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## Thinking Gender Papers

### Title

Virtual(ly) Queer: Anti-Genealogy and Obsessive-Compulsion in Bechdel's Fun Home

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**Virtual(ly) Queer:  
Anti-Genealogy and Obsessive-Compulsion in Bechdel's *Fun Home***

*If I wanted to accuse queer theory of liking anything straight, I'd probably pick straight lines.* Straight lines are the form of genealogies, the tracing of lines of affinity and inheritance through time. A genealogy is one way of spatializing time, of turning it into a straight line that can then be divided into discrete segments or be assigned a beginning, middle and end. Spatialize time and you literally territorialize it—in the case of genealogies, you turn the past into a territory at which you can glance from the present. Some kinds of genealogies, like family trees, are normative projects of the repetition of the same thing through time. Others, like the critical projects of genealogy of Nietzsche and Foucault, use tracings to denaturalize the very things that the former kind of genealogies make real. Queer theory has especially depended upon the latter kind of genealogy because the field's primal scene has coalesced as a particular reading of a tracing of discursive signs like homosexual, lesbian, or gay. More recently, this endeavor has evolved into *queer* genealogy: Chris Nealon calls it “feeling historical,” Heather Love calls it “feeling backward,” and Ann Cvetkovich traces them in “an archive of feelings.”<sup>1</sup>

I have a concern, however, with what genealogy does to time. I'm interested in queer children: not the proto-gays *we* adults used to be when *we* were younger, nor the figure of the Child with a capital C, but rather the actually existing queer children in the world, ones that are mostly absent from queer theory. The problem with genealogy is

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University press, 2003.

that its territorialization of the past in an arborescent form leaves no time for childhood at all. Queer theory's investment in genealogy tends to make it always look backward from the present or forward toward the future, and so it tends to turn queer children into proto-gay kids, making them the back-formation of an already achieved adulthood. The once potentially queer child is subject to a freeze-frame, reducing it to a fantasy or a narrative that queer adults tell one another. I would intensify this point to say that the child actually troubles queer theory's investment not only in genealogy, but the very developmental, humanist teleology of queer theory's normalizing subject. The proto-gay child's dominant deployment in queer theory—think here, for example, of Jack Halberstam's arguments about children in *The Queer Art of Failure*<sup>2</sup>—is actually the far more conservative securing of the becoming human of the queer subject (which is an adult). When, as in models of “feeling backward” or “queer futurity,” queer theory's role is always and only to subvert the normative through its queering, the very same structures that animate one form of investment in a regulatory future (the capital C Child as futurity) are simply replaced with a new, “good” object (the proto-gay capital C Child as *queer* futurity). In these parallel structures, the human exceptionalism of queer theory's subject is left intact. Creating anything new is difficult because we are stuck in genealogical time.

To think the queer child differently then, I thought it might be fun to do an anti-genealogical reading of a text that has been consistently read queerly and genealogically.

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press 2011. Look, for example, at this passage: “The Pixarvolt films, unlike their unrevolting conventional animation counterparts, seem to know that their main audience is children, and they seem to also know that children do not invest in the same things that adults invest in: children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death or failure, they are collective creatures, they are in a constant state of rebellion against their parents, and they are not the masters of their domain. Children stumble, bumble, fail, fall, hurt; they are mired in difference, not in control of their bodies, not in charge of their lives, and they live according to schedules not of their own making “(47).

Alison Bechdel's loosely autobiographical graphic novel and memoir, *Fun Home*,<sup>3</sup> is a retrospective, archival exploration of the protagonist Alison's childhood and coming of age, set in the wake of the coincidental timing of her coming out as a lesbian with the revelation that her father had carried on affairs with teenaged boys his whole adult life, an avowal that comes shortly before he dies under circumstances that Alison considers suicide. *Fun Home* has conventionally been read as a text that puts a great deal of pressure on genealogy, but that inevitably queers it: Alison's post-mortem detective work about her father Bruce's life confronts her with the futility of the straight line that is supposed to connect them as father and daughter, while the far messier queer line that might instead connect them contains a flaw. As Alison muses in the last chapter of the novel, "There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia. But that's a problematic line of thought. For one thing, it makes it harder for me to blame him. And for another, it leads to a peculiarly literal cul de sac. If my father had 'come out' in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother...where would that leave me?" (197-198). The final frame of the novel, citing James Joyce and Icarus, illustrates child-Alison jumping into her father's arms in a swimming pool; this moment has been largely read as the stuff of a *queer* genealogy. Ann Cvetkovich, for instance, reads *Fun Home* as a text about a second generation witnessing of trauma that connects Alison and Bruce, while Rick Lee emphasizes the connection between two generations of queers and the transmission of queer forms of knowledge that are enabled by the breakdown of the hetero-genealogy of father and daughter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Ann Cvetkovich, "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Women Studies Quarterly* 36, 1-2 (Spring 2008): 111-118; Rick H. Lee, "Bechdel's Books: Filial Fantasy and Historical Consciousness in *Fun Home*," paper presented at *Feminist Fantasies: Future Directions for the Study of Gender and Sexuality*, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, Rutgers-New Brunswick, NJ, May 13, 2011.

To read *Fun Home* as an anti-genealogy I'll focus instead on its fifth chapter, which, among other things, recounts Alison's self-described "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder" at age ten. Alison recollects that her obsessive compulsion was organized in a hyperattentive connection to the working parts of world: she became interested in odd and even numbers, trying to avoid the former, especially multiples of 13; she became fearful of crossing thresholds, like doorways; she had to disperse the invisible matter in the air around her for fear of ingesting it; she began reciting incantations to protect herself; and she established increasingly complex daily routines to protect herself against bad events (135-138). To humor ourselves, we might note that the *DSM-IV* defines Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder as an Anxiety Disorder where the obsessions cause the anxiety and the compulsions serve to neutralize them.<sup>5</sup> Alison probably wouldn't endorse that psychopathological definition, though; the *DSM-IV* maintains that, unlike adults, children are incapable of recognizing that their obsessions and compulsions are "excessive or unnecessary." Alison remembers reading and rejecting a similar logic at age ten in her mother's copy of Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, where obsessive-compulsive behavior was explained as repressed hostility toward parents (138-139). Indeed, like Alison, I'm more interested in obsessive compulsion's utility for defining something we would otherwise label as a "precocious" tendency in a ten-year-old girl. Whereas a genealogical reading of Alison's management of anxiety would render obsessive compulsive behavior yet one more piece of evidence of the abjection of proto-gay childhood, an anti-genealogical reading can attend to how Alison might shed some light on what Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *A Thousand Plateaus* when they write,

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<sup>5</sup> "300.3 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder." American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Washington, D.C., 2000.

declaratively, “Children are Spinozists.”<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after becoming obsessive compulsive, Alison starts writing in a daily diary at the suggestion of her father, a practice she continues into adulthood. Sometime in April of that first year of journal writing she begins to overlay the phrase “I think” upon her daily entries. “It was a sort of epistemological crisis,” notes Alison in the caption to these frames, “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” (141). As what the adult Alison characterizes as “gossamer sutures in that gaping rift between signifier and signified,” these “I think”s thereafter intensify in her daily entries to the point where the ten-year-old finds it more expedient to simply pen a circumflex over words and nouns of whose truth she cannot be certain (142). As we can see, this intensification reaches a point where entire entries are circumflexed, over and on top of the individual parts of speech that can no longer be self-evident.

I’m less interested in claiming Alison as a ten-year-old Derrida here than I am as a Spinozist, however. This practice of circumflexion to me suggests a tactic for inventive connection with the world that hurts. Alison’s journal, as an ostensible recording of the ongoing ordinary, is so riddled with the affective traces of what’s overwhelming about life that circumflexion becomes Alison’s attempt at catching up to the experience of the present, of giving it a genre in circumflexed journaling. When, as Alison admits, her “feeble language skills” (143) are not up to the task of adjustment to what can only ever retrospectively be labeled a “queer girlhood” in the shadow of her father’s secrets, the precocious intellection of Alison’s journaling is a mode of adjustment through the cool affect of deconstructive distancing that aims to reorganize and deterritorialize the social

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<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 256.

world's impact. By cancelling out the certainty of existence of nouns like "I", "father," "mother," and others, Alison doesn't simply manage her anxiety as an obsessive compulsive, but tries to deflate the very metaphysics of presence in molar organizations like the hetero-family that cause anxiety in the first place, to open up space to become otherwise. In the frame where Alison is reading Dr. Spock, we notice that her mother and father are fighting in the background after Bruce has likely been out with one of his lovers; in this sense, although there is a homophobic matrix for Alison's OCD tendencies, it is hard to see exactly how scenes like this in *Fun Home* would support a genealogy, queer or hetero, between her and Bruce. Alison seems to instead be searching for some other way of becoming altogether.

More fundamentally, though, we could turn to someone like Henri Bergson to find a way of reading moments like this in *Fun Home* other than as the retrospective stuff of a personal genealogy. Bergson's ontology of temporality begins by *separating* time and space; time is infinite as an always forward-moving force, whereas space is finite. Time is not divisible into three (the past, present, and future) but two (the virtual and actual). All pasts (*le passé en général*), co-exist with each present. The virtual composes a unity of the multiplicity of all pasts that might be mobilized in the service of the present in order to subtract from it that which is useful in tending toward a future. Bergson: "the past is only idea, the present is ideo-motor."<sup>7</sup> Memory, for Bergson, is *the most contracted form of matter*, an image that resides not in the brain, but in duration. The body being a peculiar kind of object in the world, conscious perception is the threshold through which matter contracts into memory and memory is dilated into the present, *always in order to enable the body to act upon or respond to the world in some specific*

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<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, New York: Zone Books, 1988, 68.

way.<sup>8</sup> In this account, looking backwards is not a tracing of the lines of the past, but rather the reaching toward the virtual to enable a becoming in the threshold of present and unfolding of a future.

If we read *Fun Home* with Bergson's ontology of time and memory in mind, then Alison's OCD diaries are not just an archive of childhood abjection, locked away in a past of bad feelings. Rather, they are an inventory of tactics or Spinozist strategies of connection to the world used by a queer child to adjust to what's overwhelming about childhood. They indicate the actualizing tendencies of a queer girlhood, the resources of precociousness available to a ten year old. Like Alison, then, we might read *Fun Home* in order to think differently about the capacities of children once the normalizing, humanist subject of queer theory has been dislocated. This is really where the primary force of the child to queer theory enters into movement, but *not* as an ethical imperative to take care of an innocent or vulnerable object. Lacking the capacity for a molar politics of representation, Spinozist strategies are immanently available to actual children as a creative multiplication of the irreducible difference of age. Queer theory, increasingly under siege from posthumanist calls to scuttle its normalizing subject, ought, then, to take up the invitation of the queer child to undo itself through the intensification and multiplication of irreducible differences like age. To do that, however, will require giving up on genealogy to notice the virtually queer kids among us.

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<sup>8</sup> A good synthesis of this ontology of time is Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 106-110.