



Gender, Sexuality, Identity, and Queerness in Alison Bechdel's Comix

Nora Ambite del Rey

Tutor: Thomas Byers

Abstract

This paper studies the works of the cartoonist and memoirist Alison Bechdel to discern how, within them, sexuality, gender and identity are perceived and constructed by individuals and the systems they live in. The essay explores the issues that emerge from the conflict between the complex identities of individual human beings and the socially imposed necessity to sort life into what appears to be fixed categories and binary oppositions. The analysis is approached from a theoretical framework based on queer theory, and especially the philosophical essays of Judith Butler and Annamarie Jagose.

The first section of the essay establishes a parallelism between LGBT history and Alison's and her father's situation in *Fun Home*. Bechdel's memoir is further analyzed in terms of gender, sexuality and identity in the second section, while her most famous compilation of comic strips is studied in relation to queer theory in the last section.

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1. Introduction

Comics have traditionally been downgraded in literary tradition. Indeed, as the association of comics with children's literature was a handicap for many artists, they began to use the term 'comix' in order to distinguish their work from comics for children. Bechdel's work is a great example of comix that should be considered high art. Like well-known works such as *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, *Fun Home* and *Dykes to Watch Out For* deviate from convention, defying preconceived ideas formed around comics. Through her drawings and texts, Bechdel addresses complex and serious matters with a satirical tone. Her comix are especially significant regarding gender and how it is developed in society, and especially remarkable for how they point out the systemic limitations of identity.

It would have been fruitful to address the intertextuality of *Fun Home*, for throughout the memoir there are references to other authors, such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich. However, Bechdel's ability to depict trauma and identity issues through humor and parody was the feature that intrigued me the most. By examining Bechdel's and Alison's¹ experience of binary gender and identity categories through queer theory, I am attempting to understand and explain what is behind certain social structures and how they affect individuals.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first one provides context on the LGBTQ rights movement in order to better understand Bechdel's work, considering that her personal circumstances, as well as her father's, were highly conditioned by the ongoing social situation. This section, based mainly on Annamarie Jagose's overview of LGBTQ history in her *Queer Theory*, serves as a background to the use of queer theory in the following sections.

The second section outlines the notions of gender, identity and sexuality and analyzes the crucial role that they play in *Fun Home*. The section highlights both the author Bechdel's and the character Alison's rejection of conventional gender categories. In addition, it shows how Bruce's, Alison's father, circumstances defined and constrained him and how his frustrations directly affected his daughter.

The third section scrutinizes identity categories from a queer perspective—based on the work of Judith Butler. The notions that were explained in section two are put into question and the differences between gay liberation movements' purposes and those of

¹ Since *Fun Home* is a memoir, the author and the character have the same name. Therefore, for clarity the author will be addressed as "Bechdel" and her character as "Alison" throughout the essay.

queer theory are highlighted. Bechdel's compilation of comic strips *Dykes to Watch Out For* is analyzed as portraying and exemplifying both gender paradox and the current deconstruction and denaturalization of sex, gender and identity.

2. Historical overview of LGBT rights movement

In order to contextualize Bechdel's comic, some historical background is needed. Although identifying the origin of the so-called LGBTQ movement is a difficult task that may yield contestable results, one could argue that the root of what is known today as such has its origins in the 1950s with the emergence of the homophile movements. Their main focus was to create educational programs in order to raise awareness about, and to encourage acceptance, or at least tolerance and decriminalization, of homosexuality. Unfortunately, the movement encountered several internal issues: misogyny and homophobia were found on the inside, so that, for instance, neither the masculinist nor the feminist organizations of the movement identified themselves as homosexuals, but only as people who were "interested in homosexuality" (Jagose 27). In fact, they even accepted the definition of homosexuality as a medical condition or pathology. As will be shown in the next section, Bruce is directly affected by this issue, since he internalizes society's stigmatizing of who he is and how he loves, unable to accept his desire as a valid sexual identity.

The homophile movement's inability to fulfill what they initially promised led to its decay in the 60s. At that time, there was a social disposition towards less conformity and more distrust of and rebellion against authorities, as was evident in the rise of the counterculture movement, the civil rights movements and the New Left. In the LGBTQ world, growing tensions ended up exploding in June 28th, 1969. For more than a decade, bars in which lesbians, gays, and drag queens and kings spent their time had been targets of frequent, unnecessary raids that often resulted in these groups being sent to jail or prison without any apparent reason. That night, instead of surrendering and letting the police arrest them, a group of people who were gathered at New York's Stonewall Inn resisted authoritarian forces. This crucial and iconic moment is usually presented as the birth of gay and lesbian liberation movements, and it is the context in which Alison, unlike her father, is able to find a way to live with and as herself.

The subjects of these movements tried to achieve what the homophile movement could not. They questioned gender behavior, monogamy, and law, and thereby challenged the status quo. In opposition to the homophile movement, they were not ashamed of being gay. Rather, they embraced their gay identity and encouraged members of the community to “come out”. Nevertheless, although they elaborated a critique of gender as an oppressive construction that sustained heteropatriarchal values (Jagose 43), liberationists eventually deviated from their original goals in order to be accepted within a society that oppressed them. Eventually, however, their initial claims and goals became the base of so-called queer theory, which attempted to recover the original, more radical purposes these organizations had. This concern is related to the last section of the paper, for in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bechdel’s characters embody the main aspects of queer theory and recover gay liberationists’ radical purposes.

3. *Fun Home*

3.1 An introduction

In the Queers & Comics conference at the Graduate Center of New York University, Bechdel summarizes *Fun Home* by stating that “my coming out process was extremely complicated by the fact that almost as soon as I realized I was a lesbian, I found out that my dad was gay too, or bisexual, and deeply closeted. Almost as soon as I found that out, he died. He was hit by a truck in what my family was pretty sure was a suicide”. The whole memoir revolves around Alison trying to make sense of her father’s death. In an attempt to find the truth, Bechdel explores her childhood, youth and memories of the past through Alison. She is convinced that Bruce committed suicide due to the fact that he remained in the closet for most of his life and had recently been exposed as a homosexual. Her relationship with Bruce, their sexualities and gender identities, the different cultural and social contexts they experienced and Alison’s self-discovery are some of the issues that arise in Alison’s growing into a mature woman, and they contribute centrally to the construction of her identity.

Bechdel explores these matters in *Fun Home* by using a postmodern device: the book is made of fragmented memories that overlap with each other at different points of the memoir and are contemplated from diverse perspectives. For instance, Alison’s writing of a coming out letter appears at least three times at different points in the book.

Furthermore, the use of narrators, as Utell points out, is quite complex. Bechdel melts into her own narrative as an artist, within her pages; as Alison, her main character; and as a narrator, to help the reader keep pace with the story (xx). Moreover, she incorporates two different registers: not only does she narrate her memoir but she also “uses the relationship between image and text to come to a fuller picture of a scene” (McBean 105). By combining reality and fiction, the author creates an atmosphere of ambiguity in her life and her memoir.

3.2 Gender impositions and limitations

To wholly understand the struggles Alison and her father suffer throughout the novel, it is necessary first to acknowledge the basic concepts that revolve around gender, sexuality and identity. We may begin with the distinction between sex and gender. Although these terms had been used mostly as synonyms until the 60s –and 70s, they generally represent two separate concepts. “Sex” is usually related to genitalia and the biological differences between “males” and “females”. Nonetheless, it should be noted that exceptions to the binary oppositions of these terms can be found, as in the case of intersexual people, who are born with ambiguous genitals. This concern will be further explained later.

Regarding gender, the World Health Organization defines it as “[referring] to the roles, behaviors, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for [...] men and women”. This definition implies that gender is socially constructed and changes depending on the society and epoch in which it is developed. Gender is usually associated with the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, since these embody the binary and fixed characteristics commonly assumed by social and cultural conventions. The terms male-man, female-woman are usually used interchangeably in common speech, meaning that in everyday discourse the difference between sex and gender is not taken into account nor made visible. For instance, when a female is born, she is immediately associated with the category ‘woman’ and the roles she is supposed to play in society, with all the implications and limitations these have. The same occurs with males and the category ‘men’. However, there are individuals who do not feel comfortable, or even identified, with the gender stereotypes that have been imposed on them at birth.

At this point, the notions of gender identity and expression are necessary for a complete understanding of gender's complexity. Gender identity is defined by Istar Lev as "the internal experience of gender" regardless of biological sex (81). Gender expression is closely related to Chrysochoou's definition of identity as "a particular form of social representation that mediates the relationship between the individual and the social world" (225), for gender expression consists of the ways in which each individual chooses to communicate his/her gender identity to others. In other words, the way individuals are perceived depends largely on how they decide to present themselves. This presentation can be expressed in various ways: through clothing, hair style preferences or makeup, among others. It needs to be remarked that even gender identity and gender expression (masculinity, femininity and androgyny) need not coincide, for an individual can identify with the category 'woman' and express her gender in a masculine style. More generally, masculinity and femininity are notions that should be separated from the categories 'male' and 'female', as gender expression and gender identity do not necessarily have to coincide with one's biological sex.

Bechdel explores these issues, which are also central to her autobiographical memoir, in New York University's conference 'Queer and Comics', while showing the audience several cartoons she made when she was a child. They depict "all kinds of people, except for one curious exception: there [were] no women". Bechdel attributes this absence to the fact that "the representations of women that [she] saw in the world did not connect with [her]". It was not that she felt identified with boys or wanted to be a boy, but that she perceived herself as a person, not as a female person. This probably results from the fact that most of the female images she received during her childhood followed the conventional female stereotypes that most people are familiar with, but that had nothing to do with her. Given that women have generally had relatively little representation throughout history, and that what they have had has generally been highly stereotyped, it is not difficult to imagine why Bechdel felt closer to males' representation and masculinity rather than females' and femininity

Indeed, the cartoonist states that she has always struggled with a feeling of disconnection of societal expectations from herself, her own autonomy and agency. Bechdel explains how she was forced to wear clothes she disliked because that was how girls were supposed to be: "My childhood was a constant struggle between this dead public self and my alive private self. I would wear dresses to school and church and then I raced home to get back into my real clothes". Freedom to self-express is essential,

especially at a young age, in order to develop one's personality and identity. As she declares "there is something very necessary about seeing an accurate representation of yourself in the world. [...] I did not see myself when I looked in the cultural mirror".

3.3 Bruce and Alison: two sides of the same coin

Bechdel's character Alison is troubled with the same issues in *Fun Home*. This is clearly seen in a moment of epiphany when Alison realizes she has been lying to herself the same way his father lied for most of his life. It involves one of her most valuable memories—of a time when her father took her on a trip to Philadelphia. While they were having lunch in a cafe, a butch woman came in and immediately caught Alison's attention: "I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. / But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home [...] I recognized her with a surge of joy". This may be the first time she sees someone she can completely identify with; Alison finally sees herself represented "in the cultural mirror". As Janine Utell remarks in the introduction to *The Comics of Alison Bechdel. From the Outside In*, this episode "speaks to the significance of representation and the force to be wielded by signifiers of transgressive gender performance" (xvii). As Alison's usual gender transgression is being reflected through someone else for the first time, she is finally fully aware of herself. "This glimpse of female masculinity is described as a sustaining force for young Alison" (McBean 110), for this revelation will help her to overcome the unfounded rejection of her gender expression and develop her sexual and gender identity in the future. All along, her main impediment to doing so had been her parents, especially Bruce. He was absolutely determined to lock his daughter into femininity and offer her no other option but to reject her true self. Bruce repressed Alison the same way he was repressed in his early years, perhaps in order to protect her or to prevent her from suffering, which more often than not turned out to have the opposite effect.

Bruce's coming of age and development of sexual identity were quite different to his daughter's, for they grew up in different social circumstances. As has been mentioned, being recognized as a homosexual was something to be afraid of in the 40s and 50s. Even the members of the groups who were fighting for tolerance of homosexuals felt pressure to hide and to reject themselves. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine what it was for Alison's

father to develop his sexuality during those times, especially since he lived in a small town most of his life. Although he always remained in the closet, he had several sexual experiences with men from the time he was young, and especially after marrying Alison's mother. He constantly had romances with young men and was even accused of "giving alcohol to minors" to seduce them. His daughter did not acknowledge any of these matters until, while in college, she came out of the closet by sending a letter to her parents. It seems that Bruce was disturbed by his daughter's revelation because he identified with her, but had not been able to accomplish what Alison did:

There've been a few times I thought I might have preferred to take a stand. But I never really considered it when I was young. In fact, I don't think I ever considered it till I was over thirty. Let's face it things do look different then. At forty-three I find it hard to see advantages even if I had done so when I was young" (Bechdel, *FH* 211)

As Cvetkovich argues, Bechdel relates "two different generations of queerness" with "national histories" (123). Alison had the chance to come out of the closet around ten years after the Stonewall riots, in a period of time when the gay liberation movements were developing. All this gave her a completely different opportunity to experience her sexuality compared to what Bruce experienced in the 50s. Alison's father is quite aware of this: "I'll admit that I have been somewhat envious of the 'new' freedom (?) that appears on campuses today. In the fifties it was not considered an option. [...] Yes, my world was quite limited" (Bechdel, *FH* 212). Alison was immersed in an inclusive university community, where she was able to discover and explore her own sexuality without much pressure. Admittedly, Bruce had a similar opportunity when visiting New York, both as a young and as a grown man; since no one knew him there, he could be himself without being recognized or harassed. Nonetheless, as Cvetkovich argues "despite fleeting contacts with a world beyond rural Pennsylvania, in Paris and New York (and also even more significantly through literature), [Bruce] does not have access to the social world that might allow him to assume a more overtly gay identity" (123). Given all this, Bechdel implies that Bruce's "early death [by suicide seems] was tragically overdetermined by social and psychological factors" (Gardiner 57).

Alison's coming out story is deeply imbricated with the story of Bruce's closeting. The impediments he had to deal with, especially the imposed feeling of necessity to

follow a prefabricated sort of life, led him to close himself off and live an unwanted journey of which Alison was part. They had a complicated relationship, for Bruce tried to force her to be someone she was not, as he wanted her to like, wear and do certain “feminine” things he had been deprived of. Her parents constantly tried to persuade or coerce her to fit into social standards, while Alison tried to do the contrary (Gardiner 62). Bechdel presents several situations in which her protagonist refuses to accept gender conformity. Her dissociation from femininity and her approach towards masculinity are generally accepted by her peers, or at least by many of them. For instance, when Alison is playing basketball with her cousins, she is called ‘butch’ several times, a term under which she feels comfortable: “I counted as an indication of my success the nickname bestowed on me by my older cousins” (Bechdel, *FH* 96). She was pleased that her nickname was the complete opposite of ‘sissy’, which was the term she identified her father with. Alison resisted his imposed feminine aesthetics and “instead [created] different kinds of visual knowledge for herself” (McBean 111) by approaching ‘masculine’ aesthetics.

Another example of Alison’s rejection of femininity is found when, on a three-week trip to Europe, she is allowed to wear shorts at the beach instead of the swimsuit girls would normally wear. This achievement is something she defines as “freedom from convention” (Bechdel, *FH* 73). It is clear that her gender expression does not match girls’ stereotypes, for on the same page she tries to convince her mother to buy her trekking boots, after pointing towards a group of women who are actually using them. She argues that “girls wear them too” (Bechdel, *FH* 73), implying that it is not something only men can wear. Her mother has probably rejected her petition previously because she identifies the boots with masculinity, which bothers Alison. Even at a young age, she seems to be aware of the reason why her mother does not want to buy her the boots.

Another illustration of Alison’s discomfort towards gender stereotypes is shown when all her family but her mother–Bruce’s latest fling seems to have occupied the mother’s place– go camping and decide to explore the strip mines nearby. An operator lets Alison and her brothers go inside the cab of a steam shovel. “As the man showed us around, it seemed imperative that he not know I was a girl” (Bechdel, *FH* 113). Hence Bechdel’s character approaches her brother and asks him to call her Albert instead of Alison, hoping that the man will not notice. This moment may be Alison’s chance to experience gender without being judged for her apparent deviation from femininity; she will not be questioned at all if the man thinks she is a boy. Her gender expression,

preferences and behavior would be accepted within the man's perception of her identity. Moreover, this does not seem to be the only reason why Alison wants to be addressed as Albert. Before going to the strip mine, Alison had seen a naked picture of a woman in a calendar. Although her father had warned her not to look at it, for its images were considered to be 'dirty', she peeked anyway, which made her feel ashamed "as if I've been stripped naked myself" (Bechdel, *FH* 111- 112). While in the shovel's cab, Alison notices that there is a similar calendar hung up on the wall, which she directly relates with the one she saw earlier. The girl has already been introduced to a highly sexualized representation of women she does not want to be identified with (Gardiner 63), and this is part of her motivation for asking her brother to call her by a different name. Alison discovers "how the visual field might constrain her as a young woman" (McBean 107) and rejects it; she "repeatedly enjoys passing as a boy" while she "shrinks from feminine identification" (Gardiner 63).

As has been remarked, Alison did not fill society's expectations regarding gender, but neither did her father. Although Alison was under the social pressure to be feminine and to like certain elements associated with women, she tried to avoid them as much as possible. Conversely, her father had learnt that for him enjoying those feminine attributes and expressing them as his own were socially condemned. He envied his daughter for having the 'social right' to what he had always desired. "Not only we were inverts, we were inversions of one another. While I was attempting to compensate for something unmanly in him, he was attempting to express something feminine through me" (Bechdel, *FH* 98). As Cvetkovich states: "when he is sissy, she is butch; where he is aesthetically fussy and baroque, she is spare and minimalistic; while he wants her to wear a dress, she wants to wear suits" (119). Bruce constantly tried to project his femininity through her. His personal frustrations along with Alison's rejection of gender conformity led him to become aggressive towards her preferences and behavior as, for instance, when he forced her to put on a barrette and ended up yelling at her when he found out she had taken it off: "Next time I see you without it, I'll wale you!" (Bechdel, *FH* 96). These moments are present from the beginning of the book, when the reader is introduced to Alison's father as a heartless interior designer who wants to keep his family-man façade as impeccable as his home. When it is time to decorate Alison's room, Bruce does not consider her preferences, but his own: "(Alison) This is the wallpaper for my room? [...] But I hate pink, I hate flowers!" (Bechdel, *FH* 7). Decorating is an art that has traditionally been associated with women and femininity, and it seems to be Bruce's ultimate way to

express himself and “make things appear to be what they [are] not” (Bechdel, *FH* 16). However, as Gardiner argues, he enforces his infatuation with femininity “with masculine authority” (55). This behavior persists even when Alison is not a child anymore: “You need some pearls. (Alison) No way! (Bruce) What are you afraid of? Being beautiful? Put it on, Goddamn it!” (Bechdel, *FH* 99). Bruce’s hostility is related to his being, as Judith Kegan Gardiner says “a man of artistic talent who is filled with shame and self-loathing internalized from the homophobic culture around him” (53). Moreover, as part of his self-expression, Bruce tries “to live up to mid-twentieth-century American ideals of manhood” (53) which are the cause of the authoritarian posture he has towards his family, for his “approaches to masculine gender” serve “as a defensive differentiation from women” (Gardiner 56) and homosexuality. His dedication to the images society imposes is evident in the scene where Alison is excited to see a butch lesbian with whom she can identify, Bruce is fully aware of what is taking place and shows his discomfort towards it. He does not want his daughter to follow in his footsteps. It is clear that Bruce associates following gender stereotypes with being heterosexual, and deviating from them with being homosexual, something he has learnt to reject. Bruce’s interiorized homophobia (Gardiner 56) makes him reject himself in favor of heteronormative impositions, and expect his daughter to do the same, since “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 191). Bruce turned himself towards masculinity in a desperate attempt to ‘solve’ what was going on inside him, which concerned both his sexuality and gender expression. His decisions, circumstances and frustrations conditioned not only himself but, as a consequence, his daughter.

Although the relationship between Alison and her father has thus far been presented as distant and problematic, towards the middle of the book, the two of them come closer when Alison starts having English literature lessons at college, for Bruce is a high school literature teacher. Their communication is based on sharing their perspectives on different literary works, along with Bruce’s book recommendations, which have an impact on his daughter’s life. In fact, Bruce’s recommendations are usually related to gay and lesbian studies, which makes Bechdel wonder if he was trying to tell her about his sexuality and, at the same time, letting her know he knew about her as well. This is at the time when Alison begins to identify herself as a lesbian while becoming aware of her father’s homosexuality.

Towards the end of the book, Alison visits her parents right after coming out. On their way to the movies, Alison and her father open up to each other, this time face to

face; for what might be the first time they talk about their sexuality openly (Bechdel, *FH* 220 – 221). This passage portrays a reconciliation between the two of them. Although he approaches the topic very subtly, Bruce does not seem to be so constrained and reserved. He even tries to take his daughter to what might be a gay bar (Bechdel, *FH* 223). “They confirm for each other their positions not only as father and daughter but as inverts alike” (McBean 114) by expressing their feelings while processing and accepting their distinct gender expressions and sexualities. By sharing common experiences, they finally come to understand what the other has been through.

Alison and her father exemplify the idea that gender is a social invention, and that it does not determine someone’s personality or preferences, but rather conditions people’s freedom by associating them with certain social rituals that they are supposed to follow. Breaching these norms results in society’s rejection. It not only psychologically affects members of a society but highly limits them and their self-projection; hence it is a social issue that becomes deeply personal.

4. *Dykes To Watch Out For*

4.1 An introduction

Dykes to Watch Out For (hereafter *DTWOF*) is a collection of comic strips that Bechdel published between the 1980s and 2008 in various gay and lesbian newspapers. Bechdel’s work not only includes the life of queer characters and their experiences, but presents diverse issues that desolated American society, such as the September 11 attacks, Nixon’s Watergate and the O.J Simpson trial, among others. Most of her characters belong to African-American, Asian-American and Latino communities, and her writing also portrays interracial relationships between the main characters, which was something unusual at the time.

Aside from being a political—and hilarious—representation of a lesbian community, *DTWOF* is widely known due to the “Bechdel test”. The episode “The Rule”, in which two lesbians were discussing which movie they should watch next, became extremely popular. One of the characters had a rule about watching a movie: 1) it should have at least two women in it, (2) they have to talk to each other, (3) about something besides a man. As Janine Utell effectively argues, “it reminds us that representation,

visibility, and identity are central to *DTWOF* and Bechdel's work" (xviii). The author reaffirms this statement at the Queers & Comics conference by saying that her "ongoing effort [is] to show that queer people are people, that queer lives have a value, not just to the people living them but to everyone".

DTWOF follows the lives of "Mo, Bechdel's alter ego; Mo's lovers [...]; Jezanna, the owner of the independent feminist bookstore Madwimmin Books; Sparrow, a bisexual woman who winds up having a baby with the very progressive and mild-mannered Stuart; [...] Ginger, a PhD candidate in English who often finds herself unlucky in love [...]; and the polyamorous genderqueer drag king Lois" (Utell xviii), among others. Unaware of the repercussions her comic strips actually had, Bechdel probably did not expect these dykes to end up being "conventional" and "the same as everyone else" (xviii), as she writes in the introduction of the comic strip collection. Their universality and success make it clear the comic strips speak "directly, and intersectionally, to the collective experiences of contemporary women from the highly singular points of view of diverse individuals" (Utell xviii). What follows will analyze *DTWOF* through Queer Theory and Judith Butler's most famous work *Gender Trouble*, presenting how Bechdel depicts the concepts Butler deconstructs.

4.2 Queer Theory and Bechdel's reaction towards it

Queer Theory emerged in the late 80s and 90s as a reaction against the limited purpose gay and lesbian liberation movements following Stonewall eventually aimed to achieve. These movements initially attempted to eradicate fixed notions of gender and declared that gay and lesbian categories would only be used until gender was abolished (Jagose 42). However, as time went on, their goals ended up embracing the existing sex/gender system in order to seek liberal political changes within it. Queer theory questions the established limits of identity while keeping itself open to ambiguity and unlimited possibilities.

The parameters that were explained in the *Fun Home* section regarding sex, gender, sexuality and identity can be used to explain those of queer theory, but with different nuances. For instance, the previous definition of gender expression can be related to Judith Butler's concept of gender—and, consequently, identity—as a performance. By performing acts and gestures that have been culturally created and associated with gender categories, the individual creates an illusion of identity that is to

be maintained in order to support the “obligatory frame” of coherent heterosexuality (Butler 186). Nonetheless, even though drag constitutes Butler’s main example of gender as a performance, as will be discussed below, here the concept of ‘performance’ in Butler is not generally a consciously intended and staged action. As Jagose explains: “gender is performative, not because it is something that the subject deliberately and playfully assumes, but because, through reiteration, it consolidates the subject” (Jagose 86).

As discussed earlier, generally speaking, sex and gender constitute different notions. Nonetheless, as Butler argues, they are not all that different in the sense that sex is actually “as culturally constructed as gender” (10), for the commonly accepted “naturalness” and “reality” of biological characteristics are themselves matters of interpretation. To support this argument, Kitzinger addresses the problematic impositions of sex and gender regarding intersex individuals. Intersexual children who are born with genitals and reproductive apparatuses that are not coherent— as, for instance, a baby who is born with ovaries but presents a penis, among other possibilities— are sexually reassigned to fit cultural sex standards and to be able to perform heterosexual intercourse in the future, even though this reassignment requires exposing the babies to surgeries and mutilating their genitalia (493). Intersex individuals do not suffer any pathological condition but they “simply fail to fit one particular definition of normality” (Kitzinger 496). The ‘solution’ medicine provides only reinforces the fact that both gender and sex are socially imposed.

The deconstruction and denaturalization of sex and gender imply that identity is “an enacted fantasy or incorporation” (Butler 185), and that sexuality—and especially heterosexuality— is something that has been culturally imposed as natural. Overall, although these categories are not essential but constructed, they are presented as the only way for people to relate and interact with others. One cannot live in a society without having to adjust to the existing gendered categories, for persons “only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler 22).

Bechdel has explained how, as Queer Theory began to make an impact in the 90s, it affected her comic strips. In the introduction to her 2008 compilation *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, the author presents herself panicking at the constructivist perspective of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (Bechdel, *Essential* xvi). Indeed, the title’s ‘the essential’ makes reference to essentialism as opposed to constructivism. According to Jagose, “whereas essentialists regard identity as natural, fixed and innate,

constructionists assume identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself” (8). Bechdel exaggerates and mocks her anxiety at the theory’s move away from the limitations of traditional identity categories: “Oh, and apparently, no one was essentially anything!” (Bechdel, *Essential* xvi). As Parker-Hay notes, this new “critical theory [...] felt incompatible with the compositional foundation of her work” (37). *Gender Trouble* marked a turning point in gay studies, since Butler questioned many of “their cherished assumptions [...], including their appeals to commonality and collectivity” (Jagose 85). For instance, in her chapter ‘Subjects of sex/gender/desire’, Butler argues that the category “women”, by which feminists have defined themselves and which they have made the subject of their vindication, has itself been created, and used as a constraint, by the very structures of power that oppress them (3). Butler also draws a parallelism between feminism and gay studies and questions the limited categories of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and the concept of gay identity. In fact, even Bechdel feels bounded by her categorization as ‘lesbian’ and ‘cartoonist’. As she expresses at *Queers & Comics*, she sometimes wonders “what it would mean to not need these categories”, along with “what it would be for comics to be just another way to tell a story, and for queerness another way of relating to people”.

4.3 *Post-Dykes to Watch Out For*: The queerest necessity

In an earlier compilation, *Post-Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bechdel generally portrays gender, identity and sexuality’s complexity from a queer perspective, even as her characters are concerned and bothered by the deconstruction and denaturalization of these notions. The title makes reference to post-feminism and post-gay liberation movements, which are contemporary with and related to queer theory. Consequently, Bechdel’s characters represent almost every “[facet] of what queerness can entail” (Thalheimer 24). Due to their limitations, gender identity and sexuality are never enough to define an individual. Bechdel and her characters will struggle to find their way within a new constructivist perspective.

Concentrating on identity issues, Sparrow, Lois, and Stuart are the characters that struggle the most with this concern. Bechdel’s characters’ identities fluctuate between categories and “change in relation to their relationship with other characters, their desires and interests and how they understand and experience binary gender” (Thalheimer 22). Lois identifies herself as a ‘butch’ or ‘masculine’ lesbian. She is the character who flouts

convention the most. In an episode called ‘Au Courant’, the reader sees her mulling the same issues queer theory raises and trying to educate her friends through her activist position. Mo complains about a request to change the name of her reading series for local lesbian writers to another one that does not exclude bisexual and transgender women. Mo does not have a queer or inclusive perspective yet because she has not been introduced to it. She has closed herself and reduced her position only to cisgender—that is, in Butler’s terms, intelligible gender—lesbianism without considering other possible options. As an example, she rejects transgender lesbian women because she considers that, due to their genitals, their experiences might not fit into her own conception of a ‘lesbian’. Through Mo and Lois, Bechdel represents the binary conformist position gay liberation movements had and the extent to which binary gender limited the new queer position. Lois tries to convince Mo to include these non-cisgender women in her series, since they will provide a unique perspective on diverse topics. As Mo keeps rejecting her arguments and makes explicit that she does not know the meaning of transgender, Lois explains its definition:

We haven’t had any language for people you can’t nearly peg as either boy or girl. Like cross-dressers, transsexuals, people who live as the opposite sex but don’t have surgery, drag queens and kings, and all kinds of other transgressive folks. ‘Transgender’ is a way to unite everyone into a group, even though all these people might not identify as transgender (Bechdel, *Essential* 125)

As Lois suggests, the term ‘transgender’ includes not only FTM (female to male) and MTF (male to female) individuals, but also “those that are located between and beyond these categories” (Hines, 187). In fact, a new, broader term has emerged nowadays for these specific cases: ‘gender non-conforming’ or ‘non-binary’ individuals. As Lois points out, the reason for all those people shrinking from gender limitations is that there are not “two rigid genders” but “an infinite sexual continuum” (Bechdel, *Essential* 125). Consequently, in ‘Lime Light’, Mo follows Lois’ advice and organizes a reading conference that commits to diversity, which turns out to be a success (Bechdel, *Essential* 126).

Along with her growing interest in queer theory, Lois starts questioning her own gender identity and sexuality when she immerses herself in drag culture. She transforms into ‘Max Axle’ and performs in various drag spectacles. Her new hobby arouses

controversy among other characters, as is seen in the strip entitled ‘Sixty minutes man’. Toni argues that drag is highly misogynistic while Ginger suggests that drag could be “the ultimate critique of gender stereotypes, and thus inherently feminist” (Bechdel, *Post* 63). Butler argues that although drag’s “gender meanings are clearly part of a hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization” (188). Therefore, drag is not misogynistic because it does not consist of hating or despising ‘women’, and it is about being aware of gender’s artificial construction and thus aims to denaturalize it. Lois complains and dismisses Ginger’s idea by declaring that she is just expressing her masculinity through drag. Butler, however, argues that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself– as well as its contingency” (187). In Butler’s terms, by performing her masculinity, Lois is reaffirming that gender has been constructed, and mocking the idea of a heterosexually coherent identity, by showing that the ‘original’ has been an invention since the beginning. She “dramatizes the cultural mechanism of [gender’s] fabricated unity” (Butler 188). After Lois’ intervention, Bechdel relieves the tension by making Stuart come out of the bathroom and say: “Who used up all my rose-mary-cucumber conditioner? I need it to keep my beard silky!” (*Post* 63). The author uses his entrance in order to show that masculinity is relative, an easy target for mockery, and certainly not coherent with Stuart’s expected gender expression.

Everything starts getting more complicated when Lois falls in love with Jerry, the transgender gay man who had introduced her into drag. He works as a mechanic and used to be Geraldine, a butch dyke. Lois does not know how to manage her feelings, for she considers herself a lesbian but starts questioning her identity due to her desires and her growing immersion in drag and masculinity (Thalheimer 31). Furthermore, Lois states she was not attracted to Jerry when he was Geraldine, for he was “way too butch” for her (Bechdel, *Post* 132). As Thalheimer argues: “The implication is that Jerry, in becoming male, has become less butch and therefore more attractive to Lois” (31). Although this can be ambiguous and confusing, Lois felt Geraldine was ‘too masculine’ for a lesbian to feel attracted to her. However, now he is not all that ‘masculine’ on the spectrum of men and, therefore, is potentially more attractive to Lois.

Given the complexity of this situation, Lois starts thinking about whether she should consider herself a “fag”, for she feels attracted towards Jerry, especially when she is Max Axel. She struggles to define herself; there is not a category that can encompass what she is perceiving. As Sally Hines argues, “a binary understanding of gender fails to

take account of the many gender identity positions that fall between or beyond the categories of male/female [...] Moreover, [...] a heteronormative framework [...] is unable to account for the complexities of transgender sexualities” (183). In addition to this, Talheimer poses a question regarding Lois and Jerry’s sexual activity, for they challenge the preconceived idea of heterosexual intercourse. She argues it would be complicated to define their encounter as ‘heterosexual’, for “Lois, who is a lesbian, dresses in drag and receives oral sex while packing a dildo from Jerry, who currently identifies as a FTM gay man who used to identify as a butch lesbian” (32). Lois’ experiences with binary gender and fixed categories support the notion of gender identity and sexuality being socially constructed rather than simply natural, as well as being problematic. As is exemplified here, conventional categories cannot hold the infinite possibilities queerness can entail.

Stuart and Sparrow suffer an identity crisis as well. On the one hand, Sparrow starts feeling attracted to Stuart, in spite of considering herself a lesbian. At the imminent necessity of redefining herself, for the category ‘lesbian’ does not seem to involve having sex with men, she reframes her identity by stating that she is a “bisexual lesbian” and that “identity is so much more complex and fluid than these rigid categories of straight, gay, and bi can possibly reflect” (Bechdel, *Post* 58). On the other hand, when Lois introduces Jerry to the group and explains that he has transitioned, Stuart remembers being attracted to him when he was Geraldine. Stuart has always been attracted towards lesbians, such as Sparrow, his partner. As a consequence, he declares that he might be “a butch lesbian in a straight man’s body”, to which Ginger responds that, in any case, he is a “soft butch” (Bechdel, *Post* 58), for although Stuart is a man, he is not as masculine as a butch lesbian.

In sum, using humor, Bechdel is able to depict the complexity of gender by complicating the “reader’s understanding of binary gender and categories of identity as a way to give voice to these issues” (Talheimer 25).

5. Conclusion

This essay has tried to show how Bechdel problematizes categories of identity through Alison’s (and her own) experiences in *Fun Home*, as well as how Bechdel wryly mocks the categories’ complexity in *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Her work exemplifies how the gender bind constitutes an issue in Western societies: individuals are trapped within fixed categories that cannot be fully erased, for they seem to be the bridge that brings individuals together into relationships. Although categories benefit those who adjust

to the preset models of the heteropatriarchy, getting rid of them would imply an enormous invisibilization of oppressed groups and the acts of discrimination that are performed towards them. Ideally, eradicating categories would lead to fairer societies, but this does not seem to work until everyone is equal. This being said, the conclusion I have reached during the development of this paper is the following: Rethinking the traditional, deconstructing identity and being aware that fixed binary categories limit and oppress individuals are essential to understanding ourselves and how society works, and are perhaps a leading instrument for disassembling its abusive system.

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