (a distinction I will also use to differentiate between the writer and herself as the protagonist of her own 'non-fictional' story). In constantly looping back onto itself – making use of repetition but repetition with a slight difference – *Fun Home* makes a point about the instability of memories and identity categories and the impossibility of any single truth.

Several themes run through the book, two of the most prominent being sexuality and literature, themselves intimately connected. Bechdel's search to understand her father's death is accompanied by an attempt to also come to terms with the fact that he may have been a closeted gay man, which itself is paralleled by her own coming out as a lesbian only months before he dies. For Alison, it is through books, not bodies or desires, that she begins to label her own sexuality. Coming across a dictionary entry of 'lesbian', Bechdel writes of her own realisation of her sexuality: 'My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind' (Bechdel 2006: 74). Alison goes on to spend considerable time in bookstores and libraries, eventually getting the courage to purchase volumes like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's *Lesbian/Woman* and *Homosexualities* by sexologists William Howell Masters and Virginia Johnson.

Connected to the memoir's exploration of sexuality is an investment in discussing non-normative gender expression. Foreclosing a critique that sexual orientation be

conflated with gender identity or gender expression, Bechdel admits that 'It's imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex' (ibid.: 97). Throughout her youth, Alison struggles to express her gender in the face of her father's strict requirements that she abide by acceptable 'femininity'. In stark contrast to her father's (absence of) masculinity, she is drawn toward 'traditional masculinity', presented in the form of sports stars and 'grimy deer hunters at the gas station, with their yellow workboots and shorn-sheep haircuts' (ibid: 96). And here, she writes of herself as stepping in where her father fell short, self-congratulatory when her older male cousins bestow her with the nickname 'butch': 'No one needed to explain what it meant. It was self-descriptive. Cropped, curt, percussive. Practically onomatopoeic. At any rate, the opposite of sissy. And despite the tyrannical power which he held sway, it was clear to me that my father was a big sissy' (ibid.: 97).

While she is 'butch' and her father is 'sissy', she finds that indeed they share certain non-normative traits. In the image below we see that she eventually labels them both as 'inverts', an outdated term used to refer to homosexuals, but one which also suggests overlaps between sexuality and gender, as homosexuals were seen to 'invert' or reverse gender traits. The text accompanying the image of her dandyish father in velvet suit and tie and Alison resisting her 'least girly dress in the store' reads: 'Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another. While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him [...] he was attempting to express something feminine through me' (ibid.: 98). Ann Cvetkovich comments on this scene: 'father and daughter mirror each other as gender-crossing homosexuals, they are intertwined in a way that doesn't allow easy distinctions between perverse and normal sexuality, obsession and art, or prelibation closeted queers and out and proud lesbians and gays' (2008: 119).

How does this image also reveal something about the narrative content? Without the included text, we would merely see father and daughter standing in front of the mirror, looking at each other. But the captions, speech balloons, and commentary add layers to the panel. Alison's father sits in the middle of the panel, but we only see his face in the reflected mirror, perhaps suggesting that he is always projecting an image of himself, a façade behind which he hides. In this panel, colour also plays a role: Alison's father is the only figure depicted in colour, with the lines of his jacket filled in with shades of green. But while our eyes may be drawn to the centre of the image where he stands, when we attempt to read the words, we are pulled in different directions, unsure of where to begin. Indeed, the order of the dialogue is not clear, and we may read the elements of the page in a different order each time, yielding multiple meanings.

This image we can also read as a follow-up to one of the opening panels of *Fun Home* wherein Bechdel also defines herself against her father. Combined with four equally sized images in which we see Alison and her father side-by-side yet at odds with one another, the text reads: 'I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete' (Bechdel 2006: 15). As we will see later, *Fun Home* lends itself to exploring how concepts are constituted and understood through their oppositions, for which we will adopt a deconstructive approach to uncover how the image/text pairing may deconstruct dichotomies. Reflecting on these coercive dressing scenes wherein Alison is forced to dress like a 'girl', Jane Tolmie describes Bechdel's graphic memoir as resituating the historically marginalized, a process that has political implications as well:

I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN. MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.

UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.



Figure 11.2 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*: 'I was Spartan to my father's Athenian [...]' © Alison Bechdel (2006). Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Fun Home demonstrates that queerness is marked and forced to be different in negative ways, rather than being allowed to be in any sense positively or creatively different [...] Quotidian difference, as it were, is one of the strengths of the piece, which literally shows us in pictures how the heterosexist world makes queerness different. Bechdel's explorations of difference seek to break down the apartheid type of difference between straight and queer.

(Tolmie 2009: 83)

This breaking down – even deconstructing of straight and gay – is a practice central to not only feminist and queer theory but also to deconstruction, as we will see below.

Poststructuralism and deconstruction

To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell.

(Spivak 1976: lxxviii)

Thanks to its genre-bending, non-linearity, meta-reflections on the relationship between writer and text, and thematics of non-normative sexualities, *Fun Home* lends itself especially well to an engagement with poststructuralist philosophy and queer theory. Indeed, an exploration of poststructuralism – and its tool of deconstruction – could allow us a way into analysing the complexities and complications of Bechdel's narrative. While the field of poststructuralism is vast, here we will concentrate on the work of one philosopher in particular: Jacques Derrida. Although Derrida (1930–2004) himself was reluctant to identify as a 'poststructuralist', his work is revelatory for analysing a text like *Fun Home*. Just as the epigraph that opens this chapter details, Derrida is interested in the constant play of differences central to the process of signification and text production, a process not unlike Bechdel's attempt to convey her own genealogical tracing of the past in the graphic memoir.

In order to understand the connection between the method of deconstruction and the style of the graphic novel, it is important to briefly summarize poststructuralism and a few of its key terms, including discourse, deconstruction, and *différance*. However, once we attempt to define the term 'poststructuralism', we are quickly met with a conundrum. Because it avoids closure on any final meaning or interpretation, to define 'poststructuralism' seems impossible and counter to its epistemological commitments. This does not mean, though, that we cannot discuss what poststructuralism could do or could allow for. First and foremost, poststructuralism is intent on recognizing the power of categories in shaping our thinking. It sees fixed or rigid definitions as doing 'epistemic violence' by claiming some sort of truth-value against all other possible interpretations. Because we cannot view the world from outside our culture or history, poststructuralism rejects universalizing or totalizing discourses that claim to be true for all people in all places at all times. In this way, it embraces fluidity and multiplicity of meaning and interpretation.

Central to poststructuralist interpretation is a specific understanding of language, and essential to this process is discourse, a topic that has been dealt with at length by a number of philosophers. In poststructuralist thinking, discourse does not merely describe

or document 'reality' but instead constructs and constitutes. For Derrida, discourse is productive, it is 'a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (Derrida 2005: 354). While this may initially sound complicated, a closer examination of terms like signifier, signified, and sign proves helpful. In semiotic theory, 'signifier' refers to the word or the sound-image (*signifiant*), while 'signified' is the concept or meaning attached to the signifier (*signifié*). The relationship between the two is quite arbitrary, and a signifier without a signified has no meaning. A 'sign' is the coupling of the signifier and the signified and, in effect, refers to anything that can be interpreted as having meaning. Swiss structural linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure put forth the idea that a sign can be understood as self-sufficient and self-contained. A deconstructive approach, though, lays bare how signs are instead perpetually proliferating signification; they cannot be understood as self-sufficient or independent. A sign perpetually leaves traces as it bleeds into other signs, and as such, is influenced by those that precede it. And because they rely on what they are not, they are given meaning by distinguishing themselves from other signifiers and concepts. Words (signifiers) have no essence and hence can never be pinned down. They are always exceeding signification.

Connected to this process of signification is another key feature of poststructuralism: multiple interpretations of any text, event, or phenomenon will always exist. And such multiple interpretations are the result of our unique subject positions, based on our location at the intersection of various and competing discourses. We are embedded in networks of complex social relations, which, as Viviane Namaste points out, 'determine which subjects can appear where, and in what capacity. The subject is not something prior to politics or social structures, but is precisely constituted in and through specific sociopolitical arrangements. Poststructuralism contends that a focus on the individual as an autonomous agent needs to be "deconstructed", contested, and troubled' (1994: 221). Central to Namaste's description of discourse and subjectivity is the notion of deconstruction. But what is deconstruction?

Having been heavily influenced by structuralism (particularly Saussure and the French literary theorist Roland Barthes), Derrida first used the term 'deconstruction' in *Of Grammatology* (1967) but would go on to develop it throughout his later works. Like the philosophical school under which we might place it, the term 'deconstruction' eludes and resists definitions, for it cannot be reduced to a method or defined as a theory with a clear set of objectives. As feminist philosopher Barbara Johnson has pointed out, deconstruction 'has been the most influential feature of post-structuralism because it defines a new kind of reading practice which is a key application of post-structuralism' (cited in Cuddon 2000: 210). It should not, though, be confused with 'destruction' and is instead a strategy of critical analysis (Johnson 1981). And deconstruction has important political implications, succinctly summarized by feminist postcolonial scholar and translator of Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: 'deconstruction is the deconstitution of the founding concepts of the Western historical narrative' (Spivak et al. 1990: 31). Deconstruction chips away at – and even upends – western metaphysics, which is built on polarized dichotomies.

Deconstruction has been very much used as a critical strategy for articulating the recognition of how the lives of many marginalized groups have been damaged by dominant systems of knowledge and representation. For Spivak, the political value of deconstructive reading is that it protects against the universal claims of approaches like

Marxism or western feminism to speak for all the oppressed. She goes on to describe it is 'a programme which tells how social justice is to be achieved [...] when a narrative is constructed, something is left out. When an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are [...] What is it that is left out? Can we know what is left out?' (ibid.: 18–19).

Doing deconstruction

While Derrida's brand of deconstruction emerged from an extended analysis of the speech/writing binary, particularly his questioning of theories previously put forth by structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (Derrida 1967), it has been taken up by a number of academic fields, including queer theory and postcolonial studies, that seek to expose the underpinnings and effects of binaries and dichotomous thinking. For example, in calling into question the distinction between signifier and signified, deconstruction also calls into question the distinction between language and thought; hence, it lends itself well to analysing both literary texts and social categories. We may, though, be left with some questions: How do we 'do' deconstruction? What does it allow for? How can we make use of deconstruction in feminist and gender studies work?

Deconstruction is particularly important in gender studies because it questions rigid categorizations, while simultaneously uncovering how assignments (e.g., 'feminine' and 'masculine') that we are taught to take as 'true' or 'natural' are instead social constructions with real (sometimes violent) impacts on bodies and lives. It also recognizes the power of language and naming in constructing hierarchies and controlling and disciplining individuals. Indeed, deconstruction forces a radical rethinking of what has previously gone unquestioned or been taken for granted: there are no truths, no stable signifiers, no fixed social categories. Poststructuralist gender theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is enacted through 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 43). Gender itself and gender-normative expectations are produced through the repetition of 'feminine' and 'masculine' behaviours. And because of their constant repetition, they begin to appear 'natural', even as they are socially constructed.

In *Fun Home*, we witness a similar deconstructive and discursive approach being taken up in its examination of the textual production of homosexual subjectivity. A case in point is the idea that Alison's father Bruce is not easily categorizable, with Bechdel alternately referring to him as 'gay', 'bisexual', and 'homosexual' (none of which could be seen as necessarily synonymous or stable). Bechdel interrogates how discursive processes produce her and her father's (homo)sexuality, asking larger questions of how individuals are shaped by the conditions of desire and their historical and cultural contingencies, summarized in the captions towards the end of the memoir:

When I try to project what Dad's life might have been like if he hadn't died in 1980, I don't get very far. If he'd lived into those early years of AIDS, I tell myself, I might very well have lost him anyway, and in a more painful, protracted fashion. Indeed, in that scenario, I might have lost my mother too. Perhaps I'm being histrionic, trying to displace my actual grief with this imaginary trauma [...] Or maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, sexual shame and

fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say that, in fact, this is my father's story. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia.

(Bechdel 2006: 195–196)

While going on to say that this could be a slightly problematic line of thought, Bechdel signals the messiness in attempting to make sense of another's sexual identification.

In adopting a deconstructive approach, we must start by acknowledging that within binary oppositions, the primary term gains its dominance through suppression of its opposite. Think of, for example, binaries like man/woman, white/black, nature/culture, or heterosexual/homosexual. All take their superior position by placing their 'opposite' in an inferior category, defining themselves in relation to what they are not. But for Derrida there are no stable binaries; each is a tenuous coupling, even if they are the condition and effect of interpretation. The trick, though, is that this process is so constant and ubiquitous that we take it for something natural and inevitable. Because it is everywhere, it becomes invisible.

Deconstruction consequently calls for two related steps: a reversal and then a displacement of binary oppositions. Such an approach highlights the instability of terms and language more broadly (as well as accompanying identity categories) while simultaneously enabling 'an analysis of the culturally and historically specific ways in which the terms and the relation between them have developed, and the effects they have produced' (Sullivan 2003: 51). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz reiterates the deconstructive process and highlights its radical possibilities:

Taken together, reversal and its useful displacement show the necessary but unfounded function of these terms in western thought. One must both reverse the dichotomy and the values attached to the two terms, as well as displace the excluded term, placing it beyond its oppositional role, as the internal condition of the dominant term. This move makes clear the violence of the hierarchy and the debt the dominant term owes to the subordinate one. It also demonstrates that there are other ways of conceiving these terms than dichotomously.

(cited in Scott 1988b: 5)

The key theoretical basis of Derrida's deconstruction is *différance*, a neologism that explains how the process of making meaning (i.e., signification) is structured in terms of how signs differ from other signs. Deconstruction operates through *différance*, which Derrida states is 'neither a word nor a concept' (Derrida 1973: 130). In French the verb '*différer*' means both 'to differ' and 'to defer'. Identical to 'différence' ('difference') in pronunciation, Derrida changes the 'e' to 'a' to signal the instability of the speech/writing binary and to question the privileging of speech over writing. Words can never fully capture what they mean but can only be defined through additional words from which they *differ*. Through an endless chain of interactions between presence and absence, meaning is perpetually *deferred*.

Bechdel repeatedly engages with this notion of deferral and *différance*. For example, while her father may never self-identify as gay or homosexual, Alison repeatedly 'comes out' and declares herself a lesbian, and each time in a slightly different fashion – and perhaps with a different meaning. Valerie Rohy offers an insightful – and deconstructive – reading of this deferral of meaning in *Fun Home*:

There is no point in asking which of the three tells the true story or which lesbian she really is. That galvanic phrase ‘I am a lesbian,’ while neither wrong nor disavowed, is a possible statement, not the only self that Alison might claim. In *Fun Home*, then, the same mechanisms that make lesbian identity also unmake it.

(Rohy 2010: 356)

Rewinding to her childhood, Alison was very clearly instructed about norms related to gender and sexuality. In a repeated disciplining by her father, she is taught what *not* to be through difference. For example, at the age of four or five, Bruce takes Alison with him on a business trip to Philadelphia, where Bechdel recounts seeing ‘a most unsettling sight’: a butch lesbian. She writes ‘I didn’t know there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home – someone they’ve never spoken to, but know by sight – I recognized her with a surge of joy’ (Bechdel 2006: 117–118). The young Alison’s excitement is tempered by her father’s recognition and intervention: ‘Is *that* what you want to look like?’ (ibid.: 118). And despite having no choice but to utter ‘No’, she could not help but look back, ‘the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years ... As perhaps it haunted my father’ (ibid.: 119). In line with Butler’s statements above, we see here how masculinity and femininity are simultaneously bolstered by the ‘constitutive outside’, those ‘abject identities’ who do not fit into normative gender categories. These gender ‘failures’ must be constantly identified and singled out against which the strict binaries of masculine and feminine can reify themselves.

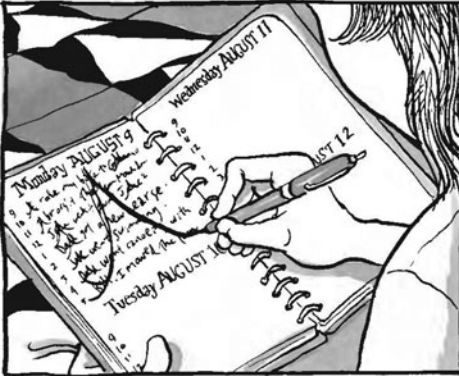
According to Derrida, the relationship between the signified and the signifier, which are two related but separate aspects of the sign, is produced through differentiation. A sign must point to something beyond itself that is its *meaning*, but this then means the sign is never fully present in itself but is a deferral to something different from it. Signs are never fully identical with the things they refer to. In fact, because they are incomplete, they require additional terms to complete them.⁴ From this deconstructive process, it becomes clear how each term in a binary couple depends on the other for its meaning.⁵ Because each sign is influenced by those that precede it, there are constant traces left behind. Here, another key term in Derrida’s work is worth bringing into our discussion: ‘under erasure’ (*sous rature*), a concept that points to the constraints of language. Because there is a constant slippage between signifier and signified, the signifier is not entirely appropriate or suitable. Often represented as a strike through, words that are ‘inadequate yet necessary’ are put under erasure, for example **Being** (because ‘Being’ is outside representation). Because the letters composing the word are stricken through, a trace is left, but we are unable to access it, even if we may read the letters.

It is here we see a compelling parallel with Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Although surely unaware of Derrida’s deconstructive approach to putting things ‘under erasure’, Bechdel’s earlier self, Alison, enacts a similar practice at a young age. Perhaps there is no clearer example than the epigraph with which I began, included below with its accompanying images.

Again, the combination of word and image exceeds what only word or only image could communicate here. In doing a close reading of this page, we see that the captions are a language of the present, with Bechdel as author commenting on Alison as child. In the pages leading up to these three panels, we learn that having developed some obsessive-compulsive tendencies, Alison begins keeping a diary of her daily activities:

THEN I REALIZED I COULD DRAW THE SYMBOL OVER AN ENTIRE ENTRY.

THINGS WERE GETTING FAIRLY ILLEGIBLE BY AUGUST, WHEN WE HAD OUR CAMPING TRIP/INITIATION RITE AT THE BULLPEN.



Dad got a dead person. We came to the Bull pen. Bull had come with us. We went for a walk. It got dark we saw falling stars.

CONSIDERING THE PROFOUND PSYCHIC IMPACT OF THAT ADVENTURE, MY NOTES ON IT ARE SURPRISINGLY CURSORY. NO MENTION OF THE PIN-UP GIRL, THE STRIP MINE, OR BILL'S .22. JUST THE SNAKE--AND EVEN THAT WITH AN EXTREME ECONOMY OF STYLE.



Figure 11.3 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*: 'the troubling gap between word and meaning. My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience.' © Alison Bechdel (2006). Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

'It was pretty warm out [...] Christian threw sand in John's face. He started to cry. I took him in [...]' (Bechdel 2006: 141). Despite the mundane nature of these events, she soon starts to doubt herself, wondering if these things were 'absolutely, objectively true', and accordingly begins writing 'I think' at the start of each sentence. Through its graphic representation of her obsessive-compulsive tendencies, another layer is added to the narrative. We are witness to her 'epistemological crisis', as Bechdel describes it looking back, which pointed to her discomfort with 'the gaping rift between signifier and signified' (ibid.: 142). In an attempt to join these semiotic components together, she obsessively inserts 'I think' before each and every sentence in her diary. But this process proves laborious, and to save time Alison creates a curvy circumflex (an 'amulet, warding off evil from my subjects' (ibid.)) that she first puts between sentences, but then begins drawing over names and pronouns, and eventually over the entire page, signalling 'the troubling gap between word and meaning. My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience' (ibid.: 143). Reminiscent of Derrida's detailing of the slipperiness between word and meaning, between signifier and signified, the young Alison recognizes how her writing falls outside representation, with the curvy circumflexes indeed putting her words 'under erasure'. The project of *Fun Home* itself seems to take this even further in its attempts at representing an unrepresentable past, with Bechdel's drawings combined with words serving as a possible bridge for meaning-making.

Conclusion: queer theory

The mobility of 'queer', its resistance to definition and its affirmation of that in identity which is irreducible to any heteronormative domestication calls into question the efficacy of any categorization [...] Moreover, such affirmation implies a critique of the limits of normative concepts, if not the act of conceptualization itself.

(Wolfreys 2004: 202–203)

First emerging in the early 1990s, queer theory is very much indebted to Derrida and deconstruction. As Julian Wolfreys points out above, the word 'queer' (like poststructuralism and deconstruction) cannot be easily defined; not reducible to 'gay' and 'lesbian' (or 'LGBT'), it has been adopted over the past two decades by social and activist movements to counter heteronormative (and homonormative) assumptions and privileges. Meanwhile, it has also emerged as an important field of academic study that is invested in radically destabilising and troubling categories. Like poststructuralist thought, queer theory exposes the instability of identities and destabilizes the assumed naturalness of the social order. The term 'queer' allows for a reflection on uneasiness with binaries. Although 'queer' has historically been used as a derogatory noun to refer to non-heterosexual subjects, it has also been reclaimed as an identity or, perhaps more importantly, as an anti-identity.

Poststructuralist queer theory then questions the binary homosexuality/heterosexuality and is invested in demonstrating how heterosexuality is consistently privileged over homosexuality (or non-heterosexualities). But, in deconstructive fashion, it also shows how heterosexuality is in fact dependent on its seemingly polar 'opposite'. Queer theory can also uncover how historical and social contexts determine sexuality. Given these investments, the connections between Derridean deconstruction and 'queer' may seem evident. Literary studies scholar Carla Freccero echoes this point:

Queer, in its deconstructive sense, designates a kind of Derridean *différance*, occupying an interstitial space between binary oppositions [...] This use of queer finds its energy from the way the term works to undo the binary between straight and gay, operating uncannily between but also elsewhere. Queer – precisely by marking out the space and time of *différance* – can thus show how the two, gay and straight, are inter-implicated and how they differ from themselves from within [...] Queer is what is and is not there, what disaggregates the coherence of the norm from the very beginning and is ignored in the force to make sense out of the unintelligibilities of grammar and syntax.

(2006: 18–19)

Here, it is also worth considering the word as a verb, ‘to queer’: to act in relation, opposition, or resistance to the norm (Jakobsen 1998: 517). ‘Queer’ then becomes about acting, not about being; about practice, not about identification. Indeed, we could read *Fun Home* (which itself defies classifications as merely autobiography, comic, or novel) as engaging in such a practice, as it queers categories, including social identities and literary genres. With the multiplicity and endless deferral of meaning, Bechdel uncovers the instability of categorical thinking and the absence of true meaning. A deconstructionist approach to literature highlights the constant tension between dualisms, and *Fun Home* offers a case study in how placing dualist pairs alongside one another (e.g., reality/fiction, straight/gay, word/image) can reverse and neutralize the hierarchies within so that they now stand on equal footing. Additionally, the text points to the inadequacy of words – indeed, language more generally – showing how *différance* becomes perceptible in the coupling of word and image, a coupling that resists and reverses binary thinking.

And it is thanks to this intricate relationship between word and image that graphic novels like *Fun Home* allow us to see social, cultural, and personal relationships in a different way. Despite the comic form that may counter verisimilitude, we see the individual interacting with – and shaped by – other beings and objects. We live in a complex world of overlapping words and images, and graphic novels uncover the continual negotiation between these two systems. At the heart of deconstruction is the idea that we ‘cannot but narrate’ (Spivak et al. 1990: 19); that is, we cannot escape the signification system of language, power, and knowledge. We must, however, recognize the limits of narration. Bechdel’s project engages in exactly such a project in its compulsion with narration and genealogical archiving, processes that seek to question that which we may take for granted. While feminist and queer deconstructionist philosophers lay bare the phallocentrism of narratives that position the hero as ‘western man’, graphic novels like *Fun Home* take this a step further in that they offer unique opportunities for seeing but also constructing and *deconstructing* the social, teaching us how fixed or stable meaning is never reached in any signifying system.

Notes

- 1 It is also worth mentioning that the infamous ‘Bechdel Test’ for evaluating gender bias in fictional works of pop culture originated in *Dykes to Watch Out For*. For a work to pass the test, it must abide by three criteria: (1) it contains two women (2) who talk to each other (3) about something other than a man.
- 2 Bechdel followed this best-seller up with another graphic memoir, entitled *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012), which chronicles her relationship with her mother, this time framed through

psychoanalysis. For both graphic memoirs, Bechdel has gained international awards and accolades, and most recently was awarded the highly prestigious MacArthur ‘Genius’ Award in 2014.

- 3 Photographing takes on an added layer of significance in *Fun Home* because Bechdel works with a technique of photographing herself in every single pose, which she then uses to draw each character and scene in the book.
- 4 Here, Derrida’s employs the notion of ‘supplement’ to refer to this excess and this idea that meaning is organized through difference.
- 5 An important point to emphasize is that deconstruction also exposes our inability to escape from such dichotomous thinking. Queer theory (which will be explored in more detail later) has been highly influenced by this approach, as it seeks to trouble the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary. For example, let’s take the process of ‘coming out’ as gay or lesbian. Not only does heterosexuality depend on homosexuality, but by ‘coming out’ as homosexual, there is a simultaneous reinscription (and perhaps reification) of its perceived opposite, heterosexuality. Even in declaring oneself gay or lesbian, a straight identity is called up and even reinforced.

Questions

1. What is the relationship between queer theory and poststructuralism? Why are they both important schools of thought for analysing literary texts and social categories? What tools do they each provide for cultural and literary studies research? For example, how might you apply deconstruction to other objects of cultural analysis?
2. Both non-binary gender and sexual non-normativity are central to *Fun Home*’s narrative. How does Alison Bechdel’s stylistic approach reflect on these lived experiences? In what ways do historical and geographical specificities play a role in their acceptance, or lack thereof? Outside of this text, how are non-normative gender and sexual expressions and identities (in)visible?
3. Imagine you are tasked with describing to a colleague how to read a graphic novel. How would you go about presenting this description? In preparing your response, you might think about how reading a graphic novel compares to reading a more ‘traditional’ novel written in prose as well as what techniques you would find more important or necessary to discuss the visual and narrative elements of the text.