

The roots of incomprehension. *Fun Home* : different definitions of sexuality and queer community

Mounia Abousaid

Alison Bechdel's fame as an artist first came through her long-running comic strip chronicling, dissecting and satirizing lesbian culture: *Dykes to Watch Out For*. And while it may seem like her artistic focus shifted when she published *Fun Home – A Family Tragicomic*, queerness¹ very much remained the main theme of her work. Indeed, *Fun Home* focuses on exploring Bechdel's relationship with her father – a relationship that happens to be articulated largely around the queerness of both parties, as she spends a large part of the memoir attempting to parse out and explain his conception of his sexuality, and the relation to her own lesbianism. Because it focuses on different conceptions of sexuality, *Fun Home* allows the reader to explore the following questions: how are ideas about (homo)sexuality constituted? What makes them vary? What effect(s) do the variations have? The present essay is devoted to answering those questions; it argues that *Fun Home* illustrates that queer identities are much more short-lived than other ideas about sexuality, as they shift incredibly quickly. It also attempts to see what are the consequences for queer communities in general.

Fun Home and queerness construction

One of the most valuable insights brought by Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is the idea of sexuality a social construct. Indeed, as David Halperin sums it up, Foucault shows that while “sex has no history”, because it is a “natural fact, grounded in the functioning of the body”, “sexuality is a cultural production” that represents “the appropriation of the human body [...] by an ideological discourse” (Halperin 1989, 257). Sexuality is the way each cultural context interprets and contextualizes sex, and is thus eminently culturally relative because it changes with varying cultural contexts.

But how does a culture condition the way individuals approach a matter as bodily, and as seemingly immediate as sexuality? Foucault readily answers: through discourse. All the discourse surrounding sexuality in society – from academic theories to soap operas, from pornography to the “Talk” parents give to their children –, produces the way we approach sex. Nothing about our relationship to sexuality is “natural”: all of it is produced through discourse and is socially constructed. Therefore, as discourse changes, as culture shifts with time, sexuality and ways of viewing sex change along with it. Shifts are hardly captured, indeed, one conception of sexuality does not disappear entirely before a new one appears. As such, the new one takes form while the old one is still presents in the minds of many, since culture itself changes very progressively and slowly. It appears, then, that there are situations in which different frameworks and discourses to theorize sex cohabit, even if they contradict each other.

That is the case in *Fun Home*. The memoir's queer figures, Alison Bechdel and her father, obviously have two different ways of looking at their sexuality. She is an out and proud lesbian and he, while attracted to other men, is in a heterosexual marriage, has no intention of leaving it, and does not even necessarily-conceive of himself as homosexual. He does not seem to conceive of his behavior as

¹ Here, and throughout this essay, queerness is used as a generic word for same-sex attraction – with none of its political connotations. Because this essay is about discourses and the construction of different kinds of sexuality, I did not want to use a loaded word with homosexuality over and over again when it might not be appropriate.

contradictory or hypocritical, whereas it is incomprehensible for Alison²: she methodically attempts to make sense of it by framing his life to be a result of homophobia and repression, because she cannot conceive of a reason for his behavior other than shame and the desire to hide himself from open homosexuality. ,Lets have a closer look at that situation in asking what discourses went into producing their understanding of their sexuality, and what led to a different understanding?

Bechdel, sexuality and literature

Stating that one of the main themes of her memoir is analyzing sexuality, Bechdel describes many of the discourses that went into forming both her and her father's conceptualization of their homosexuality. At the very start, she identifies a common discourse: literature. *Indeed*, in her meticulous rendition of her memories of her father, the only permanent element of his daily life that even remotely alludes to queerness is, literature. Her father is always shown to us with books that present homoerotic subtext: Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Not only are books an ever-present representation of queerness in Bruce Bechdel's life, they also provide him with a central way of seeing and thinking of himself. For instance, let us consider the following cartoon panel:



His exclamation (bottom left), *You damn well better identify with every page*, is representative of the role literature plays in his life: he identifies intensely with characters and books, and relates to them on a very personal level. We are told books are the center of his identity, and the books he cares the most about are queer-themed. The fact that literature is the kind of discourse most central to the production of Bruce Bechdel's idea of his own sexuality is then fairly obvious.

That idea is further driven home by the fact that the only way Bechdel communicates with her father's queerness is through literature: in the fourth chapter of *Fun Home*, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower" (which happens to be the title of the second volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where Bruce Bechdel is compared extensively to Marcel Proust himself. The frames show him gardening and carefully caring for flowers, while the captions describe the scene in Swann's Way, where the narrator sees Gilberte in Swann's garden, and automatically falls in love with her. When Alison Bechdel finishes describing the Proust scene, the last caption says: "if there was ever a bigger pansy than my father, it was Marcel Proust" (see bottom right caption, Panel 2). This is the first time that Alison Bechdel clearly identifies her father's sexual orientation, rather than heavily implying it, and it is in the context of an extended reference to literature.

² No disrespect is meant by using Ms Bechdel's first name – using "Bechdel" at all times just got too confusing.



Literature is also central to the formation of Alison's identity. In the third chapter of *Fun Home*, "That Old Catastrophe", she narrates her coming out as follows:

"My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. I'd been having qualms since I was thirteen, when I first learnt the word due to its alarming prominence in my dictionary. But now another book, a book about people who had completely cast aside their own qualms elaborated on that definition". (Bechdel, 2006, 78)

These few sentences were the captions on a series of frames that showed a college-aged Bechdel finding a gay-themed book. The realization of her homosexuality, the leap from simply unnamed desires to a full-blown identity is made by Bechdel when she faces a book that presents her with a way of conceptualizing them.



If the same kind of discourse – *ie*, literature – that is at the center of both Bechdel's conceptualization of their sexuality, then why are they so different? The answer may seem like a tautology: the content. Bruce Bechdel's foundational books are by Wilde, Joyce and Proust, they are *The Great Gatsby*, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As such, the idea of internalizing same-sex desire does not contradict being married, – a concept of same-sex desire produced by the 19th century. A context for

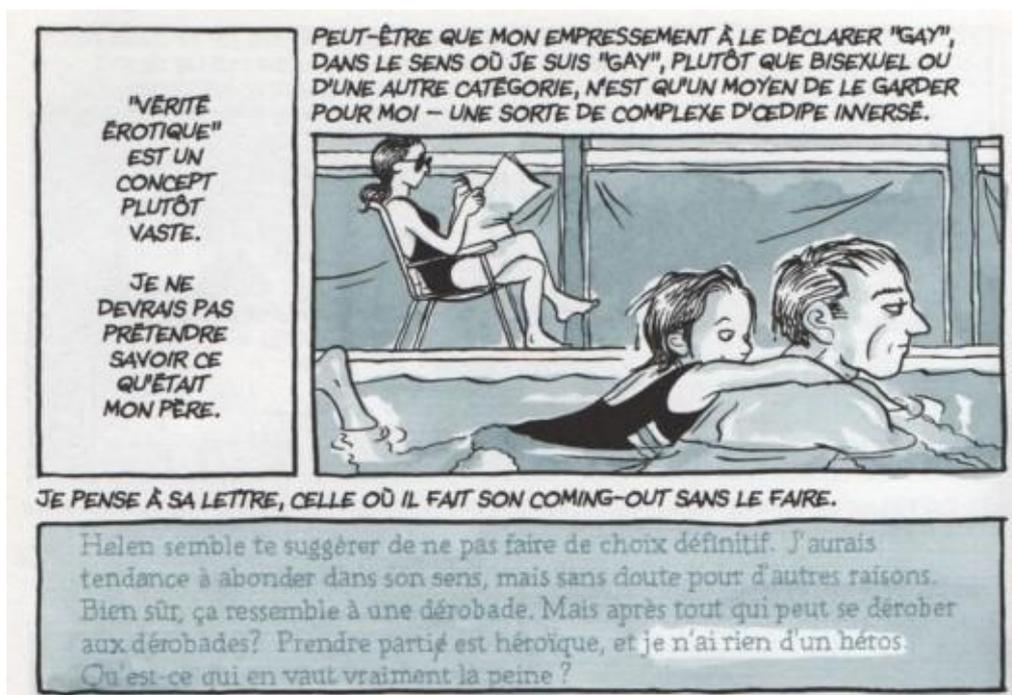
which the idea of homosexuality as an essential facet of one's identity, one that must be proclaimed and liberated, is foreign.

On the other hand, the literature that Alison's identity is constituted through is highly political. In panel 3, the book that helps her to come out is taken from the celebrated documentary *Word is Out* (released in 1977). And the books she continues to read in the wake of her coming out are works like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's *Lesbian/Woman*, or Jill Johnston's *Lesbian Nation*. All of those are works that emphasize gay identity to be essential and central to the self, and coming out and visibility to be the way to liberation.



The corpus of works, so to speak, that constitutes Alison's identity is fundamentally different from her father's: therein lies the root of their different views on queerness and thus latest incomprehension. When she was attempting to fit her father's life into a narrative of homophobia and repression, she wasn't discovering his true identity. Rather, she was projecting her one idea of same-sex desire upon him in order to relate to him:

Pane 5



In truth, she was projecting her “erotic truth”, not discovering his. The importance of books in the constitution of Alison Bechdel and her father’s identities, and the resulting dissonance are important to look at because they are representative of what happens in large queer communities. Indeed, books are instrumental in the formation of queer identity. As Valerie Roby (2010) puts it in her article of archiving in *Fun Home*:

“It should be no surprise that queers are liable to an intern library cathexis. What sort of people, after all, must research who they are? Those whose difference is antifamilial, somatically unmarked, culturally veiled, and potentially shaming are drawn to lonely stacks and secret research, where the archive enables self-definition” (Roby 2010, 355).

Because of the nature of queerness, people who experience same-sex desire do so outside of a community, unless they are the children of gay/lesbian parents, which is still rather rare. Therefore, queer identity is defined through an exploration of outside media, which most often happens to be literature, because it is the only thing that will define what being queer *means* and what it entails. Isolated from a larger community in real life before coming out, a queer sense of self is thus defined through the writings (and increasingly, media) available. That is beautifully illustrated by Nicole Brossard’s poem “My continent”, quoted by Didier Eribon (2004):

“My manifold continent of those who have signed themselves: Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barnet, Michèle Causse, Marie-Claire Blais, Jovette Marchessault, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Colette and Virginia, other drowned women...” (p. 87)

For this reason, queerness is fundamentally unstable: the works that initially define an individual, before they have a sense of a queer self, and thus before they join the community, are based on what an individual “happens to find” instead of an outside established canon. Hence the works closest at hand will be what happens to be available at that particular time, and under those particular circumstances. This will be wildly different from generation to generation, and thus similarly varying concepts of queerness will be produced. Because the moment of realization, of coming out to oneself and theorization of queerness occurs outside of community, queer identity lacks the continuity that mainstream culture processes – and thus shifts much more quickly.

An interesting corollary to consider is that the dependence of queerness and its definition on cultural products further proves John D’Emilio’s argument that gay identity is a product of capitalism: the very constitution of queer identity relies on the mass production of media portraying queerness, and what kind of identity depends on how the media portrays same-sex desire. In other words, it is an identity that is eminently market-driven, and how younger members will think their sexuality depends on *Glee*, *The L Word*, or less mainstream shows are more widely available... that is more widely distributed.

However, the main striking point here is that there are constantly different discourses and ways of conceptualizing sexuality coexisting in queer communities; each most often corresponding to a different generation. And as it is the case with Alison Bechdel and her father, the different discourses lead to a lack of understanding, a gap which eventually leads the respective parties to drift away from each other. This might very well be one of the many elements that keep queer communities from being as transgenerational as they can be: different generations are not only kept away by differences in experience, but differences in the very way they think on themselves and think of their identity. It is not only that varying experiences make it so that they don’t have very much in common, they make it

so that they speak different languages: even the commonality of thinking of their queerness in the same way is not present.

Conclusion

Reading Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and looking at the portrayals of sexuality it contains, sheds an interesting light on the way queer identity is produced. Like the Bechdels', most queers' sense of themselves, their way of thinking their sexuality is produced by literature... And to a certain extent, by media at large. Because of that, queerness seems to be a much more transient identity, a situation that in turn leads to the coexistence of different conceptions of sexuality within the community and in a time period, causing rifts and incomprehension within it.

Bibliographie

Bechdel Alison. 2006. *Fun Home, A family Tragicomic*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

D'Emilio John. 2004. "Capitalism in gay identity"

Eribon Didier and Michael Lucey. 2004. *Insult and the Making of The Gay Self*, Duke University Press Books.

Foucault Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality 1-3*, New-York, Random House.

Halperin David. 1989. "Is there history of Sexuality?", *History and Theory*, numéro 28, volume 3, p.257-274.

Rohy Valerie. 2010. "In the Queer Archive", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 16, Numéro 3, p. 341-361.