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APPREHENDING GHOSTS: INVISIBILITY AND MOURNING IN ALISON BECHDEL'S FUN HOME (2006)

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Abstract: In the context of the larger conversation on durability and transience this volume proposes, this paper examines not how much one can enhance the durability of something whose nature is transient, but how one can apprehend that which has already given the measure of its fleetingness and transitioned into another state, beyond visibility and palpable presence. The space this paper is examining is that of trauma, mourning, and invisibility, as well as the representability and apprehension of the invisible within one of the most important American graphic memoirs, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), in the context of other post-traumatic graphic memoirs (i.e. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own*, Alissa Torres and Sungyoon Choi's *American Widow*, and C. Tyler's *You'll Never Know*). The theoretical background of this discussion comprises, among others, dialogues with Roland Barthes' work on photography and mourning from *Camera Lucida* (1981), Jacques Derrida's reading of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* from *The Work of Mourning* (2001), Judith Butler's work on representability, framing and grief from *Frames of War* (2009), as well as Peggy Phelan's performative writing on death and invisibility from *Mourning Sex* (1997).

This paper examines the spaces of invisibility within the post-traumatic autobiographical scenarios drawn in Alison Bechdel's acclaimed graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006), in order to unveil and challenge the norms which regulate representability and death, as well as those regulations which predicate post-mortem presence and dictate what it means to mourn appropriately. My hypothesis is that the blanks of the inherently fragmentary account offered by the medium of comics manage to add something to the map of more or less chronological living and loss that is the autographic gesture, and that this supplement is actually the discovery of what has always already been there, a *hic sunt leones* territory where a meeting between the dead and the living can be performed, beyond life and visibility.

Whenever one examines possible access routes through visuality and autobiographical discourse into a space where the living may once again recognize the dead,¹ and through that recognition, mend a broken line of communication, we must go back to Roland Barthes and his important work on mourning in *Camera Lucida*. **Recognition**, in Barthes' case, is produced in spite of what he witnessed of his mother while she was alive. The famously invisible Winter Garden Photograph contained an image of the mother he had never actually seen when she was still with him, but still it was the only one where he found her again. What I am examining in this paper is the contribution made by Bechdel's post-traumatic graphic memoir to this sad game of recognition that Barthes proposes.

That Ghostly Condition

In Bechdel's *Fun Home*, the ghost is as much a political figure signaling past violence, unjust invisibility and the dangers of amnesia, as an emanation of the traumatic experience, a silent lingering

¹ But, unfortunately, not the other way round, as Derrida notes in the *Work of Mourning*.

presence that haunts the survivor; both an uncontrollable outside force (a common post-traumatic effect) and a constituent element of the subject, a trace whose constant revisitation is essential to the subject (herself constructed as a trace of her dead father and the pre-Stonewall gay community he stands for). In a sense, the autographic subject of these post-traumatic narratives is both haunted and a ghost within the geography of mourning and recuperation s/he inhabits.

I am thus reading haunting, as proposed by Avery Gordon, as the process through which, quite simply, visibility is granted to the invisible. In other words, when the subject allows her/himself to be haunted, presence is conjured. Just as photography is believed to be a confirmation of presence (Sontag, Barthes), the haunting confirms absence (cf. Avery 8). Gordon also associates the ghost with an affective force which pulls us “into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition” (63), thus offers my own work a means of accessing an absent memory/past/person who remains unavailable through the most frequent means of visual representation.

I am proposing here that a state of repeated if not constant breakage and woundedness is an appropriate strategy in this context. The fact that there is no open suggestion anywhere that this memoir is written with the purpose of putting pain in the closet thus puts forward the loving desire not to lose touch with past realities which produce most valuable wounds, both personal and political. In this case, mourning has implicit political effects. For instance, in *Fun Home* the father is introduced from the very beginning as a half-fictionalized figure, a living ghost, rendered invisible by his closeted homosexuality and mourned in advance by a daughter who both loved him greatly and suffered from his sudden outbursts of angry frustration. When Bechdel first mentions the major traumatic moment of the book, her father’s death, she announces it as a suicide, although she later concedes that there is no palpable evidence to support it (hence, she gives six alternative scenarios). What remains, though, as a pivot around which these conflicting theories are constructed, is the sentiment of anticipated loss:

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

To put it differently, this is where Bechdel’s book, I would like to argue, goes beyond autobiographical practices and into historical revisionism. **Haunting**, in the case of Bechdel’s narrative, is a meditation on and work with both **vision** and **visibility**. In this retrospective narrative where we are not given one, but several imagined alternatives to events nobody but the dead witnessed, **vision** implies the willingness of finding a way of seeing into the past which allows haunting and impersonation. **Visibility** is the political result of this kind of vision. Quite tellingly, Bechdel’s is also a graphic memoir which hovers between photography and drawing as means of representation.

Bechdel thus attempts not only a personal work of mourning and recuperation, but also a political one. By impersonating the father, she positions herself in the pre-Stonewall age and takes upon her a venture in postmemory (cf. Hirsch), although her father’s fragmented narrative prevents her from using his stories to accomplish this labor of love. Along with her masculine suit, she appropriates her father’s shame and projects another grim mourning scenario during the AIDS crisis; she redraws the map of America as a long road from Christopher Street to the Castro, and places her own trajectory as a lesbian woman long before the time she was born:

When I try to project what dad’s life might have been like if he hadn’t died in 1980, I don’t get very far. If he’d lived into those early years of AIDS, I tell myself, I might very well have lost him anyway, and

in a more painful and protracted fashion. Indeed, in that scenario, I might have lost my mother too. Perhaps I'm being histrionic, trying to displace my actual grief with this imaginary trauma. (...) Or maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say, in fact, that this **is** my father's story. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia. But that's a problematic line of thought. For one thing, it makes it harder for me to blame him. (195-6)

By impersonating a ghost, she lends it a body - her own - which she offers up for the writing of the past history of invisibility. Also, by drawing universalizing shapes, she invites both the reader's identification with the palpable social ghosts of the gay community and suggests her own disidentification (cf. Munoz) with her father's world view. The fact that ghosts transform the living is not debatable, and Gordon writes an entire book about particularly these transformations. The question is, rather, how to make sure that this transformation does take place at all times.

Mourning and Visibility

It is without a doubt that the parameters of mourning and haunting are mapped within a theoretical frame wherein any academic investigation must place itself if it does not wish to arouse suspicions of eccentricity. However, this does not mean that these parameters are fixed or easily locatable. If we follow Judith Butler's proposal from *Frames of War*, that it is always some invisible frailty that lies within the very structure of the frame one applies to recognize a life *as* a (grievable) life, then it becomes easier to accept that the map containing the route towards the unremembered or absent may be constantly shifting within some unlocatable dimension. The hypothesis that the wound – or *punctum* – may lead the way is important but not sufficient. When Derrida notices that the “uncoded” *punctum* haunts the *studium* with its “homogenous objectivity” (cf. *Camera Lucida* 55), he must also admit that this flexibility or fleetingness of the *punctum* contaminates the stable space of the *studium* and obfuscates visibility in favor of ecstasy, although, paradoxically, it is through vision that the *punctum* may become available to us: “We are prey to the ghostly power of the supplement and it is this unlocatable site that gives rise to the specter (...)” (41). Thus, Derrida implicitly proposes the blurring of boundaries between – as Butler would put it – what qualifies as a life and what qualifies as a death, and although he fails to regain access to his suddenly departed friend, Roland Barthes,² he undertakes this important theoretical gesture which places the location of the dead within the *I* of the living: “Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the *punctum* in the *studium*, the completely other, dead, living in me. This concept of the photograph *photographs* every conceptual opposition; it captures a relationship of haunting that is perhaps constitutive of every logic” (42).

At the same time, interestingly enough, Derrida reminds himself and us that Barthes places love outside any system of representation: “The suspension of images must be the very space of love, its music (*CL* 72).” What does this imply in terms of reconnecting with a beloved ghost? So far, based on all these readings, the route towards apprehension begins in the wound produced in front of a visual representation

² Although he begins his last paragraph with the acknowledged failure of memory, he promises to return, a promise which, in the face of sudden accidental death, is inevitable: “I still cannot remember when I read or heard his name for the first time and then how he became one for me. But anamnesis, even if it breaks off always too soon, promises itself each time to begin again, it remains to come” (67).

such as photography, but after the initial dismantling of existing norms of recognition that the *punctum*³ produces, the rest of the road becomes lost in an unmapped space of invisibility.

This type of experience, however, Derrida reminds us, exists within a utopian space whose conditions of reproducibility are predicated upon the constantly shifting frames of death, mourning, and representation: “The impossible, sometimes, by chance, becomes possible: as a utopia. This is in fact what he said before his death, though for him, of the Winter Garden Photograph. Beyond analogies, “it achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being” (CL 71). He said this uniquely, turning toward his mother and not toward the Mother” (46). Inhabiting this utopian space can only be temporary but at the same time, through repetition, it can become not only a space where rehearsal for death (see Phelan’s “Francesca Woodman’s Photography: Death and the Image One More Time”) can be enacted, but also a bearable space which allows the survivor to be neither consumed by nor remain ignorant of the extent of his/her loss. This type of reconnection to “some unique and irreplaceable referent” (61) can actually be practiced – or is actually constantly exercised – by interconnecting subjects in the most banal daily exchanges:

As long as we do not hold to some naïve and “realist” referentialism it is the relation to some unique and irreplaceable referent that *interests* us and animates our most sound and studied readings: what took place only once, while dividing itself already (...). The photographic apparatus reminds us of this irreducible referential by means of a very powerful telescoping. (...)

The metonymic force thus divides the referential trait, suspends the referent and leaves it to be desired, while still maintaining the reference. It is at work in the most loyal of friendships; it plunges the destination into mourning while at the same time engaging it. (Derrida 61)

It is precisely this type of dynamics that Bechdel’s *Fun Home* attempts to problematize, embedded as it is within a larger crisis of representation and the subsequent breakage of frames Butler was discussing. This may be one additional reason why this narrative – which, again, relies on structural frames that must always be made and remade to accommodate narration and point the way towards the unsaid and invisible – is so preoccupied with haunting and its potentialities:

As frames break from themselves in order to install themselves, other possibilities for apprehension emerge. When those frames that govern the relative and differential recognizability of lives come apart – as part of the very mechanism of their circulation – it becomes possible to apprehend something about what or who is living but has not been generally “recognized” as a life. What is this specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside?” (Butler 8)

In what follows, I will be examining precisely those instances which deal with how to represent the unrepresentable, the gap in meaning, the space between ourselves and our own shattering as we lie suspended in it, contemplating the utter darkness of inevitable loss. As Derrida pointed out, in a sense we are all placed in downward flight toward an inevitable end-point, but certain representational modes (in this case, photography) have a special role in *reminding* us of this state. Trauma breaks the subject up,

³ I am here using *punctum*, after Derrida, by departing from Barthes’ use (closely related to photography) but extending it to that unique detail which pricks/wounds one. Derrida locates the *punctum* at the tip of the wound created by unique experience/presence: “Contrapunctal theory or a procession of stigmata: a wound no doubt comes in (the) place of the point signed by singularity, in (the) place of the point signed by singularity, in (the) place of its very instant (*stigmē*), at its point, its tip. But in (the) place of this event, place is given over, for the same wound, to substitution, which repeats itself there, retaining of the irreplaceable only a past desire” (67).

and other breakages ensue, such as linguistic and visual representability. Art Spiegelman translates this process several times in *Maus*: when the first mice are seen hanging in the Jewish ghetto, in “Prisoner on Hell Planet,” when he finds out his mother has committed suicide, another type of breakage when Art shrinks before his shrink (sic!) who is also a Holocaust survivor, and finally and perhaps most memorably, Vladek’s suddenly magnified body covering two thirds of the printed page and suddenly separated by gutters like a large statue contemplating the ruins of what had once been a complete family. Also, Spiegelman constantly breaks the frame of his horizontal narrative, most noticeably with photographs he usually places obliquely and over the frames. Similarly, Alison Bechdel draws the severed panel containing her frame from behind, as she is contemplating her father’s lifeless form in the casket, the gutter passing right through the middle of her head and separating it in two. On the other hand, in *We are on Our Own* and *American Widow*, Sungyoon Choi and Miriam Katin choose dark wide gutters, much wider than the panels themselves, and also blank spaces, instead of breaking up the frame or the characters. C. Tyler also constantly draws outside frames and dispenses with panels altogether, particularly in her dream sequences or in those pages where she experiences strong pain and attempts to construct a retrospective cause-and-effect discourse to account for her present misery (and which, she strongly implies, goes back to unresolved traumas and unacknowledged ghosts from her father’s generation). C. Tyler’s narrative is also, in these particular panels, connected by large swishing lines which are usually conventionally employed to suggest a swaying movement such as that of tree branches when the wind is blowing. In this context, though, they indicate a state of perpetual downward movement, in more or less slow motion. Unanchored by a narrative which might bring some solid justification for her father’s prolonged absence from her life, C. Tyler drifts and, every now and then, touches bottom.

Impersonation and Performativity

Barthes shifts the focus from the referent to “presence” when he discusses the umbilical connection between photography and reality. In a similar manner, Peggy Phelan, in making the case for “performative writing,” signals a type of autobiographical discourse whose mimetic thrust is not aimed towards some reenactment of the event, but towards an evocation of that event’s “affective force” (*Mourning Sex* 12). At the same time, Phelan asks again and again the heavy question of the cure, which seems to preoccupy the other theoreticians I am in conversation with less. It is, nonetheless, one of the more difficult things to balance in any discussion of the post-traumatic autobiographical discourses here, so deeply embedded in the mourning process with the explicit purpose of mending broken connections that the “cure” becomes morally suspect and difficult to separate from amnesia. However, Bechdel’s *Fun Home* does not explicitly or causally relate visual and narrative representation with a post-traumatic cure (unlike, for instance, those narratives which focus on the recovery from a terminal illness, such as Brian Fies’ *Mom’s Cancer*). It is rather the other way around. The question here is not how to eliminate ghosts and accommodate suffering within a bearable frame, but rather how to see and incorporate what one cannot remember and also what one is no longer or was actually not ever visually accessible. This effort presupposes a penchant for or generous offering of what Hirsch referred to as an evacuation of the self (22) in favor of an other’s memories and suffering, and also a type of imaginative investment with the unseen which requires skills which belong to the performative regime of (self-)representation. From this perspective, Phelan’s work is particularly pertinent, especially her essay – briefly mentioned above – on rehearsed death and self-representation (dealing with American photographer Francesca Woodman) and her work on memory, performativity, and sexuality (from *Mourning Sex*). Her writing (itself “performative”) comes closest to enacting a meeting between the mourner and her object of desire.

This paper has been revolving around the idea that it is possible to find the right parameters for the staging of an encounter between ghosts and those haunted by them, and that this meeting can – through constant woundedness and mourning – be incorporated within the frame of what is perceived as a life. Perhaps in the process this framing might break, but it is ultimately in the breakages of our iron-clad geography that one can hope to find the absent and unseen. At this point in my research, performativity plays an important part of my discourse, and the context in which it is possible to stage this performance appears so far to be made up of blanks and breakages. In this space, the body figures as an agent of change, but only to the point where it is involved in performative events and represented as such. The performances I shall be looking at here are gestures of recuperation and sometimes incorporation: Alison Bechdel impersonates her father and takes pictures of herself as Bruce Bechdel before she draws many if not all of her scenes. The structural exercise performed by most autobiographies (the doubling of the self, cf. Julia Watson's "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*") is here supplemented by the doubling of the self AS the father. In other words, this autobiographical account does not introduce the image of the *I* of the narrator, as Derrida would put it, as the main source of the autobiographical impulse, which is presented as actually lying elsewhere, in the person of an other who, for various reasons, cannot speak or be seen. When the reason is absence through death, the process of mourning adds even more force to an already strong performative impulse towards vicarious living. This impulse is doubled by the process of drawing the other and oneself in comic book format.

The work of memory and mourning, performance (loosely defined by Mieke Bal as "playing a role, dancing, singing, executing a piece of music" (176)) has an interesting relationship to performativity (Bal uses Austin's definition to read it as "the unique occurrence of an act in the here-and-now" or "the moment when known words detach themselves from both their sleep in dictionaries and people's linguistic competence, to be launched as weapons or seductions, exercising their weight, striking force, and charm in the present only, between singular subjects" (idem)) which also relies on memorized cultural scenarios for its effectiveness. By insisting on the unavoidable and necessary intermingling of the two concepts, it follows that Bal proposes that during a performative gesture an act is performed which alters the fabric of the way we perceive reality.

By speaking in place of an other who is absent but whose discourse the narrator once had some measure of access to, imperfect though it may have been, Alison Bechdel places herself in that area between memory, documentary reconstruction, and imaginative improvisation (both visual and factual) which is characteristic of the performative event. By re-placing her absent father, she fills no holes, but rather reveals them, in the tortured hide-and-seek game that is the fragmented genre of the graphic narrative, its gaps exposed and openly hiding the untold. The panels, filled as they are with the visual representation of the inaccessible, construct the outline and not the center of the blank stage of the gutters, a stage with no props where the spectacle of loss is performed, as Phelan thought desirable as well:

The desire to preserve and represent the performance event⁴ is a desire we should resist. For what one otherwise preserves is an illustrated corpse, a pop-up anatomical drawing that stands in for the thing that one most wants to save, the embodied performance. (...) My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we still want to touch than the restored illustration can. Or at least the hollow of the outline might allow us to understand why we long to hold bodies that are gone. (Phelan 3)

In Bechdel's work of mourning, touching the dead can only be performed through the mediation of their traces. This is why Bechdel constantly insists on her resemblance with her father, doubled by her

⁴ It is already clear that in this paper I am reading the initial performance event (the first time the play was staged) as the actual encounter with the body which is missing when that body was still accessible.

work method in which she plays the part of the dead father in photographs which later serve as the basis for another replacement (that of herself as the father in the photograph by the drawn image of her father as a cartoon).

The traces left by departed or otherwise inaccessible bodies form the outline of a blank space which holds the absence responsible for the fracturing of the world of the subject. In the case of the post-traumatic narrative I am analyzing here, the performative force of the autobiography comes from the fact that Bechdel introduces herself as a trace of her father's body, despite the apparently contradictory presence of the reality of her own (but again, as a queer body, it is more familiar to prescriptive invisibility than a normative one). Since one's body as a trace as well as other traces left by the dead are themselves contaminated by the tantalizing absence-presence of the ghost, this results in the lodging of invisibility in the substance of the flesh of the mourner,⁵ an "I am not here" which both serves to rehearse death and question the parameters of the visible in the world around. In some cases, it may also postpone or alter the chronology of conventional living, changing the prescriptive (hetero)normative division of life into well-established units (cf. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*). Survival in this case presupposes a breakage of the frames through which one reads life and death.

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⁵ I must – again – draw attention to the fact that Hirsch also diagnosed this condition as the "vacating of the self" of the living.