

QUEERING THE NARRATIVE: TRAUMA AND HEALING IN JAMES BALDWIN'S
GIOVANNI'S ROOM AND ALISON BECHDEL'S *FUN HOME*

By

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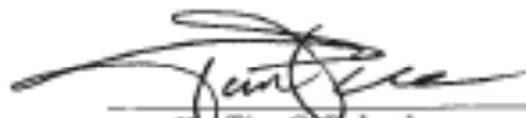
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Abstract

The word “trauma” is used to describe situations that are emotionally painful, disturbing, and that often overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless. Trauma Studies began focusing on war and genocide, occurrences considered “outside the range of normal.” More recently, it has grown to include the everyday, more hidden, private experiences that are consequences of oppressive social constructions. Specifically, Laura Brown’s concept of “insidious trauma” illuminates society’s institutions and systems that perpetuate oppression. This thesis explores how two modern texts represent homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity as causes of psychic trauma in the lives of individuals; it further suggests that giving narrative form to trauma allows for a kind of healing from the psychic damage done by discrimination and oppression that social institutions and ideologies produce. The first chapter examines James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and its representation of the damaging effects of homophobia; it argues that Baldwin challenges the established gender roles and accepted sexuality of 1950s America while affording the protagonist, David, the potential to heal. The second chapter explores Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and its examination of both the historical oppression and liberation of homosexuals. It argues that Bechdel challenges cultural and sexual hegemony and exposes the generational differences between father and daughter who both grapple with their same-sex desire. The chapter concludes with analysis of the social shift in sexual subjectivities evident in the father’s, Bruce’s, succumbing to his trauma while his daughter, Alison, heals. Ultimately, through its use of trauma theory and the application of “insidious trauma” to the above mentioned texts, this thesis expands recognition and respect for individuals who have suffered from sexual discrimination.

Dedication

For all struggling with selfhood,

Allow yourself love.

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Introduction

The use of trauma theory in literary analysis illuminates how artists expose the truth about our corrosive and trauma-causing social institutions and systems. I am using trauma theory to read two texts by 20th-century American writers, one a bisexual African-American male and one a butch-identified white lesbian, one pre-Stonewall and one post-Stonewall. Using trauma theory, I argue that James Baldwin in his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* and Alison Bechdel in her 2006 graphic memoir *Fun Home* examine the causes of trauma in American social institutions and ideologies that define and regulate sexuality and gender. Today, the interdisciplinary field of Trauma Studies has grown in scope since developing as a way to study the Holocaust and its enduring consequences; now Trauma Studies has expanded to include the study of other collective historical traumas (such as the Vietnam War and systemic racism) and to include sexual abuse as a cause of trauma that is also a phenomenon of everyday life for many women and children. Using a feminist analysis of trauma, Judith Herman and Laura Brown have helped to broaden the definition of trauma to include the more hidden, private experiences that are not really “outside the range of normal” (as genocide and war are) but instead are part of daily experiences because of society’s institutions and systems that perpetuate oppression.

The purpose of this thesis is to use trauma theory to examine how James Baldwin’s *Giovanni's Room* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* represent homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity as causes of psychic trauma in the lives of individuals. Homophobia can be understood as prejudice against homosexual people or anyone who appears not to be heterosexual; heterosexism is a system of attitudes and discriminatory practices that privilege heterosexuality as the only norm or that assume its superiority over all other forms of erotic attraction; and heteronormativity—an outcome of heterosexism—is the system of discriminatory

attitudes and practices that recognize dichotomous or binary gender roles of masculine and feminine as the only acceptable gender norms within an overarching normative heterosexuality. As this thesis demonstrates, both Baldwin and Bechdel expose how heteronormative discursive practices and institutions marginalize gay and lesbian lives. To make this argument, the thesis uses feminist therapist and theorist Laura Brown's understanding of "insidious trauma." Brown argues,

The private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated. Feminist analysis also asks us to understand how the constant presence and threat of trauma in the lives of girls and women of all colors, men of color in the United States, lesbian and gay people, people in poverty, and people with disabilities has shaped our society, a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event. (102-103)

Using, in addition, Dominick LaCapra's theory of "acting-out" and "working-through" trauma and feminist therapist Judith Herman's theories about trauma and narrative, the thesis looks at how Baldwin and Bechdel represent narrative as a form of healing from trauma both for the individual and society. Brown, as cited above, argues that a feminist analysis compels us to see the constant "presence and threat of trauma in the lives of girls and women of all colors, men of color, lesbian and gay people, people in poverty, and people with disabilities" (103). In turn, I analyze these texts using trauma theory to suggest how they render into narrative form the kinds of trauma that occur every day in the lives of gay males and butch lesbians, and how their use of narrative constitutes a form of healing from trauma.

Chapter one examines *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin's novel confronts 1950s America with its own homophobia and heterosexism and challenges the established gender roles and accepted sexuality of the time. I analyze the culture surrounding that narrator, David, and the toxic form of hegemonic masculinity as modeled by his father, to argue that they represent a heteronormative, patriarchal society that produces trauma for those who cannot conform to the heterosexist norms of the times. I conclude the first chapter positively by interpreting the end of the novel as David's recognition of his failure to love and his reflection upon the reasons for that failure, a recognition that suggests his ultimate potential to heal.

Chapter two addresses *Fun Home* and two dynamic characters, Alison and her father, Bruce. Both are affected by homophobia and the heteronormative society in which they struggle to shape a queer identity. An examination of the historical context of 1950s-1980s America plays a vital role throughout this chapter because these two characters were born into very different worlds, divided by the Stonewall Rebellion. I examine *Fun Home* because Bruce succumbs to his traumatizing struggles with identity and sexuality but Alison is able to shape a positive butch-lesbian identity by remembering and reflecting upon her past experiences, by coming out in an affirming lesbian-feminist community, and by rendering past traumas into narrative form.

My thesis dives into Brown's theorizing of "insidious trauma," and challenges readers to expand their definition of trauma as a whole. By addressing homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity, I examine how Baldwin and Bechdel expose the damage inflicted by oppression, whether based on gender, class, race, sexuality, or gender identity. This trauma study has the potential to challenge and change current social attitudes and practices. It encourages understanding of and compassion for sexual minorities, rather than criticism, punishment, torment, or damnation; it promotes support and respect for those affected by discrimination

based on sexual identity. Social and sexual roles are constantly changing and it is my hope that this thesis serves as a healing tool for those who have suffered such discrimination. It is also my hope that this thesis serves as a learning tool for readers struggling to empathize with those to whom they may feel no connection.

“Love Him and Let Him Love You”: Queering *Giovanni’s Room*

James Baldwin was a man of great visions for the future. Both his expository writing, which exposes the boundaries on which American identity relies, and his fictional works, such as *Giovanni’s Room*, that place traumatic experience into narrative form, serve as healing tools that deepen our understanding of how racism and homophobia affect individuals and society today. Homophobia is an attitude that impacts much of society, caused by deeply engrained and culturally constructed dichotomies of sexuality and gender. Baldwin critic Abur-Rhaman argues that “the most effective path to realizing the potential of US democracy is to undo those sinister dichotomies, those maliciously mapped boundaries, between black and white, citizen and alien, heterosexual and homosexual on which American identity so assiduously relies,” a claim which Baldwin prophetically made sixty years ago in *Giovanni’s Room*, suggesting the damaging effects of sexual categories (477).

Baldwin’s 1956 novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, follows an American man, David, to Paris and details his constant struggle to find love in a world that demonizes his love for men. A novel well-known for its complex, empathetic representations of homosexuality, *Giovanni’s Room* expands the public discourse of same-sex relationships and contests dominant homophobic assumptions about gay men in 1950s America. Baldwin’s work on this novel was born directly from the cultural milieu of this time. The decades in which Baldwin wrote were characterized by hegemonic American ideas of white masculinity, fierce heteronormativity, and an anxious reassertion of patriarchy following World War II. The ethos of hypermasculinity—exaggerated stereotypical male behavior—and its consequences, homophobia and misogyny, emerge as two intense themes throughout *Giovanni’s Room*. By thrusting David into a society that emphasizes heteronormativity, distinct and hierarchical gender roles as well as hegemonic masculinity, all of

which subordinated women and gay or bisexual men, Baldwin examines the traumatic consequences of these ideologies on gay men.

An interest in Trauma Studies has grown since the late 1980s, and has been incorporated into literary analysis since being used to study the psychic consequences of catastrophic events and less obvious causes of trauma. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has noted that trauma cannot be defined by the event itself—“which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally” (4). Trauma theory expounded by Caruth and others offers a lens that brings Baldwin’s analysis of the trauma caused by homophobia into focus. Baldwin looks at how the fierce heteronormativity of the 1950s along with the social promotion of hegemonic masculinity cause trauma to males who identify as homosexual or who exhibit bisexual erotic desire. Baldwin explores homophobia as a form of what psychotherapist Laura Brown calls “insidious trauma”; he also explores how it causes internalized homophobia. Brown identifies “insidious trauma” as the “private, secret, insidious traumas ... in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated” (102). Brown argues that a feminist analysis compels us to see the constant “presence and threat of trauma in the lives of girls and women of all colors, men of color, lesbian and gay people, people in poverty, and people with disabilities” (103). The present analysis of *Giovanni’s Room*, using trauma theory to illuminate Baldwin’s representation of the damaging effects of homophobia, suggests how Baldwin renders into narrative form the kinds of insidious trauma that occurred every day in the lives of gay males in 1950s America. Brown’s theory of insidious trauma provides a theoretical lens with which to analyze *Giovanni’s Room* and its representation of heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia as causes of psychic trauma.

Trauma, when unaddressed, produces continually repetitive and arguably destructive behavior, driving away human intimacy. Using Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through," I demonstrate how David, the protagonist in *Giovanni's Room*, is dealing with the traumatic experiences of his youth caused by heterosexism and his own internalized homophobia. And while David denies, devalues, and, until the end of the novel, disassociates himself from his same-sex desires, I argue that David's destructive and self-destructive behavior ultimately forces him to come to terms with his trauma. Furthermore, Baldwin's fictional frame is David's re-telling of his story from dusk to dawn; it is his narration of the story of his trauma. Judith Herman's theories about trauma and narrative attest to narrative as a form of healing from trauma both for the individual and society. Narrativizing David's story affords a kind of healing from the trauma caused by discrimination and oppression and encourages understanding on a larger social scale. It was Baldwin

who realized and persistently proclaimed that the African American, the woman, and the (so-called) sexual deviant are doomed symbols of the US cultural imagination, where the fears, fetishes, and fantasies of the straight, white bourgeois mainstream are deposited, and that the key to all human redemption is to recognize in these figures their own innate and complicated humanity—and to let them live. (Abur-Rhman 677)

Giovanni's Room attempts that redemption by portraying a protagonist suffering within the sinister dichotomies of a homophobic world. Only when David questions the dominant constructions of masculinity and sexuality does he begin to realize the potential within his own being to love himself, his flesh, and others.

Eldridge Cleaver deplores Baldwin's battle against homophobia and misogyny as he mindlessly endeavors to condemn the so-called sexual deviant: "I, for one, do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as much as baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (56). Ignorant is the only worthy word for this claim because by no means does Baldwin strive to erase heterosexuality, only heteronormativity, and besides, sexual identity is certainly no competition in Baldwin's work. Cleaver blasts Baldwin for disowning his heritage and again is quoted referring to him as "Martin Luther Queen" (Spurlin 108). Cleaver's homophobia is typical of the late 1950s and early 60s homophobia and demonization of gay and bisexual men. Hence, the option to be considered a "real man" who identifies as homosexual or bisexual was missing. The dominant 1950s construction of manhood did not leave room for anyone apart from heterosexual men.

David emerges in *Giovanni's Room* as a fictional character that Baldwin shapes to critique Cold War ideas of masculinity and how they affect gay and bisexual men. According to Neuhaus, the 1950s produced a postwar crisis of masculinity in the United States. Individual initiative, personal ambition, and creativity were repressed and replaced by corporate hierarchy with elevated production and consumption (Neuhaus 537). The 1950s emphasized respecting authority, loyalty to superiors, and the ability to get along with others; ideally cooperation without attention to self was maintained as the status quo. Men were encouraged to acquire goods and a suburban home to demonstrate their middle-class success with a wife and children as well.

The first sentence of the novel narrates darkness falling over the protagonist. David establishes his ancestors and himself as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Emphasizing their

dominance, David immediately associates himself with those who “conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until [coming] to an ocean which faced away from Europe” (1). Furthermore, David claims his face is “like a face you have seen many times,” and describes himself as a tall blond, “perhaps like an arrow” (1). Immediately within the novel a distrust of reflection emerges as mirror imagery proves problematic with the potential for “aiding and abetting self-deception” (Henderson 323). Those introductory details emphasize the cultural milieu in which David was raised and stress the importance of the white, heteronormative patriarchal society. As he watches his “reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane,” this vision is not David’s true self but rather a carefully constructed cultural and ideological representation of what a white, straight man was supposed to be in order to fit into hegemonic gender and sexual categories (1).

David seeks to define himself within the context of American culture and its heteronormative identity categories. Dominant cultural settings throughout the 1950s reinforced the heteronormative man and also reinforced that those who do not fit into the mold belong only where the dominant see fit—on the fringes, in the subcultural demi-monde, or in jail. America is the land of the free and home of the brave—that is, with the exception of all those who happen to stray from the accepted identity categories society imposes. David wants so badly to align himself within his own white, Anglo-Saxon straight ancestry, one Mae Henderson describes as tainting David’s vision and responsible for the complexity of his dilemma (Henderson 315). This idea of a heteronormative patriarchy—David’s colonizing ancestors—establishes not only heterosexual relations but also dominance and hierarchy as “normal” for a “real man.” The heteronormative patriarchy that David alludes to in his vision of his ancestors also allows for the white, straight man to emerge as a leader both in society and at home.

David was raised by a father who exemplifies heteronormative patriarchy that the idea of hegemonic masculinity it is founded upon; he chased countless women for happiness. One drunken night, David's father removes any lingering uncertainty of what he expects his son to become. Defending his own monetary and sexual indulgences, David's father announces to his sister, "[A]ll I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher" (15). Once these words tumble out, David is forever changed; he states, "From that time on, with mysterious, cunning, and dreadful intensity of the very young, I despised my father" (15). David portrays such raw emotion because expectations have been set on his behalf and from this point forward David's heteronormative, patriarchal father and the society in which they live impress upon him standards that he finds repugnant, even as he attempts to mimic or act them out, in order to fulfill their conventional idea of western masculinity.

In the shadow of his father, who represents American Cold War hegemonic masculinity, and in an effort to uphold these masculine ideals, David exhibits "homosexual panic." Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick terms "homosexual panic" as "the most private, psychologized form in which many ... western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail"; in other words this panic drives gay men to hide their homoerotic feelings and experiences (89). David's constant necessity to confirm his masculinity, as defined not by him but by his father and American culture, has proven traumatic by distorting his own sexuality. Cultural homophobia represents David's desires as monstrous and shames his sexuality; homosexual panic creates internalized homophobia and David is incapable of owning his same-sex desires.

Internalized homophobia persuades those struggling with their sexual identity to distort their same-sex desire. An awareness of the stigmas associated with homosexuality introduces extreme negativity and disconnection with the self (Meyer and Dean 61). Internalized homophobia pervades David's consciousness and produces secrecy and shame within his own being. David is personally suffering from self-hatred as a result of internalized homophobia and becomes a victim, traumatized by his "sexual anxiety [which] expresses itself in an identification with the dominant heterosexual subjectivity" (Henderson 320). David upholds hegemonic patriarchy. For David, to reveal homosexual desires would be an act of defiance of cultural customs, and David desires acceptance and validation of his masculinity, although his attempts to earn both lead only to intense anguish for him and callous use of others in his attempts to confirm his manhood.

Living in a heteronormative society, David's internalized homophobia induces counter-productive "acting out" as a response to his trauma. LaCapra's concept of "acting out" involves one's unconsciously being driven to repeat destructive behavior because of trauma. LaCapra further explains that traumatized people exhibit the "tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" ("Interview" 2). David's acting-out is repetitive in the sense that he is fleeing time and time again from the reality of his same-sex desires. The past for David is his self-rejection and the rejection of his desire for men caused by his internalized homophobia. David keeps "acting out" this fearful rejection of his desire for men because he has been traumatized by living in a heterosexist society that demonizes gay and bisexual men. Heteronormativity is the only option for white males and David is no exception. He has been conditioned his entire life to uphold the masculine patriarchal

traits as exhibited by his father. Paralyzed by what has been impressed upon him in the past, David is not capable of existing in the present.

During boyhood, David develops an intense and intimate friendship with Joey, and it serves as the first example of “acting out.” Spending much of their time together, the two eventually grow erotically attracted to each other and engage in sexual relations. However, David reacts in homosexual panic after their initial sexual interaction: “That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood” (9). David felt it necessary to never again place himself in a similar situation—even though this resolve breaks down frequently and David seeks out covert sexual relations with other men. A sexual encounter with another of the same sex proved threatening to David’s sense of manhood, even though his own fleshly desires lead him naturally to other men. According to his upbringing, David’s masculinity was supposed to be entirely entangled with desire for women, as exhibited by his father. Hence, sexual emotions, let alone actions, directed towards another male eliminate the possibility of manhood altogether. His thoughts are racing as shame and a feeling of vileness swallow David whole while he flees from Joey and from homoerotic desire for the first time, acting out the trauma society has inflicted on him in the form of internalized homophobia, thwarting his yearning for homosexual touch.

David’s reaction to his sexual desire for Joey begins a pattern that he is to repeat throughout his life, “acting out” the effects of insidious trauma caused by his internalized homophobia. David makes a decision after this experience with Joey (9). Admitting to fear and confusion, David could not understand how something so dirty “could have happened to me” (9). David chooses to leave the next morning and becomes nasty to Joey, as David finds it is easier to be mean to Joey than to expose his true feelings. Fibbing about a girlfriend and running with a

tougher crowd, David remembers “the sadder this made [Joey], the nastier I became” (10). Upon further reflection, the elder David confesses, “I began, perhaps, to be lonely that summer and began, that summer, the flight which has brought me to this darkening window” (10). David’s unconscious need to reaffirm his masculinity proves troublesome repeatedly.

While Baldwin provides few details surrounding David’s career in the Army, David’s time in the military produces another instance of “acting out” as he both seeks out and denigrates sex with another man. Driven by his self-deception, David “had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened” him (20). That “something” is same-sex desire but despite David’s best efforts at denial and disassociation, he still manages to find a male sex partner, whom he calls a “fairy”—reflecting both his internalized homophobia and sexism directed toward an effeminate gay male. David acknowledges that “even constant motion, of course, does not prevent an occasional mysterious drag”; repressing and denying feelings does not equate with escaping them for David (20). After the brief description of his drunken liaison during his time in the Army involving “a fairy who was later court-martialed out,” David again panics (20). His fear stemming from the other man’s punishment serves as reminder of what could happen to him and how easily he could be accused of “sexual perversion”; David’s secret is not safe and the possibility of exposure leads him to flee America.

David’s flight from America represents another distinct example of David’s “acting out.” While Baldwin, who openly expressed his homoerotic desires, fled America for self-preservation from racism and homophobia, his character assumes flight in hopes of running away from himself and his homoerotic desires. When Baldwin expatriated to France, he was leaving behind both American racism and the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, a phenomenon of heterosexuality both forcibly and subliminally imposed which leaves no alternative options for

sexual relationships (Rich 653). But David thought he could leave behind his very self. David's struggle between his heritage and sexual identity causes him to look elsewhere for answers. Raised in a restrictive environment, David is traumatized by his culture. David is uncertain with how to proceed because he does not identify with the traditions of his homeland nor does he accept himself and the desires of his body. In his own words, David "resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make [him] nothing more than that, whatever that was; and [he] resented being called not an American because it seemed to make [him] nothing" (89). David intuitively feels that he is allowing himself to become nothing by attempting to flee himself. After time removed from claustrophobic America, David realizes that while his cultural background is poison, fleeing his homeland and himself is not a solution. David confesses, "There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard—the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger" (6). This passage exemplifies the futility of David's choice to act-out, to flee his homeland, leaving behind all who have ever known him. Eventually David realizes his trauma does not reside in America nor with his father but rather in his attempts to escape his own being. The "bulldog" in actuality is David's desire for other men, and no matter how far or wide David travels to escape, this bulldog follows and has grown to a stature that cannot be ignored.

Despite realizing his problems do not solely reside in America, David continues "acting out" the trauma imposed on him by internalized homophobia by courting Hella. Even though his physical being has been removed from the venomous heteronormative American culture, David's mentality remains affected. He continuously chooses to suppress his identity by involving himself in heterosexual relationships. Hella is comparable to other 1950s women who have been

interpellated by dominant ideas of a subordinated femininity and who are pining away for a husband, unconsciously supporting patriarchal heteronormative gender roles. Shortly after beginning to date Hella, David soon realizes an aspect of their relationship is amiss yet attempts overcorrection by proposing marriage: “I had asked her to marry me before she went away to Spain; and she laughed and I laughed but that, somehow, all the same, made it more serious for me, and I persisted” (5). Despite his dissatisfaction, David pushes towards permanence. If only he no longer had a choice in the matter maybe he could “go straight.” If only their lives were connected by marriage maybe he would no longer desire men. If only he could prevent himself from feeling unfulfilled. David foolishly tricks himself, “I told her that I had loved her once and I made myself believe it”; he hopes that if Hella were to agree to his proposal then together they might obtain the necessary means to achieve heteronormativity and he might claim his “manhood” (5).

David continues “acting out” with attempts to evade his attraction to men even at Guillaume’s bar at the center of the gay male bar scene in Paris. David’s internalized homophobia, as revealed in his relationship with Joey and all his subsequent actions, leads him to judge other gay men harshly in Guillaume’s bar as well. Similar to David’s nasty interactions with Joey, efforts to distance himself from other “out” and sometime effeminate gay men surface when David refers to such men as “screaming parrots,” “peacocks,” and “monkeys” (27). Internal monologue reveals David has frequented this bar before and that he had “been accused of causing a minor sensation by flirting with a soldier” except denial prevails as he assumes no responsibility, claiming he was drunk (27). While past speculations about his sexuality do not prevent David from returning, he remains steadfast in his desire to preserve his reputation as a “straight” man who is so heterosexual that he cannot be seduced by any of the gay men in the

bar. Refusing to assist Jacques's attempts to court Giovanni at Guillaume's bar, David asserts his heterosexuality, declaring himself "queer for girls" (30). Struggling to find a response, Jacques avoids further controversy while simultaneously reminding David of his transparency: "'I was not suggesting that you jeopardize, even for a moment, that'-- he paused- 'that immaculate manhood which is your pride and joy'" (30). Once again, David is "acting out" to ensure heteronormativity and preserve his sense of masculinity.

While David is not the only character in *Giovanni's Room* suffering from internalized homophobia, he seems to be the only one who demonstrates any hope to change his self-rejection into affirmation of his love for men. One older male, Jacques, warns David about succumbing to society's shame and allowing his homosexual actions to be defined by those around them after noting David's fright and shame associated with the newest bar boy, Giovanni (56). Jacques urges David to "come out" and accept his feelings for Giovanni (57). Hiding deep in the depths of Guillaume's Bar, and living as a closeted gay male elsewhere, Jacques suggests, while it provides a brief escape, cannot help David in the outside world to which they return in the daylight because it does not welcome them. Jacques's wisdom is available for David as he is obviously suffering and facing the same lonely loveless outcome that Jacques has endured. Jacques further urges David to let love exist, to feel it, and embrace it because inevitably the passion will not last. David must comprehend, and quickly, that his happiness is entirely contingent within his own being. As Jacques so aptly puts, "[I]f you think of [homosexual relations] as dirty, then they will be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his" (57). Jacques continues: "But you can make your time together anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make the both of you better—forever—if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe" (57). If David

succumbs to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in a patriarchal society, if he allows his desires to be poisoned by the homophobia that is part of that ideology of masculinity, then ultimately his panic will be permanent and his “acting out” compulsive and endless. The inability to dismiss internalized homophobia will result in David’s being trapped in his own conception of a dirty body, forever (57).

With Jacques’s words ringing in his ears, David begins “working through” his trauma to embrace Giovanni. Dominick LaCapra explains “working through” as a countervailing force, as the desirable result when processing trauma: “In the working-through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future” (“Interview” 2). It’s via the “working through” that one acquires the possibility of agency (“Interview” 3). David gains critical distance from heterosexism and his own internalized homophobia by realizing culturally constructed dichotomies of sexuality and gender can be left in the past. Jacques declares: “Love him, ... love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under Heaven matters?” (57) From that morning forward, David and Giovanni spend many hours together. Giovanni’s bar schedule calls for much of their interaction to take place either at night or in private; regardless, David actively explores, both socially and sexually, sharing his life with Giovanni. Their routine develops opposite of most others, sleeping all day and living in the darkness. In the hours before dawn, they would walk the streets and eat breakfast for dinner. Often too tired to sleep, they make coffee and drank cognac, talking and smoking until they have sex (78). Giovanni’s confining room with heteronormative décor (“a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together”) and layers of filth and clutter becomes David’s home (86). Despite the unappealing condition, this experiment develops into a relationship and David finally begins to feel deeply towards this other man.

David's behavior countervails his internalized homophobia, and his same-sex relationship exemplifies David's attempt to "work through" trauma.

Despite David's attempt to "work through" his trauma, insecurities surrounding his same-sex desires could not be silenced and he continues to "act out," even as he attempts to "work through" the trauma of his internalized homophobia in his relationship with Giovanni. Dominick LaCapra acknowledges that "acting out" and "working through" are not mutually exclusive, which explains David's indecisiveness. LaCapra asserts that the two responses are necessary when addressing trauma and that "acting out" should not be seen as a different kind of memory work from "working through" ("Interview" 2). LaCapra explains: "Acting-out and working-through are in general intimately linked but distinguishable processes, and it may be argued that creating conditions in which working-through could counteract (while never fully transcending) the force of acting-out and the repetition-compulsion would generate different possibilities in thought and life" ("Revisiting" 45). In Baldwin's novel, one sees the interlinked processes of "acting out" and "working through" in David's relationship with Giovanni and in his sexual relationships with women. David recognizes, "even at my most candid, even when I tried hardest to give myself to him as he gave himself to me, I was holding something back," and he resists Giovanni (78). David's reservations about same-sex relationships resurface through his words: "People have very dirty words for—for this situation" (81). He even refers to his desires as criminal. The romance David and Giovanni shared was fleeting and David confesses the whole ordeal as a "terrible confusion" (88).

The news of Hella's return, whom David has asked to marry him, arrives without warning from the post one afternoon. It influences David's denial of his feelings for Giovanni and throws him back into a compulsive "acting out" of his trauma. Convincing himself that life

with Giovanni must be ended, David describes their affair as “something that had happened to me once—it would be something that had happened to many men once” (94). Hypermasculinity and heteronormativity rematerialize as David “acts out,” pursuing reaffirmation of his manhood through women: “I wanted to find a girl, any girl at all” (95). David seems to assume that seeking out and having sex with the lonely and vulnerable Sue will no doubt reaffirm his heterosexual masculinity. Perhaps sex with Sue will mask all his undeniable feelings for Giovanni. Maybe heterosexual intercourse with Sue will prove to David that he is equipped for a heterosexual lifetime with Hella. Regardless of David’s thought process, he admits that his plan to have sex with Sue just to prove his own masculinity to himself is a brutal, cruel thing: “What I did with Giovanni could not possibly be more immoral than what I was about to do with Sue” (99).

David’s relationship with Giovanni and the “working through” that it initiates could not transcend his trauma or completely break the compulsive cycle of “acting out,” which LaCapra says is impossible to do. However, it does “counteract” the acting out enough to “generate different possibilities in thought and life” for David, as LaCapra says is sometimes possible. As David narrates his story, his retrospective reflection upon his continual “acting out” of destructive behaviors leads him to a whole new perspective on his life and sense of future possibilities. David finally recognizes not only how he has been traumatized by internalized homophobia but also how he is responsible for hurting others, including his former lover, Giovanni, who will be executed, in part because David abandoned him to the predatory Guillaume, whom Giovanni kills.

The end of *Giovanni’s Room* poses the possibility of change for David but at tremendous cost for Giovanni, Hella, and Sue. James Baldwin himself, at a young age, shed American

constructions of poisonous categories, and while Baldwin's invented character struggles to accomplish the same freedom, eventually the novel suggests that the potential for change is possible for David. Emmanuel Nelson's article, "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community," asserts: "[P]eople invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity. ... Straight cats invented faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves" (27). Nelson captures Baldwin's battle to deconstruct the boundaries on which American identity is grounded. Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room*, is in fact an entire text written in an effort to undo sinister dichotomies. Baldwin is dedicated to tearing down social constructions of categories in which humanity is forced to live. His essay, "Preservation of Innocence," announces that the construction of masculinity and femininity are in reality a paradox in the nature of sexes, and Baldwin further explains that the intense pressure placed upon men to recapture their status by exuding their superiority over women is ludicrous: "[N]ot only does the resulting rigidity of attitude put to death any possible communion, but, having once listed the bald physical facts, no one is prepared to go further and decide, of our multiple human attributes, which are masculine and which are feminine" (597). Baldwin further argues that the recognition of the complexity that resides in manhood as well as in sexual and personal identity brings epiphanies which serve as a signal of maturity: "[I]t marks the death of the child and the birth of the man" ("Preservation" 597).

While I agree with Nelson's incisive ideas about how Baldwin deconstructs destructive American identity categories, I disagree with his assertion that Baldwin's protagonist fails to achieve a sense of self. It is true that David does hesitate to accept his own self and even acts out in an effort to conform to heteronormative identity categories. The whole novel, however, is cast as David's act of deep self-reflection, his confrontation with his own internalized homophobia,

and his recognition of the heartache caused by a refusal to accept his own flesh and his own desire for his male lover. David recognizes not only that he has been living a false life but also what he must do if he is to redeem his life. In contrast to my position, Nelson claims that David fails to accept his sexuality, lacks the ability to commit to anyone, and is morally and spiritually blind (28).

I disagree with Nelson's conclusions, especially in view of the last two pages of the text. Again, in "Preservation of Innocence," Baldwin states, "[T]he American dream of love insists that the Boy get the Girl; ... and we are always told that this is what he really wants, to stop all this chasing around and settle down, to have children and a full life with a woman," but once an individual realizes how unreasonable this expectation is, a transformation of heteronormative understanding of love takes place (598). And that is what occurs throughout this short but tumultuous story: David searches for his soul and in narrating the story of his trauma, he can appropriately mourn what he has lost and what he has done to others; he casts aside cultural constructions and realizes that he must construct a different self if he ever wants to love.

Reflection on the past has allowed David to acknowledge and embrace his own same-sex desires. His memories, in direct relation to LaCapra's concepts, expose David to the numbing ideologies imposed by society. While Nelson's account of David is accurate for his earlier actions in the novel, I argue that when analyzed through the lens of trauma theory, the novel suggests that David recognizes at the end of the novel, and through the process of narrating his story, that a transformation of self is necessary. All of David's past actions—"acting out" by fleeing America, proposing marriage to Hella, having anonymous sexual encounters with an effeminate gay man over whom he feels superior, having unenthusiastic casual sex with Sue, and abandoning the only person in the novel whom he has loved—finally emerge as signals of

David's melancholia. LaCapra explains how "Freud compared and contrasted melancholia with mourning. [Freud] saw melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, remains narcissistically identified with the lost object" ("Revisiting" 44-45). David's various modes of acting-out display his persistent attempts to define his lost object—hegemonic American masculinity—within the narrow cultural constructions of heterosexuality. In his attempts to reaffirm his American manhood, David is locked in melancholia over a loss, ultimately the loss of his heteronormative masculinity. However, the structure of *Giovanni's Room* revolves around David's narration about his past. The act of telling his story can be seen as an act of "mourning" which enables him to move beyond the repetition compulsion that has driven him thus far. Hence, the revelation that melancholia could reside permanently within David reveals the necessity to shed constructed sexual and gender ideologies. Unbeknownst to David, he has been "acting out" in an effort to understand his same-sex desires, in order to gain the confidence necessary to withdraw from society's imposed ideals. David realizes insincerity has commanded complete control over his life choices. In narrating his story—the story of a life dominated by melancholia and the "acting out" of trauma—David is in the process of what Freud terms mourning and LaCapra deems "working through" ("Revisiting" 44).

Allowing himself to feel the loss of an expected masculinity, and accepting his responsibility for having inflicted pain on others affords David the opportunity to mourn. Through mourning, David acknowledges that he must disregard constructed ideologies of manhood and instead form his own sense of what it means to be a man—what it means to be human. LaCapra's essay states that, "mourning [brings] the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or 'recathexis' of, life that [allows] one to begin again"

("Revisiting" 45). Further, mourning allows "for critical judgement and a reinvestment in life, notably social life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others" (LaCapra, "Revisiting" 45). Through mourning, David faces his insidious trauma and realizes its effects. David sees the hurt he has imposed on others, and ultimately himself. For a long time, David clung to the idea of a heteronormative life but fortunately "working through" and mourning encourage clarity, and he propels himself forward. David acknowledges responsibility not only for Giovanni's death but also for the pain he has caused to Hella and Sue.

Traumatized by cultural conditioning towards masculinity and the need to conform into heterosexuality, David contributes to not only his own suffering but also the suffering of those whom he cares for as well. Long before deeds were irreversible, David realizes the extent to which Giovanni, jobless and hurting, was dependent upon him: "[T]he burden of [Giovanni's] salvation seemed to be on me and I could not endure it" (114). David's own panic causes him to leave Giovanni at his most vulnerable state, "alone in that room without any food, without any money, without, even, any cigarettes," and reality returns in the form of Jacques' reminding David that indeed he left Giovanni without so much as a goodbye (127). Hella's return to Paris causes David to disengage from Giovanni. Their last conversation illuminates David's inability to fully give himself to anyone and Giovanni professes, "You have never really been here. I do not think you have ever lied to me, but I know that you have never told me the truth"—even declaring "if you cannot love me, I will die" (137).

Holding fast to his unspoiled heterosexual manhood—purity—David has been allowing his internalized homophobia to stifle his inability to love. Giovanni damns David one last time for his attention to masculinity and attempts to protect a constructed idea of manhood:

You have never loved anyone, I am sure you never will! You love your purity, you love your mirror—you are just like a little virgin, you walk around with your hands in front of you as though you had some precious metal, gold, silver, rubies, maybe diamonds down there between your legs! You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody touch it—man or woman. You want to be clean. (141)

David escapes Giovanni's room but while his words linger, David considers his evasion of dirtiness and thinks to himself: "One day I'll weep for this. One of these days I'll start to cry" (145). Indeed it's soon thereafter that news of Giovanni's murdering Guillaume hits the papers and remorse floods David. Leaning on Hella, David explains he looked to her for help, "I tried to bury each night, in [Hella], all my guilt and terror"—except Hella is merely a distraction for David and has been for far too long (152). David loses interest in Hella "all at once" but in actuality David recognizes the loss had been happening for a long time, and with descriptions of her as "pale," "watchful," and "uncertain," David struggles to balance his emotions for both Hella and Giovanni (159).

Tortured by the guilt of compromising both Hella and Giovanni for self-preservation, David finally has an epiphany. David confesses "feeling that I placed [Giovanni] in the shadow of the knife. He wanted me to stay in that room with him; he begged me to stay" (160). David recognizes the power he has been unconsciously holding over his lovers, describing Hella as a "puppet dangling from a string"; she offers to give up smoking and a career if only David will make her a woman by marriage and with children—and Giovanni offered his life for David's love (161). David's realization comes only when Hella finds him in a gay bar among sailor friends after nights without returning home; he finally admits: "I was lying to myself" (163). As

a consequence of all his own suffering, and his guilty realization of all the pain inflicted on Giovanni and Hella, David's confusion evolves into clarity. David has been allowing his internalized homophobia to stifle his ability to love others as well as himself. However, the last two pages of *Giovanni's Room* convey a distinct revolution in David's understanding and perhaps the intensity with which he has allowed others to define his identity can at last subside. David realizes his happiness, manhood, and ability to love are contingent on himself and himself only.

At dawn, returning to the opening image of the novel with which he began his narration of the past, David tries to recognize the stranger who stares back at him:

“The body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror and it is trapped in time and it hurries towards revelation”. (168)

This passage on the penultimate page of the text ignites David's utter dissatisfaction with himself. He barely identifies with the body that appears because, truthfully, decisions have never belonged to him; David has instead been continuously conforming to cultural norms. However in his last declaration lives hope: change is possible because David realizes that he must change. Baldwin critic Josep Armengol likewise contends that “David begins to realize the distorting and limiting role played by homophobia in his own life and affective relationships, eventually turning to this own body as the road to his salvation” (690). David begins to achieve insight into his own being.

Baldwin's citation of a passage from St. Paul strongly attests to David's emerging transformation. David remembers and cites the verse from 1 Corinthians 13:11 "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (168). Those biblical words and the verses that follow, which Baldwin omitted, reveal the secret to becoming a "man," that is to say becoming a human being. The dominant idea of masculinity will actually keep one from being a real man—a fully human being. One must rid themselves of this "idea of masculinity" in order to be a man. The meaning behind manhood, David finally realizes, is not David's father's definition locked in childish behavior and sexuality, but instead, becoming a man involves the recognition that one must come to know one's self not in terms of the identity categories that society imposes. At last, David is rejecting the sense of self and of manhood that society has imposed on him. While Baldwin only incorporates one verse of 1 Corinthians, the next verses prove valuable in an analysis of David as well.

1 Corinthians 13:12 reads "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known." The description of coming to manhood is, thus, quickly followed with details about reflection. At first the reflection is tainted by darkness and seen only partially, tainted by the corruption of cultural constructed categories; these categories must be rejected if one is to ever know what a more human self might be. The next verse from 1 Corinthians also illuminates powerfully what Baldwin suggests about David's final epiphany: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these three is charity." In order to shed immaturity and grow into full manhood, David must embrace his love for other men and embrace the flesh that is the vehicle for that love. Baldwin has purposely included only one verse in order to provoke the reader who is familiar with this

frequently quoted text to complete it and arrive at the revelation of love. While *Giovanni's Room* in no way elicits a happy ending, the citation from Corinthians and implied evocation of its concluding verses suggests there is hope for men like David, who have been traumatized by internalized homophobia, but the cost is shedding one's former life. David is urged by Jacques to take the risk of loving Giovanni. Giovanni chides David for his failure to love anyone at all because he loves his "purity"—meaning his unspoiled heterosexual manhood. The final sentences of the novel suggest that David has begun to heed their advice.

The next section of the novel suggests that David is actively shattering the disastrous dichotomies and heteronormative identity categories of American culture: "I long to make this prophecy come true. I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how I can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over" (168). David rejects heterosexist assumptions in order to stop being a child and become a man. He longs to break the regime of routine and expose his reflection truthfully. While David admits that there is still much work to be done on his sexuality, he asserts that avoiding the castration associated with losing masculinity, hence the knife, demands a change in his whole understanding of masculinity. No longer will society define what constitutes manhood; instead David becomes the authority figure responsible for his own masculinity. With Giovanni's impending death approaching, David realizes life itself is too short to be bothered by dishonesty.

Baldwin structures *Giovanni's Room* around David's internal reflection on his past, and it takes place from dusk one night to dawn the next day ending with salvation in sight—or at least the hope of salvation as a possibility. The end of the novel concludes with David slowly tearing into many pieces the blue envelope containing news of Giovanni's fate. As they dance in the

wind and he begins to walk away, David states: “the wind blows some of them back on me” (169). David will never be able to rid himself of this traumatic experience or of his responsibility for Giovanni’s death but instead he will forever carry it within his new self. By transforming his trauma into narrative form, the story is integrated into David’s past and present. Trauma theorist, Judith Herman, explains that, “reconstructing of the trauma story begins with a review of the [narrator’s] life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event”; hence, the entire structure of the novel acts as a reflection from childhood to the present day, and David begins to gain insight into the insidious trauma of internalized homophobia he has endured and into its devastating effects on his own life and that of others (176). Herman theorizes that it is essential that the narrator not only reconstruct the events but also the emotions involved; David is able to do so by recounting his relationships, his reactions then and in hindsight, and his feelings afterward. Jill Matus explains that trauma in narrative form brings about the opportunity to take responsibility for actions by foregrounding experiences of guilt and processes of mourning (34). We see precisely these actions in David’s narration. Ultimately, trauma when put into narrative form becomes a testimony and allows for the narrator to come to terms with memories of the past. Narrative form allows David the acknowledgement that he can never walk away from nor forget the pain he has caused, but the process affords David integration of past traumatic events into his life and the possibility of self-acceptance.

James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* critiques the ways in which heteronormative systems of thinking defined as universal and absolute can do much damage to an individual. By extending trauma theory beyond its conventional boundaries, Brown’s theory of insidious trauma creates understanding as to how Baldwin represents the damaging effects of David’s internalized homophobia. Cultural conditioning towards masculinity and the need to conform into

heterosexuality traumatizes David. Living in a society rampant with homophobia ultimately influences David to experience internalized homophobia. These intense restrictions drive David away from love. So desperate to escape America, to court a woman, even to experience fast and meaningless intercourse with one, David fails at loving. Despite trying with Giovanni, David is incapable earlier in the novel of sharing his life with another male. Indeed, Baldwin's novel "works to open up oppressive structures of patriarchal power," except his character cannot escape the associated trauma unaffected (Spurlin 110).

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* confronts homophobic and heterosexist attitudes of the 1950s by narrativizing the struggle of the protagonist, David. Rendering his own life, thus far, into narrative form during his night-long reflection affords David a kind of healing from the trauma caused by discrimination and oppression. David struggles to define masculinity and love without his culture's insistent heteronormativity. As he remembers his trials with same-sex desires, and compares expectations with reality, David eventually casts aside his heteronormative "purity" for what may be left of his life and ability to love.

Baldwin's work articulates the ways in which gender oppression and homophobia intertwine while aiming "to debunk the traditional American myths of innocence and purity—and conventional masculinity" (Henderson 322). David realizes that only when clinging to heteronormative purity ends can his life begin: "Yet, the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh" (168). Successfully shoving aside the heteronormative American dream allows for David to save himself. The key to his salvation does not reside in Heaven but rather on earth within his own body; owning his own sexuality will reveal happiness and open him up to the fullest expression of his human love—which is salvation for Baldwin. The sanctity obtained in life is the sanctity that emerges from love. To be saved is to become

fully human through love. *Giovanni's Room* finishes with David successfully shedding his culture's constructed heteronormativity. By defining masculinity and love for himself, David chooses self-fulfillment instead of social acceptance. While David's struggle with insidious trauma proves laborious, he is saved by accepting his own flesh, his own sexuality.

“Sexual Shame Is In Itself a Kind of Death”: Queering *Fun Home*

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Alison's Bechdel's *Fun Home* employ similar characters who struggle with their sexual identity and their ability to love. While the end of Baldwin's novel poses the possibility that the protagonist, David, may shed his culture's constructed heteronormativity, which impedes his capacity to love himself and others, Bechdel's graphic-memoir exposes the fictionalized version of her father, Bruce, as failing to do so, but triumphs with the narrator, Alison, as she embraces lesbianism and resists homophobic oppression. The previous chapter examines the homophobic and heterosexist attitudes of the 1950s, and this chapter establishes generational differences between pre- and post- Stonewall father and daughter who both struggle to situate their same-sex desire within the dichotomies and heteronormative identity categories of American culture. Alison Bechdel, a literary and graphic artist, has been producing a cartoon strip entitled "Dykes to Watch Out For" since 1983 and with her work recently expanding to graphic novels, has been deemed a feminist interventionist in literary and visual culture (Tolmie 88). *Fun Home*, "a family tragicomic," offers the chance to analyze the queer body in a particular cultural milieu, mainly white, middle-class America from the 1960s to the early 1980s, and addresses the compulsory heterosexuality and imposed heteronormativity of those decades which stigmatized gender non-conformity. Similar to the previous chapter, I will use trauma theory to analyze the "insidious trauma" caused by society's homophobia throughout *Fun Home* and argue that rendering trauma into narrative form allows for the narrator to heal. Ultimately, Alison heals from the trauma inflicted by society's homophobia because she lives in a post-Stonewall America and "comes out" into a thriving lesbian community, whereas Bruce had to endure the intense homophobia of a pre-Stonewall society and found no supportive community which affirmed a gay identity.

Bechdel's representation of trauma is an attempt to bring to consciousness what has been repressed and sealed off, both during her father's maturity and her own. Over the past thirty years, trauma studies have grown to encompass more than the examining of the psychic consequences of catastrophic events. Psychotherapist Laura Brown argues,

We must attempt to find the meanings of these different sorts of events that constitute an assault on the integrity and safety of those who are not members of the dominant classes if we are to fully comprehend the meanings and nuances of psychic trauma and its presence in the lives of all humans. When we do so, we must ask questions about how we have understood that which constitutes a traumatic event. (102)

The expansion of trauma theory, as Brown advocates, to include less obvious causes of trauma offers a lens that brings Bechdel's analysis of the trauma caused by homophobia into focus. Bechdel looks at how the heteronormativity of the 1950s and 1960s, along with the social promotion of definitively stereotypical masculine and feminine roles, causes trauma to those who identify as homosexual, who exhibit same-sex desire, or who desire a non-normative gender presentation. Bechdel explores homophobia as a form of what Laura Brown calls "insidious trauma"; she also explores how it causes internalized homophobia. As we have seen in Chapter One, Brown identifies "insidious trauma" as the "private, secret, insidious traumas ... in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (102). The present analysis of *Fun Home*, using trauma theory to illuminate Bechdel's representation of the damaging effects of homophobia, suggests how Bechdel rendered into narrative form the kinds of insidious trauma that occurred in the lives of males and females resisting heteronormativity in 1950s, 60s, and 70s America. Brown's theory of insidious trauma provides a theoretical lens

with which to analyze *Fun Home* and its representation of heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia as causes of psychic trauma.

Trauma often produces repetitive and destructive behavior, driving away human intimacy. Using Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through," I demonstrate how Bruce and Alison Bechdel are dealing with the traumatic experiences of their youth. Bruce denies, devalues, and disassociates himself from his same-sex desires and Bruce's destructive behavior ultimately causes his death. In contrast, even though Alison battles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, she ultimately comes to terms with her trauma and her father's as well. Bechdel writes in reference to her father, "his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I knew him" (23); retrospection is important in re-telling traumatic events, and only after Bruce's death can Alison work toward closure. *Fun Home* is Bechdel's reflection upon her past, her memory of childhood, and the narration of the trauma that she and her father endured. This memoir serves as not only Bechdel's process of remembering and coming to terms with traumatic experiences of her own past, but also her attempt to piece together a coherent narrative about her father's hidden and closeted past so that she might understand his tortured life. Judith Herman's theories about trauma and narrative attest to narrative as a form of healing from trauma both for the individual and society. Narrativizing Alison's story affords a kind of healing from the trauma caused by homophobic and heterosexist oppression and encourages the reader to a deeper understanding of how this systemic oppression affects individual lives.

In a society that continues to be plagued by homophobia and structures of oppression, Bechdel challenges cultural and sexual hegemony by placing emphasis on history, especially the history of the gay and lesbian liberation struggle. Indeed, "*Fun Home* queers the genre of

historical graphic narrative by insisting that the traumatic history of a closeted gay man and his protolesbian daughter is contained within larger historical events” (McBean 104). While *Fun Home* does not reveal very much about Bruce’s childhood directly, the atmosphere and cultural milieu in which he was raised was riddled with intense homophobia. Mixed in with McCarythism and the anti-communist climate of the Cold War was a witch hunt against gay males and lesbians referred to as the Lavender Scare, because lavender was the color commonly associated with homosexuality (Johnson 217). Mass firings of gay men from the United States government took place in the 1950s: “The typical case involved a homosexual confronted with circumstantial evidence that he had associated with ‘known homosexuals’ or been arrested in a known gay cruising area. Almost all those accused quietly resigned rather than risk further publicity” (Johnson 3). In his history of the gay liberation struggle, *The Lavender Scare*, David K. Johnson writes: “When not referred to directly as homosexuals or sex perverts, such persons were often called ‘moral weaklings,’ ‘sexual misfits,’ ‘moral risks,’ ‘misfits,’ ‘undesirables,’ or persons with ‘unusual morals;’” and worst of all, homosexuals were considered “security risks” (7). Thus, presumed to be lacking morals because they rejected conformity to straight, bourgeois culture, homosexuals were categorized as careless, easily seduced, and then coerced into disclosing classified information. Presumed to be more susceptible to blackmail than heterosexuals, homosexuals were presumed to pose a threat to national security and were removed from federal employment. The Lavender Scare—a fear that homosexuals posed a risk to national security and needed to be systematically removed—permeated 1950s culture (Johnson 9). Hence, the Lavender Scare unleashed pervasive homophobia affecting many generations to come.

Homosexuality was considered not only an offense that could justify firing but one that carried the connotation of mental illness and was prosecutable by law. In 1952, The American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder in the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I). Hence, there is no doubt that gay Americans in the 1950s and 60s faced an anti-gay social system. Stonewall historian David Carter states, “By 1961 the laws in America were harsher on homosexuals than those in Cuba, Russia, or East Germany, countries that the United States criticized for their despotic ways” (15). Carter further illuminates that at the end of the 1960s, not one law—federal, state, or local—protected gay men or women, not to mention there were no openly gay politicians, police officers, movie stars, public school teachers, doctors, or lawyers (2). And while there was some early resistance to homophobia in the form of the Mattachine Society, who used the term homophile to refer to their organization, the social and legal oppression of homosexuals prevailed.

However, the late 1960s brought about many oppositional voices, such as the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war demonstrations against the Vietnam War, which ultimately served as catalysts for the gay and lesbian civil rights movements. The Stonewall Riots took place in June of 1969 and are widely considered the single most important event leading to the modern gay liberation movement and the fight for LGBTQ rights in the United States. While the streets in Greenwich Village erupted with violent demonstrations when police raided the Stonewall Bar to arrest gay patrons, it was the first time that thousands of gay demonstrators went out into the streets to protest the intolerable situation imposed on gay males and lesbians by the routine raids of gay bars (Carter 195). Even though Christopher Street was filled with pride and police and the sense of liberation and equality for gays, the Mattachine Society intervened and encouraged peace among the protesters (Carter 196). One panel halfway through *Fun Home*

depicts Alison walking by a billboard that reads: “We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the village—Mattachine” (104). It was not until 1974 that the seventh printing of the DSM-II no longer listed homosexuality as a category of disorder. Despite not directly experiencing the beginning of the gay rights revolution, Alison’s childhood coincided with the struggle for equality and the open fight for homosexual rights. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for Bruce. With his death in 1980, just six years after the removal of homosexuality from the list of psychological disorders in the DSM-II, Bruce was born into and operated within a thoroughly homophobic cultural milieu. *Fun Home* exposes the generational differences between Alison and her father; Alison’s references to sexual liberation and community suggest that her life is significantly different from her father’s both personally and historically. Alison comes out in a culture of lesbian feminism but Bruce does not have access to the social world that might allow him to assume an openly gay identity. (Cvetkovich 123).

Bechdel herself is even searching for an understanding of her father. Her graphic memoir situates her father as a closeted gay man who suffers deep psychological damage from the intense homophobia of 1950s America. Bechdel manipulates both literary and historic figures to account for her childhood. The realization occurs that this family her father worked so hard to create, whom he sacrificed his sexual identity for, was a source of trauma. Alison, and in-turn Bechdel, would never be able to rid themselves of the foundation their father developed. Bechdel wastes little time with descriptions of her father before announcing: “My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret” (16). Bechdel claims, “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (16). Her father’s tedious behavior seems well-thought out, and while he might

perform to strangers or fellow church members as a loving parent, high school teacher, and successful owner of a funeral home in the small town of Beech Creek, the panel shown in Figure 1 states otherwise. This panel portraying the Bechdel family at a Sunday service allots Bruce a guilty demeanor. His body language reveals a certain discomfort, cutting nervous eyes at the Priest; Bruce's slouching shoulders suggest an attempt to cower away. And while his children convey boredom, Bruce's wife appears stern, cold, lost, even struggling to keep up their heteronormative lie.

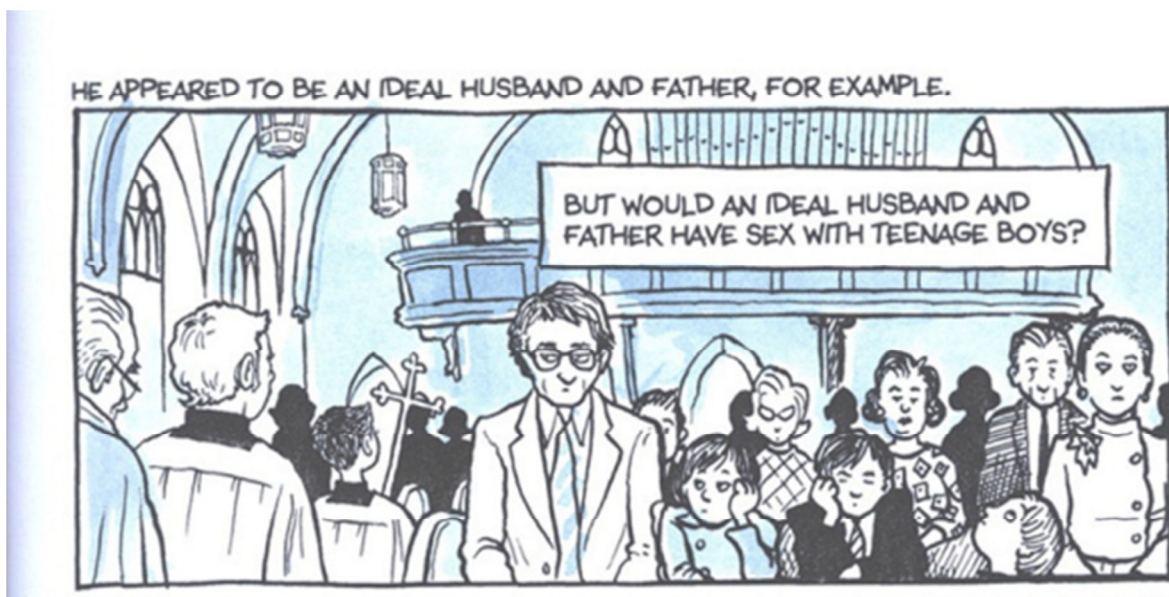


Figure 1

As his posture discloses, Bruce has a secret life and has, for Alison's entire life, engaged in sexual acts with other males. Bechdel describes her father's fully developed self-loathing, caused by internalized homophobia: "[H]is shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany"; Bruce's self-rejection can be understood in relation to the cultural milieu in which he was raised. Born in 1936, his adolescence and young adulthood, arguably the most formative years of one's development, occurred during the Lavender Scare and its homophobic attitudes. American society in the 1950s and 60s purged and

demonized homosexuals, preventing Bruce from embracing his same-sex desire. Under the pressure of such a harsh heterosexist regime, Bruce attempts to comply out of “homosexual panic.” Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick describes “homosexual panic” as “the most private, psychologized form in which many ... western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail”; in other words, this panic drives gay men to hide their homoerotic feelings and experiences (89). The cultural stigmas associated with same-sex desires have proven traumatic by distorting Bruce’s own sexuality. Cultural homophobia represents Bruce’s desires as monstrous and shames his sexuality; homosexual panic creates internalized homophobia and Bruce is incapable of owning his same-sex desires. He does everything he can to conceal his same-sex desire and relationships, seeking out encounters in which he can guard his secret and maintain control.

Internalized homophobia persuades those struggling with their sexual identity to assume society’s negative perceptions and intolerance associated with homosexuality. An awareness of the stigmas associated with homosexuality introduces extreme negativity and disconnection with the self (Meyer and Dean 61). Internalized homophobia pervades Bruce’s consciousness and produces secrecy within his own being. Hence, internalized homophobia explains why Bruce is personally suffering from self-hatred. In an attempt to mask or hide his same-sex desires, Bruce ultimately approaches hegemonic patriarchy as an institution to be upheld. For Bruce, failure to construct the façade of a normative patriarchal family would run the risk of exposing his desire for other men and his past homosexual relationships.

Internalized homophobia produced by a heteronormative society induces counter-productive “acting out” as a response to his trauma. LaCapra’s concept of “acting out” involves one’s unconsciously being driven to repeat destructive behavior because of trauma. LaCapra

further explains that traumatized people exhibit the “tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (“Interview” 2). Bruce’s acting-out is repetitive in the sense that he is fleeing time and time again from the reality of his same-sex desire. The past for Bruce is his self-rejection and the need to uphold the appearance of his heteronormative life caused by his internalized homophobia. Bruce keeps “acting out” because he has been traumatized by living in a heterosexist society that diabolizes gay and bisexual men. Heteronormativity is the only option for white males and Bruce is no exception.

While Bechdel provides few details surrounding her father’s career in the Army, Bruce’s time in the military produces an instance of “acting out” as Bechdel narrates his relationship with a particular “friend” with whom he has shared intimacy and continues a closeted relationship. This pattern of seeking out sexual intimacy with men and maintaining a closeted relationship with them while trying to maintain the façade of a heterosexual marriage is one Bruce repeats throughout his life. It constitutes his repeated pattern of “acting out” because of the trauma he has experienced in a homophobic and heterosexist society. Bechdel provides minimal information, only enough to gather that indeed Bruce engaged in a same-sex affair with a fellow Army soldier and continued to keep in contact even after marriage. While the need to escape the confines of homophobic America was not the only reason Bruce joined the Armed Forces, it provides him a break from the close-mindedness of American culture. Despite geographically escaping the confines of American culture, Bruce cannot withstand society’s interpellation and strives to achieve heteronormativity, resorting to “acting out” the effects of insidious trauma caused by his internalized homophobia. Bruce is “acting out” by attempting to evade his same-sex attraction and deciding he will marry a woman in order to mimic heteronormativity.

Soon after her parents wed in Germany, they took a trip to Paris to visit an old Army friend of Bruce's and Bechdel writes, "Later, my mother would learn that Dad and his friend had been lovers" (71). Bruce and Helen carried on with their appearance of heteronormativity for nearly twenty years. Perhaps Helen was hoping that Bruce's interest was not in men but only one particular man. Perhaps Helen was content to leave the man from the army in their past and continue with their own attempts at happiness. Whatever the reasoning, Helen stayed, but from that moment she knew her husband's sexuality was not exclusively straight; her staying in the marriage enables Bruce to continue "acting out," and his inability to accept his sexuality openly requires that he continue "acting out" by making "things appear to be what they were not."

While his mentality can only be supposed, perhaps Bruce thought marriage would prevent his desire for men; nevertheless, Bruce is not fulfilled and continues "acting out" by courting other males. While Bruce had had affairs with men his own age throughout his lifetime, it seems his interest had narrowed; or rather the lack of opportunity to meet other closeted men in Beech Creek turned his attention to younger boys. Bechdel acknowledges it was young, often straight, males with whom her father fell in love (94). Bechdel also announces her father, a high school English teacher, as further educating his most "promising" students with trips to his personal library, and insinuates that those "promises" were, in some cases, sexual (61). Turning to students is a part of "acting out" because it is an attempt to hide and conceal his same-sex attraction while maintaining the façade of a heterosexual marriage. It is easier to conceal these relationships than any other in the small, rural town where he lives. There's no gay bar scene or identifiable circle of similarly closeted gay men in Beech Creek. Hence, after Bruce's youth escapes him, once he is deep into pretending heteronormativity, he chooses to engage in sex with men who could never fully commit themselves to a relationship with him. Bruce channels his

same-sex desire towards considerably younger men who are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the vulnerable position Bruce put them in. Bruce's effort to seek out a certain type of individual is a reflection of his own inability to commit. Bruce never allows his same-sex desire to develop into real love. He is uncertain of how to proceed with his desires in an appropriate way. Bruce himself does not consider his desires appropriate because of the cultural and societal restrictions that he has been forced to exist within; thus, Bruce is incapable of entertaining the idea that same-sex desire can indeed produce love or a committed relationship that can be publicly acknowledged. So, Bruce does not allow himself to engage with anyone even remotely close to his age or ready for an adult, committed relationship.

Bruce's choice to express interest in such youthful males further proves his "acting out" as destructive behavior especially when the judicial system gets involved. Bechdel remembers venturing to a family friend's for an entire weekend and never paused to think what her father might have done with his free time. Twenty-seven years later she looked up the police report. Bruce, it turns out, invited a minor male out joyriding, they drank beers, and rather ambiguously, what else occurred is only speculation. Nonetheless, Bechdel details what little memories exist of that time in her life, relating to her father's behaviors: "The summer I was thirteen, my father's secret almost surfaced" (153). Bruce's not so inconspicuous behavior finally caught up to him as two brothers in town, both of whom he courted, testified against him in court. The matter proved humiliating for Bruce as his presence in the town of Beech Creek, and employment as a teacher, were immediately threatened.

Bechdel's reflection on that tumultuous summer discloses that while her father's actions went without spoken accusation, the truth behind his court appearance was understood and his punishment suggested that the judge suspected Bruce's sexual interest in these young men.

Bechdel writes, “‘furnishing a malt beverage to a minor’ was the least of his troubles; ... the real accusation dared not speak its name” (175). Despite the magistrate’s only addressing the liquor charge, Bechdel believes “a whiff of the sexual aroma of the true offense could be detected in the sentence” (180). The fact that Bechdel alludes to the “love that dare not speak its name” suggests that her father’s real offense—which went unacknowledged—was same-sex activity with the male student. The judge opted to dismiss the charges if Bruce completed six months of counseling; this sentence alone speaks to the belief that homoerotic desire could be eliminated with therapy, exemplifying the dominant homophobic assumptions about gay men in the 1960s; ultimately same-sex desire was problematic but could be driven out by emphasizing and reinforcing heteronormativity. Thus, the cultural milieu of America had not progressed since the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde in London, and Bechdel notes her father failed to provoke a burst of applause “with an impassioned plea for the understanding of ‘such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan,’” but rather silently accepted the consequence of his actions (180).

Bruce remains steadfast in his desire to preserve his heteronormativity, posing as a “straight” man who is heterosexual, involved in a loving marriage, a man who even produces children; Bruce, however, had been “acting out” his same-sex desire destructively by choosing to live a secret life. He held no regard for his wife, and if it were not for his children’s youth, they perhaps would not have been so blind to their father’s reality either. Bruce succumbs to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in a patriarchal society, he allows his desires to be poisoned by the homophobia that is part of American ideology, his internalized panic is permanent, and his “acting out” compulsive and endless. In comparing her father to Daedalus, Bechdel states Bruce did not answer to the laws of society, but in fact he did (7). Abject and shameful, Bruce admits

“I’m bad,” which illuminates the adverse effect of internalized homophobia (153). Bruce cannot escape the insidious trauma inflicted by society’s distortion of same-sex desire, which produces his own internalized homophobia.

Bechdel details her second to last interaction with her father as more straightforward, providing more insight into her father than ever before. For two pages, Bechdel employs fifteen square panels, similar to photograph film rolls, closely resembling one another but each encompassing slight differences. The conversation depicted takes place on the way to the movies and her father divulges two separate sexual experiences with males. Alison immediately identifies with her father. After the movies, Bruce attempts to take Alison into a “notorious local nightspot. The front was a topless club. The back was a gay bar,” but Alison—not yet twenty-one—causes the pair to be refused at the door (223). Bechdel describes the drive home as “mortified silence,” no doubt due to the tension of such secrets escaping but also because of Bruce’s shame.

Bruce never reaches the “working through” stage of his insidious trauma and therefore is eternally saddled with self-loathing rejection. Their last father/daughter date had the potential to be enlightening and reassuring for Alison; instead, she is faced with her father’s embarrassment and even questions who, in that particular situation, acted as the parental figure. Dominick LaCapra explains “working through” as a countervailing force in response to trauma. Critical distance is a necessary component to “working through,” the ability to partially disengage from the trauma and acknowledge existence of self regardless of oppression. Furthermore, “it’s via working through that one acquires the possibility of being an ethical agent” (“Interview” 3). Hence, the ability to make judgments based on one’s own moral compass and disregard socially accepted heteronormativity to instead pursue one’s own individual desire is the epitome of

“working through.” Bruce’s internalized homophobia and the cultural milieu in which he was raised never allowed him to reach such satisfaction. Heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia damaged Bruce and perhaps even drove him to commit suicide. Bechdel writes: “dad’s death was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time” as if, it is to be understood, Bruce’s entire life was a catastrophe (83).

The circumstances of Bruce’s life and death, however, become an essential part of Alison’s “working through.” Whereas Bruce never “works through” the trauma he has endured in a homophobic society, Bechdel’s memoir narrates the process whereby the young Alison works toward self-knowledge and acceptance in a way her father never could. Within the pages of *Fun Home*, Bechdel, as an artist and a daughter, challenges the oppressive structures that span across generations and participates in the process of social change. Bechdel’s deep reflection proves that her father no doubt suffered traumatically from a hidden sexuality for many years but instead of condemning Bruce, his daughter narrates a sense of compassion, even a sense of identification with her father. In adulthood, Bechdel revisits the events of her childhood and with more clarity accounts for their gender inversions, realizing similarities with Bruce. She realizes that the two existed in vastly different generations and had much different cultural experiences that affected their self-acceptance and acceptance of their sexuality. Likewise, feminist and queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich states that Bechdel bears witness to the “secrecy and shame” of Bruce’s life that concealed his trauma in order to understand the development of her own sexual identity and to “be the sympathetic witness who can make available the rich and contradictory story of his life so that he is something more than a pedophile, suicide, or tragic homosexual” (113).

Bechdel realizes the differences in cultural acceptance of homosexual desire between her life and her father’s, given when they were born. One summer Alison was in New York City just

days after The Stonewall Riots. Even though Alison had not yet considered the possibility of her same-sex desire, she recognized a slight identification with the 1969 rebellion against heteronormativity (104). It's the next page that exemplifies the generational differences between her parents and her as the panel deems the afternoon "a curious watershed" carrying decades of difference. Alison's face peeks through the center console of her parent's station wagon and suddenly an understanding prevails, in her bright future; Alison realizes she can become whoever she chooses (105). Unlike her father, Alison's predecessors have successfully paved the way toward gay liberation. No longer must same-sex couples hide their desires, and while that is an achievement Alison can rightly enjoy, it is also one her father missed out on. Similarly, Monica Pearl states that "while homosexuality has always been around, favorable ways of dealing with it have not; it is generational, that is, different generations of men and women will experience homosexuality very differently depending on societal mores at the time" (290). It must be understood that while Bruce did not pass along his sexuality to Alison, he provided the example of shame, which she and her generation have been shown they can avoid. Her father, a closeted pre-Stonewall man, stood in opposition to his post-Stonewall, out and proud daughter.

In reflection upon a family European trip, Bechdel remembers her independence and her ability to remove herself from standard American conformity but does not accord her father the same liberation. The entire vacation receives only one page coverage, but Alison depicts herself with wide eyes, persuading her parents that "girls wear them too," as she insists on a pair of masculine hiking boots. Furthermore, Alison happily trades in her tank suit for a pair of shorts and no top, as the next panel portrays siblings building sandcastles on the beach while an adult woman walks topless in the background of the foreign land. Bechdel describes: "Such freedom from convention was intoxicating. But while our travels widened my scope, I suspect my parents

felt their own dwindling” (73). Thus, while Alison is enamored with the idea of freedom from stereotypical and confining gender roles, that same concept forces her parents to revert back to stereotypical gender norms. As her spectrum of life experiences widened and Alison gained exposure to culture outside of Beech Creek, which elated her, she describes quite the opposite effect of such cultural exposure on her parents, who seem to experience a certain sadness that never will either of their lives provide the freedom that they see when they travel abroad.

While Alison is portrayed as rebelling against any obligations association with femininity, her father reacts in anger at her rebellion and reinforces gender norms. Never comprehending why girls must function in one manner and boys in another, Bechdel remembers becoming a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age (95). Alison decodes the façade of gender roles and responsibilities early in her life. Unbothered by American customs that dictate what is socially acceptable to preserve binary genders, Alison instead identifies with more open cultures, recognizing and rejecting gender conformity, yet she is forced to operate “under her father’s vigilant maintenance of her femininity and oppressive social norms” (Lemberg 134). Bechdel accords her younger character, Alison, wit and a matured sense of self, and when her father insists upon Alison’s wearing a barrette, in an effort to keep the hair out of her eyes, she responds, “so would a crewcut” (96). The panel shown in Figure 2 depicts Bruce’s usual policing of Alison’s outward appearance and also illuminates his tedious attention to his own presentation. It must be noted that Bechdel in no way associates homosexuality with inversion, stating, “It’s imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex” (97); but nonetheless she suggests that in terms of her and her father, inversion was accurate. Bechdel recalls attempting to compensate for her father’s lack of masculinity just as he was attempting to reinforce her femininity. As Lemberg suggests,

Alison's resistance to wearing the feminine barrette grows from desires that she cannot express, just as her father has inexpressible needs of his own (135). Bechdel represents a twelve-year span in which her father, as she grows up, prompts her to embody more femininity. Their arguments about her gender presentation ranged from his forcing her to wear missionary skirts to mandatory pearls and yet, "Between us lay a slender demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls" (99). In this manner, father and daughter emerge as opposites: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (15). Yet, in fundamental ways they mirrored each other because each was uncomfortable with rigid societal gender expectations and compulsory heteronormative sexuality.



Figure 2

Even though Bruce could not reject American conformity and held Alison to conventional standards of femininity, they shared a commonality of wanting to transgress gender conformity and Bechdel, through the processes of memory and reflection, realizes she understands her father on a much deeper level. Alison stumbles across a half-naked, grainy photograph of Roy, whom she only previously knew as her babysitter who occasionally offered a helping hand to her father. She soon recalls a trip to the Jersey Shore which her mother did not attend: "I remember the hotel room [the photograph was taken in]. My brothers and I slept in one adjoining it" (100). And what becomes even more curious to Alison is her acceptance of this discovery. She questions: would more revulsion have followed if this blurry picture depicted a half-naked seventeen-year old girl? Instead, Bechdel writes about identifying with her father, "[P]erhaps, I identify too well with my father's illicit awe. A trace of this seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper" (100). Instead of confusion or discomfort emerging within Alison, she experiences a sense of understanding; her father, born in the 1930s, reached maturity at a time fraught with hateful homophobic attitudes and while experiencing same-sex desire, resorted to life in the closet.

Traumatized by the cultural milieu and his own internalized homophobia, her father was unable to transgress heterosexual norms except behind closed doors. Thus, in looking at this photograph, Bechdel realizes that Bruce never embraced his sexuality and therefore never fully belonged. This photograph finally produced a coherent understanding of Bruce, one that properly accounted for "the way my father juggled his public appearance and private reality ... [because] the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed" (101). Bechdel acknowledges that her father worked hard throughout his lifetime to create a balance between his public and private life. While never fully embracing his same-sex desire, he could neither dismiss his feelings nor could

he ignore them. Bruce was caught between a gay and heteronormative life and practiced one while wishing for the other. However, Bechdel comments that one can never fully evade the presence of the private reality because eventually the truth will prevail.

Bechdel creates her character, Alison, not without trials associated with her same-sex desire but in contrast to her father, who is much less equipped both mentally and socially to resist the culturally constructed dichotomies of gender and sexuality. As a small child, Bechdel was introduced to a non-binary gender presentation, which as a grown artist she represents as an epiphany in the young Alison's wide eyes. Upon spotting a "butch" lesbian for the first time en route to Philadelphia with her father, suddenly Alison is introduced to a different kind of woman, one that she had been discouraged from emulating. Even though they never exchanged words, this woman inspired in Alison the realization that women exist in all different shapes and sizes, have non-conforming gender presentations, and similarly operate in any occupation (see Figure 3). Even though Alison denies wanting to look "like that" when she is interrogated by her father who is distressed by Alison's fascination with the butch lesbian, Bechdel recalls "recogniz[ing] her with a surge of joy" (118). *Fun Home* critic Marjorie Allison notes that Alison not only realizes she is like the butch woman but she identifies with her rather than with traditional femininity, thereby urging readers to respect gender differences that are usually marginalized (92). This occasion propels Alison into a realm of discovery—heteronormativity is not absolute—while also laying the foundation for the realization that indeed women's sexual orientations are fluid. Little by little, gradually over the years, Bechdel details young Alison's escaping the constricting ideals associated with gender and heterosexual love; hence, in retrospect Bechdel asserts, "[T]he vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years" (119).



Figure 3

Further inspection of the bulldyke, “a most unsettling sight,” for Bruce, exposes that Alison was not the only character with noticeably expressive eyeballs. Bechdel writes that perhaps the sighting haunted her father and she illustrates his facial expressions as worried. Bruce glances over his shoulder to glare at the bulldyke and upon reengaging with Alison, his jaw line protrudes as his eyebrows and stern eyes demand denial on Alison’s behalf. The panel reveals Bruce’s swift intention to leave the luncheonette, his eyes facing forward with determination to leave the afternoon in the past while pulling young Alison along. Likewise, Jennifer Lemberg notices Bruce’s eyes and claims “this emphasis on looking in these panels suggests the overwhelming visibility Bechdel assigns to this figure and engages us in seeing the connection between Alison and the bulldyke that her father is anxious to erase” (136-137). Just

as Bruce is quick to dismiss his daughter's interest in this butch lesbian figure, suppression of emotion then becomes a constant in the Bechdel household.

Suppression of emotion prevails throughout Alison's early life and eventually that silence, which is associated with sexual repression, causes her to act out. When she first encountered a cadaver at her family's funeral home, Alison, unlike her father, was not accustomed to suppressing feelings. With a dead body on the table, Bruce requests Alison's assistance and she is met with exposed genitals and the cadaver's chest spilt open. Bechdel recalls "I studiously betrayed no emotion" (44). This studious avoiding of emotions characterizes the Bechdel family. Unable to express her emotions, Alison resorts to "acting out." Alison exists within a household that evades emotion and seemingly values heteronormativity. Her suppression of emotion is directly inherited from her father and her home life induces counterproductive "acting out" as a response to trauma. As previously stated, Dominick LaCapra's concept of "acting out" involves one unconsciously being driven to repeat destructive behavior because of trauma. Alison's "acting out" arrives in the form of obsessive-compulsive disorder that prevents her from living fully in the present.

Alison acts out—succumbing to repetitively destructive behavior—in an effort to understand her own self, and in an effort to exude control over the heteronormative home in which she resides. Bechdel writes, "My actual obsessive-compulsive disorder began when I was ten" (135). First, Alison's obsessive-compulsive phenomenon begins in an attempt to manipulate the leaky bathtub facet, but then she begins to strictly avoid odd numbers and multiples of thirteen, and eventually crossing thresholds becomes a time-consuming process as well. Alison is depicted counting everything, and developing a specific routine she lives by. Bechdel shares, "at the end of the day, if I undressed in the wrong order, I had to put my clothes back on and start

again” (137). Alison’s obsessive-compulsive disorder disrupts her ability to function. She is unsure about the changes she is experiencing associated with adolescence and is simultaneously attempting to understand her sexuality, neither of which makes sense at this point in her life. Thus, Bechdel depicts young Alison “acting out,” repeating compulsive behaviors, as a consequence of her traumatic upbringing. Alison, accustomed to suppressing emotion, is unable to verbally express her concerns, and therefore resorts to compulsive physical expressions of control.

Clearly struggling, Alison’s physically noticeable “acting out” finally gains the attention of her parents. Alison’s father gives her a diary during the high-point of her obsessive-compulsive behaviors in an attempt to help instill confidence in her or encourage her to regain control (140). However, Alison cannot simply write down daily events because she is never sure what is real, so she writes “I think” next to all her sentences. Bechdel pens, “It was sort of an epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” and further confesses: “All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those” (141). Bechdel describes a growing gap between her words and their meaning, “I was so consumed with anxiety” (142). She feels uncertain regarding the validity of her own words because she lives in a family full of deceptions and secrets; even though those words portrayed Alison’s version of the truth, she feels they were not the complete truth. Thus, when Alison begins writing in her diary, her OCD can finally be understood as a result of discomfort with her own self, living in a family that suppresses the truth about same-sex desire. The diary uncovers Alison’s disassociation from her own knowledge and suggests that she cannot find a greater truth about her own gender identity or same-sex desire within her family. Alison exists within a world that has been created on her behalf. Homophobia and heteronormativity are

simultaneously at work throughout *Fun Home*, and as a member of the Bechdel family, silence about genuine feelings prevails. Thus, Alison is traumatized by the world in which she lives because she does not understand how any of the cultural and societal regulations came to be nor can she openly question them. Alison's "acting out" stems from containment in a heteronormative culture that stigmatizes sexual differences of any kind, yet she recognizes OCD is holding her back and works to allay her anxiety.

Even as Alison's obsessive-compulsive behaviors are a form of "acting out" that persists over time, LaCapra claims that "working through" can be simultaneously taking place during this unconscious response to trauma. Dominick LaCapra explains "working through" as a countervailing force, as the desirable result when processing trauma: "In the working-through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future" ("Interview" 2). It's via the "working through" that one acquires the possibility of agency ("Interview" 3). Alison's discovery of the self-induced orgasm aligns with the beginning of her talents as a graphic artist and both signify critical distance from society's incessant social stigmas. In the weeks following her first menstrual cycle, and after the realization that ignoring her monthly bleeding would not make the matter disappear, Alison illustrates her own fantasies while also mastering the art of masturbation (170-171). Bechdel describes confidence emerging within her own being and as Jennifer Lemberg states: "Bechdel uses her art to foreground instances of seeing during which she achieves clarity about her own needs and fantasies" (135). Alison begins "working through" by owning her thoughts and accepting both a physical and emotional response to them. No longer does Alison doubt what her mind produces but rather trusts that she is capable of gaining awareness of her identity. Instead of resisting non-heteronormative desire and pleasure, Alison embraces them, beginning with her

explorations in autoerotic pleasure and continuing, once she leaves home, with explorations in same-sex pleasure.

Bechdel acknowledges the oppression associated with her upbringing in the small town of Beech Creek and declares her sexuality in college after escaping the confines of her home and home town. Bechdel writes, “My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind.” (74) While Bechdel had yet to confirm her realization with sexual activity, she remembers “having qualms since I was thirteen” and further recalls first stumbling across the alarming prominence of the word “lesbian” in her dictionary (74). No doubt a product of her English teacher parents, Alison finds comfort in literature and even looks up “homosexuality” in the card catalog at the library (75). While Alison begins “working through” by conducting research into the literary world, thus confirming her knowledge and same-sex desire among the literary greats, she soon realizes that independent bookish research provided only a provisional world in which to exist: “It became clear I was going to have to leave this academic plane and enter the human fray” (76). Hence, Alison continues “working through” by taking steps to find a physical human community. Instead of reverting within herself and resorting to a life of hiding, Alison ventures to “work through” her same-sex desire by searching out human connection.

Expecting her admission of same-sex desire to be a validation of her individuality, Alison becomes more aligned with her family than ever imaginable. Alison makes the brave declaration to her parents and in the blink of an eye is met with both resistance and her family’s biggest secret. Bechdel reflects that at the time of her letter home, “My homosexuality remained at that point purely theoretical, an untested hypothesis. But it was a hypothesis so thorough and convincing that I saw no need not to share immediately” (58). Immediately afterward, Bechdel

depicts Alison in the fetal position on the floor clinging tightly to the phone as her father's same-sex experiences are revealed: "I had imagined my confession as emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit" (59). Indeed, overshadowed by the new knowledge of her father's long time secret, Alison throws herself into becoming the best lesbian she can be. Alison steadily "works through" her same-sex desire by joining the gay union at her university and while at first taking on a silent role of observation, as her family's secrets—particularly her father's hidden sexuality—emerge, so does Alison's involvement in this organization. She volunteers to distribute flyers, attends more social events, such as a gay dance, and finally finds herself immersed between more than just sheets (see Figure 4).



Figure 4

Between her first girlfriend's legs, Alison finds her lesbian desire—which she previously declared without any experiential evidence—to be true (80). Yet, Alison's announcement, instead of liberating her from Beech Creek, pulls her back into her family's drama. Although she works toward independence, the new knowledge that her father had been "acting out" his same-sex desires for years forces Bechdel to revisit just how exactly her parents came to be a family in the first place.

Bechdel shies away from denouncing her family and childhood home. She confesses that while it would be easy enough to dismiss her early life, complete with a closeted father, as a “sham,” Bechdel rejects that notion. Indeed, the Bechdels were a family and sincerely did operate within the walls of that immaculate house. That is not to say, however, that Bechdel claims normalcy for her family. Church attendance was perhaps only in an effort to snap the perfect photograph, and any notion of fun in this home was immediately halted if the décor—which Bruce so obsessively staged—was threatened (16-18). Bechdel discloses a constant tension within her childhood home as well as hidden beneath bursts of kindness from her father and equally unpredictable angry rages (21). While the Bechdel’s lack of communication has previously been noted, their lack of emotional expressiveness is another strange, even sad, factor that drives their family dynamic. Bechdel mentions that showing her father any attention was a gamble: “We were not a physically expressive family, to say the least. But once I was unaccountably moved to kiss my father good night.” This desire is followed by embarrassment as Alison flees the room after awkwardly attempting to kiss her father’s hand, as if he were a bishop (19). Alison was not the only one stricken with embarrassment; Bechdel recalls: “My parents seemed almost embarrassed by the fact of their marriage” (67). Hindsight suggests that perhaps embarrassment ensued because their love was only an act, and one that had lasted far too long. It is no wonder Bechdel remembers being “astonished and discomforted” on the rare occasion that her parents displayed affection towards one another; as if they merely existed within the house together, raising children together but only enduring each other’s presence. A panel depicts the three siblings perched on the stairs as their parents argue, and Alison’s mother insists, “I’m warning you. You can’t keep doing this.” To this her father responds, “I’ll do whatever I goddamn please” (68). Alison’s upbringing proved rigid and lonely; in fact Monica

Pearl, a scholar on graphic novels, notes that the extremely “atomized” family is best represented by a panel in which each family member is in a separate room, pursuing individual projects, “as in an artists’ colony” rather than in the stereotypical or “fantasized” family (286). Despite this “atomized” family, Bechdel continuously draws parallels between herself and her father. Regardless of their discrepancies during his time alive, their similarities are unavoidable and despite Bechdel’s resorting to guesswork about most of her father’s same-sex behavior, this memoir is about both of their explorations into self and identity. While only one of them manages to claim her identity as legitimate and deserving of love, it becomes evident that father and daughter share much more than blood. Bechdel recalls a vivid dream just two nights before her father dies; Alison is stricken by the beauty of a sunset and races up a hill to reach the top and achieve a view free of trees. Her father fails to hurry and ultimately misses the sunset, reaching the peak just as the sun dips below the horizon. It is tragic that Bruce misses the sunset and also his opportunity to live an honest, open life. Instead, he fails to embrace his same-sex desire and dies a closeted man, one who upholds the heteronormative attitudes in his society (123). This particular passage suggests that while Bruce is incapable of “working through” his same-sex desire, his daughter Alison reaches actualization. As Pearl suggests, the memoir marks a generation divide “in the middle of the twentieth century” created by “a closet door: firmly shut then creaking open” (292). Pearl claims that coming out is a “speech act” more than a “sexual act” in that it “announces homosexuality” and “produces it” (292). Bechdel’s memoir can be seen as prying open that closet door as it announces, and in turn produces, butch lesbian sexuality.

Bechdel explores the ongoing impact of traumatic homophobic histories on successive generations in the mid-twentieth century. Bechdel describes *Fun Home* as “[a] narrative of

injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say that, in fact, this is my father's story. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia" (196). Thus, Bruce deserves more than being, quite literally, written off as yet another stereotypical male who succumbed to systematic oppression and sacrificed his life; in fact, *Fun Home* works to uncover the oppressive structures of homophobia and heterosexism in an effort to undo those sinister dichotomies. Instead of deeming her father a closeted victim, Bechdel dares to develop her own understanding through narrative form and encourages her readers to do the same.

For Bechdel, art acts as reparation and provides the ability to understand the connections between her father's life and her own in an effort to work through the trauma that can accompany queer identity. *Fun Home* not only addresses Bruce's trauma and its effect on his family, but also acts as the artist's claim to authority, the representation of her own story. Trauma theorist Judith Herman affirms the action of telling a story as the basic principle of empowerment for those who have experienced trauma in their lives (175.) Furthermore, reconstructing the trauma into narrative form often incorporates life experiences into a coherent story that "puts trauma in its place" so that it does not have to continually disrupt the present, causing one to "act out" in destructive ways. Bechdel reflects on her entire maturation process, including her complex relationship to her troubled father, providing childhood context and adult reflections upon the past to readers. Herman continues to elaborate that incorporating both actions and emotions in the narration of traumatic experiences is essential to healing; Bechdel allows access into the deepest depths of her uncertainty, her complicated emotions about her father, and her struggles to understand her sexuality. In regards to her own growing pains and

gradually learning her father's secrets, Bechdel shares intimate moments within the pages of *Fun Home* both in literary and pictorial form.

Bechdel uses a recursive structure in *Fun Home*, first mentioning a specific memory and returning pages later to elaborate upon it allowing her readers to be active participants. Instead of producing a linear text, Bechdel produces panels from her memory that vary in size and avoid chronology which forces readers to revisit past events, jumping back and forth in time, much like one's own memory functions. As Allison suggests: "[R]eaders who face the challenge of the material Bechdel presents are forced to make choices, conscious or not, about what line of narration to follow and how to do it" (Allison 76-79). Hence, just as Bechdel has worked to construct this memoir, readers, too, have an equally demanding duty and a translation to complete on their own. The reader has to work to decide which panels to study for clues, which text aligns with which illustration and how to make sense of the book as a whole; this graphic novel requires much attention because instead of simply reading words, the reader must also engage their visual imagination and literally look deeply into each scenario Bechdel presents in her illustrations. As Allison says of the reading experience of graphic novels, "By seeing and reading themselves into the story, readers can actively reimagine how the world is constructed and how they are similar to and different from the world the writers present. What has been marginalized is brought to the centre and given a privileged place in these stories" (Allison 74). Hence, in Bechdel's graphic-memoir testimony, she integrates past traumatic events into her life's story, and, by extension, affords readers the opportunity to envision themselves in a fictional world that affords human insight into the lives of people who are marginalized and traumatized because of their sexual identity.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* critiques the way in which America, from 1950s forward, pathologizes homosexuality and instills heteronormativity as absolute, causing damage to the individual. By extending trauma theory beyond its original boundaries, Brown's theory of insidious trauma creates understanding of how Bechdel represents the damaging effects of her father's internalized homophobia. Engagement with hegemonic institutions, discourses, and systems ultimately harms and impedes Bruce's ability to love. Bruce never comes to terms with his sexuality; instead he settles for heteronormative marriage, has children, and resorts to "acting out" the consequences of his internalized homophobia by living a closeted life. In an act that Bechdel believes was suicidal, Bruce steps in front of a delivery truck shortly after Alison comes out as a lesbian and his wife shares with Alison the secret of his closeted existence. Bruce dies before ever confronting his trauma and working it through fully.

While her father struggles to live—let alone love—without his culture's unrelenting heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, Alison cultivates her own resistance to such oppression. Rendering her own life into narrative form affords Bechdel a kind of healing from the trauma that she experienced as the child of a closeted gay father who commits suicide and as a young lesbian attempting to find self-acceptance in a stifling, homophobic small town. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* redefines the connections between memory and history, private experience and public life, as well as individual loss and collective trauma. *Fun Home* queers the perspective on trauma and illuminates the relation between the catastrophic events that shatter lives and the everyday, hidden or insidious traumas that can damage the lives of LGBTQ persons. Toni Morrison once said: "I suppose all artists have either to bear witness or effect change—improvement—take cataracts off people's eyes in an accessible way. It may be painful, but that's [her] job—to enlighten and to strengthen"; so even though creating this memoir proved

trying for Bechdel, reflecting on her past, on her relationship with her father, ultimately *Fun Home* provides healing for her and a “taking off of cataracts” from the eyes of readers who may not see the hidden damage done by homophobia (Matus 13). *Fun Home* challenges cultural and sexual hegemony; it upsets heteronormative culture. Despite the secrets her father kept, despite the ways in which he was not emotionally available to his children, and despite his suicide, Bechdel finally realizes through the related processes of memory and narration that “in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232).

Conclusion

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, one published in pre-Stonewall 1956 and the other post-Stonewall 2006, convey the psychically traumatic consequences of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* should not solely be interpreted as a 1950s novel stunted by the hegemonic discourses of the Cold War in which an American bi-sexual man flees to Paris in order to resurrect his sexual identity. On the contrary, Baldwin's protagonist, David, affords understanding on a larger social scale, and should be understood as transgressing the sexual oppression and discrimination imposed by a heteronormative society that is still present in some forms today. Likewise, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* attests that sexual struggles have no preference in age, gender, or decade. No matter the cultural milieu, heteronormativity continues to maintain the façade of superiority and Bechdel's testimony portrays that very concept as distorted and in desperate need of re-evaluation. David, Bruce, and Alison all endure the insidious trauma caused by the sinister dichotomies of a homophobic world.

These two texts introduce characters whose courage to defy cultural customs deserves attention. Their efforts to situate themselves in a harsh society fraught with hate toward their sexuality can have detrimental and even fatal results as exhibited by Bruce. David, however, assumes the potential to heal and Alison triumphs to find love, disregarding socially accepted heteronormativity to pursue her own desire. To find love in this world is rare. And when someone is fortunate enough to love, no one should condemn or demonize what comes naturally, the love that is pure. This thesis establishes the need for those struggling with insidious trauma, suffering under society's incessant heteronormativity, to narrate their story. Literature, no matter the form—textual or graphic or both—allows other souls the realization that they are not alone.

Furthermore, literature allows those who feel no connection to others who suffer discrimination because of their sexuality the opportunity to evaluate their own actions and determine if perhaps they can work to become a part of the solution, instead of perpetuating the problem of homophobia and heterosexism.

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