

Review

Queer attachments: Alison Bechdel and the shifting relationship between queer selves and heteronormativity

FUN HOME : A FAMILY TRAGICOMIC, 2006
THE ESSENTIAL DYKES TO WATCH OUT FOR, 2008
ARE YOU MY MOTHER? A COMIC DRAMA, 2012
Alison Bechdel

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Alison Bechdel. (2014). Unpublished talk for the Auckland Women's Centre, Auckland: Freemans Bay Community Centre.

Alison Bechdel's talk in March was a fundraiser for the Auckland Women's Centre within the wide, wooden arms of Freemans Bay Community Centre, huddled as it is beside Ponsonby and Grey Lynn (previous bastions of lesbian life in Auckland). It was an oddly fitting – albeit humble – venue for hearing Alison Bechdel talk about her works, the long-running comic strip *Dykes to watch out for*, and the critically acclaimed memoirs *Fun home* (2006) and *Are you my mother?* (2012). It felt appropriate because of the intersection of lesbian and feminist concerns, where the stitch of feminism was more transparent amongst lesbian community, writ large through the comfortable sea of women with short, salt and pepper hair.

Bechdel is a confident speaker. I was mildly disoriented by the disjuncture between her literary persona as author, and the narrative voice of *Fun home* and *Are you my mother?* While Bechdel's low key, dark humour carries across all of these self-representations, *Fun home* (2006) and *Are you my mother?* (2012) are deeply introspective, and I had imagined her as an introvert. She presented a largely chronological series of slides of her work, and gave a narrative overview of her approach to the work, telling pieces of autobiography and premising humorous anecdotes.

As Bechdel's (2006, 2012) later works have been searingly intimate, reviewing Bechdel talking about her own graphic memoirs risks reproducing a reader imaginary whereby our view of her texts are narrowed through proximity to her own literary persona, and cast as 'purely' personal. We could mis-read *Fun home* (2006) and *Are you my mother?* (2012) as 'straight' autobiography. Both *Fun home* (2006) and *Are you my mother?* (2012) are multilayered and complex visually and narratively, recasting her life narrative within broader philosophical and literary frameworks. Riquelme (2013) has argued that *Fun home* both draws on and expands the modernist life narrative through explicit reference and allusion to James Joyce.

Instead I want to draw on Bechdel's comments about the shifting relationship between queer communities and the heteronormative, and use it as a lens for briefly considering her later work. Bechdel's description of *Dykes to watch out for* as 'undoubtedly a product of a specific era' points to the way the comic mapped a shift in lesbian and queer political and social worlds.

Bechdel wrote *Dykes to watch out for* from 1983–2008 as a series of comic strips. She described *Dykes to watch out for* as ‘half soap-opera, half editorial cartoon about how politics shapes daily life’. There was a balance, Bechdel said, between depicting the ‘universal, lurking fear of difference’ and our need for ‘unconditional approval’. Bechdel has a sharp acuity for depicting the social norms and dominant themes of lesbian lives, such that the collected edition *Dykes to watch out for* feels like a touchstone for the complexity of lesbian and feminist identity politics during that period. While readers often felt that the characters must be ‘real’, Bechdel explained that they were not based on actual people. Rather, Bechdel’s process was to depict different points-of-view ‘along the continuum’ of lesbian community. Familiar characters included Ginger, who was an English teacher, and Lois, who worked for ‘MadWimmin Books’ and was a drag king.

Bechdel explained that she managed to present contentious issues within the lesbian community by doing a lot of research, having different characters present different sides of the debate, and using humour. Yet she reflected that there were still thorny issues that she never discussed, including S/M and domestic violence in lesbian relationships. Asked by an audience member about her realistic portrayal of polyamorous relationships, Bechdel self-consciously admitted that she felt the comic never managed a ‘successful poly relationship’: ‘So it’s a fail, right? Well, it’s a fail for most of us’. The audience laughed. I noticed how her humour worked because it is ‘insider’ humour, in this case reflecting on having experienced different forms of relationships, rather than say, the ‘outsider’ humour of stand-ups. She explained that it was more that she depicted ‘the difficulties of monogamy’.

Dykes to watch out for was about a politics of visibility. Bechdel explained that during the 1980’s writing a lesbian comic was about ‘proving something to the world, or at least other lesbians’. In her talk, Bechdel reflected that *Dykes to watch out for* was fuelled in part by the personal history she explores in *Fun home* (2006); her father was a closeted gay man who committed suicide in 1980, only four months after she came out as lesbian. However, it is also possible to read her autobiographical script as a metonym for the social shift in sexual subjectivities during that time: the closeted life of Bechdel’s father between the 1950’s–1980 both fuels and is antagonistic to Bechdel’s subcultural visibility as an ‘out’ lesbian cartoonist. *Dykes to watch out for* is indelibly imprinted with a queer politic that intentionally puts queer women’s lives at the center of the narrative rather than the margins. It preempts Sedgwick’s (1990) now infamous claim that the literary canon is shaped by the exclusion of homosexuality. Bechdel’s texts reveal an intense engagement with canonical queer texts that are part of a queer collective imaginary; in *Fun home* she adds the copy of Colette’s autobiography to a stack of books in her bedroom that includes *Orlando*, *Rubyfruit jungle*, *Lesbian/woman* and *The homosexual matrix* amongst others (Bechdel 2006). Bechdel explained that at the time she began writing *Dykes to watch out for*, the lesbian and broader queer community was a vital subculture interested in revolution.

Dykes to watch out for, then, follows a shifting social trajectory from Bechdel’s initial hope for radical changes brought about through sexual activism during the Bush era to a far more muted and politically ambivalent stance. She had earlier seen queer possibilities for more radically ‘destroying the fabric of heteronormative culture’. Instead, she explained the Bush administration ‘burned something out’ of her and the characters she depicted. She showed slides depicting the affair that two characters engage in while ironically serving on a committee for same-sex marriage rights. She then showed some slides of the character development of Stuart, a heterosexual man who partners Sparrow (a character who is previously lesbian). Stuart’s leftist, environmental and feminist politics mean that he more closely resembles Bechdel’s own persuasion than other lesbian characters. Thus, Bechdel is describing the decoupling of radical progressive politics from the gay and lesbian community.

Bechdel hoped the LGBT movement would create change, not be assimilated into mainstream culture. The visibility of queer cultures and subsequent social transformations that Bechdel and others have imagined have never been realised; Bechdel jokes that '*Dykes to watch out for* never achieved mainstream relevance' showing a slide of a woman wearing a strap-on dildo.

Bechdel remarked that there is a 'false equation of marriage status and citizenship'. We are undoubtedly witnessing a shift in queer politics that is entrenched in the politics of late capitalism, where the hegemonic subjectivities of white middle-class gays and lesbians in the first world are overtly disaggregated from those of us who are still variously 'queer' outsiders; poor, non-white, disabled, migrant, polyamorous, living in the Global South, and so forth (see Weiner & Young, 2011; Duggan, 2000; Puar, 2007). Bechdel described how at the time she began writing *Dykes to watch out for* being lesbian was 'deviant and radical', but had become far more mainstream, the shift 'from outlaws to citizens'.

For cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011), our pervasive engagement with hegemonic institutions, discourses and systems that harm or impede us – like heterosexism – is premised on maintaining fantastical attachments she describes as 'cruel optimism'; an unsteady stream of hope that our pathway will yield a good outcome even in the face of encroaching darkness. Berlant (2011) asks:

Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear cost abounds? (Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

The uptake of the relationship forms and personal values of heterosexism via the institution of marriage amongst white, middle-class queer folk could be seen as a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), via fantastical attachments to marriage and the family as sites that will yield love and fulfillment.

Fun home and *Are you my mother?* arguably challenge heterosexism by poisoning Bechdel's nuanced social critique at the site of the heterosexual, nuclear family. Both *Fun home* and *Are you my mother?* draw our 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) to the surface of family life by making it visible, uncomfortable and eerily funny. The title *Fun home* is the ironic recasting of Bechdel's home life through the use of her childhood nickname for their funeral home. Bechdel uses memoir to produce a queer narrative lens on the normative nuclear family that twists and buckles under the microscope.

Fun home also explores Bechdel's relationship with her father. Our fantasy of the good life that extends via the nuclear family is held in tension with the violence it often produces but elides. Bechdel is explicitly interested in 'artifice'; the first chapter is called 'Old father, old artifier' (p. 2) and depicts her father's extraordinary effort to restore their Victorian home (p. 3-23). These images are juxtaposed against images of her father's violence against the children. An image of the three children sitting under an immense Christmas tree with their father silhouetted in the foreground of the frame has the text:

Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least the air of authenticity we lent his exhibit. A sort of still life with children. (p. 13).

The theme of inheritance runs throughout the work, most obviously through the references to Icarus and Daedalus that bookend the narrative. The final frame depicts Bechdel as a child jumping into her father's arms at the pool; she is faced away from the reader. The text reads 'but in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt' (232). Riquelme (2013) has argued that this ending evokes Joyce's character Stephen asking for assistance from his father figure at the end of *Ulysses*. In both texts,

Riquelme asserts, there is a reversal between the subject positions of father and child where child's story produces a revisioned account of self and of their own fathers (p. 467).

A queer reading of inheritance is instructive here. Ahmed (2006) has argued that the heterosexual couple is made 'compulsory' in part through what she calls 'the gift of inheritance' (86). Our social indebtedness to our parents for giving us life creates a requirement to be like them via taking up heterosexuality (and coupledness and monogamy). And yet, Bechdel's narrator suggests a rupture, where the 'straight line' of the parents is not taken up via the resemblance of the child to her heterosexual parents.

Instead, Bechdel's narrator's refusal of heterosexuality creates the conditions of possibility for seeing her father's life as queer, the odd life of a closeted gay man. In the narrative, the narrator's coming out as lesbian leads to admission of the family's secret; her father has had multiple affairs with young men. It is the narrator's worldview as lesbian that is able to deconstruct the heterosexual form of her parents. She reinterprets the queer life of the family via salient absences of parental affection; the presence of the 'babysitter' on the camping trip, and so forth. This self-conscious queer narration is in turn her autogenesis; her refusal of the 'straight line' reveals that it is already unstitched; 'likeness' between herself and her father becomes a quality of 'queerness' instead of a condition for 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 84).

If Bechdel's narrator signals a rupture from the heteronorms of the nuclear family, the narratives of *Fun home* (2006) and *Are you my mother?* (2012) also signal the painful, tender connections only possible through rejecting these norms and the interpersonal hierarchies they entail. Weiner and Young (2011) have argued that 'the antisocial force of (queer) sex is fundamental to the world-making inventiveness that queer bonds also name' (p. 226). Throughout *Are you my mother?* Bechdel explicitly refers to Winnicott's theorising on early attachment both through direct text and through the narration of historical flashbacks that reveals Winnicott's personal story, i.e. he appears as a character. Bechdel explores the projection of her child-mother relationship onto two relationships with psychotherapists (as a long-term client), and multiple, less longstanding, love relationships. At the end, the ability of Bechdel and her mother to enjoy a play side-by-side – her mother still encased in her own world rather than actively engaged with her daughter – represents the micro shift in their connection. Bechdel can enjoy her mother as a spectator because she is no longer intensely bound within her need for maternal validation. What might this insight offer for our queer attachments to the broader social; our own quests as queer subjects for social recognition so often wrought in hegemonic and hierarchical terms?

Reflection on the queer attachments in Bechdel's work, and the broader relationship between queer lives and heteronormative conditions, made me return to the poignant ambivalences in the 2007 series of *Dykes to watch out for* (Bechdel 2007). The smart but frighteningly neo-conservative white American student Cynthia moves in with progressive couple Ginger and Samia, who take a parental role with her despite her convictions. Cynthia's right-wing rhetoric is in part enabled by her ability to be 'held' by the emotional work done by her non-white, progressive nurturers. The sheen of her neo-conservative convictions does not get dimmed through rejection by her natal family or not having a place to live, because Ginger and Samia's caring adult presence enables her to flourish. White, conservative gays and lesbians have acquired their social privilege in part through the lobbying by radical queer folk, whose visibility through protest might be considered unrecognised labour. The embodied and material (although invisibilised) dependency the gay and lesbian mainstream has on the work of queer outsiders might be considered another queer attachment; fraught affective bonds that require further critical and creative investigation.

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