

THE HOSPITABLE AESTHETICS OF ALISON BECHDEL

VANESSA LAUBER

Over the past three decades, Alison Bechdel's body of work has spanned from fringe, single-frame cartoons aimed at representing gay life to a critically acclaimed long-form graphic memoir that has become a referent text for understanding queer comics and the graphic memoir form. Throughout, Bechdel is a presence both in the narrative voice of her work and as the object of her own self-reflexive representation, balancing the tensions of her interests in radical politics and normativizing representation. In an early interview, she professed a goal to "show actual things" and "to reach a broader audience while staying radical politically" (Metheny). She has succeeded in reaching that broader audience: in the past decade, her graphic memoir *Fun Home* has become the darling of critics, scholars, and, in its adapted form, even theatergoers on Broadway and beyond.

It is harder to locate radical politics in the success of her work. *Fun Home's* mainstream academic and cultural popularity can be read as a self-damning celebration of the capitulations of gay and lesbian identity politics to assimilation, against which Bechdel's comic strip dykes have wrestled through various presidential regimes. In March 2016, Samantha Power, US ambassador to the United Nations under President Barack Obama, took seventeen ambassadors on a Broadway outing to see the musical adaptation of *Fun Home*. Power celebrated the musical's ability to "humanize" LGBTQ individuals, hoping to engender greater support for LGBTQ rights internationally and emphasizing the importance of "a sense of empathy and community" (Mattila; Meyers). It is easy to imagine Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* doppelgänger, Mo, ranting about the evils of the neoliberal state in response.

Bechdel and her comic strip dykes are not alone in struggling with the tensions of identity politics and radical queerness. The persuasive power of empathy and community—goals of identity politics and rights-based movements—buts up against queer claims toward destabilizing norms and

resisting assimilation. The birth of queer studies as an academic discipline is defined by its break from LGBT politics, with the goals of marriage and military service pitted against radical queer liberation. In broad strokes, LGBT studies produces sexual orientation as a category, while queer studies seeks to upend categorical thought. Bechdel's unique insight into that tension, I will argue, arises from her complex and nuanced attempts to represent marginalized identities in a form that has itself been marginalized. Her politics of the outsider cannot be cast off in a dismissive reading of her popularity in the cultural imagination, nor hewn from the longer history of her formal innovation. Taken as a whole, the paradoxical and yet coconstitutive relationship between the queerness of her forms and the mainstream popularity of her texts performs a sort of queer world-building. To the extent that her work cultivates empathy or community, it does so not only, perhaps, in the service of identity-based movements or bald market capitalism but also by modeling a more radical, relational aesthetic that illuminates the ongoing power of queer critique.

I by no means wish to fall victim to the tendency, identified by Tyler Bradway (one of the contributors to this volume), of some scholars to "prioritize a specific literary form as the ideal mode for transmuting literary affect into socially valuable force" (xxxvi). Rather, by contextualizing the construction of Bechdel's short- and long-form comics, I suggest that there is a place in the mainstream for the sort of contributory, pleasurable, and rich reading of texts that opens up space for alternative social imaginaries. I adapt Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics in visual and performance arts to literary practice to suggest how the expanding mainstream audience for Bechdel's work extends the queer forms of her comics communities. Bechdel's work is an act of hospitality both collaborative and antagonistic, a practice with potential for radical transformation, even in its inherent and sometimes irresolvable tensions.

I will first lay out the theories of relational aesthetics and hospitality on which my reading of Bechdel relies, before considering how the political and representational spaces of *Dykes to Watch Out For* provide a foundation for reading *Fun Home* as a space of both hospitable aesthetics and resistant queerness.¹

Relational Form

I invoke the performance art concept of relational aesthetics as a means to further understand the allure and imaginative possibilities of reading Alison Bechdel in various forms. The art historian Nicolas Bourriaud developed the

concept of relational aesthetics in impassioned monographs on artistic practices that modestly "take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" (113). His theory of this practice of visual art is particularly useful in a discussion of the discursive logic of language and image of visual narrative. Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* was first published in French in 1998, announcing the death of the old avant-garde and, with it, utopian politics and teleological visions of history, echoing queer theory's critiques of normative temporalities.² Relational aesthetics sought to theorize art that abandoned imaginary utopias and instead enacted ways of living and models of acting collectively. To take an example from Bourriaud, the Argentinean-born Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's work is perhaps the most recognized among artists associated with relational aesthetics. In his untitled solo show at 303 Gallery, New York, in 1992, Tiravanija converted the gallery space into a working kitchen, where he prepared Thai food for visitors. Rather than comprising the art itself, the food was instead the means for creating the possibility and opportunity for social interactions, with the artist as host in the social gallery space. For Bourriaud, "present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition" (21).

Some scholars, most notably Claire Bishop, have critiqued Bourriaud's notion of form as relational property, in that by understanding form itself to be the locus of meaning, he assumes that "the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect" noting that "the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic" (Bishop, 62, 67). But Bourriaud conceives of form as improvisation that motivates the relational exchange between the artist and the public and thus motivates finding meaning in a structured work that is nevertheless open. In considering Bechdel's work, I take up Bishop's critique and follow Hillary Chute's interest in "*how comics texts model a feminist methodology in their form*, in the complex visual dimension of an author narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject" ("The Space," 200). I seek to understand *Dykes to Watch Out For* and *Fun Home* together as potentially relational queer forms. To develop a notion of relational aesthetics in the reading of Alison Bechdel's work, I conceive of her authorial voice, so present in the text, as positing an invitation, in which the relational space created is one of constructive antagonism, both pleasurable and challenging, with the potential to upend hierarchies and reconstitute social possibilities: a responsive mode of relating to others that is simultaneously generous and vulnerable.

The Openness of Radical Hospitality

Jacques Derrida's theorizations of hospitality provide a useful framework for developing a notion of authorial invitation, with the author as host and reader as guest. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida distinguishes between conditional and absolute or radical hospitality. Conditional hospitality exists within the practical stipulations that make extensions of hospitality possible, the formalized rules that define the way to receive visitors, establishing a sort of pact between host and guest, much as literary forms determine rules and expectations for a reading experience.³ Conditional hospitality relies on normative language to solidify identity, establish responsibilities, and define boundaries and limitations. Constrained by these terms, this conditional hospitality is never fully open, according to Derrida, but rather always contains the potential for violence in the violation of its complex terms. Radical hospitality, on the other hand, gives without restriction. The host offers up everything, and paradoxically the guest becomes the host. The host must be master of the domain to extend hospitality, but hospitality also requires the willingness to give everything for the benefit of the stranger: "Even if the other deprives you of your mastery or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the conditional of unconditional hospitality" (70). In this study, then, I recast the hospitable relationship as that enacted between an author and reader, as an invitation. That Derrida's characterization of absolute hospitality contains the possibility of the impossible, even the compulsion or necessity to upend the dynamics of the host-guest relationship, wherein the "guest becomes the host's host," suggests its potential for envisioning a radical redetermination of reading relationships.

As theorized here, hospitable aesthetics provide a space for public feeling, for volatility, for creating new alternatives—a queer culture that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner identified as a world-building project. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler wrote of the challenge of "politicizing disidentification," in the process of deconstructing the constraints of identity forms, using misrecognition to create and recover other new modes of being. José Esteban Muñoz likewise worked through the act of disidentification as a "step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material" for as-yet unimagined futures (*Disidentifications*, 31). Hospitable aesthetics work in a similar way, neither relying on a mainstream or normative voice to issue the invitation to act, create, or inhabit; nor relying on an indivisible subjectivity as the prerequisite for action and inhabitation—but rather providing the raw material for world-building and re-creation.

Bechdel's work, taken as a whole, provides an opportunity for this hospitality, characterized by both confrontation and cooperation, wherein origins of

change and difference might be humanized and localized through the literary imagination. *Dykes to Watch Out For* lays the groundwork for potential radical hospitality in the openness of its form. The reflexivity and ironic stance of Bechdel's work help to craft an invitation to the reader. As developed in *Fun Home*, the multimodality of Bechdel's form, so often remarked on in critical studies of her art and born of her long history of alternative comics artistry, ultimately models radical aesthetics that include and extend beyond the constraints of normativizing identity politics. By offering an invitation to the reader, Bechdel as artist and author offers up the control that she has as host, presenting her work—and, in the case of *Fun Home*, her family home—and the recollection and interpretation of her life therein, as a site of relational exchange that engages both mainstream LGBT and radical queer politics.

The Space of Self-Narrative

Bechdel's work functions as such a productive site of hospitable aesthetics, in part, because of its self-reflexivity and self-narrativizing, which simultaneously engage with questions of identity and deconstruct identity's normativizing values. Bechdel has frequently discussed the tension between her desire to represent the complexity of lesbian life as a site of difference as well as representation's role in processes of normativization, as I will discuss further. Since the 1980s, identity categories have gradually been narrowed and unified in the name of social change and political representation, in turn resulting in the alienation from and rejection of the use of those identity categories as a site of political and social organizing. It was in opposition to these limitations and the production of norms that queer theory sought to distinguish itself from LGBT studies in the academy.

In the lead-up to that split, the practice and critical study of autobiographical life writing played a significant role in instituting norms, particularly around sex and gender. Critical feminist theory of the '80s and '90s further highlighted the complex generic and formal constraints of staking temporal and spatial claims for women's life writing, the sort of conditions that undermine radical change. But feminist reinterpretations of autobiography, which emerged in the early 1980s, attempted to distinguish men's and women's autobiography, organizing generic and formal claims around the desirability of locating difference in essentialized lived experience, as evinced in the work of Estelle Jelinek. Those readings risked erasing the intersectional effects of class, race, and sexual orientation and drew generalized conclusions about textual effects recast as experiential cause. This essentializing effect is a starting point for Leigh Gilmore's critique of feminist interpretations of autobiography, in

which she interrogated the generic and truth-telling claims of feminist autobiographical practice. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, following Susan Stanford Friedman, have suggested “spatiality, rather than temporality, as a focus of critical reading practices” (“Introduction,” 39). By recasting self-narrative as a function of space rather than time, we can further consider how a literary text, especially one such as Bechdel’s, might provide the space necessary for a hospitable literary practice.

Indeed, Bechdel’s entry into self-reflexive writing came alongside the development of both LGBT autobiographical practice and the culture of alternative comics. In the wake of Stonewall, the prototypical gay autobiography had been the coming-out narrative, an act claiming to make invisible subjects visible (extensively problematized by Judith Butler and others). The coming-out narrative of victimization gradually gave way to “stories of living in community and refusing a minoritized and stigmatized identity position” (Smith and Watson, *Reading*, 152), which marks the starting point for *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

The Hospitable Aesthetics of Comics Counterpublics

If self-narrative provides a space for hospitable aesthetics, so too do comics. Comics studies scholars have argued that the reader of comics is an active, interpretive partner in the creation of meaning from the page. Drawing on foundational work by Scott McCloud, Gillian Whitlock has described reading comics as an experience of interpretation, “not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction, but a unique interpretation that transcends both, and emerges through the imaginative work of closure that readers are required to make between the panels on the page” (968–69). Hillary Chute characterizes comics as a form that is “internally, conspicuously dialogic, or cross-discursive, across its words and images” (“The Space,” 199). Those words and images do not repeat each other but rather “move the narrative through a constant, active, uneasy back-and-forth,” working “in relation to each other but necessarily never blend[ing]” (199). Critically for Chute, and for my interpretation here, the tension between word and image is an external dialogic that draws “its readers *in* to construct meaning in the spaces of the gutters between the panels” (199). The reader becomes a critical, relational, contributory participant not only, necessarily, in interpreting the narrative grammar of the comics but also in making meaning in the forum of public consumption. Julia Watson’s study of *Fun Home* takes up the effects of Bechdel’s “self-reflexive utographic,” distinguishing the form of graphic memoir from traditional autobiography for the way its “recursive autographic structures” invite readers

to put themselves “empathetically into its intimate picture” and thus “question the social privileging of normative heterosexuality” (53). I build on Watson’s notion of *Fun Home*’s invitation to the reader but suggest more radical effects of that reading than the normativizing of homosexuality.

While Chute characterizes the participatory work of the comics reader as a “drawing in,” Seymour Chatman suggests that it is, rather, a kind of “reading out.” I prefer this notion of reading out, suggestive of an outward-facing, world-building impulse toward queer relationality, in which reading comics and graphic narratives is not only a practice of self-reflection and growth but also one of radical exchange. Ramzi Fawaz has adapted Michael Warner’s concept of a counterpublic to the realm of comic book fandom, arguing that fan letters and correspondence created a new counterpublic in the 1960s and 1970s in which readers expressed “politically unfashionable or radical ideals through the discursive apparatus of a culturally denigrated medium” (95). By encouraging readers to take pleasure in comic book fandom, comic book “writers and artists encouraged readers to see comic book aesthetics as a vehicle for producing alternative social and political imaginaries” (96). Bechdel’s own comics practice was born in the space of this counterpublic. Although her comics did not appear in published form alongside direct reader responses, she did respond to reader letters (she in fact moved to Vermont in 1991 after starting a relationship via correspondence with one of her fans [Thurman]). Bechdel accounted for reader input in shaping the narratives of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, acknowledged in the gutters of the strips with a “tip of the nib” to individual contributors (Resmer). Although the scale and demographic diversity of superhero comic fandom diverge from the more particular audience of gay comix and, even more so, Bechdel’s readership, what they do share is the pleasure and possibility of the participatory and coconstitutive affective reader experience.

Hospitable Dykes

Bechdel marks the ongoing invitation to her readers by inserting a narrator’s voice into the narrative of the comic strip and deploying a mock-heroic tone; she emphasizes both the seriality of the comics form and the normalizing of lesbian leads in the ongoing narrative. Implicitly hearkening back to the genre of (analog, pre-bingeing) television serials, Bechdel inserts the language of viewership: “Don’t touch that dial!” (*Essential*, 31). Although anthologizing the comic strip as *The Essential Dykes to Watch For* more actively encourages a linear reading, Bechdel offers readers the ability to drop in and out of narratives, an open invitation of sorts. At the start of each strip, she thrusts the

reader into the immediate narrative with a purely textual introduction that adopts the tone of “when we last left our heroes.” But in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, the characters are not superhuman heroes or even bumbling cartoons (see, e.g., Rocky and Bullwinkle) but rather heroines, a community of lesbians and queers. While she might be invoking, through the text, a tradition or practice of normative viewership, the images highlight Bechdel’s referential irony and in turn her self-representational impulses. She says:

Mo is me. In fact, all the characters in “Dykes” are more or less me. All I’ve ever written about is myself, and this book, if I finish it [here referring to *Are You My Mother?*], may be the most solipsistic piece of insanity ever published. . . . But aesthetic neutrality appeals to me. I’m always striving to be a generic person. (Thurman)

Bechdel writes about herself, about lesbians like those she knows, creating “generic” people who are identifiable and to whom readers will relate. In so doing, she extends an invitation, not only to queer women to see themselves represented on the page, but to everyone to see lesbians as people.

Bechdel further addresses this outcome of normalization in her introduction to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, published in 2008, two years after the publication of *Fun Home*. That introduction is its own sort of memoir, in which Bechdel, as the character of the cartoonist, retells the history of her comic strip career in its larger historical context. She articulates her intention to derive a universal lesbian essence from particular examples. But she also notes the personal gratification she took in representation: “To be honest, it was so comforting to see my queer life reflected back at me, I would have kept drawing these dykes to watch out for just for myself” (xiv). But she notes her flawed thinking in a belief in lesbian exceptionalism. As in the comic strips the written narrative and include a lesson in gender essentialism versus constructivism provided by Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (landing the “essential” gender studies joke of the collection’s title) (fig. 1.1).

Bechdel’s cartoonist self thus acknowledges the paradox of her efforts to catalog lesbian life as a site of difference, only to find that she has participated in a process of normalization. This is the paradox into which she invites the reader. Ultimately, tossing the illustrated representation of *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* into closer perspective, she invites the reader to decide and walks away. It is an invitation that is a confrontation as well as an opening. The reader takes possession of the text, along with its complicated politics, now abandoned by the author, thus upending the narrative authority.



Fig. 1.1. “Cartoonist’s Introduction” and “essentialism” (*Essential*. xviii).



Figs. 1.2, 1.3. "The Baby Question" (*Essential*, 215).

Resolving the paradox of radical and mainstream politics must happen in a space in which the authorial voice has been destabilized as the site of control.

But the cartoonist as narrator—along with her conflicted politics—remains present throughout the text, and the reader is invited to dwell in the contradictions and even humor of her efforts to resolve those tensions. While following the lives of a recurring cast of characters, Bechdel places them within current events. Her characters are politically active, highly critical of big corporations, privatization, and neoliberalism. With varying degrees of success, they attempt to fight the pull of homonormative life. Bechdel heightens the humor of her characters' responses to current events by inviting the reader into parodic visual jokes, thus doubling down on her self-awareness regarding the tensions between representational, normalizing politics and the queer politics of antinormativity. Mo, Bechdel's *Dykes* alter ego, also struggles to reconcile her radical leftist politics with the lived realities of the radical queers inhabiting their lives around her. Other characters call Mo out on the hypocrisies of her staunch beliefs. In "The Baby Question," a strip first published in 1999 (figs. 1.2, 1.3), Mo waxes nostalgic about the good old days: "Smash the family! Same the state!" Her girlfriend Sydney questions whether she wants to smash Clarice and Toni and Raffi's family.

Clarice and Toni, by this point in the strip, are in a domestic partnership, living an apparently more settled, (homo)normative life. Mo responds, "Please, Sydney, I'm expressing an ideological conviction, I'm not talking about real people" (*Essential*, 215). Invoking "real people" highlights the tensions between the radical queer communities that drove the LGBT rights movement in its more radical forms and the mainstream LGBT movement for equal legal recognition. Questions that had defined the previous decade of queer political movements are discussed casually while characters brush their teeth in a scene of domestic (if unmarried) intimacy. As Mo spouts her radical nostalgia, Sydney stares directly at the reader via the mirror, visually implying that we are reflected in the mirror with herself and Mo as they converse. Readers are thus invited to reflect themselves into the midst of the conversation and to engage both the humorous hypocrisy and the question of how to reconcile radical politics with real life.

Bechdel's commentaries on the impositions of real-life politics also stage more formal interjections. She frequently inserts contemporary political commentary—such as a newspaper whose changing headlines throughout a strip satirize the tragic absurdity of real headlines (*Essential*, 223), or corporate-sponsored NPR broadcasts that provide background text to the narrative arc (194)—taking the form of textual jokes within or adjacent to images (often with startling resonance to contemporary politics for today's readers; neoliberalism hasn't changed much). In a unique strip, published immediately



Fig. 1.4. "Leadership Vacuum" (Essential, 214).

before "The Baby Question," Bechdel appears as her character the cartoonist, with Mo, for once, as the voice of calm reason. First published in the midst of the Clinton impeachment proceedings in early 1999, "Leadership Vacuum" captures, in its jarring departure from form, political exasperation, even as it addresses itself directly to the reader (fig. 1.4).

Bechdel here departs from the standard panel and gutter, materializing rough-sketched, crumbled, failed drafts, tossed away in one frame, unwrapped by Mo in the next, and appearing for the reader to view, with cross-hatched shading giving its crinkled edges depth on the page. The extrapanel text boxes typically reserved for Bechdel's narrative voice are given over to Mo, a small talking head, narrating the cartoonist's breakdown in a direct-address apology to the reader. Whereas Bechdel typically acts as the intermediary between reader and character narrative, this strip flips that relation, with the character mediating between reader and cartoonist. This is an even more intimate invitation, in which Bechdel foreshortens the distance between the reader and comics artist, even as the reader is forced to confront the insanity-inducing state of contemporary American politics. Per a crazed portrait in the ninth panel, the crisis of contemporary politics has shorted her "irony fuse" and her "satire chip." She can no longer maintain an aesthetic, mediated distance. As in the introduction, readers are left on their own, narrative authority performatively abandoned. Bechdel is inviting the reader into her studio, making visible the labor of her political commentary alongside the characters, who would, from their apologetic tone, prefer to just get on with the story. In experiencing the startling interruption to the serial reading experience, readers must not only confront the formal deviation of the strip itself and the intersection of political realities into the fictional lives of the comics' characters, but also think outward to the disruption that real political events cause in their own lives.

This more dramatic juxtaposition of political satire with the personal dramas of the characters in *Dykes to Watch Out For* demonstrates the mode of hospitable aesthetics in which Bechdel engages, wherein the space of the comics form enables a self-reflexive irony that is itself a complex invitation. The ironic mode, which Lee Edelman has called the queerest of all rhetorical devices, is one relative to audience, assuming a level of knowledge or common understanding for the reader to be in on the joke (23). By relying on the ironic structure of contrast inherent in stitching together the text and image of the strip, Bechdel made her audience of lesbian readers—who wished to see themselves represented on the page—the knowing reader, the ones in on the joke, rather than the butt of the joke (or worse) in mainstream media. It is the pleasure of being addressed, of the sort that Fawaz highlights as the

strength of the comics counterpublic. It is a model of queer hospitality, in the mode of early LGBT political movements, built on principles of representation, community, and identification, that begins to suggest the site of a promising method whereby some of the critical force of queer theory can be redirected toward the imaginative world-building it first sought to undertake.

The Queer Hospitality of *Fun Home*

Radical hospitality relies on the guest being welcome even as her identity remains in question. Rather than a call to forswear claims to identity, it is a liberating invitation to dwell in uncertainty, to take as a starting point an openness that carries within it the possibility of a relational existence and world-upending change. The productive tensions within the aporia of radical hospitality would seem to speak to similar goals as the antinormativity strains of queer theory, the both/and that pushes to encompass multiplicities and resists set meaning, particularly in the defining of individual subjectivities within a larger social collective. It is within that potentiality that I wish to consider *Fun Home* as a text of queer hospitable aesthetics. Taken in light of Bechdel's self-conscious ironizing in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, as well as its wider mainstream success, *Fun Home* captures the growing pains of queer history as a personal and relational experience and hopefully suggests the ways in which a hospitable practice of reading can provide the means to reconcile the tensions of radical political hope.

Bechdel does extend an invitation into her family home, but it is a home fraught with memory and withholding. *Fun Home* scholarship has discussed at length Bechdel's intricate drawing process, her meticulous cataloging of personal ephemera, and her excavating of what Ann Cvetkovich and Valerie Rohy have characterized as a "queer archive" and an "archive of feelings" in service of a recursive process of confronting the past.⁴ This extensive work on Bechdel's creative practice enables my own consideration of reading as hospitality in the context of the longer arc of Bechdel's comics work. That such a rich body of scholarship has emerged on *Fun Home* suggests the power of its invitation and the ways in which its carefully constituted text remains a site of openness, confronting both the richness of its own self-realization and the traumas and tragedies of the past. To some extent, Bechdel would seem to be setting aside "the personal is political" impulses of *Dykes to Watch Out For* in favor of "the personal is personal" studies of her own family. But just as political satire serves as an ironic referent in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, so literature likewise serves a similar purpose: as the referent for establishing the complex process of reading hospitably.

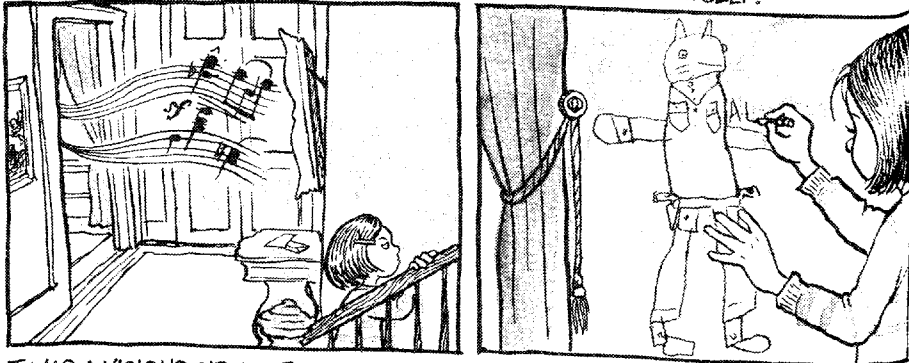
Fun Home's self-reflexivity is arguably what has generated such a rich vein of scholarship on subjectivity, history, genealogies, and the nature of truth and memory. Bechdel renders transparent her own deep-rooted anxiety about the truthfulness of her own account and her ability to translate her memory to the page.⁵ Her conflicted feelings about the process of self-representation build trust with the reader. By self-reflexively acknowledging her own doubts about her writing as she writes, she establishes credibility, even as she is up front about handing over to the reader the act of interpretation. The making of the self and the writing of history are the problem, and in both the textual and the extratextual world, reading and interpretation do the work of confronting the irresolvable tension between lived experience and representation. By asserting the experience of the impossibility of fully knowing or representing the self, Bechdel communicates the nonfictionality of the text. It is the complex, and what I call hospitable, work of simultaneously establishing narrative authority and relinquishing it as an act of good faith.

Even as Bechdel as narrator asserts the nonfictionality of the text, literary fiction becomes the "vocabulary in which the story can be told" (Rohy, 350). Bechdel and her father share a love of literature and the language it provides, which is simultaneously a means of avoidance and deferral within the structure of their relationship. They speak to each through Joyce; she interprets his death through his reading of Camus. He critiques her reading choices and slyly gives her a copy of Colette. Bechdel's sexual identity develops through a stack of gay books checked out from the library, and her sexual practice is fused with reading aloud (including from both Adrienne Rich and Roald Dahl). Alison's father, Bruce, also uses literature as a tool of seduction, offering texts to promising students, an act that Bechdel chooses to read ambiguously: "Whatever else might have been going on, books were being read" (*FH*, 61). Bechdel represents each member of her family as experiencing their own peculiar isolation, most notably in an innovative panel that invites the reader into the Bechdel home via circular cutouts, like peepholes, and into the isolation of their creative endeavors (fig. 1.5).

But reading, by contrast, has the potential to be a site of sociality, of conversation, and of reference, both confrontational and joyful. Much as Tiravanija served Thai food in the gallery, Bechdel serves her reader books, thus creating the possibility and opportunity for social interactions. It is into that space that Bechdel invites the reader. The visual space of the page provides the means by which Bechdel chooses to process her own complex relationships to her sexuality and to her father and his death. Readers inhabit that space with her, producing, via the complex intricacies of the recursive narrative, their own read. While *Dykes to Watch Out For* provides a space in which privileging a certain reader was a political and personal goal, the personalized

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.

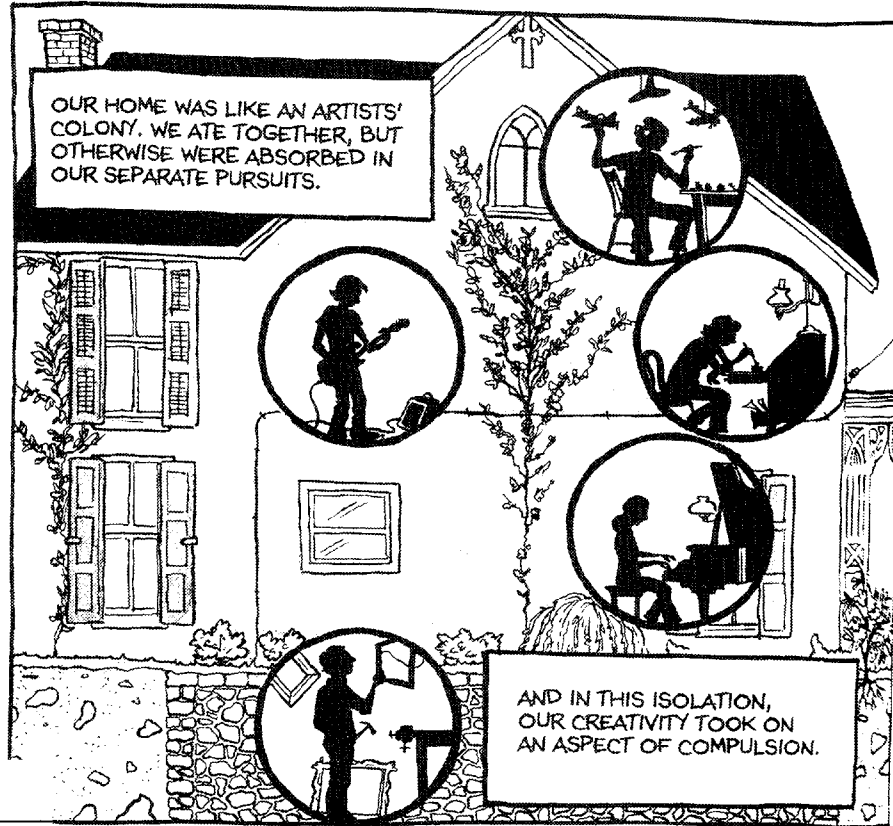


Fig. 1.5. The Bechdel home (*FH*, 134).

work of reading in *Fun Home* produces a text in which the privileged audience is one who reads, inherently, already, the reader in whose hands the book rests. By accepting the invitation to even open to the first page, Bechdel has constituted a relational space in which the reader is rendered a collaborator from the start. This does not impose or presume normative values, nor does it assume identity, fixed or unfixd, but rather opens up the possibility that the reader might accept an invitation and be transformed in acceptance. In the final panel of *Fun Home*, Bechdel executes the extended image of herself and her father as coconstituted Icaruses, plummeting into the sea (*FH*, 232). She imagines, in an act of trust and the relinquishing of control, that her father is there to catch her as she leaps from the diving board and into the pool. And facing down into the frame of the image, the reader jumps with her.

In this reading of hospitable aesthetics, Bechdel's work in developing the self-reflexive serial comics narrative enabled the development of her visual narrative in *Fun Home* as one that extends an invitation of radical queer possibility. Insofar, then, as the form is relational, Bechdel's invitation is re-extended and shifts with every reading. That reading can be performed by a UN ambassador in a Broadway theater in the service of normalizing homosexuality for legal recognition, but it can also reconstitute the creative work of collaboration, with both joy and antagonism, for a queer reader, coconstituted as a voice of collaboration. By inviting the reader into a space of interpretive play, Bechdel's work constitutes an invitation to imagine different ways of being, understanding, and creating.