

**“BELONGING TO AN OUTLAW TRIBE”:
IDENTIFYING WITH DIFFERENCE IN THREE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES
BY BECHDEL, ANZALDÚA AND ALLISON**

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract	v
Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Autobiography	1
Chapter One: <i>Fun Home</i> and the Autobiographical Image	11
1.1 Seeing as Telling.....	14
1.2 The Closeted Home.....	21
1.3 Towards a Queer Composition.....	29
Chapter Two: <i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i> and the Possibilities of Hybridity	40
2.1 The “Wild Tongue” of the Borderlands.....	44
2.2 Mythological Realities.....	50
Chapter Three: <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i> and the Power of Fictionalized Witness	55
3.1 Truth, Lies and Trauma.....	57
3.2 Forging a Self from Shame.....	69
Conclusion: A Pedagogy of Difference	80
Bibliography	89
Biography	93

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ABSTRACT

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Title: “Belonging to an Outlaw Tribe”: Identifying with Difference in Three Autobiographies by Bechdel, Anzaldúa and Allison

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My thesis centers around the autobiographies and autobiographical fiction of American authors from underrepresented or marginalized communities. I am working with three texts, each of which defies traditional norms of the autobiographical genre, deviating in form, structure, language and perspective. This project seeks to establish how the integration of such texts into the American literary and historical canons can function as a tool in the process of identity construction for those who deviate from the white, male, heterosexual identity that dominates traditional American storytelling. In *Fun Home*, the graphic memoir by Alison Bechdel, the author opens new terrains of memory in the gaps between text and image. Gloria Anzaldúa depicts the landscape and emotions of dual culture in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a hybrid text of English and Spanish, prose and poetry. Finally, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, by Dorothy Allison, demonstrates the power of “telling lies” in an autobiography, as a method of working through the effects of trauma. The significance of my inquiry lies in its social-justice and educational implications, and I strive towards more equitable representation in the academy and American schools, as well as the wider philosophical aim of advocating for every individual’s agency in telling their own story.

Introduction: What We Talk About When We Talk About Autobiography

In this thesis, I set out to justify the positioning of narratively unconventional autobiographies as equal to, but apart from, more conventional examples of the genre, in terms of their truth value and their contributions to the work of identity formation. I have selected three texts for close study: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) by Alison Bechdel, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa, and *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) by Dorothy Allison. Through an analysis of the narrative structures available to each autobiographer, the various methods of navigating trauma each text uncovers, and a review of the “queering” elements in each author’s compositional practice, I hope to carve out a space in which autobiographies like these function to complement, contradict and expand upon accepted truths of United States society. By staking out this terrain I wish to illustrate how these texts, and others like them, can reinforce healthy and fluid practices of identity formation, particularly in young people from marginalized groups who see their stories and struggles expressed authentically and in a nuanced manner, perhaps for the first time. History is made, embellished, manipulated and employed by those in power to tell one version of a story that would surely be related differently in the hands of another narrator. Reading the family narrative of a queer author, the diasporic tale of a multilingual border-dweller, a testimony of sexual abuse through the eyes of a child narrator—these reading experiences disrupt the assimilationist project of literary and historical canons. The structure and impact of these sorts of texts warrant further inquiry, and their achievements merit them a place in a new, revitalized pedagogy of difference.

I have chosen texts that exemplify contemporary autobiography grappling with a range of identity issues, but before diving into these books with specificity, I will address some problems,

and corresponding advantages, of the genre of autobiography itself. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in the first pages of *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, provide an historical definition of the term *autobiography*, labeling it “a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment and subsequently became definitive for life writing in the West,” with a focus on “the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement.”¹ They go on to note, however, that this definition has in recent years been made to contend with the forces of postmodern and postcolonial scholarship which question the primacy of “the Enlightenment subject” (3). This discourse on the genre itself has led to an explosion of autobiographical texts in a wide range of subgenres, which Smith and Watson catalogue thoroughly in Appendix A of their text, and which range from autoethnography to self-help books to acts of witnessing.

Accordingly, the texts analyzed here bill themselves in a variety of ways. This diversity manifests on their very book jackets, where, listed next to the International Standard Book Number and publisher’s information, one can find the genre label that booksellers would use to categorize these works on the shelves. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is marked fiction; *Fun Home* is a graphic memoir; *Borderlands* is categorized as Chicana Studies/Women’s Studies. These labels, of course, oversimplify the complexities of genre in general, but do allude to the breadth of material which can be considered life writing.² Labels like Chicana Studies and Women’s

¹ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 2-3.

² *Life writing* is an even wider term than autobiography, including biography and fictional writing in the first-person, and serving, in Smith and Watson’s text, as an umbrella term that encompasses any sort of autobiographical written act one could imagine. I use the terms *autobiography* and *life writing* interchangeably throughout this project, in keeping with the updated definition of autobiography that grants it a similar diversity of application.

Studies, in particular, hint at the sociological and historical uses of autobiographical texts. That said, the most important criterion I used to select these texts from the vast pool of autobiographies dealing with themes of oppression, marginalization and trauma is that they all break out of the narrative structure and established trajectory of generally accepted forms of autobiography, such as a factual recounting of the chronological events of a life or the traditional bildungsroman formulation. Is there a common structural form to autobiographies as diverse as the three I have selected? The answer to this question could provide a framework for further studies into life writing that grapples in similar ways with issues of identity.

Bastard Out of Carolina, at its core, adheres most closely to the traditional narrative structure of chronological time. Each event more or less follows the preceding one, and character development progresses according to this natural temporal arrangement. Yet, even this seemingly logical progression is a construction of sorts, for many of the anecdotes related in *Bastard* were first tried out as short stories in Allison's debut collection, *Trash* (1988). In light of this, the events of her life as narrated for the autobiographical novel in what appears to be chronological order are in fact able to be told out of context, in varied order, while holding constant the same painful memories that need sorting out. Similarly, Bechdel's *Fun Home* tells and retells key events in the life of her father, and although the "tragicomic" progresses along the loose arc of Bechdel's childhood and sexual awakening, readers are periodically flung backwards in time into memories that stretch for pages at a time, signaled most obviously by how old the characters appear in the drawings, rather than by the written word. *Fun Home* also parallels *Bastard* in its novelistic affect; despite not being billed as an actual novel, as *Bastard* is, *Fun Home* displays a clear element of fictional construction. The author structures each chapter around allusions to

and themes lifted from major canonical works of literature, and as a result, her recollections, which fit so snugly into this structure, feel like creations, though not completely artificial.

Reading *Borderlands/La Frontera*, on the other hand, one is struck by its lack of adherence to any one narrative form, as the autobiographical elements at work are dispersed across essays, poetry, allusions and socio-historical storytelling. Here, we find nothing in the way of chronology, but much in the way of memory and underlying structure. For one, the first part of *Borderlands*, comprised of essays, begins with the story of Aztec tribes settling in Mexico and what is now the southwestern United States; it ends with a section called “*El retorno*,” the return, and the words, “This land was Mexican once / was Indian always / and is. / And will be again.”³ Thematically, the text comes full circle, from the initial settlement to an imagined reclamation of native land. Additionally, Anzaldúa links her life to this ancestral past through the continual use of indigenous mythology as both the spiritual background of her experiences and as a story to be retold in the modern context. Just as Bechdel reclaims the works of prominent authors in the Western canon to make sense of her father, Anzaldúa reclaims the stories of her Mexican-Indian heritage to make sense of her existence in the borderlands.

One common thread across these three texts is the anti-chronological impulse of acts of memory—the ways in which what is remembered cannot be properly placed in time and might be more useful if manipulated into some other form of narrative. One potential form is temporal, though not necessarily chronological, narration. *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Fun Home* fit into this category. The other is spatial, a categorization most appropriate for a text like *Borderlands*, but with applications to the other two texts, as well. Below, I will discuss these unique but far

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 113.

from mutually exclusive terms; in fact, I wish this analysis to reveal the complementary nature of the temporal and spatial narrative frameworks.

Temporal continuity is key to Paul John Eakin's discussion of narrative, in which he favors the "extended self" as the psychological entity that narrates a life. Eakin draws on Ulric Neisser's formulation of five psychological selves, with the extended self at the third tier, above the "interpersonal self," which understands itself as a subject interacting with other subjects, and the "ecological self," which comprehends its own interactions with a surrounding environment. The extended self constitutes "the self of memory and anticipation, the self existing outside the present moment."⁴ On the surface, this definition of selfhood should indeed be enough to encompass the subject of any autobiography, for an autobiographical act in its purest sense requires only that its author be aware enough of her place in time that she can recollect and communicate events "outside the present moment." However, an investigation of the final two, higher forms of the self that Neisser outlines, but which Eakin stops short of, uncovers expanded facets of selfhood that help to demystify the nuances of texts like the ones I have chosen. The "private self" incorporates a consciousness of the uniqueness of one's own subjective experience, and the "conceptual self" includes theoretical and social understandings of selfhood and how it relates to groups and other categories. Autobiographical writing frequently implies the existence of a private self through its desire to chronicle the particular subjectivity of a singular individual. And in cases in which a group history, a group trauma, or a collective memory supersedes or underlies the story of an individual, surely the conceptual self of social existence can be invoked.

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* serves as a prime example of a text which fetches back memories that

⁴ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), xii-xiii.

are largely of a social nature, and scatters among these memories the personal reminiscences of the author's extended and private selves. Likewise, *Fun Home* addresses a subversive history of queer becoming in the midst of a personal coming-of-age story and *Bastard* draws on a family chronicle in an effort to understand the forces of love and shame.

But Eakin insists that “we are trained as children to attach special significance to one kind of selfhood,” the extended self, because it is the first tier to incorporate the act of memory (3). With the support of psychologists and neuroscientists who study the process of narrative creation in patients with amnesia and Alzheimer's, who lack a stable temporal self, he posits that a firm hold on memory is the cornerstone of narrative identity, which is in turn the cornerstone of autobiography. The more complicated private and conceptual selfhoods may also include memory, but are superfluous to the most basic prerequisite of autobiography—the ability to wake up in the morning, know who you are, and remember the events of your past.

Patients with amnesia or Alzheimer's cannot perform this basic process, at least not every day, and one can see that they would make poor writers of a temporal narrative. Eakin notes that “narrative is especially suited to registering the effects of time and change,” and the ability to coherently and chronologically tell a life story is the easiest way of tracking these effects (3). But what if the patient with Alzheimer's were to write her memories down in lucid moments, and to compile these, in the random order in which they were recalled, into an autobiography? This narrative would be temporal, in that it relies on memory, on the extended self, but it would be neither coherent nor chronological if taken in its raw form. In another vein, Anzaldúa's text imagines time in a transcendent, cross-generational sense, through which she has access to the ancient knowledge of indigenous goddesses and her ancestors. Here, the timeline of spiritual

events complements and complicates the chronology of Anzaldúa's own life.⁵ While Eakin's investment in the extended self and the temporal narrative framework is useful in analyzing certain elements of my chosen texts, the unconventional structure of these books requires an additional structural reference point.

In a chapter titled "Dialogues of Diaspora," from her book *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Susanna Egan suggests that the spatial model of narrative suits bicultural life writing better than temporally-rooted autobiography does. She describes the spatial as encompassing "transitions and overlap, boundaries and their permeation, simultaneous inside/outside instabilities, hybridity, hyphenation, cultural creolization...find[ing] fullest expression in narrative that is permeable, polygeneric, and significantly free from the constraints of time."⁶ This definition might double as a description on the book jacket of *Borderlands*, and the concept does much to make room for "unauthoritative" stories being told by members of marginalized communities, diasporic or not. The literature of diaspora may epitomize Egan's theorizations, but I argue that, once established, the traits she locates in this literature can be found in other stories, as well. She points out that diasporic autobiographers must constantly "[negotiate] complex terrains of historical circumstances and personal positions in which past and present transform each other," and though her examples include only immigrant stories, like "the autobiographer [who] repeatedly reinterprets what it means to be Mexican in the United States" (125), could not these same words apply to Bechdel's memoir of discovering her queer sexuality, or Allison's account of childhood abuse? In both cases, personal positioning within a particular socio-

⁵ See the chapters "Entering into the Serpent" and "*La herencia de Coatlicue*" in *Borderlands* for their significant handling of this structure.

⁶ Susanna Egan, "Dialogues of Diaspora," in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 144.

historical context of oppression (in Bechdel's case, homophobia; in Allison's, extreme poverty) produces a decidedly "complex terrain" in which memories scatter across the narrative in fragmentary, anti-chronological pieces, conjured up by scarcely noticeable triggers.

Egan's definition of spatial narrative fills many gaps in Eakin's temporal theory. First, it recognizes that memory cannot necessarily be related chronologically. Rather, it frequently manifests in bursts, often with the same lived experiences repeated again and again in the mind, while other events remain buried and inscrutable. In a sense, this description of memory gives further support to the importance of a private self, which experiences memory in this highly individualized, completely interior manner. Eakin may be right that the memory of the extended self lends itself to chronological narrative, but the memory of the private self is often incoherent and requires more spatial narration in order to transcribe it accurately.

Spatial narrative also addresses the social and group-oriented concerns of the conceptual self, such that "theory becomes autobiographical, as do political and cultural commentary, criticism, fiction, poetry, film. While rejecting the notion that they represent all of their people, [spatial] autobiographers define and represent themselves as members of communities whose stories demand refashioning to make sense in changing situations" (Egan 122). Thus, the subjects of spatial autobiographies, by necessity, move far beyond the individualistic Enlightenment figures of traditional autobiography, acknowledging the structures and networks that influence their power to speak and write. They take up community stories even as they relate their own lives. Egan's analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* illustrates this process in a widely applicable way. She writes that "Kingston's conquest of North America and Asia is achieved not in one linear narrative that moves through time but in a collage of

narratives, each one combining personal and community experience, Chinese histories and present circumstances, Chinese legends and their contemporary American translations... its maps to be determined in memory, dream, and the languages of talk-story” (151). Many of these traits appear in the texts I have chosen. As only one example, *Fun Home* incorporates Western “legends” in the form of allusions to canonical modernist literature, and touches on history when Bechdel compares her own experience as a gay American to the experience of her father a generation earlier. Crucially, she links these threads together through the “collaging” of her own and her father’s narratives, sometimes even appearing to venture out of her own subjectivity and into his.

In the spatial mode, this movement is wholly acceptable. Egan argues that “retaining the spatial narrative that recreates... one’s layered identity depends on a sustained use of fictive techniques,” and she questions the effectiveness of authors who rely too much on chronology because it places limits on such sources of knowledge as dreams and memory (144). Specifically, she observes that “chronology can become almost irrelevant when the processes of perception and recognition focus on the present as a space in which worlds of difference are contained—contained but not complete, and fraught with contradictions” (124). This is a succinct summary of why temporal, chronological narrative is not sufficient to deal with the autobiographies of marginalized subjects who must navigate these “worlds of difference” with particular caution and care, introducing a critical dialogue around the stakes of remembering for subjects who experience the trauma of various oppressions.

I begin my study with a chapter on *Fun Home* because it represents the most straightforward autobiography of the three selected, involving elements of memoir and

documentary archival practice that strongly attest to an objective and verifiable truth of experience even as Bechdel questions whether the matter of truth can ever truly be closed. In the second chapter, I move on to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which complicates notions of objectivity by asserting the validity of alternative ways of knowing. I conclude with an analysis of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a work which completes the argument against external verifications of truth through its composition in the fictive mode. As the chapters progress, I address the tensions constantly arising between personal and political, fact and imagination, traumatic experience and positive identity formation. Each chapter concludes with a section outlining the specific tools the author employs or introduces to help in reconciling such tensions. The significance of my inquiry lies in the social justice implications of reading and teaching deviant autobiographies, and I strive towards a more inclusive curriculum for United States schools, as well as the wider philosophical aim of advocating for every individual's agency in telling her own story.

Chapter One: *Fun Home* and the Autobiographical Image

Fun Home, by Alison Bechdel, is the most straightforward autobiography I analyze in one important sense, for her book is a *memoir*, telling the story of her relationship with her father while adhering to the autobiographical pact—author, protagonist and narrator are all Alison Bechdel.⁷ However, *Fun Home* diverges from norms in other ways which increase its complexity. Most significantly, it is a *graphic* memoir; as much of the story is told by drawn images as by words. With *Fun Home*, Bechdel joins the ranks of Art Spiegelman (*Maus*) and Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*), along with many others, who have contributed to the undeniable rise of comics studies in the academy through the genre of autobiography.

But why does autobiography, in particular, hold such a place of prominence amongst comics considered to have literary merit? A study of the interaction between text and image in *Fun Home* gestures toward an answer to this question, albeit one heavily steeped in the particularities of expressing gender and sexuality. The importance of the graphic element of narrative unfolds through thematic and structural elements including embodiment, spatial narrative and memory. First, in response to Gillian Whitlock's and Anna Poletti's contention that "autographics frequently involves the 'graphic' in the sense of explicit and confronting images of bodies in pleasure and pain,"⁸ I argue that *Fun Home* includes uncensored depictions of the

⁷ Philippe Lejeune coined the term "autobiographical pact" to argue that the trust a reader has in a given life writing text stems from an implicit "pact" between reader, writer and publisher ensuring that the author, subject and narrator of a book are indeed the same person.

⁸ Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, "Self-Regarding Art," *Biography* 31, no. 1 (2008): vii. Whitlock and Poletti use the term "auto-graphy" rather than autobiographical comic or graphic memoir, as does Robyn Warhol, who claims the term "suggests the writing of the self, the drawing of the self, and even the signature, or autograph, indicating the authentic imprimatur of the self" (see Robyn Warhol, "The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home,'" *College Literature* 38, no. 3 (2011): 2).

pleasure and pain invoked by nudity, masturbation and intercourse in order to force a proxy experience of queerness in readers. Merely reading about lesbian sex and sexuality in the verbal form requires giant leaps of the imagination for those who do not identify as gay women or engage in such sexual acts themselves. However, “reading” an image depicting these themes brings readers into closer identification with the lesbian subject, as they relate to the human body drawn on the page and begin to recognize similarities alongside imagined differences. Consciousness of similarities which transcend difference encourages readers to “actively reimagine how the world is constructed,”⁹ leading them to question the norms dictating that a particular experience (in this case, lesbianism) is a taboo subject.

Julia Watson also references graphic memoir’s potential to access “a richly embodied subjectivity different, in its sustained semiotic cross-referencing, from the narrative consecutiveness of verbal autobiography.”¹⁰ Here, Watson hones in on an element of spatial narrative unique to the graphic form, the literal disruption of narrative time as one reads the text and then views the image, or vice versa, perhaps returning to re-read one or the other or both in an attempt to fully understand their interaction. This repetitive process draws out a narrative moment, simultaneously complicating chronology because each panel prompts a different interaction and produces a series of distinct narrative eddies which contain that back-and-forth, circular movement between text and image. Carolyn Kyler’s conception of the graphic memoir as a “map” of a life offers another reading of spatial elements. She stresses how both maps and graphic memoirs “include many gaps and spaces, compelling the reader-looker to navigate the

⁹ Marjorie C. Allison, “(Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2014): 74.

¹⁰ Julia Watson, “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home,’” *Biography* 31, no. 1 (2008): 36.

narrative and create meaning,” a process which “emphasiz[es] the ordering and navigation necessary to collapse fiction and nonfiction, associate word and image, link time and space, or make sense of a disparate collection.”¹¹ While this method of reading attends to various elements of Egan’s spatial narrative, like the inherent fictive nature of representative images and the scattering of “disparate” information across a text, it is most salient in its acknowledgment of physical space as a key element of the comics form. Navigating the gutters between panels in a graphic memoir enhances the practice of active, embodied reading practices, as readers reach a gap and make a decision about where to train their eyes next.

Images further enrich life writing by providing an alternative route for transcribing memory. This is one of the most frequently cited interventions the graphic form makes within the genre of autobiography. If a hallmark of traditional autobiographical texts is dual narration by the self of the recollected moment and the self of the present writing moment, then “that splitting of self into observer and observed is redoubled in autographics, where the dual media of words and drawing, and their segmentation into boxes, panels, and pages, offer multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection” (Watson 28). While I will speak later on the potential of relating the “untellable” features of trauma through images, I want to first draw attention to how the particularly conscious differentiation between these two narrative levels adds to the texture of memory. Most concretely, image-text interplay makes obvious the inconsistency of memory, as images “sometimes illustrate what the voice-over is saying, sometimes contradict it; sometimes reproduce the protagonist’s youthful perspective, and often make her the object of the narrative gaze” (Warhol 5). In doing so, the graphic

¹¹ Carolyn Kyler, “Mapping a Life: Reading and Looking at Contemporary Graphic Memoir,” *CEA Critic* 72, no. 3 (2010): 4.

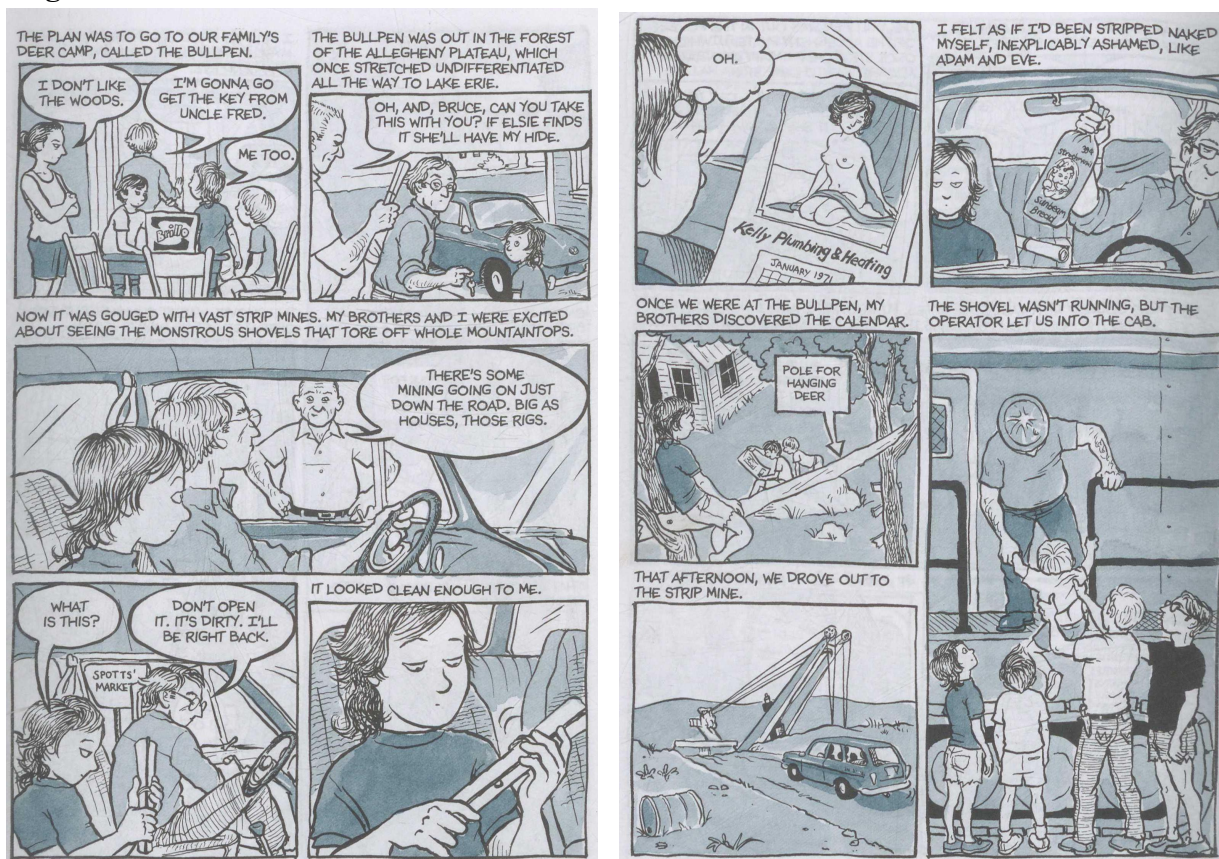
autobiographer essentially provides two versions of a recollection in conversation with each other, allowing the reader to parse their differences and establish a fuller truth, defined by both the objective positing of a memory through words and the emotional complexity and questioning indicated by drawings. Moreover, this “complex intertextual memory work” is heightened by the physical separation of “the autobiographical avatar” within a boxed frame and “the autobiographical narrator” who speaks primarily in unboxed narrative tags above each panel (Whitlock and Poletti x). Thus, memory might be said to exit the temporal realm and enter the spatial in the context of graphic autobiography.

In this chapter, I begin by providing examples from *Fun Home* of the form and structure of comics expressing issues centered around bodies and sexuality. Building on this framework, I then discuss *Fun Home* as an act of witness, a text which works through familial trauma and the pain and confusion that frequently surround a queer sexuality existing within the confines of a heteronormative culture. I conclude by analyzing the ways in which Bechdel participates in “queering” narrative form from a compositional perspective, but also through a literary lens in her choice to structure chapters around links between canonical modernist texts and her father’s and her own sexuality.

1.1 Seeing as Telling

As I have already explained above, the voice of the author Alison Bechdel materializes in *Fun Home* as unboxed text above each image panel, or as boxed text within a panel, while the dialogue of characters in her story is enclosed in rounded speech bubbles. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the author-voice as Bechdel and the character-voice as Alison. The

Figure 1.



reactions, emotions, preoccupations and perspectives of each character become visible to readers not only through their dialogue, but through presences and absences in text and image. For instance, in a sequence in which Bechdel depicts her first encounter with pornography as a 10-year-old, she does not name the object of her fascination as a “girly” calendar in any of the text present on the page, instead *showing* the audience what she herself saw (Figure 1). “What is this?” the young Alison queries in her speech bubble, holding a rolled tube of paper and gazing at it with interest. “Don’t open it. It’s dirty. I’ll be right back,” Bruce Bechdel responds in the same panel, exiting the car. The subsequent and final panel on the page contains no dialogue, only a close-up portrait of Alison about to unroll the paper tube, with Bechdel’s concise narrative tag

unboxed above the frame: “It looked clean enough to me.”¹² Turning the page, the reader is immediately confronted with the calendar’s image of a naked woman, narrated only by Alison’s thought bubble, which merely reads, “Oh” (112). In this panel, the viewer peeks over Alison’s shoulder to peer at the calendar with her, “occupying her subject position as one does in reading first-person narration”; conversely, in the next frame, the reader is again “looking directly at her, as from a third-person perspective” (Warhol 13). This frame has no speech bubbles, but the careful reader should pick up on multiple clues as to Alison’s state of mind after seeing the “dirty” picture: Bruce has apparently just returned to the car, as his body is not fully within the panel and suggests a movement to close his car door, while Alison stares straight ahead with an unsmiling, slightly mortified expression on her face. The calendar, again rolled into a tube, has found its way to the back seat, physically separated from the young-girl-turned-voyeur.

Alison’s secret shame resonates through this image alone, but Bechdel’s unboxed narration above the panel makes it slightly more explicit, stating, “I felt as if I’d been stripped naked myself, inexplicably ashamed, like Adam and Eve” (112). The word “naked” appears as a metaphorical way of expressing Alison’s creeping knowledge of her attraction to women, rather than describing the image that triggers that knowledge, an instance of a picture expressing something too intimate for speech. Jennifer Lemberg, writing about Bechdel’s portrayal of her relationship with her father growing up, describes the use of “acts of looking to convey what her narration cannot easily describe,”¹³ and the same tactic is employed when working through her sexuality in the coming-out subplot.

¹² Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 111.

¹³ Jennifer Lemberg, “Closing the Gap in Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home,’” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1/2 (2008): 137.

In the next panel, the narrating text explains, “Once we were at the bullpen, my brothers discovered the calendar” (112). Again, most of the explanatory work is performed by the accompanying image, which shows Alison sitting in a tree, spying on her brothers, who appear small and in the distance, ogling the calendar. Just as Alison’s shame is revealed through her physical distance from the calendar in the preceding panel, her outsider status as a girl and as a lesbian is highlighted through a physical separation from her brothers. The narrator does not *say* that she was excluded from viewing the naked women in the calendar; instead, the image suggests a much richer range of meanings for the reader to consider. Perhaps Alison was intentionally excluded by her young, forgivably heteronormative brothers. On the other hand, without any further text-based explanation, one also intuits that Bechdel is self-segregating as a reaction to her sexual shame, and that even a 10-year-old can subconsciously recognize and internalize social norms that punish queerness, without need for explicit instruction.

The conclusion of the scene I have been discussing relates to graphic narrative’s remarkable ability to embody psychological realities. A few days after the encounter with the calendar, in a “bizarre coincidence,” Alison comes across another girly calendar in the cab of a mining rig (Figure 2, 113). Again, she expresses awareness of the taboo nature of her attraction to these images of nude women, with the narrator Bechdel suggesting that, held in the gaze of the male heterosexual tour guide, “it seemed imperative that he not know I was a girl” (113). With this in mind, she asks her younger brother, in the subsequent panel, to “call [her] Albert instead of Alison,” which he finds befuddling (113). The accompanying cartooned image depicts the calendar hanging on the wall behind Alison’s head as she and her brother face each other in profile. Framed by images of blatant femininity and comfortable masculinity, Alison’s body

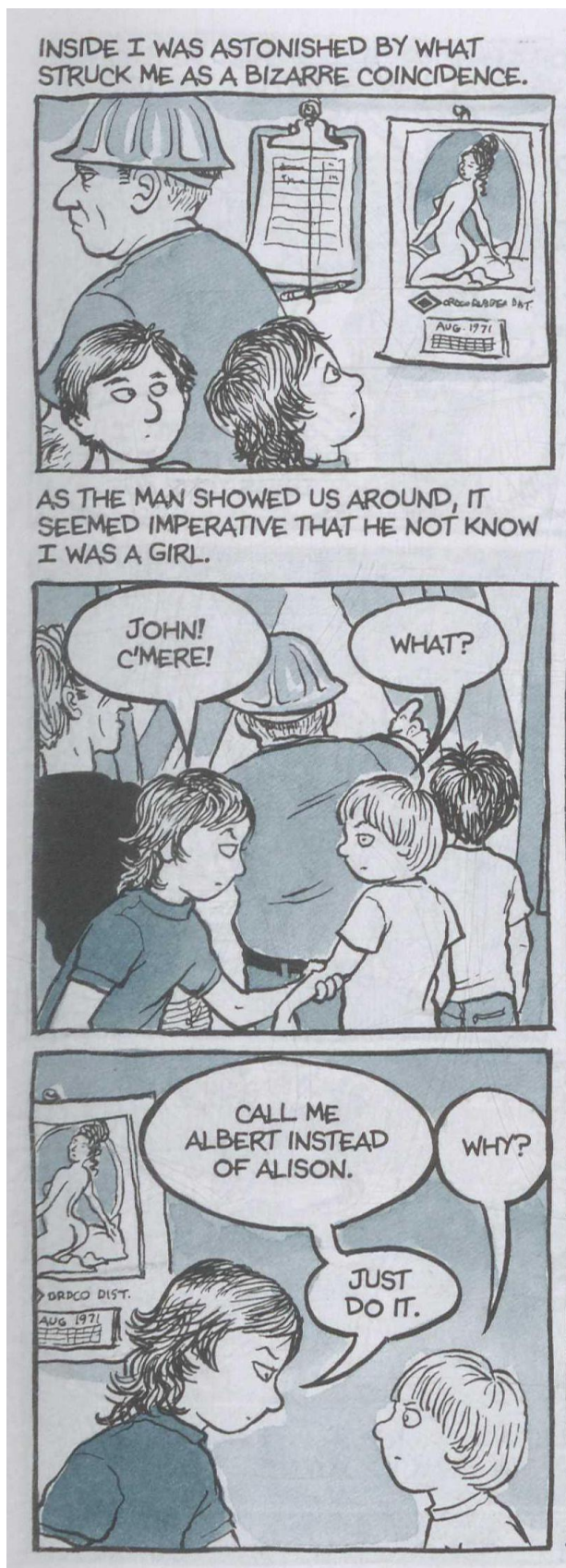


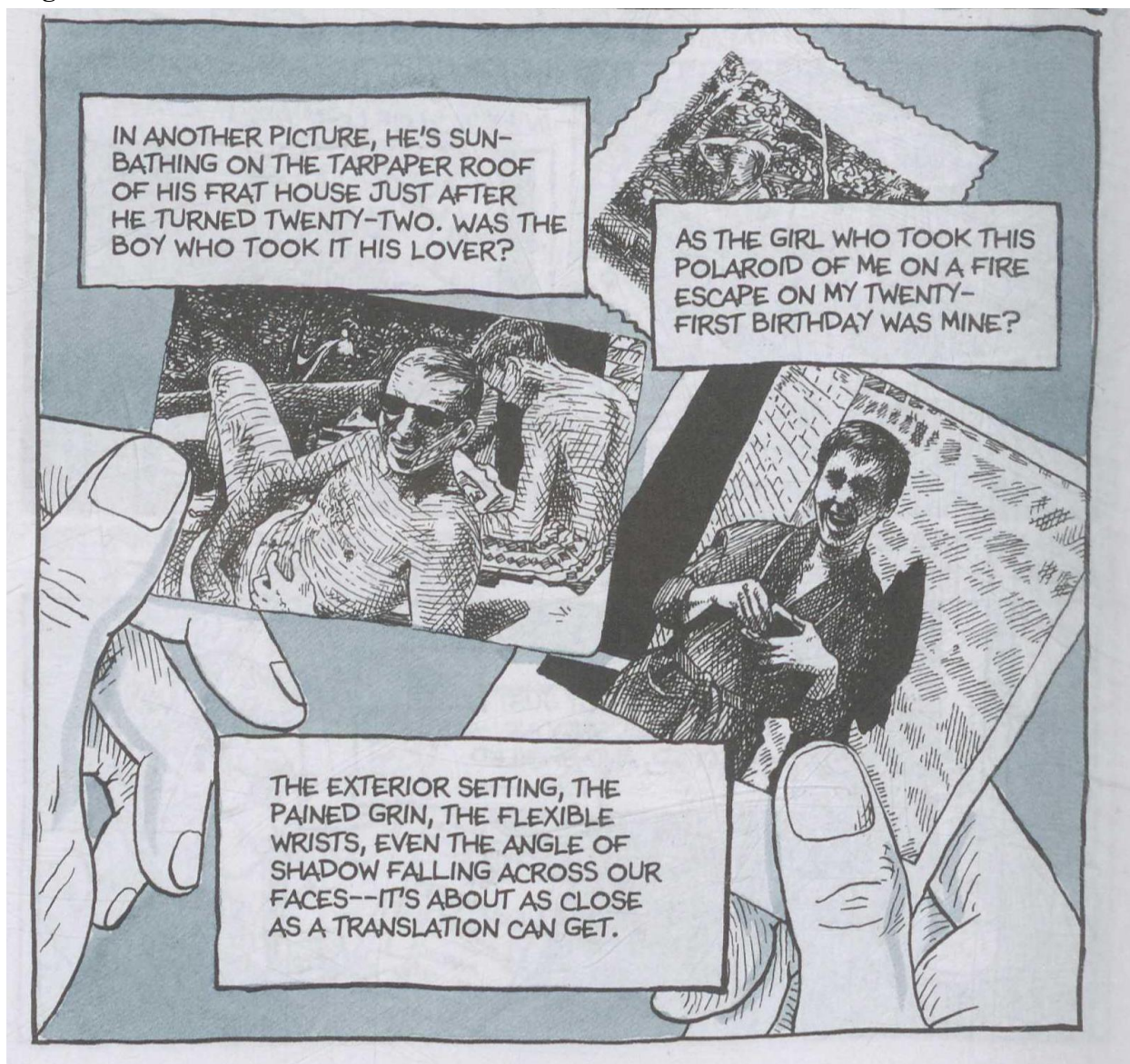
Figure 2.

occupies an androgynous realm, physically embodying her queerness in a manner impossible to achieve through language. Speaking on this particular ability of the images in autobiographical comics, Robyn Warhol notes, “the voice-over Alison-narrator usually speaks in abstractions... because the realms of the visual and the aural come through drawings rather than through language, the images of people and places in autography are more vivid, fixed, and concrete than the ‘sensory aspects’ of verbal description” (10). The old saying, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” comes to mind, accurately predicting the opportunities for concision and directness that come with working in the comics form—a much needed tool in a book like *Fun Home*, so thematically complex and dense with allusion. Furthermore, Alison’s sexual awakening and struggle with gender norms is often a complementary and secondary subplot to the

narrative of working out the secrets of her father's life. Subtle visual moments, like this one with her brother, do much of the heavy lifting to maintain the thread of her own queerness throughout the book.

Photographs, however, may be the most frequently cited way in which Bechdel gives physicality precedence in *Fun Home*. The importance of photographs to her project cannot be overstated. In a stunning feat of obsessive-compulsive artistry, Bechdel actually posed for reference images for almost every frame in her book, imbuing the drawings with “an almost palpable physicality, interestingly gendered in that Bechdel poses herself, appropriately costumed, for both male and female characters” (Warhol 7). Beyond allowing Bechdel to embody the masculine identity she craved access to as a child, her poses also allow her to “imaginatively inhabit” the body of her father, a term I borrow from Watson (48). She achieves this not only through posing for her cartoons of him, but also by recreating old family photos in the pages of *Fun Home* in a manner that often highlights the physical similarities between father and daughter. In a moment demonstrative of Bechdel's awareness of this potential, the closing page of Chapter 4 features a panel containing two drawings of photographs, one of her father at age 22, and another of herself at age 21 (Figure 3). The panel includes a life-sized depiction of Alison's cartoon hands holding the two photos side by side as she offers a comparison of the images, noting as almost identical “the exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces,” and musing, “it's about as close as a translation can get” (120). Indeed, the subjects of these two drawn photographs could be twins; at first glance, father and daughter look completely androgynous in their similarity. In this instance, Bechdel utilizes the visual interplay of elements on the page (side-by-side juxtaposition, first-

Figure 3.



person view of the photographs as Alison handles them), as well as father's and daughter's mutual embodiment of a queer identity position, in order to establish the personal and political threads connecting the two.

Poignantly, Bechdel closes this chapter with narration that further hints at the retroactive links she seeks to foster between herself and Bruce Bechdel, as she speculates about her father's secret love life and wonders, "Was the boy who took [the picture] his lover? As the girl who took

this polaroid of me on a fire escape on my twenty-first birthday was mine?” (120). Again and again in *Fun Home*, photographs open these channels of identification and imagination, emphasizing the power of images to trigger deep meditations on difference, representation and the multiplicity of truth. Especially in a text like *Fun Home*, which traffics in themes of sexuality, genealogy and the many avenues of memory, images provide the necessary vehicle connecting abstract and complicated emotions with their physical manifestations. Bechdel writes beautifully and intelligently, and one can surely imagine that her words, divorced from images, would still carry significant weight. Without the drawings, however, her story would lose much of its grounding in reality, slipping into the muddled realm of the theoretical and sacrificing many important moments for potential reader identification. The active experience of reading and interpreting paired text and images offers a productive ground for working through queerness, trauma and memory that should not be forsaken.

1.2 The Closeted Home

The trauma represented in *Fun Home* stems from an oppressive tradition of homophobia in the United States and the consequences of hiding a queer identity from the world—especially from one’s family. Throughout the first chapter of the book, Bechdel develops the idea of her father’s manic quest for a perfect home as paralleling his desperate attempts to hide queerness with an outward heteronormativity. Using her house as backdrop, Bechdel chronicles the various restraints she encountered as a youth, which range from emotional repression to strictures on her gender expression. Together, I label these forces as “the closeted home,” a term I believe conveys the effects of Bruce Bechdel’s closeted homosexuality on the Bechdel family’s life as a whole.

Merriam-Webster defines trauma, in its most basic sense, as “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.”¹⁴ Taken singly, particular recollections of Bruce Bechdel’s despotic management of his perfect home might not register as anything more than standard examples of the parental impulse towards authoritarian rule with children, and every child resents her chores. However, the psychological impetus for Bruce’s actions lies in the repression of his homosexual desire and aesthetically effeminate nature. As he cannot express this identity outwardly in his own body, he instead embodies it in the house, and in his daughter. Thus, the repression Alison experiences growing up—a repression that predates the knowledge that she and her father inhabit similar identity positions—is a subconscious manifestation of Bruce Bechdel’s own traumatic experience as a marginalized gay man. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, “Bechdel serves as an intergenerational witness who explores the ongoing impact of traumatic histories on successive generations and into the present...haunted by questions about the effects of growing up in the vicinity of powerful combinations of violence and secrecy, including forms of secrecy that in the interest of protecting children’s innocence seem only to harm them.”¹⁵

Bechdel the author retroactively recognizes her father's great secret as the root of the deficit in her family’s emotional capabilities. Early in Chapter 1, titled “Old Father, Old Artificer,” she compares her father’s home improvement project to that of the family in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, commenting that her own life “could have been a romantic story.... But in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone... it’s out of the

¹⁴ *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “trauma,” accessed May 12, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma>.

¹⁵ Ann Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home,’” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1/2 (2008): 113.

ordinary” (10-11). The accompanying images depict Bruce towering in anger over his laboring children, whose faces exhibit considerable fear, but whose bodies reveal the standard nature of these unpleasant interactions as they preemptively flinch in anticipation of a diatribe, or even a blow. For Bechdel as a narrator, memories of her father’s erratic anger become inextricably bound up in the unsustainable perfection of his interior design; as she recalls it, “his shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany” (20). Considering Rachel Walerstein’s idea that shame “forces one to be looked at, to be seen in one’s body with all its flaws, while at the same time permitting the one shamed to turn away from oneself,”¹⁶ I conceive Bruce Bechdel’s obsession with the aesthetic appearance of his house as a transference of shame off his own body, though he cannot completely remove himself from it. Embodying his queerness in effeminate decor and objects means he can bear to be looked at, armed with the excuse that a house can be “pretty,” even if society claims that a man can’t be.

Alison’s reactions to the constant state of tension within her family range from the angry —“I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture”—to the agential, as she chooses to embrace “the unadorned and purely functional” whenever possible (14). But more than anything, Bechdel expresses her childhood in terms of imprisonment, repeatedly returning to the metaphor of the dangerous Minotaur and its helpless child victims, all of whom are trapped in Daedalus’s labyrinth. While Bruce may be the Minotaur stalking the maze-like hallways of the family home, Bechdel is more interested in comparing him to Daedalus. Not only is he the “skillful artificer” (7); he, like Daedalus, is “indifferent to the human cost of his projects” (11). Outsiders would likely attribute this indifference to mere

¹⁶ Rachel Walerstein, “Recomposing the Self: Joyful Shame in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 4 (2016): 173.

personality flaws, comfortably explaining away his distant partnership with his wife, which Bechdel describes as “cooperative” in theory but not in practice, and his utilitarian view of his children as “extensions of his own body, like precision robot arms” (13). The family's sterile relationships, however, mask the deeper human pain of an inexpressible identity.

To be gay is not quite the same as to be a woman, or a black person, or any other identity which manifests in external appearances. Queerness *can* be hidden, if one tries in earnest. Yet, as Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes explain, “at many different moments, queerness appears (or emerges or erupts) to trouble normalcy, legitimacy, signification. It doesn't fit. It skews the realities we construct for ourselves.”¹⁷ This proposition is in accordance with Bechdel's suspicion that “something vital was missing. An elasticity, a margin for error” in her home life (18). In one regard, what is missing is the very queerness Alexander and Rhodes point to, queerness as an elasticity that would disrupt the family's suffocation under Bruce's regime of traditional middle-class American perfection. On the other hand, one cannot deny that his queerness does in fact exist, bubbling to the surface, at times, to “trouble normalcy.” In these moments both Bruce and his children most need “a margin for error” that would enable them to accept their deviance from representative families, to navigate the tension that closeted homosexuality produces. Instead, the family members sink deeper into their personal worlds, disconnected and uncommunicative.

The silence concerning sexuality in the Bechdel family saga—that is, until Alison herself forces the subject by coming out as a lesbian—might be seen as more than just the silence of shame. If we understand repressed sexuality as a trauma, then we must consider talking about it

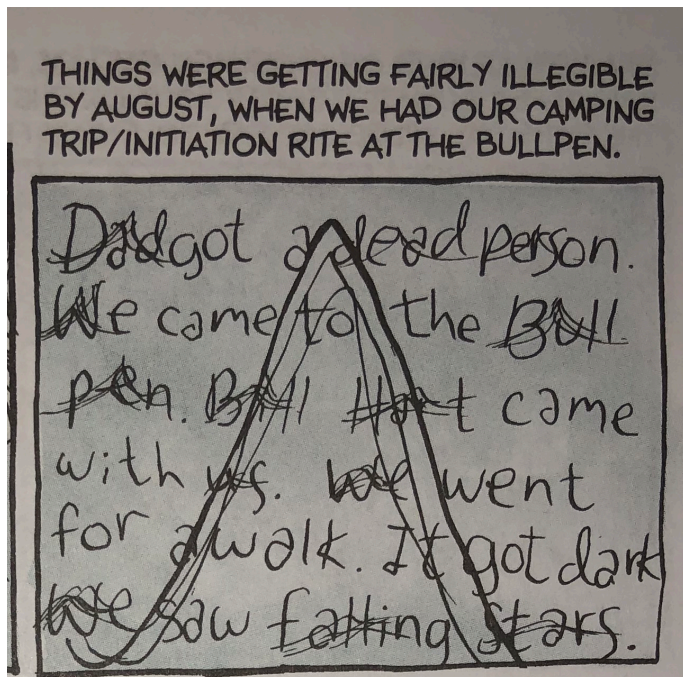
¹⁷ Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition,” *JAC* 31, no. 1/2 (2011): 181.

to be “a conversion of trauma’s morbid contents into speech,” which requires “working through trauma’s hold on the subject.”¹⁸ This work is not to be taken lightly, and not everyone is well-positioned to carry it out. As a husband, a father, a high school English teacher living in a small, rural town in the 1960s and ’70s, perhaps Bruce Bechdel was not prepared to open a conversation about his true sexual desires, which were cast at the time as undeniably illicit. “Coming out” could have cost him his job, his family, or even his life. Leigh Gilmore’s scholarship is finely tuned to this dilemma, striving to complicate the “the consensus position [which] argues that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language not only fails in the face of trauma, but is mocked by it and confronted with its own insufficiency” (“Limit-Cases” 132). Gilmore insists that the abundance of trauma narratives populating bookshelves today attest to the actual sufficiency of language itself, but that realms of discourse are controlled by various legalistic, social and cultural norms that coerce traumatized individuals to not tell their stories (“Limit-Cases” 133).

Bechdel herself does not have this problem—or rather, she has it, but overcomes it. In Chapter 5 she describes the onset of her obsessive-compulsive disorder at age 10, including a recollection of reading the famous 1946 text by Dr. Benjamin Spock, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Childcare*. Spock’s partial attribution of the disorder to “repressed hostility” is quickly dismissed by Alison at the time, but Bechdel’s inclusion of that reasoning in *Fun Home* implicitly connects the mental difficulties of her youth to the traumas I have been discussing. Bechdel also includes in this section a meta-analysis of the act of self-narration, describing her “compulsive propensity to autobiography” and reproducing many entire from her childhood

¹⁸ Leigh Gilmore, “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdiction of Identity,” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 129.

Figure 4



not even those” (141). Crucially, she soon begins to replace the words “I think” with a symbolic image, first placing it between sentences, but later using it to cover words and entire passages (Figure 4). If Bechdel has an impulse towards autobiography, she also has an instinct for the drawn visual.

Returning to the question of narrating trauma, Alison’s dissatisfaction with the written word in her diary adds another layer of complexity to my understanding by highlighting the particular difficulty children might have in narrating their experiences verbally. Cvetkovich considers the symbol to be “its own eloquent testimony to the impossibility of documenting truthfully what [Alison] is seeing or experiencing...the diaries provide witness to the secrecy and uncertainty that pervade the house, testifying to her inchoate reaction to that which cannot be narrated” (121). Bechdel herself concludes the saga of her diary's degeneration into image by saying, “My feeble language skills could not bear the weight of such a laden experience,”

diary (140). The diary is a set piece of reckoning with truth and falsehood, as Alison begins to add the words “I think” to the end of each declarative statement. She considers this habit as “a sort of epistemological crisis,” precociously musing, “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

referring to her minimal and symbol-infested description of the camping trip I described in the previous section (143). I do not see these statements as contradicting Gilmore's defense of language as a means of expressing trauma, but rather as another facet of that argument. Children necessarily possess a more constricted verbal toolkit, for they have read less and learned fewer words; Bechdel's "language skills" are considerably less feeble at the time of *Fun Home*'s composition. The issue here seems actually to boil down to a particular coercive force regarding personal testimony—the possibility of judgment and condemnation if one is discovered to have misrepresented the truth. A child is unlikely to understand that truth, especially personal truth, is rarely expected to be absolutely objective, and Alison's anxiety about the truth value of simple statements concerning daily happenings is an extreme example of this misunderstanding. Moreover, children lay claim to very limited power in our society, making them even more susceptible to the pressures against telling that Gilmore describes. On top of these widely applicable societal factors, I concur with Cvetkovich in pointing out that Alison exists in a household that encourages secrecy with unusual zeal.

Nevertheless, Alison's diary does gesture towards a larger significance in her future practice as a graphic memoirist. Just as many autobiographers include photographs and facsimiles in their published books, Bechdel draws these documents alongside cartoon images of the story of her life. This exercise represents a fascinating mix between the imaginary and the evidentiary. Bechdel is oft-noted as an "archivist" of sorts, but even Cvetkovich, who frequently employs this term, addresses how "graphic narrative's hand-crafted drawing distinguishes it from contemporary realist forms such as photography and film and reminds us that we are not gaining access to an unmediated form of vision...demonstrating in visual form testimony's power to

provide forms of truth that are emotional rather than factual” (114). I have already discussed the expressiveness of Bechdel’s drawn images, which ground the distinctly intellectual and literary discourse of their corresponding textual components in relatable physicality and emotions. I am ready to extend this analysis to an argument for the necessity of images to her particular narrative practice, even if I believe that trauma in general does not necessarily avoid the verbal.

Lemberg’s point that “it is precisely when she is unable to write that Bechdel locates drawing as an outlet for queer desires” strikes me as particularly salient (134). Perhaps these early revelations contributed to her prolonged devotion to the comics form. Even as she works through her compulsions—her diary entries, once devoted to “[bearing] no false witness,” eventually allow “hard facts [to give] way to vagaries of emotion and opinion”—she persists in her drawing, now penning representative illustrations of the male body she wishes she had (170). *Fun Home* itself bears witness to Bechdel’s dual love of text and image. One need only refer to the image of a college-aged Alison masturbating to Colette’s autobiography, accompanied by the tag, “good for a wank,” or to the two-page spread illustrating her sex with her girlfriend Joan, ecstatically narrated with an Odyssey-inspired metaphor, to believe that Bechdel has overcome the difficulties of writing her queerness.

I end this section with a return to the trauma of the author’s childhood. While *Fun Home* does include passages relating joyous expressions of queer sexuality and deviant gender, Bechdel explicitly attests to the harm built up throughout her youth as a result of her father’s lie—a hurt which appears to have been confirmed, rather than initiated, by his premature death and the exposure of his secret life. The closing lines of the first chapter of *Fun Home* describe the nature

of her feelings about his suicide, an event that would generally be considered a traumatic incident in itself, though she returns instead to memories of his cold parenting:

It's true that he didn't kill himself until I was nearly twenty. But his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him. Maybe it was the converse of the way amputees feel pain in a missing limb. He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials...smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne. But I ached as if he were already gone. (23)

Here, Bechdel casts herself as a fatherless child, paternal affection thwarted by societal constraints before she could even comprehend what those constraints were. Such are the devastating effects of our culture's abhorrence of the queer individual. *Fun Home* is an important text because it offers "queer perspectives on trauma that challenge the relation between the catastrophic and the everyday and that make public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful" (Cvetkovich 111). Notably, Bechdel's narrative does not depict more frequently recognized traumatic experiences of outright violence and blatant discrimination. Rather, she makes visible the subtler forces of self-denial and secrecy that ultimately lead to the same ends.

1.3 Towards a Queer Composition

Perhaps in 2019, the central narrative of *Fun Home*—Alison and Bruce Bechdel's separate but overlapping struggles to grapple with their homosexuality—will not strike readers in the United States as exceptional or taboo. Just last year, movies and television shows about

LGBTQ people constituted some of the biggest and buzziest releases of the year,¹⁹ and as Smith and Watson note, “narratives of sexuality—sexual identifications, sexual transformations, and sexual violence—now constitute a distinct subgenre of the autobiographical” (152). However, considering the abundance and variety of queer narratives being marketed to the mainstream consumer, there is a noticeable lack of stories that leave questions of gender and sexuality unresolved, or that recognize the historically deviant aspects of queerness.

Smith and Watson celebrate this phenomenon in one sense, suggesting that, for LGBTQ subjects, “new stories have become possible: about committed relationships, building a family, and wielding power and authority in social life” (152). I do not wish to argue that such new possibilities are not a step in the right direction; it is certainly beneficial that viewers and readers of every age and social position have greater access now than ever before to positive stories about navigating queerness. Yet, many scholars of queer theory resist what they see as “homonormative” narratives, stories about queer identities that are oversimplified and rife with assumptions that queer people *want* to assimilate into the dominant, heterosexual culture. In their essay about the “impossibility” of queer composition, Alexander and Rhodes, who self-identify in their article as members of the LGBTQ community, outline this argument, writing:

the ways in which queerness is typically represented renders it unrepresentable.

Queerness becomes a series of tropes or clichés that elide its differences from normative heterosexuality. In the process, we never realize the potential critical agency of a fully

¹⁹ Examples include the films *Boy Erased* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, both about outed teens facing conversion therapy; *Love, Simon*, the first major-studio Hollywood film to center around a gay teen romance; and a variety of television shows featuring LGBTQ characters and plot lines, from the true crime of *The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story* to the reality show glitz of *Queer Eye*, the harrowing dystopia of the *The Handmaid's Tale* to the charming animation of the children's program *Steven Universe*, which featured a same-sex wedding in its most recent season.

represented queerness; queerness becomes yet another subject position that must be given glancing acknowledgment in the growing multicultural pantheon, another diversity ‘charm’ on the bracelet. Hence, the nod in composition texts to the ‘coming out’ story or the fight of queers for the right to be married. In both cases, queerness marks just another surface difference (since we’re all the same on the inside, after all), a difference that only ever has relevance when positioned against the normative (since queers really want to be married and settle down, just like the straights). Such formulations erase the critical difference of queerness. (180)

In many ways, Alexander’s and Rhodes’s formulation of queerness mirrors arguments about the inexpressibility of trauma. Accordingly, they offer a solution that can potentially be placed in dialogue with use of the autobiographical image. They propose non-normative queer representation—even when it involves topics that are frowned upon, avoided, or condemned by a mainstream society that claims to have made space for queer stories—as an essential element of the queer political movement, and a crucial compositional tool.

Fun Home, both in story and structure, exemplifies how a text might respond to these complaints. There is nothing cliché or homonormative about either Alison’s or her father’s stories. Whereas many mainstream attempts at representation insist upon the relatability of comfortably cisgendered characters, socially acceptable romantic relationships and happy endings, Bechdel’s text deals with the intersections of sexuality with gender norms, the illicit nature of pedophilic desire and the potential of a coming-out narrative to conclude while still unresolved. “Central to *Fun Home*’s moral and political complexity,” Cvetkovich attests, “is its willingness to engage with sexual desire as a messy and unpredictable force that can’t be

Figure 5.



equally sized rectangles (Figure 5, one of the few instances of such uniform geometric configuration in the entire book), she provides four different binary oppositions that describe her relationship with Bruce: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (15). The cleanly partitioned congruent rectangles provide an appropriate visual landscape for one of the only moments at which Bechdel juxtaposes Alison and Bruce; elsewhere, she depicts them as connected in something more of a web, existing in a constant flux of evolutions and devolutions ultimately connected by “the tricky

relegated to scapegoated pervers” (118), an orientation which manifests on the page in Bechdel’s graphic depictions of bodies, but also in the subjects she does not depict, the secrets of her family life.

In the first chapter of *Fun Home*, before readers are even made aware of her father’s homosexuality, Bechdel has already embarked upon the task of complicating the concept of the gender binary in her home. On a page comprised of a grid of four

reverse narration that impels [their] entwined stories” (232), rather than through direct paths of identification.

Fittingly, Bechdel structurally disrupts whatever comfort a reader may experience at her neat cordoning-off of Bruce’s and Alison’s opposed identities by returning to a more visually dense panel configuration and comics style on the next page. The caption for the last image on this page reads, “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. That is to say, impeccable” (16). The narration directly refers to the obsessiveness with which Bruce restores the family’s gothic revival mansion, but is attached to a panel illustrating father photographing wife and children in their “impeccable” Sunday best. Read along with its accompanying graphic elements, the caption’s meaning functionally extends to the obsessiveness with which Bruce attempts to enforce impossible standards of order on his family. That Bechdel portrays this attempt as “artifice” suggests that the order and safety implied by the binaries established on the previous page might contain a measure of fraudulence as well.

But would a reader feel comfortable with Bechdel’s proposed binaries to begin with? After all, they tend to cast the girl child as masculine and the male parent as feminine. Politically, Bechdel’s work is concerned with chronicling the many ways in which “father and daughter displaced onto each other versions of conventional femininity and masculinity as a way of enacting their refusal of conventional heteronormative gender roles” (Watson 39), in order to demonstrate how this process benefits both of them. I mentioned earlier how the author Bechdel “imaginatively inhabits” her father’s body throughout the process of writing *Fun Home*, but one could also argue that Bruce Bechdel “imaginatively inhabited” Alison’s body throughout her childhood, as he enforced strict rules about feminine dress and behavior. By recording this

experience, which was never vocally acknowledged as it happened, Bechdel embarks upon “a quest to situate her own desire in a familial line that both ‘outs’ and reclaims her father” (Watson 44).²⁰

Bechdel’s ability to “reclaim” her father through the autobiographical act is another critical component of her queer composition. I want to emphasize that she reclaims him expressly for herself, giving due care to the fact that he never publicly “came out” to her, and admitting “my eagerness to claim him as ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself—a sort of inverted Oedipal complex” (230). In this manner, Bechdel avoids one of the fatal flaws of the homonormative queer narrative condemned by Alexander and Rhodes, the mistake of claiming the representative center for a certain type of queer individual, which they consider reductive. As *Fun Home* draws to a close, Bruce Bechdel is not positioned as a stereotypical gay man, but retains the “marginal” status of a subject with a messy, incomplete sexuality fraught with contradictions.

At the same time, Bechdel *does* claim certain aspects of her father for history, acknowledging the differences between his own queer experience and hers as rooted in the respective time periods during which they came of age. Cvetkovich notes Bechdel’s insistence “that [her father’s] story be incorporated into a more fully historicized present but also that its unassimilability be acknowledged in order to problematize the present. In doing so, she embraces a queer temporality, one that refuses narratives of progress” (Cvetkovich 124). Importantly, this

²⁰ I find it necessary to add that I would not always use the term “outs” to describe matters of gender; I do not wish to conflate non-normative gender identity with queer sexuality. However, in the context of *Fun Home* the two matters remain very closely linked. Neither Bruce nor Alison is truly “genderqueer,” but both suffer from societal judgments that assume “gayness” when they stray from conventional modes of gender expression.

aspect of queer composition relates back to the concept of spatial narrative, in which “collages” of narrative are preferred to “one linear narrative that moves through time” (Egan 151). The temporal space of *Fun Home* is ostensibly the 1970s, indicated as much by the attire and vehicles depicted in the images as by narrative events like attendance at the New York City Bicentennial fireworks show. However, pages at a time feature drawings and captions that recreate the lives of Bechdel’s parents before she was born, and the texts and conflicts she engages with span centuries. These pages, in particular, force us to recognize the fantasy, the imagination that went into creating this memoir. The precisely illustrated scenes from the “ancestral past” of her parent’s generation feel more like an historical drama or reenactment exercise than a factually-steeped documentary, to use a cinematic analogy. I am reminded of a few questions posed by Leigh Gilmore that we might ponder until I return to her criticism in the third chapter of this thesis: “How do memory and imagination combine to form a historical record? Could a survivor of trauma offer a personal history of a collectivized experience... which incorporated invention? What does the autobiographer owe to history, and who will decide?”²¹

Another element I wish to label as an aspect of queer composition is unique to *Fun Home*. Bechdel employs fictive structures not only through her temporal imaginings, but also through allusions to and reworkings of canonical texts that provide a means of understanding her father’s life. The Bechdel family is decidedly literary, and the author’s decision to become a writer-cartoonist was surely influenced by her parents’ work as English teachers, her father’s layman scholarship, and her mother's acting and graduate work that took place while Alison was

²¹ Leigh Gilmore, “Bastard Testimony: Illegitimacy and Incest in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,” in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 47.

still young. While Bechdel references Proust, Joyce, Wilde, Fitzgerald and various canonical authors of the lesbian persuasion at length, there is simply too much material to cover. I highlight her connection to the myth of Icarus and Daedalus because it provides the narrative arc that best encapsulates the entirety of the text.

Fun Home opens with a comparison between the author's father and the ancient figure of Icarus, who famously "flew too close to the sun" after ignoring the warnings of his father, the Athenian inventor Daedalus. Bechdel uses the story of Icarus and Daedalus to foreshadow what will occur in this story about herself and her father, stating in the fourth panel, "in our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). She also coopts the myth in a particularized memory, relating the experience of "playing airplane" with her father to the circus trick of "Icarian Games." Interspersing the intimacy of personal recollection with the grandiosity of epic literature, Bechdel describes the game of airplane: "As he launched me, my full weight would fall on the pivot point between his feet and my stomach. It was a discomfort well worth the rare physical contact, and certainly worth the moment of perfect balance when I soared above him" (3). Accompanying the text, the drawings chronicle in six parts the launch, soar and tumble of the game. In their measured progression through an approximately 15-second interval, the drawings frame time separately from the captions: though the words speak of a past of legend and a future of consequences, Bechdel's drawings situate her precisely in a specific site of memory, a time of youth, simplicity and childhood games with her father. Through the use of these many layers—past, future, memory, myth—Bechdel's pages become "prisms to refract the many meanings of the self," as Egan puts it (145). She continues to review memories of her father from several different angles

throughout the memoir, and eventually returns to the Icarus-Daedalus construction on the final page of the text. Here, instead of allowing Alison to tumble off her perch, Bechdel writes that her father “was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). Although Bruce represents Icarus in his tragic demise, he also represents Daedalus, his life providing a guide that Alison might reference as she navigates her own sexuality. Likewise, Alison occupies the Icarus position as Bruce’s child, but simultaneously embodies Daedalus, inventing a queer existence for herself out of scraps.

These sorts of dual identifications are hallmarks of *Fun Home* and important products of a queer composition. Through her metaphors and allusions, “Bechdel makes even more explicit the maps between parents and children as she presents her father’s life and her own in a progression of different mappings, first emphasizing opposition, then identification, and finally continuity” (Kyler 15). Importantly, each of these processes is *emphasized* at different points in the text, but none is ever actually *completed*. Similarly, the processes of reading autobiography for identification or writing one’s own life story might never reach satisfying conclusions. Despite her eventual recourse to the works of Joyce as a means of interrogating her father’s life, Bechdel recounts feeling “suffocated” by Bruce’s enthusiasm over the assignment of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in one of her college classrooms. He tells her, “You damn well better identify with every page” (201), but this sort of identification cannot be forced. *Fun Home* demonstrates how the work of connecting to literature and the effort of connecting to family histories are both strenuous, emotionally exhausting acts.

Nevertheless, reading offers ample jumping-off points for the construction of a positive conception of identity. As Viv Ellis explains, the young Alison’s reading practices help her to “[grow] not only in confidence but also in mindful strategies for seeking out, extending, and

reflecting on her understanding of various categories of identity and her position within and against them.”²² Many scholars testify to a unique power of graphic narrative in this regard, as cartoons represent “a pleasurable alternative to high seriousness” (Watson 29). Perhaps this melding of “high” and “low” culture is the final element of queer composition at work in *Fun Home*. The history of comics is defined by deviance, and the form had to fight for recognition by the arbiters of culture just as members of the LGBTQ community have had to struggle to assert their validity in heteronormative society. It only makes sense that comics are an exemplary mode in which to narrate queer existence. Additionally, Whitlock and Poletti call attention to ways in which “the textual cultures of autographics... frequently invoke the specter of juvenilia... [and] present narrative strategies reminiscent of adolescent behaviors and subcultures, such as experimentation with self-image, a heightened awareness of the potential for images to produce shock in the viewer, and a fascination with the power of social and visual performance in the construction of identity” (xviii). Claiming the space of comics for youths offers both an increase in power to that universally marginalized population and points towards comics’ relevance in the emerging culture this visually-literate group will create.

In closing, I return to the work of Alexander and Rhodes, whose concept I have riffed on throughout this section. They aver that “queerness has the potential to stretch our sense of not only what *can* be composed, but *how* it can be composed” (183). Bechdel fulfills this potential through her depictions of sexuality and familial trauma that are both figuratively and literally graphic. Furthermore, “if queerness means more than just one more static representation of ‘diversity,’ containable in its knowability, then it must *move* in multiple directions at once” (183),

²² Viv Ellis, “What English Can Contribute to Understanding Sexual Identities,” *The English Journal* 98, no. 4 (2009): 52.

and Bechdel exhibits this trait as well, in her textured temporality of memory, history, imagination and literary allusion. Finally, Rhodes and Alexander call for “the kinds of writing—and the kinds of subjects—that challenge such composure, that offer rich, capacious, and (yes) excessive ways of thinking and writing” (183). If Bechdel’s world of text-image interplay, blurred objectivity and queer sexuality isn’t capacious and excessive, I don’t know what is.

Chapter Two: *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the Possibilities of Hybridity

In many ways, a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* could begin where I leave off my discussion of Bechdel, with the possibilities of queer composition. The author initiates the body of her text with a reference to the physical border most important to her work and life, that between the United States and its neighbor to the South. "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta*," she famously writes, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."²³ From two worlds, three; they do not mix, but birth something new. Anzaldúa does the same, in *Borderlands*, a hybrid text which features seamless transitions between academic essay, personal memoir and poem, all interspersed with excerpted quotes in Spanish and English, folk sayings, tidbits from songs, and indigenous mythology. Perhaps her most daring innovation is a constant shifting between Spanish and English, again crafting a third and unique language that exists separately from the other two. Her compositional practice is queer in its deviations from Standard Academic English, its inability to be contained within a single genre, and its commitment to bringing together disparate themes and modes of perception. This labeling is further complicated by the deeper intention of Anzaldúa's work, which seeks to explore the borderlands within the self that are manifested physically at times, but are often of a more abstract nature.

²³ Anzaldúa, 25. I will not be uniformly translating Anzaldúa's Spanish in footnotes, but may translate where analytically necessary or organically possible. In this way, I hope to preserve the integrity of her mission in writing in a hybrid language.

Though it makes up only one facet of the text, it is nevertheless useful to begin a discussion of *Borderlands* by addressing the physical border, the *herida abierta*, or open wound, that still holds so much political meaning in the United States today. Writing in 2005, only a year after Anzaldúa's death and four years after the attack on the World Trade Center that birthed a new sense of paranoia in Americans regarding outsiders, Beth Berila notes that "calls for national unity in the United States have too often constructed a homogenous and narrow national identity that violently 'others' multiethnic voices and experiences. Combined with... increasing militarization along the US/Mexico border, and recent challenges to bilingual education and affirmative action, this political trend reflects a deep anxiety over US national identity."²⁴ In the almost 15 years since, as legal and illegal immigration from Mexico has inevitably persisted, these questions of national identity in the United States, and the part Mexicans play in it, have arguably become even more divisive. In the final weeks of 2018, the federal government experienced its longest-ever shutdown, at 35 days, over the question of a wall along the Mexican border. However, the question of physical barriers between the two states is an old one, as "focused attention to policing the borderlands has been given spectacular visual representation in the military fences erected literally on the border, and in the case of the San Ysidro/Tijuana fence, built, tellingly, of armor plating cast off from the first Persian Gulf War."²⁵ Fences, walls, policing, armor plating—such language helps to illuminate that what takes place in the borderlands every day resembles a war or a prison.

²⁴ Beth Berila, "Unsettling Calls for National Unity: The Pedagogy of Experimental Multiethnic Literatures," *MELUS* 30, no. 2 (2005): 31.

²⁵ Todd R. Ramlow, "Bodies in the Borderlands: Gloria Anzaldúa's and David Wojnarowicz's Mobility Machines," *MELUS* 31, no. 3 (2006): 172.

While Anzaldúa's hybrid autobiography expresses the psychological and spiritual effects of literal violence at the border, it also addresses the violence of the political rhetoric surrounding that physical space. Berila suggests that "experimental multiethnic literatures" like *Borderlands* can "highlight the colonizing violence inherent in the process of identifying with certain fantasies of the nation" (41). The particular nationalist fantasy Anzaldúa is concerned with is the idea that "the only 'legitimate' inhabitants [of the United States] are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites" (Anzaldúa 25-26). She frequently exposes the hypocrisy of this mindset by reminding her readers of the unambiguous claim of Mexican peoples to the land now defined as the United States. "As refugees in a homeland that does not want them," she writes of Mexican, Chicana and Amerindian inhabitants, "many find a welcome hand holding out only suffering, pain, and ignoble death" (34). As exhibited here, in the idea of one who is a refugee while also residing in her homeland, of a "welcome" that offers only undesirable prospects, *Borderlands* engages even the subtlest choices in language to reveal the irony in the Anglo occupation of the Southwest. Anzaldúa punctuates her first essay with an anecdote, told partially in her mother's voice, detailing how both her maternal and paternal grandmothers lost their land to swindling white men. She recalls that some of the land had constituted the family cemetery, but discovers upon attempting to bury her grandmother there that the sacred ground has been fenced and locked, bearing a sign that reads, "Keep out. Trespassers will be shot" (30). The story ends on this abrupt note, the reader left wondering who the true trespassers are.

A cursory reading of *Borderlands* might suggest to a careless reader that Anzaldúa herself, in opposition to white-Anglo nationalism in the United States, proposes a sort of

nationalism of her own in the frequent reiteration that her people, returning to their ancestral homeland, are “originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest” (27). But her question is more nuanced: “How can we say that this is our house, but it is also their house, without inviting a takeover?” she asks in a 1995 interview.²⁶ At the root of the borderlands theory that Anzaldúa outlines in this work is her desire to oppose all forms of binary, dualistic thinking, an orientation towards a fluid, anti-essentialist identity that is also encountered in the concepts of spatial narrative and queer composition. Thus, the problem is not “us” versus “them,” and she leaves quite a bit of space open for the whiteness in her own blood, and for what she has assimilated through her work in the academy and with white feminists. In a later interview she articulates the idea of *nos/otras*, a play on the Spanish word *nosotras*, meaning “we,” that splits the term into *nos*, or “us,” and *otras*, or “others,”²⁷ the complementary phrases separated by a slash, an aesthetic manifestation of a border. The goal is to illustrate the balance necessary between ideas of the in-group and the Other in order to exist in a society made up of many different groups. All groups exist always touching each other, and Anzaldúa’s vision is to avoid that which “locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed... reduced to a common denominator of violence” (Anzaldúa 100).

The *mestiza* consciousness, in which “nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (Anzaldúa 101), has the potential to heal some of the physical, psychological and spiritual pain triggered by life in the borderlands. With a border language, through alternative mythological realities, and utilizing her own experience to queer

²⁶ Ellie Hernández and Gloria Anzaldúa, “Re-Thinking Margins and Borders: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa,” *Discourse* 18, no. 1/2 (1995-96): 11.

²⁷ Ann E. Reuman and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “Coming into Play: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa,” *MELUS* 25, no. 2 (2000): 11.

academic norms, Anzaldúa pronounces a third option for those living as deviants both in the physical borderlands between nation-states and in the psychological borderlands of gender, race, class and sexuality.

2.1 The “Wild Tongue” of the Borderlands

In the fifth essay of *Borderlands*, titled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa interrogates the politics of language and how it functions, drawing extensively on her long background of toggling between her native Spanish and the English imposed on her by the dominant culture and the academic world in which she makes her living. She outlines the eight languages she speaks: Standard English, working class and slang English, Standard Spanish, Standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish of regional variations, Tex-Mex, and *Pachuco*, a politicized language of Chicano youth (77). She can speak any of these languages when they are called for, but “Chicano Texas Spanish” and “Tex-Mex” are the languages “closest to [her] heart” (78). Tex-Mex represents her writing style in *Borderlands/La Frontera* particularly well, as it utilizes Spanish and English words in single sentences, flowing effortlessly back and forth between the two, transforming bilingualism into true hybridity.

However, in a section called “Linguistic Terrorism,” Anzaldúa explains the devaluation and repression of this particular source of power within the mainstream Anglo-American society: “*Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue*” (80). These lines are rich with subversion. First, Anzaldúa

performs precisely the transgression the oppressor is so afraid of, even as she describes it. She resists by using her own language, “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”²⁸ Use of the second person point of view ensures that she speaks directly to those masters who she knows wish to see her assimilate. Then, she converts the negative meanings of words like “nightmare” and “aberration” into weapons for her own use, into terms of power. Hers is a “tongue of fire,” something beautiful and bright and dangerous, with additional religious symbolism because fire purges sin. Utilizing this Biblical context, blame shifts away from Anzaldúa, the deviant, and onto the oppressors, who have “crucified” something pure, as the Romans crucified Jesus.

The final subversion, and perhaps the most damning, is that even those who do not speak Spanish will understand this passage. *Deslenguadas* means speechless, without language; English speakers know that prefixes like de- and dis- mean removal or negation, and can gather that the cognate *lengua* refers to language. *Mestizaje* literally means miscegenation, but the broader concept of mixed race and mixed culture would be apparent to most United Statesians who grew up attending public school, as even the textbooks of a white-washed history curriculum have taught most of us about the *mestizo*, a person born of both European and Native American bloodlines. Those who understand that *mestizaje* denotes a sort of mixing might be able to grasp that it also connotes tension, though they may not be aware of the theoretical development of the term in Chicano scholarship to include “conquest, resistance, and blood.”²⁹ *Huérfanos* means orphans, and while the word is not as obvious a cognate at first glance, it is

²⁸ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

²⁹ Cristina Beltran, “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of Mestizaje,” *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2004): 598.

phonetically akin to its English counterpart, if one speaks it aloud. Even in this case, Anzaldúa does not allow meaning to slip through the cracks, adding, in English, “we speak an orphan tongue.”

By using “Spanglish” (Tex-Mex) to write *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa intentionally opens herself up to a range of scholarly commentary and criticism. After all, her “narrative practices limit and control understanding for monolingual speakers of English”³⁰—those who dominate the academy—and even as she facilitates understanding with phrases and passages in English that parallel the Spanish, as shown above, the reading experience is frequently disrupted, and sometimes requires a dictionary. Such disruption has a purpose beyond the surface-level deviance of rebelling against standard academic norms, for

this symbolic act of cultural defiance may evoke anger, frustration, or confusion among readers denied complete understanding and invited to search for meaning in a way that corresponds to the daily experiences of the non-native speaker of English. Rather than allowing readers to simply engage in an intellectual analysis of her subject, Anzaldúa forces them to experience alienation and the pain of exclusion. (Quintana 138)

With this technique, Anzaldúa surreptitiously draws readers into her autobiography; we experience a fraction of her pain and struggle in a carefully calculated way, rather than simply reading about it. One might view this phenomenon as a variant of embodiment. Whereas Bechdel embodies her trauma of growing up in a closeted home through the physicality of the drawn images of the comics form, Anzaldúa embodies the trauma of the “closeted” Spanish-speaker in the linguistic texture induced by reading Spanglish.

³⁰ Alvina E. Quintana, “New Visions: Culture, Sexuality, and Autobiography,” in *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 130.

Anzaldúa also frames her use of a hybrid language within the political context of language policing, referencing the white nationalist mindsets referred to earlier. In the opening passage of “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she describes her experiences in Anglophone schools: “I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for ‘talking back’ to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. ‘If you want to be American, speak “American.” If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong’” (75). This memory illustrates the racism inherent in “language colonization,” a term I borrow from Holly R. Cashman.³¹ “The process of language subordination,” Cashman argues, “serves to justify *a posteriori* the superiority of the standard language variety and its speakers” (135). Through equating intelligence with mastery of the English language, the American school system has been able to discriminate against non-English speakers, largely of Latinx communities, but also of Asian and African descent, in a manner defended by misleading pedagogical reasoning.

In recent years, the practice of alternating between multiple linguistic modes, known as code-switching, has begun to be recognized as a valid and “correct” practice. Cashman explains how “the negative attitude to code-switching, either spoken or literary, results from the belief that it is grammatically wrong in some way” (140), indicative of a speaker who has a limited grasp on the structure of both languages in their use, but that “linguists now recognize code-switching as a functional linguistic behavior which demonstrates the speaker’s ability to manipulate the grammar and lexicon of two languages at the same time” (132). Anzaldúa pushes back on

³¹ Holly R. Cashman, “Language Choice in U.S. Latina First Person Narrative: The Effects of Language Standardization and Subordination,” *Discourse* 21, no. 3 (1999): 136.

concepts of linguistic deficiency by synthesizing her own experiential understanding of the hybrid languages she speaks with a revealing linguistic-historical origin story of borderlands Spanish. She attributes the unique blend of English, Spanish and even indigenous languages discernible in her tongue to 250 years of colonial pressures that developed such practices as “Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word such as *cookiár* for cook” (79). These alterations represent necessary changes made to standard languages so that they meet the needs of their speakers. “For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?” Anzaldúa asks (77). With this personal appeal, she speaks to the fact that hers is “a living language,” rather than a fixed and immutable entity.

By penning an academically-oriented personal text in this “wild tongue,” Anzaldúa intervenes in more than just the scholarly discussion surrounding Spanglish; she makes its legitimacy into an identity marker, placing linguistic agency on a plain level with racial and ethnic pride. Lea Ramsdell, analyzing the work of authors who make language a character in their autobiographies, defines *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a linguistic autobiography, a form in which “the acquisition of languages is equated to the acquisition of selfhood.”³² Anzaldúa concurs, proclaiming:

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate

³² Lea Ramsdell, “Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 1 (2004): 176.

Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. . . . I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (81)

Reclamation of her voice, and thus identity, must be enacted every day. To speak only English masks the parts of her that are not Anglo, and distances her from the culture she grew up in.

Anzaldúa recognizes that the identity she projects most visibly has real-world ramifications, that “if, for example, I’m speaking at home, me the little Chicanita from this *campesina* background is speaking in Spanglish with my mother and my sister, but Gloria the writer, Gloria the academic, Gloria the person with one foot into the middle-class world, Gloria the feminist is on stage, they’re just behind, they’re not taking the center” (Reuman and Anzaldúa 12). Including Spanish and Spanglish in her autobiography brings not only her own identity to the forefront, but also centers the stories of people like her mother and her sister, with the broader impact of crafting a space of inclusion for any reader who may have experienced the same struggles with compulsory English use. This attendance to who is marginalized and who is centered exemplifies the spatial narrative practice of engaging with group histories of trauma and oppression, rather than focusing solely on the individual.

Finally, Anzaldúa does not forget to critique the linguistic rigidity present within her own community. She comments explicitly on the masculinist constructions of Spanish, pointing out that Chicanas “are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse” (76). For this reason, she uses the feminine form *mestiza* when formulating her new consciousness, although she upholds that borderlands are inhabited by women, men and every

gender identity in between. Furthermore, she discusses the perception in the Spanish-speaking world that Chicano Spanish is inferior, or “poor Spanish” (80). This mindset reinforces Western colonial ideas about language purity, a purity “as imagined and nonexistent as racial purity” (Cashman 141), but which has been weaponized even by *mestiza* Spanish-speakers who may have adopted a more formal version of Spanish (itself a colonial language) while striving for legitimacy in the Spanish-speaking community. In fact, within Latinx cultural and academic spaces, it has sometimes been the case that “a strong politics of Spanish language maintenance is articulated... and those who accept and use English are considered traitors or sell-outs” (Cashman 140). Tex-Mex Spanish, as a hybrid language, does not resist English as completely as this politics calls for. But in keeping with her thesis that language is identity, Anzaldúa notes that in the charged political climate of the 1960s, “something momentous happened to the Chicano soul—we became aware of our reality and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality” (85). *Borderlands/La Frontera* documents the validation of the Chicano soul through this very language, solidifying identity not only in its stories, but in the manner in which those stories are communicated.

2.2 Mythological Realities

Anzaldúa’s commitment to the issue of language erasure segues into another way in which she challenges the norms of both academic writing and the autobiography—an extended metaphor connecting her own development as a person and as a feminist with the indigenous spirituality of her homeland. She is deeply invested in gender politics, even as they require her to walk the delicate line between condemning and defending problematic practices within her home

culture, which include the masculinization of powerful feminine deities. This line is yet another border, for Anzaldúa knows she cannot live fully in either white America or Mexican America. Instead, she builds another new world for herself, a world for fellow *mestizas*, just as she refashioned Tex-Mex as a hybrid language deserving of respect. She thus takes elements from Anglo Christianity and Latin American Catholicism and instills them with lost feminist meaning through an Amerindian reading of important religious myths and symbols, in order to offer a new basis for cultural understanding. She asks for “an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian...the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of entrails” (44). Again, Anzaldúa employs the imagery of purification by fire, though this time the fire has cooled to “ashes.” She also repeats her appropriation of negative imagery, like the violence of carving into her own face, employing these images in a narrative of rebirth. “And if going home is denied me,” she continues, “then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.” Because Anzaldúa has claimed the borderlands as her home, she no longer has to adhere to the systemic and oppressive norms that she recognizes in both of the cultures that clash around her in-between space.

“Feminist architecture” is particularly important to Anzaldúa’s new world, and she traces a history of patriarchy in the European, Mexican, and indigenous worlds that birthed her. Describing the development of gendered roles in the aggressively masculine Azteca-Mexica indigenous society, Anzaldúa turns away from political science and instead infuses her memory-vignettes with the language of mythology. She mourns the loss of “complete” female deities

“who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects,” chronicling how “*Coatlicue*, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, *Tlazolteotl* and *Cihuacoatl*, were ‘darkened’ and disempowered,” by Aztec men, and later, how “the Spaniards and their Church... desexed *Guadalupe*, taking *Coatlalopeuh*, the serpent/sexuality, out of her” (49). This masculine impulse in religion constitutes another fracturing, another *herida abierta* that Anzaldúa can nurture, heal, and grow in. Reclamation of her Indian heritage, including the goddesses in their full, complex forms, is central to her process of differentiating “the new *mestiza*” from the more submissive form of womanhood that even her Mexican culture expects her to adhere to. Beyond her womanhood—her queerness—her working class childhood—Anzaldúa feels her liminality wherever she is, because “unlike Chicanas and other women of color who grew up white or who have only recently returned to their native cultural roots, I was totally immersed in mine” (43). She claims a right to speak, based upon her expert knowledge of multiple realities, garnered through lived experience.

In the chapters “Entering into the Serpent” and “*La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State*,” Anzaldúa offers up her multiple realities as credible ways of living, not beholden to traditional Western values of objective truth. As Anthony Lioi notes, “the spiritual is associated, in academia, with the irrational or illogical.... the spirit is understood as ahistorical, apolitical, and non-material. Anzaldúa’s method, however, makes the spiritual historical, political, and material.”³³ In the discussion of what constitutes truth in the autobiography, begun through Bechdel’s graphic imaginings, this approach is important for its rejection of the need to provide concrete evidence to back up assertions of memory. Whereas Bechdel’s text is described as

³³ Anthony Lioi, “The Best-Loved Bones: Spirit and History in Anzaldúa’s ‘Entering into the Serpent,’” *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2008): 73-74.

archival in its painstaking collection and reproduction of documentary proof of the author's recollections (newspapers, family photographs, diary entries, letters), Anzaldúa's archival impulse does not extend to her memories (though it is present in the collection of songs, sayings, and quotes from academic sources that back up her socio-historical work). When dealing with the personal, Anzaldúa resorts instead to the language of dreams to describe the most important moments in her life.

Serpent imagery surfaces again and again throughout *Borderlands*, and the author's first significant encounter with the snake culminates in a dream. She tells the story of being bitten by a snake while working in the fields, and how her mother killed it, but Gloria saved its skin and rattler. "That night," she writes, "I watched the window sill, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, *mi tono*, my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune" (48). The telling of the dream morphs seamlessly into the waking memory, a memory of self-discovery, of identification with an animal soul; dreams are given the same autobiographical significance as other sources of experience. Anzaldúa, in interviews, confirms the importance of dreams to her work, explaining, "When I start articulating... I start working with my dreams. And I start taking symbols in the dreams, characters in the dreams, the dream person, me," as a point of departure for further study of the self (Reuman and Anzaldúa 24).

Her reclamation of dreaming as a source of knowledge is not only a personal method; rather, it is also an important tool for any person with indigenous heritage who has had her spirituality coopted or erased by colonization. She affirms her dreams in a more explicitly

political manner, arguing that “in trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence” (Anzaldúa 59). Anzaldúa here suggests that it is easier to enact violence against one who is no longer whole, whose selfhood has been fractured and devalued. Recuperating the subjective mode of consciousness, the mode of dreaming, intuition and emotion that is so often written off, “conveys the author’s challenge to conventional Anglo American modes of perception that tend to separate feeling from thinking” (Quintana 137). The power of *Borderlands/La Frontera* lies in its commitment to reaffirming this conviction through both personal narrative and historical revisions.

Chapter Three: *Bastard Out of Carolina* and The Power of Fictionalized Witness

Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* tells the story of a young girl named Bone Boatwright, born to an unwed, 15-year-old mother in the 1950s American South, and marked on a government certificate with the red-lettered identifier "ILLEGITIMATE" at birth. While Allison's text resists traditional definitions of autobiography because the first-person narrator-protagonist is not identified by name with the author of the text, the autofictional world the author creates nevertheless resonates with the pain and tenderness of subjective experience. Allison does not shy away from depicting the tensions of a particular moment in time, crafting her tale with careful attention to social, cultural, economic, racial and gendered struggles. Bone is an outsider in more ways than one, and she is also a surrogate for the real experiences of the author, who lived a similar childhood to the one she writes. The narrative voice of Bone Boatwright and the colorful characterization of her family contribute an empathetic human element to the frequently disparaged socioeconomic category of white trash. By examining Bone's psychological behaviors in relation to the shame of both her general cultural positioning and her particular trauma of abuse and incest, I wish to show how typical white trash characteristics like violence and anger are portrayed in Allison's text with greater nuance than stereotype allows.

In order to subvert these stereotypes, I will address in depth the autofictional elements in the novel, particularly the advantages and pitfalls of fictionalizing trauma in order to tell it "right." This has been a continuous element of Allison's publishing history, which incorporates many of the same stories and characters into such varied genres as short fiction (*Trash* 1988), essays (*Skin* 1994), performance piece/memoir (*Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* 1995),

and the novel itself (*Bastard Out of Carolina* 1992). Not every story Allison tells is directly related to the abuse that occupies the thematic center of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, but the author's insistence on telling and retelling the story of her life in multiple forms represents a critical facet of the autobiographical tradition, one which recognizes the inability of a personal story to ever truly be "complete." Gillian Harkins complains that "in the contemporary literary moment, in which narratives of heroic survival are marketed as a consumable spectacle of redemption, to tell a story of survival is not necessarily to interrupt the conditions of its production. And without such interruptions, the transformative potential of this literature can too easily be contained, leading to a romantic heroics of literary survival that fetishizes 'everyday reality' while leaving it relatively unchanged."³⁴ Allison participates in the process of interrupting this stagnant narrative by offering a perpetually evolving story of survival which leaves readers with the sense that her experience of trauma is not completed by escape from her most immediate abuser, Daddy Glen, which occurs at the end of her novel. Bone has survived, but Allison has not fully healed; everyday reality *must* be changed, in order for healing to happen.

One important element to address in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which I will expand upon to move towards a more complete understanding of the genre in which Allison writes, is the role fantasy plays in Bone's reactions to her abuse. Fantasizing about violence provides a way for Bone to navigate the horror of the sexual violence and brutal beatings that she experiences at the hands of Daddy Glen. Analysis of Bone's graphic masturbatory fantasies reveals the difficulty of reconciling one's shame with a sense of agency and identity—but ultimately, the text proves that this can be done. Furthermore, on a meta level, the use of fantasies as an integral part of Bone's

³⁴ Gillian Harkins, "Surviving the Family Romance? Southern Realism and the Labor of Incest," *Southern Literary Journal* 40, no. 1 (2007): 135-36.

character development in the book parallels Allison's use of fiction as a pathway to reckoning with trauma.

3.1 Truth, Lies and Trauma

Almost every study involving autobiography addresses the issue of authenticity, whether or not this be its central concern. The question is justifiably key, as it concerns the perpetual debate about where we should draw the line between truth and falsehood in autobiography, given the inherently dubious quality of memory. "All autobiographers are unreliable narrators, all humans are liars," Timothy Dow Adams writes in the opening of the preface of *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*,³⁵ a statement that would certainly ring true for most readers, based on intuition alone. Adams admits that autobiography probably cannot exist without some deviation from objective fact, but he defends such deviations, describing perceived "lies" as useful tools in the service of thematic truths that transcend facticity. Autobiographical lies may range from the statements of "authors [who] are not aware that they are lying" to the work of "writers [who] think that they are lying but turn out to have told the truth" (15). He suggests a revised system of evaluating truth that asks whether what an author writes rings true, whether a story contradicts other biographical or historical accounts of a time, and whether various exaggerations or manipulations of fact have discernible, and honorable, motives. Assessed based on these criteria, judgments of veracity move towards a narrative "truthfulness" that complements and enriches fact-driven historical accounts.

³⁵ Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), ix.

Paul John Eakin presents a slightly more stringent variation on this way of defining truth, for he labels the “misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth” as one of “three primary transgressions” an autobiographer can commit (32). For Eakin, the seriousness of this misrepresentation arises from concerns about identity, even more than from concerns about facticity. Addressing reader perceptions of autobiographical truth value, he claims “that autobiography’s narrative rules also function as identity rules, and that when they do, the rule-defined entity may shift from text to person. When the public responds to rule-breaking autobiographers, not only the literary function of autobiographical discourse but its identity function may come into play” (34-35). I will shortly expand on the dangers of conflating one’s judgment of an autobiographical text with judgment of the autobiographer herself, but Eakin’s insistence on truth-based autobiographical writing does gesture towards the important impacts autobiographies have in the world beyond the text, as identity functions on practical and political levels that transcend the written word.

Despite the moral force of the word “transgression,” Eakin’s discussion of truth should not be understood as a direct rebuttal of Adams’ acceptance of autobiographical lies. Eakin, too, leaves room for subjective truth, even admitting that in the infamous case of Rigoberta Menchú,³⁶ her exaggerations and probable conflation of her own lived experience with that of others in her community is acceptable, for “her motive for doing so, the creation of effective propaganda supporting an oppressed people, seems understandable, legitimate, and even

³⁶ *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, published in 1999, tells Menchú’s supposedly true story of the atrocities committed against her Mayan community by the Guatemalan state and army. David Stoll researched and published a subsequent exposé, which provided biographical information about Menchú that appeared to contradict the events in the book, and suggested that the author might have lifted some of the incidents narrated in the book from the experiences of others she knew.

admirable” (39). Perhaps it is imprecise to categorize such a story as Menchú’s under the label of “propaganda,” a word that today connotes an intention to mislead, which was not her driving motivation.³⁷ Like Adams, Eakin recognizes the well-intentioned autobiographical lie as an attempt to lead readers to the truth, rather than a way of leading them astray. How, though, does one judge the intentions of an author? This question leads to subjective critical assessments that mirror the subjective nature of the line between fact and fiction.

Beginning from the premise that autobiography should, at the very least, intend to tell the truth, Adams embarks on an exploration of the various ways this intention can play out. Questioning “how...writers separate poetical truth from factual truth, psychological truth from family truth,” Adams arrives at a novel definition of autobiography: “a thing made out of a thing done” (9-10). That the plot stems from something actually *done* is the aspect that constitutes fact/truth; that it is ultimately something *made* takes into account any fictive structures the author may have imposed onto those facts. Ensuring that the latter element is preceded by the former at least gives the reader a sense that the autobiographer’s intention was truth.

One method for clarifying Adams’ argument about authorial intention comes from an exploration of autobiographies that are not written in good faith. Such texts are widely considered frauds or forgeries. Of course, complete forgeries can be neatly done away with, for plagiarism and outright lies about who you are and what you’ve done are the tricks of con artists. Labeling something as a fraud proves a bit trickier, for many texts and authors have been called frauds when they engage in various acts of literary merit. Adams contends that “the history of American autobiography is filled with generic confusions bordering on fabrication” (5-6), citing

³⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “propaganda, n.,” accessed December 13, 2018, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/152605?rskey=2yUAtq&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

examples like the fictionalized slave narrative, which served an important political function in the fight for abolition (13). Even when speaking about life-writing texts that have triggered backlash, and, in more extreme cases, lawsuits, Adams is loath to condemn the act of “fabrication,” pointing out how authors will “deliberately blur [genres] for rhetorical effect” (8). On the other hand, Eakin discusses a few cases in which fraudulent storytelling received backlash instead of critical acclaim. Notably, James Frey’s infamous memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, which chronicles the author’s harrowing battle with addiction, stirred up highly-publicized outrage when it was revealed to be a largely fictional account. Although Frey “stood by the basic truth of his story” (18), this case represents an instance in which the author’s intention to tell *a* truth could not outweigh the fact that he had not told *the* truth.

No reader can make a completely objective judgment on the motives of an author, for while Frey may have thought himself well-intentioned, he was still condemned by the media and the literary establishment. Perhaps intentions and facticity together are still not enough to form a comprehensive criterion for truth value in an autobiography. Along with these concerns, Adams also considers genre, artistic style and presentation as important factors in the distinction between which autobiographical acts are permitted by creative license and which begin to bleed into the fraudulent. A useful conception of “truth” would require us to assess all the consequences of the autobiographical act as a literary practice, including a writer’s attention to rhetoric and style and the cultural context in which she is writing.

Within the texts I have selected, fictive structures are deliberately employed in a manner that I would characterize as “permitted” under the rules presented by Adams and Eakin. For a more explicit exploration of fiction in autobiography, one might turn to Egan’s chapter on

diasporic life writing and spatial narrative. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Egan claims that “layered identity depends on a sustained use of fictive techniques” (144). Speaking specifically of diasporic authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Ondaatje, but in language that can surely be applied to other authors as well, Egan explains further:

They achieve the fluidity of their cultural experience in equivalently fluid narrative, blending fiction and whimsy with research, analysis, memory, family stories, history, memoir and the mythic components of cultural identity...they establish readers within their texts, and situate themselves as readers in relation to family lore...they reject singular statement, subverting each possible meaning with numerous alternatives...their works are rich in metaphors that function like prisms to refract the many meanings of the self...they position themselves across conflicting cultures, liminal and therefore particularly self-inventive. What they achieve, above all, with their uses of the fictive and fabulous is transformation of their reader, who experiences these particular liminalities as if in a first language, forgetting to translate. (145)

Application of these attributes to Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* may be the most obvious move; her text places the “fiction and whimsy” of poetry in direct opposition to the research and history of the academic essays that make up the first half of the book. Additionally, Anzaldúa uses *Borderlands* as an opportunity to reassess and reapply knowledge of her Indian ancestors to modern problems of feminism and ethnic identification, which situates her as a reader of her own heritage. Most significantly, *Borderlands* is written in a self-aware blend of Spanish and English, which makes literal Egan’s suggestion that liminal autobiographies force audiences to read “as if in a first language.” *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Fun Home* both deeply engage with the concept

of family history and take on the tone of legends and lore, as the protagonists of these texts attempt to read the life stories of a parent in order to understand more about themselves. For example, in the opening lines of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the narrator explains how she got her strange name. “I’ve been called Bone all my life, but my name’s Ruth Anne,” she begins. “I was named for and by my oldest aunt—Aunt Ruth. My mama didn’t have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasn’t there.”³⁸ In just three sentences, the narrator creates suspense concerning the nickname Bone, establishes the beginnings of what will blossom into a large family tree, and introduces a favorite motif of Southern literature—a gothic touch of the darkly humorous. Readers must continue on to discover exactly what Bone means when she says her mama wasn’t there when she was born. But as the story unfolds, one realizes that her wry framing of the circumstances of her birth actually introduces the major theme of her mother’s absence, which looms large over the entire novel. The novel’s opening lines also exhibit its richly involved use of Southern vernacular, a “language” that Allison inserts into a canon that views it with hostility, just as Anzaldúa insists upon untranslated, integrated Spanish in *Borderlands*. This sort of writing immerses readers in the world of the text, where the inclusion of dialogue and exaggerated characterizations do little to detract from the truth of the autobiographical work.

When applying these conceptions of autobiographical truth to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the difficulty of translating trauma acceptably into language and narrative must be recognized as a unique point of departure. Sometimes the truth simply isn’t straightforward. The trauma Allison recounts in *Bastard* is individual and personal: continuous physical, sexual and psychological abuse of a child by her father. That Allison herself suffered from such abuse makes semi-

³⁸ Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 1.

autobiographical fiction an understandable genre in which to tell her story. Trauma theory suggests that transference of emotion and experience onto a fictional character qualifies as a particular brand of witnessing, and allows the story of Bone Boatwright to be seen as truthful and accurate testimony of the effects of extreme poverty and violent abuse on survivors. As a case of autobiography written in the third-person voice of fiction, *Bastard* epitomizes the dubious lines drawn between truth, facts and fiction in assessments of which autobiographical texts can claim “authority.”

It is widely asserted that trauma “cannot be incorporated unproblematically within memory” (Smith and Watson 283), and thus, any attempt to communicate the traumatic experience will be plagued by the unreliability of memory more than the average recounting, and the autobiographer may even actively resist a realistic depiction of the memory. Gilmore, whose work has consistently focused on the intersections between autobiography and trauma, outlines the problematic relation between the two, incorporating issues of memory and fiction:

In autobiography and trauma studies veracity is always at issue.... People make things up for a variety of reasons. Some fall within the domain of memory, some seem specific to trauma, and many point to some relation between the two. Are the mechanisms by which we remember similar to the ones that permit (or compel) us to forget? Is memory simply faulty, like a machine that breaks down from time to time, or does it fail because it must?... Most controversial is the perennial claim that fiction offers truth that fact cannot. Once fiction’s truth is preferred to fact’s, the authority of both trauma and autobiography that derives from the eyewitness’s credibility is thrown into a crisis of legitimacy.

(“Bastard Testimony” 47)

Those who study Allison's novel through the lens of fiction as a method of working through trauma certainly run the risk of attaching too much autobiographical significance to the fictional elements of the text. On the other hand, there is no doubt that fiction is indeed one of multiple tools Allison has employed in the telling of her story. We must walk the line between, on one hand, oversimplifying the complexities of *Bastard Out of Carolina* as a work of art and, on the other, of failing to recognize the autobiographical accomplishments of the fictive technique.

Gilmore takes particular note of the practical and political implications of autofiction. She, like Eakin, casts them as important factors to be considered any time an autobiography is published, but she is primarily concerned with the ways in which such a policing of facticity can function to restrict the testimony of those who have experienced a trauma. Her study of trauma is two-pronged, involving "both a person struggling to make sense of an overwhelming experience in a particular context and the unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation" ("Bastard Testimony" 46). Whereas many trauma theorists understand this resistance to representation as an issue of the insufficiency of language itself (a valuable reading that I refer to in the Bechdel chapter), Gilmore views it as a product of various mechanisms of control. One of these controls is the judgment of the listeners or readers of a story of trauma. In her exploration of Allison's choice to fictionalize traumatic events from her personal history in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Gilmore argues that "the judgments such accounts invite may be too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced. When the contest is waged over who can tell the truth, the risk of being accused of lying (or malingering, or inflating, or whining) threatens the writer into continued silence" ("Limit-Cases" 129). Thus, the very writing of an autobiography can serve to re-inscribe trauma, as testimony is subjected to truth-testing and

accounts are repeated for the benefit of arbiters who comb through them, searching for discrepancies and misrepresentations.

Fiction dodges this challenge by supplying a space in which to empathize with characters that are real enough to identify with but not forced to live up to impossible standards of facticity. Allison herself comments upon this fascinating paradox of “believability” in the essay “A Question of Class,” which appears in her collection *Skin*:

I have explained what I know over and over, in every way I can, but I have never been able to make clear the degree of my fear, the extent to which I feel myself denied: not only that I am queer in a world that hates queers, but that I was born poor into a world that despises the poor. The need to make my world believable to people who have never experienced it is part of why I write fiction. I know that some things must be felt to be understood, that despair, for example, can never be adequately analyzed; it must be lived. But if I can write a story that so draws the reader in that she imagines herself like my characters, feels their sense of fear and uncertainty, their hopes and terrors, then I have come closer to knowing myself as real, important as the very people I have always watched with awe.³⁹

This rationale for writing fiction explicitly accounts for Allison’s other attempts to tell her story in the public forum. Simply explaining “what she knows” has failed, precisely due to the conditions of the telling, the context of a world that hates her existence. Just as Anzaldúa must tackle structures of knowledge that dictate her own knowledge (of language, of mythology, of spirituality) as peripheral, Allison has been stripped of her authority to explain by her positioning

³⁹ Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994), 14.

as poor, queer, female, and traumatized. Instead, she must show, presenting her truth in an imaginative form, without the abrasiveness of lecture, but with all the realistic detail of experience. Readers of *Bastard* are exposed to a protagonist with whom they can affectively identify or empathize, and in the process receive a body of knowledge about Allison's non-authoritative identity positions which infiltrates their consciousness and paves the way for future dialogue about the important issues society did not want to hear Allison explain in the first place. Importantly, Allison also recognizes that telling her story in this manner actually makes her feel more "real," suggesting the many therapeutic advantages of narrating trauma.

Gilmore describes another form of control that dictates how one is permitted to testify to trauma, and which relates particularly to the narrative plot of sexual abuse and incest in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. This control is legal in nature, and has to do with the ways in which law has been written to strip those gendered as female, and especially girl children, of any agency to speak out against male abusers. In general, children grow up under the controlling influence of conceptions of family which privilege the male sex. This is a dominant and cross-cultural societal phenomenon, applying as much to the industrial-era Western nuclear family as it does to the extended family model that holds preeminence in many non-Western and pre-industrial communities, and in relation to the law, producing a society in which, "while boys grow up to be men and can therefore negotiate their way into the role of the father, girls grow up merely to be women and thus never possess the symbolic and actual privilege accorded to men by law" ("Bastard Testimony" 59). Following a detailed deconstruction of the gendered dynamics of the law and the family, Gilmore asserts that the very nature of our supposedly objective legal institutions prevents the "criminal" in cases of incest from ever truly having to face

consequences. The law, she suggests, is a form of paternalism in the deepest sense, representing not only the general restriction of freedom by an authoritative body, but engaging intimately with patriarchal ideas of father as arbiter, father as god, within the confines of the family. The law of the state enacts the law of the father on the macro level of society. Thus, in cases of incest, “the criminal possesses not only the legal rights of men but to these rights are added the mystique of paternity, an issue in which the law’s unconscious is deeply invested. The victimized child lacks legal subjectivity, and when she is a girl, she cannot aspire to the same degree of subjectivity a legal male subject attains upon reaching majority status” (52). The law acknowledges the power of the father in line with the old adage, “a man’s home is his castle.” What hope have women and girls who have been violated by male relatives in seeking redress through courts of law which are constituted to the detriment of female agency?

Bone’s mother, Anney, does follow a course of action rooted in the law in order to mitigate the shame she feels around her bastard motherhood. Initially, she ignores her inferior legal position as a woman, making repeated journeys to the Greenville County courthouse in order to acquire a birth certificate for her daughter that does not have the label “ILLEGITIMATE” stamped across the bottom. But the courthouse clerk has little empathy for her (admittedly false) assertion of legitimate childbirth, each time providing her with an exact copy of the original certificate, and observing Anney’s frustration with “pure righteous justification” (5). Eventually, Anney’s tactics change. She conceives marriage to a male partner as a more effective method of legal recourse than “dragging down to the courthouse again,” her brother having reminded her that, according to South Carolina statutes regarding bastard children in the 1950s, “if she lived with [a man] for seven years, she could get the same result without

paying a courthouse lawyer” (5). The refrain “he’d make a good daddy” repeats throughout Anney and Glen’s courtship in the first chapter of the novel, illustrating the way in which Anney has internalized the law’s dictate that only a man can “legitimize” a child. Unfortunately, it is this very mindset that brings harm to her daughter—harm greater than she would have suffered through the trauma of illegitimacy alone. As Gilmore points out, “Bone can be harmed not only because she is outside the law as a bastard but also because her mother so desires the legal familial relation that would place Bone within the law” (“Bastard Testimony” 59). Bone’s abuse occurs within the ostensibly safer confines of a nuclear family run by a father, placing both herself and her mother in a double-bind of legal subjectivity.

In the conversation around truth and lies in autobiographies of trauma, acknowledgment of the deficiencies of narrating such traumas in the courts provides fresh ground in which to contest demands for autobiographical facticity. We cannot abandon the conversation at the point at which Eakin leaves it, for his analysis does not account for the ways in which the legal discrimination I have been discussing permeates even the layman’s reception of self-representational texts; it fails to recognize that subjects exist under a set of legal norms that both reflect and reinforce everyday judgments about ethics and morality. That Allison’s text is expressly concerned with issues of legitimacy, both under the law and in one’s own self-conception, makes it a perfect example of the struggle to claim authority to “legitimately” speak. Although writing a fictionalized version of her life story opens her up to censure by readers who expect and desire the naked “truth,” it also ensures that her actual lived experience is “not accountable to the limited presentation of evidence that could be heard in a courtroom” (“Bastard Testimony” 48). This is the material safety gained through the autofictional mode. Going further

into the theoretical and literary implications of this choice, Gilmore believes that “Allison develops a hermeneutics of illegitimacy, which suggests a meaning for the bastard form of autobiographical fiction. It is neither legal testimony nor nonfiction, and as fiction it claims a truth-value of an extralegal kind. Her preference in this project for a bastard form clarifies the survivor position vis-à-vis law and trauma” (69). Consequently, Allison’s recourse to fiction is not only intentional, but necessary to her articulation of the trauma of abuse. In order to understand the full range of uses to which she puts her fiction, it is useful here to shift focus to another major theme in *Bastard*—the nature and practices of shame and shaming.

3.2 Forging a Self from Shame

The affect of shame looms large over the plot of *Bastard Out of Carolina*. I have already gestured towards one central source of shame—that of illegitimacy, of being a bastard or having given birth to one. This shame is integrally tied to another, that of the white trash existence. The Boatwright family is a notorious white trash clan in Greenville County, its male members known to be violent, hard-drinking and reckless, its women stubborn and exhausted. The everyday consequences of being thus named appear early in the novel. For example, in the first chapter, Anney asks a lawyer why the generally unenforced protocol of stamping “illegitimate” on the birth certificates of bastards must be stringently enforced on her. The lawyer replies, ““You don’t need me to tell you the answer to that. You’ve lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are”” (9). Indeed she does. Anney is hyper-aware of the stigma placed on her as a Boatwright, and that stigma persists despite her commitment to “work her hands to claws, her back to a shovel shape, her mouth to a bent and awkward smile—anything to deny what

Greenville County wanted to name her” (3-4). A testament to the social construction of shame, Anney’s actual worth (as a worker, as a mother) goes unacknowledged in her community because she has already been marked by her class positioning.

Bone, predictably, is also named white trash at birth, compounding the shame of her illegitimacy. Even as a child, she demonstrates acute class consciousness, as well as a genuine identification with her class. Her aunts, uncles and grandmother are some of the few people in her world who make her feel loved and safe. When Daddy Glen scorns her aunts’ homes because they fit the classic image of what a white trash house looks like, with “kids on the porch, cousins going in and out of screen doors, laundry hanging out back, and chickens running around,” Bone understands the difference between these houses and the ones Daddy Glen rents for the family. Nevertheless, she cherishes the warmth and vivacity of her aunts’ houses. The liveliness of her relatives, “trashy” though they may be, is a source of pride and protection for Bone, who admits that “there was something icy in Daddy Glen’s houses that melted out of us when we were over at our aunts” (80).

On one hand, this testament to the worth of Bone’s stigmatized family is one of the crucial interventions Allison makes in the discussion around white trash stereotypes. Walerstein characterizes Bone’s self-conception as joyful shame, “which mobilizes Bone to seek out those people similarly affected by the world she shares with them... able to use those identifications to circumnavigate the risk of becoming just another angry, shamed Boatwright” (170). However, it is possible that even through these relationships, Bone comes to over-identify with the stereotypically “shameless” white trash behaviors enacted by her family members. As J. Brooks Bouson explains, “to flaunt one’s white trash shame is not to be without shame... A reaction

formation against shame, shamelessness serves as a classic defense against the feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability that accompany shame... a self-perpetuating chain of emotions in which unacknowledged shame leads to anger, which, in turn, leads to more shame.”⁴⁰ This cycle can be identified in the actions of many of the Boatwrights, but perhaps Bone’s internalization of her own mother’s history with collective shame provides the most immediate example of the paradox between pride in and hatred for one’s own disparaged community. “Family is family,” Bone muses, “but even love can’t keep people from eating at each other. Mama’s pride, Granny’s resentment that there should even be anything to consider shameful, my aunts’ fear and bitter humor, my uncles’ hard-mouthed contempt for anything that could not be handled with a shotgun or a two-by-four—all combined to grow my mama up fast and painfully” (10). As Bone comes of age under the same conditions, it comes as no surprise that she admires and acquires many of her family’s signature traits, like pride, resentment and violence, which ultimately strip her of much of her innocence.

As Bone reacts to her shame with increasing anger, she appears to reenforce the assumption that poor whites have uncontrollable tempers. She is successful in school, she is a hard worker — but she still has that deviant attitude which makes it easy for her community to label her “trash.” Shame, after all, “is not just an emotion that comes from nowhere, but rather an affective response to the sense others have about one’s self” (Walerstein 169). It is not enough that Bone finds validation within the confines of the family she loves, for she must be perpetually aware of the gaze of those around her, constantly feeling the “respectable” members of her community eyeing her and waiting for her to exhibit the negative characteristics they wish

⁴⁰ J. Brooks Bouson, “‘You Nothing but Trash’: White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's ‘Bastard out of Carolina,’” *The Southern Literary Journal* 34, no. 1 (2001): 108.

to attach to her. As her anger is one of those characteristics, it becomes self-perpetuating. When she gets angry, she almost revels in the badness, often choosing to perform the stereotypes applied to her through acts of reckless defiance. Her unlikely friendship with Shannon Pearl, a schoolmate bullied for her albino complexion, is a prime example. Bone is outraged when she sees her peers ostracizing Shannon, so she offers Shannon a seat on the bus, immediately identifying with the ugly child as another outsider. “Just the way they stared made me forget all my newly made vows to behave like a good Christian; their contemptuous, angry faces made me want to start a conversation with Shannon and shock them all,” Bone states (154), illustrating how she wishes to overtly challenge the people who despise her. Much like her uncles, whom she admires for their violent recklessness with outsiders but “invariably gentle and affectionate” nature towards family (22), Bone consciously alienates those who would name her “trash”—becoming, in the process, more vulnerable to the judgments her neighbors feel ever more justified in making.

The inability of Bone’s prideful shamelessness to truly mollify the feelings of self-loathing that stem from others’ shaming of her becomes apparent when white trash shame and bastard shame are contextualized in relation to a third source of shame, that of her abuse by Daddy Glen. It begins in chapter four, when he sexually assaults her in the car outside the hospital where Anney is giving birth to a stillborn baby boy. The abuse continues through chapter eight, where it reaches its first climax, a trip to the doctor’s office that exposes the beatings Bone takes and forces Anney to move her daughters away from Glen, if only for two weeks. The sexual abuse and beatings result in slightly varied manifestations of shame, but both are connected to Bone’s knowledge of her particular social status. Though Daddy Glen chooses to

marry into the Boatwright family and desert his upper-middle class kinsmen, who never thought much of him in the first place, he persists in translating insecurities about his own failures into attacks on Bone and her beloved relatives. Eventually, Glen begins to call the other Boatwrights “trash,” ensuring Bone cannot escape the slur even in the safety of her own home. Constantly agonizing over why Daddy Glen visits his hatred upon her, Bone comes to believe that “it was nothing I had done that made him beat me. It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was” (110). As he strips her of her bodily dignity through physical abuse, he simultaneously performs a psychological attack on her self-worth, until she feels that all of it is her own fault, because she, like her family, is nothing but “trash,” dirty and expendable. Daddy Glen was not marked as degraded at birth, as Bone was, and every day he forces her to recognize and responds to this class shame more acutely.

Bone’s three shames converge to provoke graphic fantasies of violence, which appear not only in the context of direct conflict, but also in her sexual imagination. The sexual fantasies, in particular, are crucial to an understanding of how Bone grapples with her shame, although their value is not immediately apparent to her. In one of the most detailed examples, she imagines herself as a martyr, stoically submitting to Daddy Glen’s abuse in front of an adoring audience:

When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street, or one of my cousins, or even somebody I had seen on television. . . . They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I’d stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched

admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

The first line of this passage establishes the reality of Bone's situation. In the moment of the beating, she finds herself unable to respond with strength, calling herself a baby. Of course, crying is a perfectly valid response to being beaten, but by this point in the novel, Bone has been psychologically conditioned to minimize herself. Further, at ten years old, she is, by societal standards, still a child, and would not be expected to react in any other way. Her sense of shame at her own reaction to abuse is wrapped up in the more general loss of her innocence—she has grown up “fast and painfully,” like her mother.

Despite the problems inherent in Bone's self-evaluation of this response, she does manage to invert her painful reality in her imaginings. Instead of screaming and crying, she “[makes] no sound at all, no shameful scream”; instead of kicking, she grits her teeth and endures. In her fantasy, she can lay claim to the agency denied her by Glen's superior strength and privileged position in the family—no longer forced to “beg” for him to stop, fixing him with a stare rather than averting her eyes, as she so often must in his presence. Additionally, “pride,” in this passage, is reconfigured in a useful way. As I have been discussing, Bone's pride in her white trash identity frequently functions as a double-edged sword, reinforcing judgments from her community as much as it fortifies the support she receives from her intimate familial relations. Here, she takes pride in her own strength and resilience, a far more productive emotion that encourages a reconceptualization of her own value.

This scene, more than anything, makes clear that Bone struggles with a desire to be seen. A key aspect of the fantasy is that her suffering is observed, suggesting that all the covert ways in which her abuse is enacted—lying to doctors about bruises, moving to houses far from the other Boatwrights, the tacit understanding that she mention nothing at all about the sexual nature of Glen’s beatings—contribute significantly to her experience of shame. Only when she is watched can Bone begin to feel powerful. As Walerstein points out, “Bone is *interesting* to the others [watching] because of her ability to withstand the splitting effects of shame and still find some kind of coherence. Her fantasy of being destroyed is commensurate with the joy of surviving that destruction” (175). Perceiving herself as strong, as creative and powerful, subsequently uncovers a fierce desire to be loved, as well. Gilmore explains shame as “a symptom of the construction of desire in terms of the unlawful, the dishonorable, and the violent” (“Bastard Testimony 68), and so, as Bone begins to reclaim her desire for love and validation from those negative constructions, she begins to shed her shame. We can analyze the development of her sexuality, in this light, not as a direct response to Glen’s sexual abuse, but as part of the healing process of forging a sense of self that transcends her trauma and her shame.

Also important is the gesture this fantasy makes towards a lesbian sexuality, for the people Bone imagines as watching her pain are primarily women. While this indication of queerness may seem subtle, it represents a symbolic climax to the subversive oedipal drama playing out between Glen, Anney and Bone: the girl child, who has been described throughout the novel as having “a man-type part” (54), wars with the father over the body of the mother, rather than the other way around. Her resistance to the father, also the man who beats her, naturally persists in her fantasies, but her desire transfers to other women who will acknowledge

her suffering, for the mother rarely has. If, per a definition offered by Katrina Irving, “the lesbian subject is a threat precisely because she eludes patriarchal control,”⁴¹ then Bone’s same-sex desire provides yet another layer to the opposition her fantasy world and the orgasm it provides pose to Daddy Glen.

Finally, I wish to return to the fundamental question of fantasy as a method of working through trauma. In her fantasies, Bone finds strength, and even takes comfort, in the realization that “it was as if I was being beaten for them.” This pattern of thought is often noted in studies of child abuse and trauma; Bouson references trauma specialist Elizabeth Waite’s argument that children in particular may begin to develop a scapegoat identity around their abuse, asserting that Bone’s “scapegoat identity is found in her masturbatory fantasies in which she imagines not only that people are watching Glen beat her while she remains defiantly proud but also that the witnesses of this shaming act admire and love her” (111). A scapegoat identity has its dangers, one of which is movement towards a sense of self that internalizes shame and rationalizes abuse. Bone regresses in this direction when she returns from her fantasies to her brutal reality. Self-loathing, temporarily suspended during masturbation, resurfaces with even greater potency, as she realizes she is “more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place.” The agency she claims through her fantasies, which I position as a positive attribute, is the very thing that allows her to damn herself even more absolutely for her own abuse, for “I couldn’t stop my stepfather from beating me, but *I* was the one who masturbated” (113). To a certain extent, Bone’s scapegoat identity reinscribes her shame, rather than helping her to move past it.

⁴¹ Katrina Irving, “‘Writing It Down So That It Would Be Real’: Narrative Strategies in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,” *College Literature* 25, no. 2 (1998): 101.

However, Bone's identity in relation to her abuse is constantly in process, and its complexity is reduced by an exclusively negative reading of the psychological product of her fantasies. Arguing for a more productive understanding of the relationship between Bone's abuse and her budding sexuality, Gilmore shifts focus away from the violent, instead centering love. "Allison does not present Bone's masturbation fantasies as simply the detritus of abuse," she asserts. "Rather, Bone's hunger, desire for the power to destroy, and neediness all contribute to a developing imaginary around sex, violence, and class... that exceeds the power of harm and preserves her love for her mother, and through it the damaged but still present capacity to love" ("Bastard Testimony" 60). Indeed, this argument finds support in a subsequent fantasy, after Bone is taken to the hospital and the doctor notices signs of abuse. In her imagination, the doctor comforts Daddy Glen, who is then forced to beg forgiveness from the entire Boatwright clan: "Mama would say no. My aunts would say no. My uncles, Reese, the minister, everyone in the world would stand up and say no. But I would pull myself up from my sickbed. I would look right into his eyes, into the lamps of his soul. Yes, I would say. Yes. I forgive you" (116). This fantasy illustrates the reverse effects of the scapegoat identity. Whereas before, Bone was beaten in her community's stead for their collective shamefulness, now she performs an act of love, recuperating the community from that shamefulness. If she is the one who must suffer, she will also be the one to forgive, and to encourage others to forgive as well.

Dorothy Allison's writing mirrors the processes of navigating trauma apparent in Bone's fantasies, for *Bastard Out of Carolina*, as a text, represents a metaphorical "beating" of Allison for the benefit of us, her audience—particularly those readers who wish to understand more about the ways in which one forges a self out of shame. Consequently, Allison as an author

experiences the conflicting forces of love and self-loathing that result from performing one's suffering for all to see. In the afterword to the 2012 edition of the novel, Allison offers two stories of interactions with readers that illustrate the impact publishing a work of autofiction has had on her. First, she describes how a man approached her after a speaking engagement to tell her that she had "told his story." The conversation ends with much left unsaid, but creates in her the impression that "there were probably very few people in the world who knew his story, and that seemed to be the way he wanted it. I understood that" (312). The acknowledgement that her novel made visible what was previously hidden in this man's life allows her to identify with him, and him with her, forging a community of love and support through a particularized testimony that stands in for that of others. On the other hand, Allison also admits to the suffering that stems from her literary revelations, describing an interaction with a teacher who assigned *Bastard* in a high school class and subsequently lost her job, as well as her desire to teach. "*I did this,*" Allison thinks. "*I messed up her life. Irrational, maybe. But there it was. My novel had disturbed the peace and everyone's sense of a just and reasonable world. That's how it was, and I felt guilty, ashamed, and a little desperate*" (312). Just as Bone questions the positive feelings of power and pride she develops from reconfiguring her abuse through fantasy, so does Allison descend into the throes of self-doubt when she realizes her project has negative consequences along with positive.

This tension leads again to the question of the functional value of truth-telling in autobiographical discourse about trauma. How far can one go in navigating trauma through writing, and particularly through fiction, a form of fantasizing? I would argue that one can actually go quite far, given a certain set of parameters. The first qualification for the success of

Bastard in this sense is that Allison does not ask people to take her story at face value, as the facts of her life. She insists, “I did not want to relate what had happened to me. I invented a loved creature to set against the memory of helplessness and rage” (315). The fictionalized elements of resilience and strength in the character of Bone, in opposition to the actual fact of Allison’s own character as a child, points to just the sort of imaginary effort that Bone makes while masturbating. Both author and character believe that a stronger, braver version of themselves will inspire love and empathy in the audience observing their pain, and they are open and honest about this conviction, “arguing for the innocence and worth of that child—[as people] who had never believed in [their] own innocence” (314). Secondly, Allison does not engage in what Harkins calls the trope of “survivor realism, the celebration of which all too often seems consonant with the social forces that institute ‘oppression’ in the form of ‘trauma’ and seek its redress in the form of ‘narrative’” (135). She appears less interested in celebrating her own survival than in advocating for the rights of women and children to tell their particular stories, or at least to identify with the stories they can relate to that do manage to surface in public. Connected to this qualification is Gilmore’s assertion that, while “autobiographical subjects are judged in part by whether they are appropriately representative,” Allison’s story is ostensibly inappropriate and non-representative (“Bastard Testimony” 49). The details of her story are graphic and she speaks of subjects that society views as taboo, but at the same time, the details of someone else’s abuse would position the teller in a connected but unique space. Allison’s contribution through her autofictional work is to open up space for these other stories to be possible, modeling the tools a survivor of a trauma might use to “tell” while minimizing the judgments of the law and of society that coerce one not to tell.

Conclusion: A Pedagogy of Difference

In this thesis, I have traversed a wide expanse of autobiographical narrative practices, practices which have spawned a variety of theories about the genre and prompted numerous politicized and practical debates. I now wish to synthesize my thinking about the three texts analyzed here, in order to present some recommendations about the use of such texts as these in curricula at the high school and university levels. *Fun Home*, *Borderlands/La Frontera* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* share distinct themes, which of course manifest in very different ways, but which gesture toward the broader pedagogy that I advocate for. The themes include queerness, in its broad sense of deviance and difference; individual and collective traumas and the methods used to navigate them; love and shame, especially in the context of familial and collective histories; identity construction as a political process; and the explicit reclamation of space in which to tell one's own story. These concepts coalesce in my chosen texts, functioning as a road map, of sorts, for teachers and professors to use when working with students of marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds in the context of the English classroom.

The English classroom strikes me as a space of particular importance to this discussion, over and above, say, a history classroom or the realm of bureaucracy and policy, because it roots itself in imaginative interpretations. Practitioners of History seek verifiable documentation of events; policymakers search out material evidence of the effects of their policies. The study of literature offers something else, something that fills in gaps left by a focus on the tangible. The experiences and stories shared through literary texts grapple with the psychic elements of history, the emotional residue left over when social and political phenomena have been explained in the evidential mode. The three authors I engage with do chronicle lives lived under “real” pressures,

journeys of the self which intersect with “real” cultural events that have defined the American mode of being and of thinking. Bechdel’s text is situated in relation to the gay rights movement of the 1980s and 1990s, Anzaldúa’s to the rise in Chicana political consciousness in the 1960s, Allison’s to the Great Depression that persisted in the South into the 1950s. But these social realities provide the background for personal recollections, a context that is in fact only revealed by careful attention to what is given primacy—the particularity of experience.

What does the practice of queer composition look like in the English classroom? It might be configured as the acceptance and encouragement of reading and writing practices that defy binary distinctions like gay versus straight, but also Self versus Other, me versus you, permitted versus taboo. According to Alexander and Rhodes, “if queerness is the excess of sexual identities, the part that exceeds easy and knowable encapsulation in identity, then it is also the excess of composition, of stories, narratives, arguments, and texts that are easily, knowingly ‘composed’” (183). Here, the authors riff on the emotional state of “composure,” in which one feels secure, in control, rational and calm. Composure results naturally from binary oppositions, for clean divisions allow us to know exactly where we stand in relation to others. Thus, when I argue for “de-composing” composition in the name of queerness, I mean that teachers, in their classrooms, must work to complicate this state of being.

The process begins with the selection of texts; we must be careful not to choose books that tell normative stories under the guise of “diversity,” books that feature a gay character, or a woman of color, or a working-class family, but do no work to interrogate the complexities of those identity positions. Then, armed with valuable models, students can begin *practicing* a queer composition, both in discussion and in writing assignments. Within the new terrain opened

up by the deviant style, structure and stories of selected texts, the teacher must allow young scholars space in which to play with these ideas themselves. Crucial to a pedagogy that embraces queer composition is “a disposition that views student readers as active creators and makers of meaning rather than receivers of the ‘authorized version’; a disposition that focuses on building young people’s capacity to engage in literary discussion, argument, and debate; a disposition, in other words, that equates opening up classroom dialogue with opening minds” (Ellis 54). This orientation might exist in a classroom less concerned with thematic and compositional deviance, but it both enhances and is enhanced by a queerness.

Acquiring tools for narrating trauma closely relates to queer compositional practices. In any classroom, a teacher is likely to engage with one or more students who have experienced, and perhaps internalized a trauma. In the deeply segregated schools of urban spaces in the United States, a teacher might find herself in a classroom full of students who live out the trauma of class-based and racial oppression every day. These classrooms most urgently assert the need for a reckoning with trauma, but the work retains its value even in spaces of privilege. As Autumn Dodge and Paul Crutcher note, “Disrupting the single story is not only important to the group or groups whose identities and experiences are silenced but also to those students who may be represented in the single story. Building empathy and understanding among all students in a classroom is crucial in moving towards socially just school curricula.”⁴² The idea of the “single story” speaks to the ways in which trauma and the traumatic experience of difference are both subconsciously and actively hidden in school curricula. Bringing these ideas into view (aided by

⁴² Autumn M. Dodge and Paul A. Crutcher, “Inclusive Classrooms for LGBTQ Students: Using Linked Text Sets to Challenge the Hegemonic ‘Single Story,’” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 59, no. 1 (2015): 95.

a queer composition) is the first step in overcoming the punishing effects of silence. Committed and honest discussions in classrooms take visibility a step further by fostering understanding and empathy, allowing for traumatic experiences to be shared without the fear of judgment that I discussed in depth in regards to *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

Cvetkovich argues that “providing witness to intimate life puts pressure on standard genres and modes of public discourse” (112), and I would extend this point to explicitly challenge historical and literary canons. All of the texts I study here have become, in recent years, quasi-canonical—that is, they appear as canonical in certain circles, like the gender studies and ethnic studies classrooms at progressive universities. However, I question whether the more traditional curricula of high school English courses and depoliticized university classrooms would embrace these texts without resistance. Thus, I am forced to concur with scholars who explicitly acknowledge the challenges that arise when inserting narratives of trauma into the educational space.⁴³ I do think that it can be done, but it will not be easy, as indicated by Allison’s story of the teacher who was fired for assigning *Bastard* to high schoolers. We must remember, as Betsy Dahms suggests, that “the quest of delving deep into the self to relive and reconstruct trauma is painful, yet necessary to transformation. The writer, and hopefully the reader, will be forever changed by the act of writing/reading.”⁴⁴ This “delving” is the approach we need to see in classrooms across the United States. Witnessing the intimacy of trauma, or responding to other’s acts of witness, has the potential to inspire actual changes in the structures, systems and conditions that perpetuate traumas in the first place.

⁴³ See Dodge and Crutcher, Alexander and Rhodes.

⁴⁴ Betsy Dahms, “Shamanic Urgency and Two-Way Movement as Writing Style in the Works of Gloria Anzaldúa,” *Letras Femeninas* 38, no. 2 (2012): 20.

Reading and writing autobiographies of difference also enables remarkable meditations on the concepts of love and shame. Recalling Gilmore's conception of shame as "unlawful" desire, it can be argued that love (for a person, an object, a way of life) appears first, before societal strictures begin to punish one for that love, causing shame to set in. Describing the stakes of this process, Bousoon suggests that the United States is a particularly "shame-phobic society," whose citizens would rather push all that provokes discomfort or embarrassment to the margins (101). Our goal in the classroom, then, is to recuperate love and desire from the peripheries of shame. *Fun Home* does this by bringing to the surface the truth of Bruce Bechdel's sexuality, which his misplaced shame forced him to hide throughout his life. His daughter views his queerness not as something sinful, but as something potentially generative, if only he had allowed it to flourish. His shame is appropriated by Bechdel in her reimagining of their family history, within which she can connect to her father in ways that were impossible while they both remained closeted. Anzaldúa and Allison achieve similar feats in their works, describing the innocence of love corrupted by shame, and the subsequent work required to return to a state of connectivity, understanding and acceptance within their communities. Likewise, to take part in discussion about these texts is to "enable a kind of temporary community that allows for pedagogical and political public reading moments in which readers can be held accountable to each other for the meanings they produce" (Berila 44). Accountability is a critical component of this reading practice, for in observing the ways in which these autobiographers pursue the development of their shame, reckoning with it until it can be reconciled with love, students are required to reevaluate their own experiences of shame—and their own shaming practices—in an unusually critical and honest manner. Obviously, this work can also be enacted through reading

fictional literature concerning these themes, but I offer autobiography as an apt starting point because the true story of a life is inherently in process, incomplete like the continuous effort of resisting one's shame.

To expand further on the concept of community building through autobiography, I pivot here to a discussion of the political implications of the identity work encouraged through queer composition and themes of trauma, shame and love. Many scholars of the genre point to a distinct connection between autobiography and citizenship, honing in on the cultural and historical environments that contextualize any self-representational work. Gilmore, particularly in her studies of the laws restricting testimonial speech, points out that “the cultural work performed in the name of autobiography profoundly concerns representations of citizenship and the nation. Autobiography’s investment in the representative person allies it to the project of lending substance to the national fantasy of belonging” (135). This representative person, in the United States, is white, heterosexual, cisgendered, middle-class or affluent, and educated in Standard English, with men possessing a more privileged standing. This identity position is representative because those occupying it created the structures that distribute social capital and dictate social norms of “acceptability,” frequently at the expense of marginalized populations. As Irving reminds us, “a marginalized identity does not precede, but is produced both within *and* *athwart*, hegemonic structures and institutions” (97). The marginalized identity position necessitates a close examination in order to free it from the tyranny of the representative—but also from the binary-oriented “us versus them” conceptualization suggested by its production “athwart” that tyranny.

What exactly does this close examination entail? For one, we can no longer content ourselves with the cursory nods to diversity that already populate curricula in the United States. While there has been a strong focus on multiculturalism in schools and universities in recent decades, it reeks of tokenism. Consider, for example, how well-versed schoolchildren are in the civil rights activities led by Martin Luther King Jr., and how much less literate they appear when faced with the Black Panther Party activity of the same period. The former version of the struggle for civil rights was oriented towards reconciliation between the white upper-class and the black underclass, while the latter focused on proactively bettering living conditions for black citizens living in highly segregated and violently policed neighborhoods. There are merits to both approaches, to be sure, but it is notable that schools choose to teach the viewpoint that most obviously acknowledges the “representative” American even as it brings a marginalized group into the dominant dialogue. Such assimilationist inclusion of peripheral citizens in the curriculum illustrates the ultimately reductive nature of “diversity signaling,”⁴⁵ as it “commodifies individual identities, obscuring the larger relations of structures of oppression that create these identities” (McDonald 23). It is not enough to merely *feature* leaders and authors from the margins in the study of history and literature. Autobiographies offer the chance to closely examine psychological and emotional effects of the trauma of oppression that spur identity construction within the context of the United States’s discriminatory material conditions.

Yet, in order to build a community that embraces citizens occupying the full range of identity positions, we must begin to uncover our commonalities, as well as our difference. The

⁴⁵ I am playing on the concept of “virtue signaling,” a term that has recently enjoyed a spike in common usage as a pejorative employed against those whose complaints about the moral and ethical failings of society appear not to be backed up by equivalent actions. The term is considered a political buzzword, but remains occasionally salient.

classroom is a prime location in which to perform this work, because it forces together disparate groups, individuals and perspectives. One's "friends from class" frequently exist apart from one's primary friend group; in selecting our social groups we often wind up surrounded by people who share our beliefs, values, habits and identities, in a process known as self-segregating. But if the people sharing a classroom agree to invest themselves in conversations about identity through the shared experience of reading and reflecting on an autobiography or peer reviewing each other's personal writing, as social beings they will naturally strive towards mutual understanding. Separated, biases and fears about the Other are persistently reinforced by fellow members of our own in-group. Placed together in a space defined by discourse, the opportunity arises to deconstruct these same fears and biases. Berila refers to the reading of "experimental multiethnic literatures" as a "pedagogical experience that reduces the likelihood of violence by developing alternative modes of engagement" (36), and I contend that the reading of autobiographies does the same work. In the case of self-representational texts, this "alternative mode" is one which asks students to open their minds to the subjective experiences of those who differ from them, and to learn from these experiences, rather than judging them.

I wish to address one final component that sets autobiography apart from other modes of telling—its earnest commitment to telling your story on your terms. This resolve holds particular weight in the case of marginalized communities, whose stories have so often been told by the dominant group to serve its own purposes. I have already established that the dominant group dictates what is taught in United States schools, and it will not be easy to convince stakeholders that a new pedagogy is called for. However, the texts I have chosen are among many

autobiographies of undeniable literary merit that prove the advances in understanding that are possible if changes to current curricula are indeed made.

Fun Home, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and *Bastard Out of Carolina* do not represent the genre of autobiography in the Enlightenment sense of the word; they do not express journeys of the self that eventually lead to social integration in the dominant culture. We must leave this historical definition of autobiography behind, for, as Gilmore explains, “while memoirs and autobiographies struggle with the persistent legacy of confession that institutionalizes penance and penalty as self-expression, requires subjects to produce a private truth within coded and official forms, and installs judgments about conformity and authority, experimentation at the limits demonstrates there are other ways to bear the burdens” (“Limit-Cases” 137). I advocate for an acceptance of what is deviant, non-normative and difficult in individual lives. I believe in the personal as historical. I uphold the margins as a space apart from but deeply involved with the center. And I champion the worth of self-representative texts as authoritative commentary on the forces enacting trauma on the most vulnerable populations of the United States in the 21st century. I hope that this study of three works, all deeply steeped in a revolutionary consciousness, adds to a broader conversation about power and privilege in a wide range of social spaces, beyond schools and classrooms. Through this research, I have discovered much about myself—my own sexuality, family, identity, preferred expressive modes—and perhaps that is my greatest testament to the power of engaging with autobiographies of difference.

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BIOGRAPHY

Katelyn Connolly was born in Reston, Virginia, on November 23, 1996. She moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, at the age of eight and again to Boulder, Colorado, in the middle of fifth grade, before settling in Austin, Texas, for high school. She enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015, pursuing degrees in the Plan II and English Honors programs. She began studying autobiography in her sophomore year, and has additional scholarly interests in gender and sexuality studies and the literature of the American South. Ms. Connolly graduated with honors in 2019, and will begin teaching middle school language arts in Brooklyn, New York, in the fall of 2019, through the Teach for America program. She plans to eventually pursue a doctorate in English literature or educational policy, but is excited to teach for a few years prior to returning to research. Ms. Connolly adores travel, strange foods, great wine and her precious cat, Pickles.