



Psychological Diffusions: The Cognitive Turn in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*

Genie Giaimo

Northeastern University

ABSTRACT

Graphic artist Alison Bechdel has enjoyed widespread success since the publication of her first long form autobiographical comic *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). Already, there is a substantial body of criticism on Bechdel that addresses her cerebral writing style, her personal archive, and her contributions to the graphic narrative form. Lauded for her realistic reproduction of ephemera such as letters, maps, photographs, and marginalia, critics have overlooked moments in which these documents—and her readings of events in her family—fail to produce meaning. In her second graphic narrative, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), Bechdel relies upon modernist texts and psychoanalysis in order to represent her complicated relationship with her mother, Helen. Yet, as in *Fun Home* when the archive fails to explain the circumstances that culminated in her father's death, psychoanalysis in *Are You My Mother?* impedes Alison in her quest to understand how her relationship with her mother has affected her adult life: in particular, her craft and her romantic relationships. This paper argues that Bechdel's reliance on psychoanalysis to shape her narrative overshadows a stronger and more telling presence of precepts commonly associated with cognitive science and neuroscience. In the narrative, Alison articulates a number of cognitive theories, such as pattern making and theory of mind, as well as neurological concepts such as memory consolidation and reconsolidation that better account for the events of the text—and the impulse to tell life narrative—than psychoanalysis. Part of a growing number of texts that are preoccupied with how the mind/brain give rise to autobiographical identity and narrative form, *Are You My Mother?* challenges the referential certainty of the life narrative genre in conceptually novel and aesthetically complex ways.

Keywords: contemporary American life writing, cognitive theory, comics, neuroscience, identity, memory

1. THE RISING STAR OF ALISON BECHDEL

Alison Bechdel is an American cartoonist who first came to prominence for her long-running and syndicated comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (2008, pp. 1983–2008). A Feminist and LGBT activist, *Dykes* was compiled into various collections by independent press, Firebrand Books. However, she is perhaps most well known for popularizing the autobiographical graphic narrative—a genre that, until Art Spiegelman’s publication of *Maus* in 1991, saw little mainstream and critical attention. Bechdel is part of a cadre of artists who have taken the form and content of comics to new levels of intellectual and political engagement. Indeed, female cartoonists such as Lynda Barry, Phoebe Gloeckner, Joyce Farmer, and Aline Kominsky-Crumb were creating autobiographical and semi-autobiographical comics long before such current luminaries of the field, such as Bechdel and Iranian-born French cartoonist Marjane Satrapi, arrived on the scene. However, Bechdel’s success has been stratospheric and she is often hailed as bringing literary sophistication as well as aesthetic and technical rigor—one might say obsession—to the production of autobiographical long-form comics.

Her graphic narratives take years to complete. The first, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), took 7 years to create perhaps because of Bechdel’s attention to minute detail. Comprised of recreated maps, newspapers, photographs, diary entries, letters and other ephemera, *Fun Home* pieces together the life and death of Bechdel’s father, Bruce. The technical accomplishments of *Fun Home*—and the wild success it has enjoyed—can only be demonstrated by the lengths that Bechdel is willing to go to produce verisimilitude. Not only did she dress and pose as all the characters in her story to create accurate figural poses, she also created a font based on her handwriting in lieu of hand lettering the entire book (Wellesley 2011). Such careful attention to detail has led many critics to hail Bechdel’s archival practices even as they praise *Fun Home*’s sophisticated engagement with intertextuality, which includes references to such modernist texts as *The Great Gatsby* and *Ulysses*.¹ Yet her use of reproductions—literary, theoretical, and material—fails to definitively solve the mystery that drives her autobiographical impulse, which is whether her sexually closeted father committed suicide or was accidentally hit by a truck. Alison Bechdel’s abundance of evidence cannot provide the closure for the loss that Bruce Bechdel’s death (and life) produced. Yet her astute awareness of the autobiographical genre’s masquerade as evidentiary does not detract from her heartfelt journey to locate and compile facts and memories related to her father. Indeed, the stunning panel drawings, washed in blue India ink,

punctuate the fine details of *Fun Home's* archival repository even as her story reveals the impossibility of knowing all the circumstances of her father's death.²

Because of her work's beautiful visual elements, and because of her cerebral approach to writing memoir, Bechdel has enjoyed widespread success as a best selling author and her work has helped to spark a new academic interest in the autobiographical graphic narrative form. Since *Fun Home* a number of visually complex literary and autobiographical graphic narratives have been published, some of which include David Small's *Stitches* (2010), Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012), Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* (2012), and, in England, Nicola Streeten's *Billy, Me & You: A Graphic Memoir of Grief and Recovery* (2011) and Mary Talbot's *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* (2012). By no means a comprehensive sample, these texts are part of a wide constellation of recently published autobiographical graphic narratives on traumatic personal memories. Indeed, many of these graphic narratives echo Bechdel's work in their narratological and visual sophistication.³

The year 2012 was a banner year for Bechdel. A fellow at the University of Chicago (and co-teacher, along with acclaimed comics scholar Hillary Chute, of a course on autobiography and comics) from 2011 to 2012, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship shortly before the release of her most recent memoir *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* in May of 2012, to much critical excitement.⁴ Within the span of 2 weeks she was profiled in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine* and interviewed for *Salon*.⁵ The memoir was also reviewed in a number of publications that included *Slate*, *National Public Radio*, *USA Today* and *The Guardian*. Bechdel's second memoir focuses on her adult life and in particular her romantic relationships, as well as her complicated relationship with her mother, Helen Bechdel.

2. THE COGNITIVE TURN IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE NARRATIVE

Are You My Mother? is deeply influenced by psychoanalysis; specifically, the work of pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. Like *Fun Home*, Bechdel's second memoir also relies upon a host of theoretical and material reproductions to represent her difficult relationship with her family. However, whereas *Fun Home* drew upon and referenced a number of literary texts when it described the characters and their interpersonal relationships, *Are You My Mother?* focuses its energies on psychoanalytic theories to describe the dysfunction of the Bechdel family, and Alison's resulting insecurities. This article will argue that, as in

Fun Home, reproduced objects and theories fail to account for or explain Bechdel's autobiographical story; in short, they fail to produce meaning. Rather, the story's coherence is actually maintained through schemas that are better accounted for by modern cognitive neuroscience. In the text there are a number of scenes, where Bechdel demonstrates the unraveling of psychoanalytic methods and her own inability to account for mind and behavior through these theories. Like in *Fun Home*, no amount of investigation or theorizing can fully account for autobiographical memories and experiences. Thus a cognitive approach to *Are You My Mother?* succeeds in revealing the referential anxiety present in the genre of life narrative, and offers a less prescriptive reading of how Bechdel engages with the elements that make up the genre, such as memory, experience, identity, and meaning making.

I examine Bechdel's signature meta-awareness, as well as her focus on developmental psychology, as evidence of the narrative's broader preoccupations with such cognitive neurological structures as theory of mind and long-term autobiographic memory, both of which help give rise to Bechdel's subjectivity, in the text. Introducing the research methods and discoveries of the scientific community to literary criticism can invigorate what critics and various media outlets have described as a moribund discipline.⁶ Indeed, by introducing the research and methods of cognitive neuroscience to the humanistic arts literary critics "can illuminate the processes underpinning the construction and production of life narrative and its adaptive qualities" (Giaimo 2012, p. 2).⁷ Within the past decade a number of transdisciplinary projects have emerged that take into account the "cognitive turn" in literary criticism. Such edited collections as *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives* (Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul Matthews, and James McClelland, eds. 2011), *The Neuroscientific Turn: Transdisciplinarity in the Age of the Brain* (Melissa Littlefield and Jenell Johnson, eds. 2012) and *Memory, Brain, and Belief* (Daniel Schacter and Elaine Scarry, eds. 2000) all advocate for the creation of a collaborative culture in which the discoveries of the scientific community and the cultural and philosophical productions of the humanities can find a mutual space in which to come together and collaborate. These edited volumes bring together scholars from disciplines in the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities to showcase the important work that is being done at the cross-roads of various disciplines; they emphasize that the production of knowledge is a process made more generative by transdisciplinary collaborations. For my own work, these texts signal a shift towards critical methodologies that take as their framework questions related to

the emergence, shaping, and articulation of identity through memory and visual perception. These perceptual qualities, neuroscience helps explain, are messy, faulty and biased. It is no wonder then that the genre of life narrative, which relies on these cognitive faculties for its creation and maintenance, is equally flawed. Yet critics are not the only ones advocating for methodologies that take into account brain studies and the mind. There are a number of artists who engage with the language of the brain and current neuroscience research on memory, cognition, and perception in their art.⁸ This cognitive turn in popular culture and art has fundamentally shifted the frameworks of the life writing genre. Once believed to be documentary and compact-driven, contemporary American memoirs challenge the referential certainty of the genre by introducing into its structure a number of cognitive percepts such as perceptual uncertainty—of the visual and of memory—as well as the multiplicity and mutability of self-concept. These precepts shift the formal and aesthetic configuration of narratives such as Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

One of a growing number of memoirs interested in the development of the mind, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* is part of a movement to integrate cognitive studies and psychology into literary non-fiction. Signaling the new “fourth culture” that Jonah Lehrer identifies as bridging the gap between the sciences and the humanities, Bechdel's latest graphic narrative integrates the language and discoveries of science into the art of telling life narrative, thus complicating the autobiographical configuration of the self, as well as other markers of the genre (p. 197). The memoir focuses on how interpersonal relationships influence identity and, in doing so, challenges the classic figuration of the autobiographic self as autonomous and separately configured (Smith and Watson 2010, p. 201). Additionally, Bechdel's assertion that she makes up the dialogue of a pivotal memory “wholesale”, on page 287, upends the referential certainty of the text and negates what Philippe LeJeune terms the “autobiographical compact”; a tacit agreement of narrative reliability and truth between the reader and writer of life narrative (p. 17). The psychological diffusions in *Are You My Mother?*—theories that are drawn from both psychoanalytic and developmental traditions, as well as the prominence of cognitive percepts related to theory of mind, memory consolidation, and interpersonal relationships—all nuance Bechdel's figuration of autobiographic subjectivity and challenge the referential certainty of the genre.

Framed by dreams, the autobiographical writings of Virginia Woolf, and D.W. Winnicott's papers on child psychology, *Are You My Mother?*

is more narratologically contained and more cerebral than *Fun Home*. Centered at least in part around the therapist/patient dialectic—and unabashedly aware that this dynamic often stands in for the absences in the patient’s non-therapeutic relationships—the memoir continues its predecessor’s examination of the epistemological crisis inherent in the genre of memoir. At once aware that memoir is a “suspect genre” as she says on page 11, but also hopeful that “if you write minutely and rigorously enough about your own life . . . you can, you know, transcend your particular self”, Bechdel’s new book highlights the contemporary memoirist’s confrontation with and negotiation of writing about the self (p. 201). Amidst the seminar-like explications of Winnicott’s research on mother–child emotional dynamics, and Freudian dream analyses, is a universal issue that most, if not all, writers of memoir ultimately face, that is: How can we negotiate the telling of a life narrative when there are other lives present and often at stake?

From the beginning of the text, Bechdel struggles with the dilemma of writing life narrative while lives are still in progress: “Another difficulty is the fact that the story of my mother and me is unfolding even as I write it” (p. 10). In text, Alison tries to acquire her mother’s approval for writing life narrative: first, for writing about the life and death of Bruce Bechdel and then for writing *Are You My Mother?* Often thwarted in her attempts to gain Helen’s approval, Alison’s conversations with her mother about writing become polemics against writing memoir: “Yet another difficulty is the fact that my mother considers memoir a suspect genre. This adds a confusing observer effect to the whole process” (p. 11). Considered by Bechdel’s mother to display “Inaccuracy, exhibitionism, [and] narcissism, [her assessment of] those fake memoirs” shapes Alison’s personal struggles with writing about their relationship (p. 11). These critical outbursts also contribute to the referential anxiety that plays out in the narrative’s arc. From the very title of the memoir, which is posed as a question, to Bechdel’s obsessive archival storage and retrieval process, to the at-times overly didactic examination of psychoanalysis and Virginia Woolf, Bechdel “[Clings] as tight to the facts as [she] can”, yet finds her creative process stymied on multiple occasions (p. 27). Attempting to delineate between internal and external experiences, authentic and inauthentic selves, she uses her mother as a foil through which to examine her autobiographic process and her own identity. Yet it is not only external forces, such as her mother, that thwart or call into question Alison’s autobiographical project; it is also Alison’s internal processes that keep her life at a remove from herself, as she says to her therapist, Carol, “I just feel like I’m in my own fucking way all of the time” (p. 19).

Bechdel's tendency towards intellectualization departs from the literary and mythic reproductions that were common in *Fun Home*, in her new graphic narrative. *Are You My Mother?* focuses its spotlight more brightly on Bechdel and her vigorous academic pursuit of psychoanalysis, which is fueled by her desire to cure herself of her anxiety and insecurity. When she describes her problems with switching therapists she realizes that she wants to take charge of her analysis: "All along I've been pitting myself against each of them [my therapists] in turn. What I really want is to cure myself. To be my own analyst" (p. 149). Bechdel's graphic narrative demonstrates a new approach taken by authors of contemporary life narrative to locate subjectivity through the ambiguity, or "infinite regress", of memory and experience (p. 6). Although she clings to the psychoanalytic tradition, and the notion that she can "cure" herself of her anxieties and insecurities through ever-deepening and compulsive self-analysis, Bechdel cannot obliterate life narrative's driving uncertainties, which revolve around the murky origins of the self and its evolution throughout a lifetime. In the narrative, Alison offers a number of "theories of how we come to think of ourselves as selves" that are derived from Winnicott, Lacan, and Cartesian dualism. Yet she ultimately concludes that "The 'I' is not nearly so solid, nor so easily apprehended" (p. 231). In place of a constant and certain self-concept, Bechdel develops a theory of internal selfhood and external reality that is far more "diffuse" than the theories she cites, such as Winnicott's notion of a "coherent and authentic" and ultimately "true" self (pp. 231–232).

Bechdel's desire to understand the functions of the mind leads her to exploring various psychoanalytic figurations of selfhood and perception. However, as my analysis demonstrates, these theories fail to account for the cognitive phenomena that occur in the narrative. Cognitive neuroscience, on the other hand, also studies how the mind—its desires, memories, defects, emotions, and thought processes—gives rise to and shapes identity; therefore, it is better suited to illuminate the dynamics of parental relationships, the processes of autobiographical memory, and why people care so deeply about the thoughts of others. The relentless pursuit on the part of contemporary authors, such as Bechdel, to learn how the minds of others work challenges earlier autobiographic treatments of life narrative as the work of a single autonomous author; it also signals the rising importance of brain studies in the genre's critical landscape, which life writing scholars such as Paul John Eakin have advocated (p. 64).

Bechdel's memoir crafts a sophisticated theory of mind that draws upon discourse from various intellectual disciplines that include both the sciences and the humanities. To examine her fraught relationship with her mother, as well as to locate the origin of selfhood and the relationships that shape

it, she turns Winnicott, Lacan, as well as Virginia Woolf. Furthermore, her self-identification with psychologist Alice Miller's notion of the "gifted child"—one who is "not so much 'intelligent' as sensitive"—demonstrates Alison's belief in her overdeveloped "theory of mind", which, as her mother's discouragement of her autobiographical projects highlights, makes her susceptible to being manipulated by people with "intense narcissistic needs" (p. 54). But theory of mind—and the comics medium—as cognitive literary theorist Lisa Zunshine suggests, also lends sociocognitive complexity to literature (p. 13). In the panels where Bechdel summarizes Miller's theories on the gifted child, Alison is shown reading in bed, so consumed by her familial issues that she ignores her girlfriend. The irony that the disjuncture between the text and the image produces only further emphasizes how determined Alison is to trace psychological theories onto her personal story, even at the expense of affective connections with the people around her. In the next sections, I argue that theory of mind profoundly shapes Alison's characterization of her mother and other people in her narrative and also gives rise to a distinct focus on the "other"—and the self as "other"—in the life writing genre.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY OF MIND IN SHAPING CHARACTERIZATION IN LIFE NARRATIVE

Neuroscientists Rebecca Saxe and Nancy Kanwisher argue that theory of mind is a "remarkable human facility [of] social cognition [that] depends on a fundamental ability to reason about other people [to] predict and interpret the behaviour of people based on an understanding of their minds" (p. 1835). Theory of mind is tested using the false belief test:

In the typical design, a child watches while a puppet places an object in location A. The puppet leaves the scene and the object is transferred to location B. The puppet returns and the child is asked to predict where the puppet will look for the object. Three-year-olds think the puppet will look in location B, where the object actually is; older children think the puppet will look in location A, where the puppet last saw the object (p. 1197).

Three-year-old children do not pass the test because they "fail to understand how the contents of thoughts can differ from reality" (p. 1197). Expecting that the puppet will magically know where the object has been moved, although he was not present to witness the switch, demonstrates that a young child is unable to infer the amount of information the puppet is privy to, or the external circumstances that limit the puppet's knowledge. Theory of mind and Saxe's research in particular offers a tantalizing

glimpse into a network in the brain that is responsible for interpreting the thoughts and beliefs of others.⁹ Theory of mind, “[is] a special cognitive endowment, structuring our everyday communications and cultural representations” (p. 7); it can be applied to literature to determine why we read fiction, or why we identify with characters who are not real. However it also offers a glimpse into one of the under examined facets of the life writing genre, which is how the events of the narrative are often precipitated by the main character’s interpretation of the thoughts and actions of other characters in the narrative. This interpretative practice gives rise to the representation of the narrative’s other characters and, for better or for worse, shapes the creator’s development of self-concept.

Bechdel uses theory of mind in *Are You My Mother?* in order to attribute particular thoughts, feelings, and a self-concept to her mother. Her examination of her own needs and desires as they align with, bump up against and move past Helen’s demonstrates Bechdel’s willingness to grapple with both the self and others as *other* as she does when she accounts for the causes underlying her difficult relationship with her mother. Alison’s ability to relate to her mind “like it’s an object”, as well as her position as a super-sensitive “gifted child”, places her in the unique position of conceptualizing subjectivity in a meta, and what might come across as detached, but still cognitive way (p. 152). In the text, theory of mind presents itself as a means through which Alison can infer her mother’s thoughts and emotions as well as engage in creative self-scrutiny. In one scene, young Alison runs back into the house to get a toy and hears her mother crying. Ever the “gifted child”, Alison already suspects that her trip with her father and brothers has to do with more than her mother’s “migraine”: “This glimpse of my mother’s private agony only confirmed what I already knew” (p. 153). Later in the chapter, Alison is unable to forgive herself for not comforting her mother on the night that she asks Bruce for a divorce: “I wasn’t there when she had needed me. The phone ringing in the empty room. I couldn’t get it out of my head. One ring reverberating into another. And another. And Another” (pp. 158–159). The paralyzing guilt that Alison describes as she imagines her mother’s thoughts and feelings prevents her from considering her own feelings and thoughts during her mother’s crisis. Thus an overdeveloped theory of mind allows her to create worlds containing minute details of her characters’ psychology—such as we see in her comics—but it also drives her obsession with finding referential certainty through autobiographical artifacts to prove her theories about the thoughts and actions of others (her father’s, her mother’s). Bechdel’s obsession with the thoughts of others is accompanied by an obsession with finding referential certainty through autobiographical artifacts.

These strategies are an attempt to shape and control the process of writing memoir, but, as the failure of psychoanalytic theories of self-concept also demonstrates, these are really just a stopgap.

4. PATTERN MAKING AS COGNITIVE PRACTICE IN *ARE YOU MY MOTHER?*

Alison Bechdel is a pattern seeker. The need to create what Anne Cvetkovich terms an “archive of feeling” in order to come to terms with her father’s mysterious life and death, in *Fun Home*, is an urge that persists in *Are You My Mother?* (p. 111) Once again, we observe the painstaking process of archival reconstruction in the form of family photographs, letters, movies, book excerpts, and early drawings. Bechdel creates new connections with these documents in a way that is similar to how the text-based memoirist associates memories that might be otherwise unrelated. In text, Alison’s need to make “meaningful patterns” in her life precludes her from writing fiction, in spite of her mother’s request for her to do so (p. 31). She needs to find the patterns in her life story; to “make things up about things that have already happened” (p. 28). Citing a letter that her mother wrote to her in her early adulthood, Alison identifies their shared assertion that “Everything has significance. Everything must fit” (p. 31). However, their shared proclivity for pattern-making plays out quite differently in their respective creative and personal lives. Helen writes only about external events in her life and often throws away portions of her personal diaries. Alison obsessively—neurotically even—catalogues her daily activities, conversations with friends and family, as well as her therapeutic sessions with the awareness that her life’s experiences contain necessary material for the production of life narrative. Despite their different enactments of their pattern-making desires, Bechdel suggests that their mutual need is one way of bonding: “This search for meaningful patterns may very well be crazy, but to be enlisted with her in it thrills me . . . I am carrying on her mission” (p. 31).

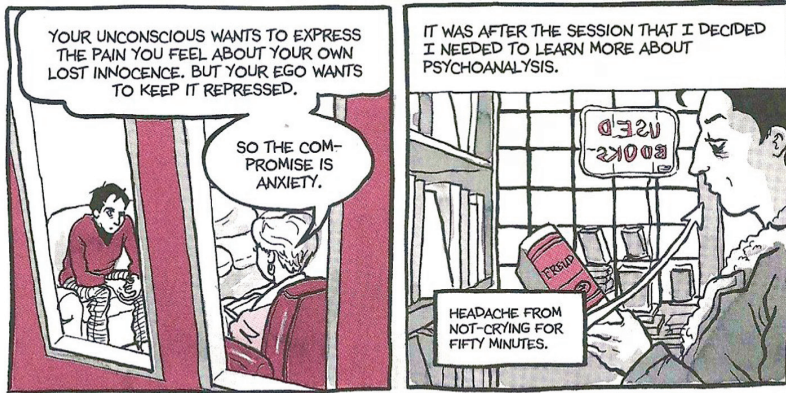
The pattern-making strategy that Bechdel engages in her memoir is one part of a larger, and problematic, imperative to write about the self as faithfully as possible. Such motivations are not all that distinct from the motivations underpinning cognitive science as neuroscientist Eric Kandel suggests, “Cognitive psychology emphasizes that the brain is a creativity machine that seeks out coherent patterns in an often confusing welter of environmental and bodily signals” (p. 350). That Bechdel can make visible, on the page, the cognitive processes of selection, creation, bias and association through her acknowledgment of the importance of pattern-making, highlights the prominent (if not conscious or intentional) role that cognitive science—its discoveries, its language—has in this story’s

construction. Bechdel's pattern-making unearths the unforeseeable consequences of constructing life narrative as the genre relies on individual subjectivity, preference, and motivation to create one narrative out of limitless possibilities.

However, as much as this is a memoir about the construction of memoir—a memoir that examines the productive and counter-productive effects of writing life narrative on the individual and her family, and the limitations of memoir in producing a stable and complete sense of self and others—it is also a memoir that catalogues the development of subjectivity. Because Alison keeps her emotions at a critical and clinical distance she is able to explore how everyday interactions, experiences, and memories affect one's identity. Relying on the nearly-clichéd therapist-patient couch scene as a site of self-interrogation, and often evisceration, she has a knack for removing herself from her *self*, as her therapist observes, “Being attached to your work, your mind, the way you would be to another person—that cuts you off from the world” (p. 152). *Are You My Mother?* is a text that focuses more directly on Alison Bechdel than *Fun Home*, but through the evocation of psychoanalysis, literature, and dreamscapes, she keeps us at a remove. Thus, Bechdel demonstrates the complicated dance that a memoirist performs as she shapes the thematic and aesthetic concerns of her life narrative; as it happens, this process also reveals the role that cognitive processes play in literary representations of autobiographical memory and experience.

5. THE FAILURE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS TO ALLEVIATE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL UNCERTAINTY¹⁰

In an early scene in the memoir, Bechdel calls attention to her own tendency towards intellectualizing the self in a comical, if not also sad, way. After a particularly theoretical session with her therapist, Alison decides that she needs to “learn more about psychoanalysis” (p. 45). She begins by re-reading *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which, as she says, “[Is] all about how our mistakes reveal the contents of our unconscious” (p. 46). Armed with an interpretative method predicated on finding meaningful patterns in everyday thoughts and occurrences, Alison proceeds to examine whether or not her unconscious manifests its desires, or preoccupations, through “erroneously carried out actions” (p. 47). Shortly after she begins to read Freud, she hits her head against a wooden board attached to the hood of her car (p. 48). After being injured, other events and objects in her life begin to form into a pattern that explains the psychological reasons behind her accident: “Twice a day for a year I’d been taking herbal tablets from my acupuncturist called ‘Brighten the Eyes.’ Now when I looked at the bottle, I



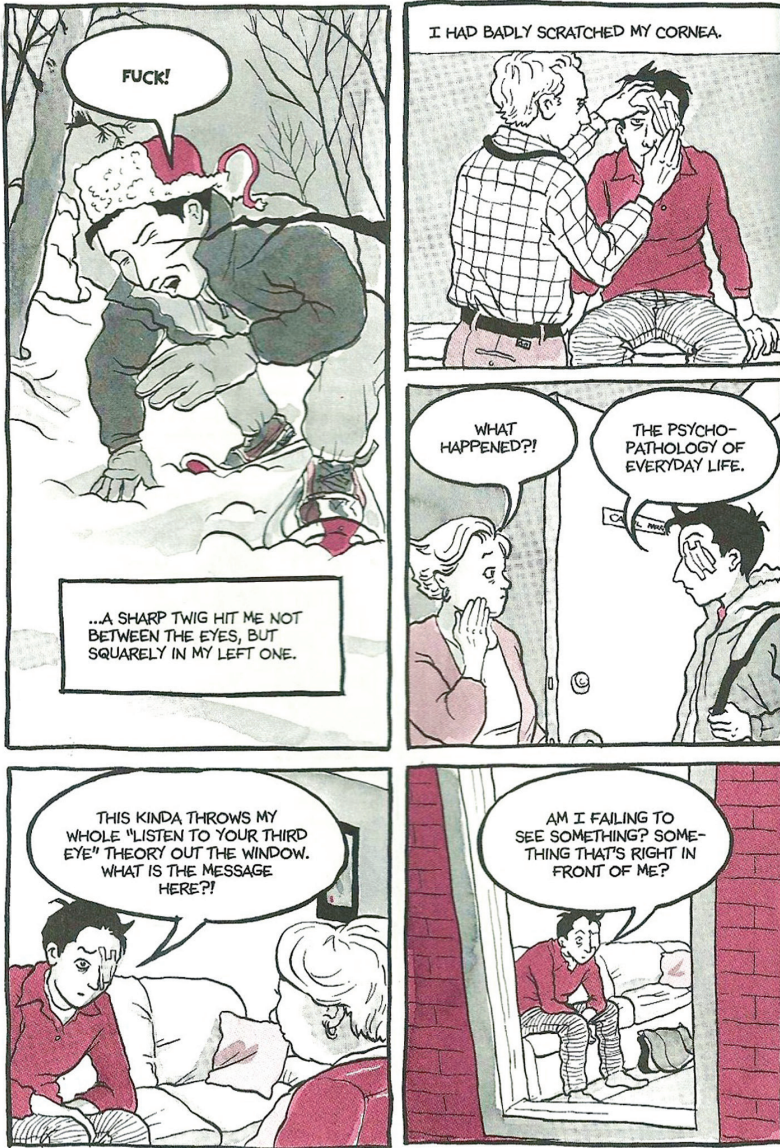
saw” that the bottle’s label says “Between the Eyes” (p. 48). Similarly, when a pimple appears on her forehead, right below the injury from the board, she imagines that this pimple is part of the “third eye . . . where we look not out, but in” (p. 48). Alison interprets these events as part of a larger plan of the unconscious to draw attention to itself: “Perhaps my unconscious was telling me to pay more attention to my unconscious” (p. 49). Such an investment in her unconscious is the opposite of her “tendency to edit [her] thoughts before they even [take] shape”, as the close-up drawing of her finger on the delete button indicates (p. 49).

However, Alison’s desire to engage in meaningful pattern-making about her experiences, while exciting and at times satisfying, does not always work out as she suggests. After reflecting on the role that psychoanalysis, and her therapist Jocelyn, play in lifting her depression, Alison identifies the high costs that therapy has on other parts of her life: “But the beginning of my relationship with Jocelyn would be the beginning of the end of my relationship with Eloise” (p. 52). Here, Bechdel candidly observes that her romantic relationship cannot co-exist with her therapeutic one: the needs of others take a back seat to her complicated relationship with herself. The pages that follow her admission feature Alison becoming increasingly absorbed by the work of Miller and Winnicott (p. 54). Panel-by-panel she drifts further away from Eloise. Alone with her books and her thoughts, she takes long and solitary midnight walks and reads by lamplight long after her partner has fallen asleep (p. 57). Such lonely activities are only highlighted by Alison’s almost desperate dependence on her therapist. On pages 51 and 58, she stands in front of Jocelyn’s house late at night.

From these physical and intellectual nocturnal ramblings Bechdel moves the narrative backward in time to when she was a baby. Imagining the failure that her mother felt over Alison’s inability to breastfeed,

Bechdel pinpoints this moment as when “a pattern of mutual, preemptive rejection could have been set in motion, each of [them] withholding in order to foreclose future rejection” (p. 60). Yet, Bechdel’s introspection moves her further away from her current relationship with Eloise and her relationship with her mother, as she recognizes at the beginning of the narrative while she records her phone conversation with Helen: “I’m trying so hard to get down what she’s saying that I’m not really listening properly” (p. 12). As she contemplates the current failings of her relationship with her mother, Alison wonders if she has been harboring repressed anger towards her since she was a child: “What hostile impulses, as Freud called them, could I have been repressing at age ten? (p. 63). As she traces her hostile relationship with her mother to early childhood, and even further back to her birth, she begins to wonder if she is writing a memoir as an act of aggression. Such an assessment might seem to gesture towards the “truth” of Bechdel’s various analyses of her motivations and experiences (the unconscious made conscious); however, as the scene that follows demonstrates, psychoanalysis—and the desire for making meaning and finding patterns in life narrative—is neither a panacea for her problematic interpersonal relationships, nor does it satiate her desire for control over random and uncontrollable experiences.

While walking up a snowy hill, Alison —preoccupied with her anger towards her mother—injures herself a second time: “I often climbed this hill near my house. But today, on the steepest part, as I looked up . . . A sharp twig hit me not between the eyes, but squarely in my left one. I had badly scratched my cornea” (p. 64). After the accident, which results in Alison wearing an eye patch, she attends a therapy session with Jocelyn who asks her “what happened?!” (p. 64). In response, she says “The psychopathology of everyday life” (p. 64). Such wry humor cannot obscure the fact that Alison’s interpretation of her previous accident was incorrect, as she later confesses to Jocelyn: “This kinda throws my whole ‘listen to your third eye’ theory out the window. What is the message here?” (p. 64) Alison’s fear that she is “failing to see something . . . that’s right in front of [her]” shores up a reading of life narrative as interpretative, selective, and, at its base, unreliable. Her inability to figure out the meaning of her injury—the fact that, perhaps, there is no meaning except the one(s) that she creates—touches upon the psychic uncertainty of living. Such moments in which psychoanalytic theory fail to provide meaningful explanations often descends into absurdity, as the cornea injury scene exemplifies. Yet Bechdel’s persistence in assigning symbolic significance to particular life events, even in the face of not really knowing if these events matter at all, is a testament to the important function that life narrative serves as a rest-stop between experience and implicit memory, where



interpretation, reflection and meaning-making occur. While writing her second memoir, Alison crates an alternative explanation for her injury: "perhaps I scratched my cornea to punish myself for 'seeing' the truth about my family" (p. 65). In her second interpretation, she demonstrates

the important and adaptive role that life narrative—and memory—play in a subject's life; it allows us to choose, order and arrange significant events out of a morass of data and to learn from these events to prepare for the future. It is a cognitive process that is never really complete. Contemporary American authors and artists emphasize the subjective process of creating life narrative, defiantly creating their stories through interpretative rather than authenticating structures.

And while Bechdel deeply wants to remain within the authenticating structures common in life narrative from centuries' past, the collapse of her various referents—psychoanalysis, archival documents, recorded conversations—further demonstrates just how influential the language and research of the brain is in shaping the current terrain of life narrative and the genre's referential uncertainty. Alison is “heavily invest[ed] in [her] own mind”, yet she desires to delineate where the boundaries between mind and body, internal and external, reside (p. 218). Citing Winnicott's notion of true and false selves, she suggests that we see ourselves reflected in the other, which, at the earliest stages of life, occur in the relationship between the baby and the mother, in a process termed “maternal mirroring” (p. 232). Yet her desire to parse her mind from her body—her true from her false self—yields little satisfaction. In fact, even as she agonizes over her “true” motivations for writing a memoir about her mother, or the first event that estranges her from Helen, she also draws attention to the creative and intellectual processes that inform the construction of life narrative: processes that, I argue, are underpinned by functions of the brain and that more accurately account for the work that her memoir engages in.

Indeed, even Winnicott's argument that we tend to be shaped by our relationship with our parents in infancy, and that this dynamic continues to affect us even as adults, is an argument that neuroscience also makes. In a *New York Times* article titled “The Brain on Love” (2012) science writer Diane Ackerman identifies the burgeoning field of interpersonal neuroscience, which is founded on the percept that “All relationships change the brain — but most important are the intimate bonds that foster or fail us, altering the delicate circuits that shape memories, emotions and that ultimate souvenir, the self” (p. 1). As Daniel J. Siegel, one of the founders of the field, suggests, “In relationships within families, one can see the intergenerational transfer of patterns of communication that are reinforced by the repeated experiences of energy and information flow exchange patterns” (Siegel 2012). In short, the relationships that we have with our parents are often the earliest and most profound; therefore, they affect how our brains are wired. Thus if a child's relationship to her parents is one where the child takes on too much responsibility

and emotional demands early on—a scenario that Bechdel describes in her memoir—she will be biologically shaped to respond in a similar way in her relationships later in her life. I draw attention to the neuroscientific analogue to Winnicott’s theory because in its current iteration the intrigue of the mind’s processes, which seem so prevalent in psychoanalytic theories—memories that are obscured or hidden from our conscious thoughts, selves that are either true or false—is replaced with a framework that is less concerned with obfuscation than it is with cause and effect. The research in neuroscience can point towards the appreciable influence of environment on the neural networks of the brain, whereas psychoanalysis offers less in the way of data and replication than it does in speculation and symbolic reference.

Drawing upon a scene in the memoir where Bechdel demonstrates the profound influence that the maternal figure has on the budding subjectivity and neurology of a child, I turn to the moment in the narrative when Helen stops kissing her daughter at bedtime: a pivotal scene that a number of the book’s reviews highlight.¹¹ Juxtaposed with excerpts and plot points from Woolf’s semi-autobiographical *To The Lighthouse*, Bechdel recalls her mother kissing her younger brothers goodnight and then passing by her bed and saying: “You’re too old to be kissed good night anymore” (p. 136). Upset by her mother’s denial of affection and emotional comfort, Alison refuses to betray her feelings of rejection: “When mom abruptly stopped kissing me good night, I felt almost as if she’d slapped me. But I was stoic. I betrayed no reaction. If seven was too old, it was too old” (p. 137).

Until she writes her second memoir, Bechdel is unsure of what prompts Helen to determine that she is too old, at 7-years-old, to be kissed good night; however, in-text she suggests that the sudden shift in their relationship has to do with a lewd drawing that she makes of a doctor cleaning a little girl’s genitalia (p. 143). Here Alison is punished for her creative impulse: “I was amazed even at the time by my ability to imagine such an unimaginable scenario. In fact, that was part of my excitement—realizing the apparently unlimited potential of my own mind to invent” (p. 143). However, young Alison’s “gynecological fantasy”, in addition to asserting a nascent sexuality that diverges from heterosexuality, also signals an assertion of clear—if not scandalous—artistic imagination (p. 143). Helen finds the drawing, destroys it, and then threatens, but fails, to address its contents, which indicates, as Jocelyn says, that Alison’s “family was [not] a very safe place to be a little girl” (p. 146). Such instances of sexual repression and tacit maternal disapproval find their way into Alison’s adult life through neurological pathways that were wired at a young age, prompting her to feel inadequate, perverted, and that she does not “deserve to be touched” (p. 165).

Healthy interpersonal relationships are rooted in early child development:

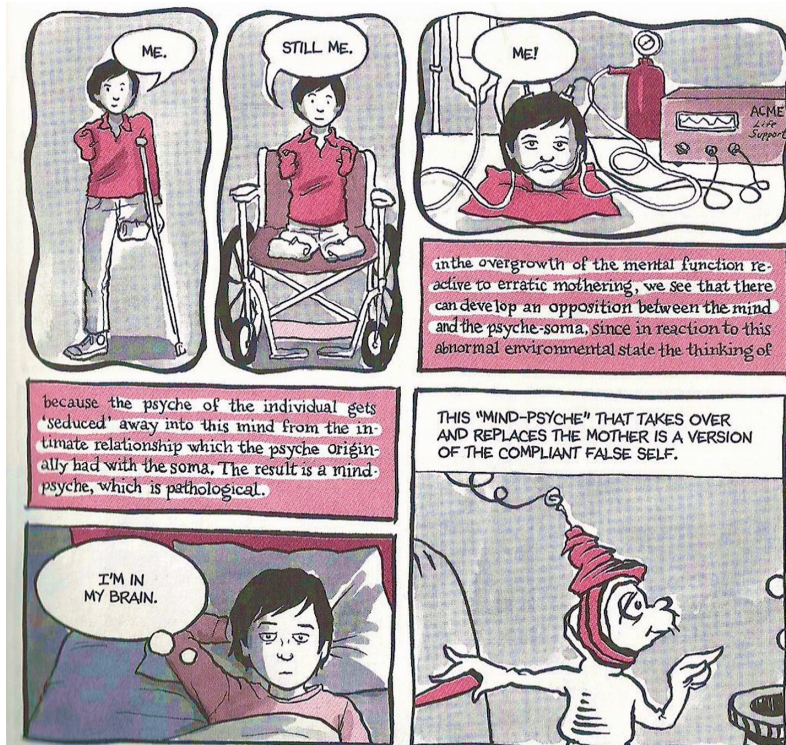
A parent and child “tune in” to each other’s feelings and intentions in a dance of connection that establishes the earliest form of communication . . . reflecting on the child’s mental state—of seeing the mind beneath behavior and respecting the existence of an internal subjective world—has been identified as a possible core mechanism underlying secure attachment (p. 34).

Because of circumstances that Bechdel alludes to in her two memoirs—her father’s closeted queer identity, her mother’s simmering resentment—and because of unknown (and unknowable) circumstances, Helen is reluctant to share in Alison’s queer art and queer life. Beyond the excerpts of letters reproduced in *Fun Home* that try to dissuade her from being gay, Alison also records other instances where Helen disapproves of her lesbian art. Her memories from early childhood in which Helen refuses to “see the mind beneath behavior” and to respect Alison’s subjective experience of sexual excitement is evidence of a conflict in their relationship that comes up multiple times in this text and that affects Alison’s romantic and professional life.

Bechdel’s struggle with her romantic relationships is not surprising given the lack of open and honest emotional communication during her upbringing. Her attempts to bridge this setback are met with moderate success, but also a lot of frustration and feelings of failure that are mirrored in her vying for praise from her mother. Bechdel’s complicated and emotionally distant relationship with her parents during childhood sets the stage for later emotional complications in her adult life. So too does her referential anxiety as a child—evidenced by the circumflex she creates to represent ontological uncertainty, and the fragile state of first-person perspective (“I”), and that she scrawls all over diary entries reproduced in both memoirs—predict her feelings of romantic anxiety and professional inadequacy as an adult (p. 49). Bechdel’s life narrative is a case study; her personal archives are materials with which she tests her memories, emotions, cognitive map, and interpersonal relationships. Her evocation of psychoanalysis is an obvious gesture towards the field’s focus on telling life narrative as a means to heal past trauma and on the introspective method of analysis, yet throughout her narrative she is unable to find absolution through these methods and often they are roundly disproved by events in the story. Less accounted for are the new trends in psychology and brain studies that she more successfully engages with in the memoir, such as self-concept, theory of mind, and interpersonal neuroscience. *Are You My Mother?* complicatedly, but also richly, lavishly even, engages with the study of the mind, of which cognition—her’s, her mother’s, her therapists’, her lovers’—is a vital component.

6. CONCLUSION: LIFE WRITING AND THE MIND

Ultimately Alison locates her subjectivity in her mind, thus separating herself from the perceived or actual expectations of others. In chapter four, titled “Mind”, she wonders “How much of me is me?” (p. 140). In a sequence of panels, she imagines losing her bodily appendages. First she loses a leg, and then her other leg and an arm, and then both legs and both arms, until finally she is only a head being sustained by an Acme life support unit whose cartoonish depiction cannot hide the ghoulishness with which she portrays selfhood (p. 141). “I’m in my brain”, she concludes (p. 141). Yet what her macabre figuration of selfhood suggests is more than just that identity resides in the brain and therefore in cognitive processes. The self, as the head hooked up to the machine suggests, can be “trapped inside the self, forever. . . [Or can open] out, in an infinite unfurling”, both of which states can be terrifying because they are unable to be controlled (p. 244). By the end of the narrative, Alison seems to be suggesting that the self is in both of these states—“trapped” and infinitely



“unfurling”—and that the main objective of writing life narrative is to “serve the story” (p. 283). Here, Helen once again weighs in on the value of the genre by offering this bit of quoted advice to Alison: “The writer’s



business is to find the shape in unruly life and to serve her story. Not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story” (p. 284). She concludes with the assertion “Family be damned! The story must be served” (p. 284). Such moments are perhaps the closest Alison will get to her mother’s approval of her art; they are also perhaps the closest the narrative will get to explaining the emergence and maintenance of subjectivity as it develops over a lifetime and is articulated in life writing.

In the end, Bechdel negotiates the complexities of creating life narrative through focusing on her mind rather than the theory of mind of her mother. She feels relief when she hangs up during a phone conversation with her mother because she can “finally . . . stop banging on this door because nobody [is] home” (p. 260). Understanding the desire to lift “the hood on my life . . . and . . . see its inner workings” is indicative of Alison’s preoccupation with how cognition and the processes underlying the creation and maintenance of selfhood give rise to a conceptualization of the self; however tenuous or confusing that concept might be (p. 253). These figurations are only approximations, as the Freudian analysis gone awry suggests, yet the text’s psychologically diffuse content allows her to make visible on the page the associative pattern-making that life narrative entails and the complex cognitive processes that are involved in the representation of the self and the minds of others.

The concluding memory that Alison recalls does not rely on Freudian notions of repressed memories, or the controversial recovered memory method, for its articulation.¹² In the final scene there is no reference to Winnicott or to his theories of how children play, although the memory is indeed about play. Instead she relies on creative interpretation and imagination to recount playing the “crippled child” game with her mother: “I don’t remember the particulars of our play. I’m inventing this dialogue wholesale. What I remember is a feeling of inebriation. The further I moved into this imaginary space, the more it opened up” (p. 287). Here Bechdel, whether she knows it or not, invokes the recent neuroscientific discovery that memory is fluid and unreliable, yet, paradoxically, has a staying power that can perhaps be attributed to consolidation and reconsolidation: the former, a process that helps to stabilize a memory trace after its initial acquisition and the latter which reactivates the memory and re-associates it to new information when subsequently recalled (LeDoux and Doyere p. 153). Alison cannot remember the details of this long-term autobiographic memory; however, she can remember a more diffuse, yet still palpable, affective state in which she and her mother engage in mutual imaginative narrative construction surrounding a pretend game in which she is “crippled” and in need of mechanical support such as crutches and “special shoes” (p. 287). Admitting that life narrative is flawed—much

like our perceptual and memory systems—she, nevertheless, offers up a satisfying conclusion that reigns in the memoir's frenzied accumulation of intellectual and theoretical information. Boiled down to this powerful yet partially constructed memory, we can observe how Bechdel draws attention to the importance of writing life narrative in the face of such ontological—and psychological—uncertainty. Such cognitive neuroscientific theories of reading non-fiction, and literature more generally, nuance our understanding of the formal elements that make up stories; so too do they challenge some long-held assumptions about how the mind experiences and interprets mental phenomena. By introducing cognitive neuroscience to the study of life narrative, in particular, scholars can upend many of the prevailing popular assumptions about the genre, such as that it is linear, verifiable, authentic, or otherwise “true”. Revealing the biases and flaws in the perceptual systems that give rise to life narrative allows scholars to engage in a more exciting and more precise examination of the genre's formal structures and content. So too does it reveal the paradox that guides the process of writing life narrative: we write in spite of not being able to fully know our memories and experiences, not because we know that definitive ontological truth exists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the internal and external readers for their insightful comments. I would also like to thank Monica Soeting for her adept facilitation of the publication process. Finally, I would like to thank Michael T. Gravina for being a sounding board throughout the publication process.

REFERENCES

- “Alison Bechdel and Hillary Chute, Mellon Fellowship.” *Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry*. Chicago: U of Chicago. 2011. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- “A Portrait of The Cartoonist And Her Mother.” *All Things Considered*. *National Public Radio*, n.p. 27 May 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Ackerman, Diane. “The Brain on Love.” *The New York Times: Opinionator*, 24 Mar. 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner, 2006. Print.
- . *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008. Print.
- . *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Print.
- . “About.” *Dykestowatchoutfor*, 2012. Web. 9 Nov. 2012.
- . “Mapping Memory: Readings by Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel.” Wellesley College Newhouse Center for the Humanities. Collins Cinema, Wellesley, MA. 16 Apr. 2011. Lecture.

- Bartók, Mira. *The Memory Palace: A Memoir*. New York: Free Press, 2011. Print.
- Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- Cohen, Patricia. "In Tough Times, the Humanities Must Justify Their Worth." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 2009. Web. 9 Nov. 2012.
- . "Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know." *The New York Times*, 31 Mar. 2010. Web. 6 Feb. 2012.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Women's Study Quarterly* 36.1/2 (2008): 111-129. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Donahue, Deirdre. "Alison Bechdel Shines in Graphic Memoir 'Are You My Mother?'" *USA Today*, 2 May 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Eakin, Paul John. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.
- El Refaie, Elisabeth. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 2012. Print.
- Forney, Ellen. *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*. New York: Gotham P, 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Garner, Dwight. "Artist, Draw Thyself (And Your Mother and Therapist) 'Are You My Mother?' by Alison Bechdel." *The New York Times*, 2 May 2012. Web. 14 May 2012.
- Giaimo, Genie. "Psychological Diffusions: The Cognitive Turn in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* A Comic Drama." *Blogger*, 14 May 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- . *Unable to Remember but Unwilling to Forget: Cognition, Perception and Memory in the Contemporary American Memoir*. Dissertation, Northeastern University. Boston: n.p., 2012. Print.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities: Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Harleman, Kathleen. "Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics." *Krannert Art Museum*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois. 24 Oct. 2008. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- "Jacques Marie Émile Lacan – Biography." *The European Graduate School*, n.p. 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Kandel, Eric. *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand The Unconscious in Art, Mind And Brain*. New York: Random House, 2012. Print.
- . "Cell and Molecular Biological Studies of Memory Storage." *Howard Hughes Medical Institute*, 19 July 2010. Web. 1 August 2012.
- Kellogg, Carolyn. "Guggenheim announces 2012 fellows." *LA Times Blog*, 12 April 2012. Web. 9 Nov. 2012.
- Leavitt, Sarah. *Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me*. New York: Skyhorse, 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- LeDoux, Joseph and Valerie Doyere. "Emotional Memory Processing: Synaptic Connectivity." *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*. Eds. Nalbantian Suzanne, Paul M. Matthews, and James L. McClelland. Cambridge: MIT, 2011: 153–171. Print.
- Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Diary*. Eds. Jeremy Popkin and Julie Rak. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2009. Print.
- Littlefield, Melissa and Jenell Johnson eds. *The Neuroscientific Turn: Transdisciplinarity in the Age of the Brain*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2012. Print.
- Loftus, Elizabeth F. "The Reality of Repressed Memories." *American Psychologist* 48 (1993): 518–537. Web. 8 Aug. 2012.
- Miller, Laura. "Are You My Mother? by Alison Bechdel-review." *The Guardian*, 24 May 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.

- Nalbantian, Suzanne, Paul Matthews, and James McClelland eds. *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*. Cambridge: MIT, 2011. Print.
- O'Rourke, Meghan. "A Mother is a Story With Neither Beginning Nor End." *The Slate Book Review*, 5 May 2012. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Roth, Marco. *The Scientists: A Family Romance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Print.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon, 2003. Print.
- Saxe, Rebecca and Nancy Kanwisher. "People thinking about thinking people: The role of the temporo-parietal junction in 'theory of mind.'" *NeuroImage* 19 (2003): 1835–1842. Web. 8 Aug. 2012.
- Saxe, Rebecca, Susan Whitfield-Gabrieli, Jonathan Scholz and Kevin A. Pelphey. "Brain Regions for Perceiving and Reasoning About Other People in School-Aged Children." *Child Development* 80.4 (2009): 1197–1209. Web. 9 Aug. 2012.
- Schacter, Daniel and Elaine Scarry eds. *Memory, Brain, and Belief*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Siegel, Daniel. *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. Web. 8 Aug. 2012.
- . *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford, 2012. Print.
- Small, David. *Stitches: A Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiographically: Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. New York: Pantheon, 1991. Print.
- Streeten, Nicola. *Billy, Me & You: A Graphic Memoir of Grief and Recovery*. England, Myriad Editions, 2011. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Talbot, Mary. *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*. Oregon: Dark Horse Comics, 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- Thurman, Judith. "Drawn From Life: The World of Alison Bechdel." *The New Yorker*, 23 April 2012. Web. 14 May 2012.
- Ulin, David L. "Graphic memoir: Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles*." *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.
- "Virginia Woolf." *The Modernism Lab at Yale University*, n.p. 2010. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Waston, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. Ed. Michael A. Chaney. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2011. 123–156. Print.
- Winnicott, D.W. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena." *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1971. 1–18. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.
- Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006. Print.
- . "Sociocognitive Complexity." *Novel* 45.1 (2012): 13–18. Web. 7 Feb. 2013.

NOTES

- 1 See Julia Watson's "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*" in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, edited by Michael A. Chaney.
- 2 See Elisabeth El Refaie's *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* for a discussion on performing authenticity in autobiographical comics.
- 3 See David L. Ulin's *Los Angeles Times* review of Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles*.
- 4 For more detail on trauma, cultural memory, and autobiographical comics, see Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*.

- 5 Although the interview has since been removed from Salon.com.
- 6 See *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (Jonathan Gottschall) and “Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know” in *The New York Times* 31 Mar. 2010.
- 7 Elaine Scarry, Alan Richardson, Lisa Zunshine, Monika Fludernik, Paul John Eakin, and Nicolae Babuts, among others.
- 8 For example, Art Spiegelman’s 2011 *MetaMaus*, Mira Bartók’s 2011 memoir *The Memory Palace* and Marco Roth’s 2012 memoir *The Scientists: A Family Romance*.
- 9 For more information on the specific regions of the brain (“left and right temporoparietal junction (L and RTPJ), the precuneus/posterior cingulate, and regions in the MPFC”) implicated in theory of mind see page 1198 in Saxe’s “Brain Regions for Perceiving and Reasoning About Other People in School-Aged Children”.
- 10 All images from *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright (c) 2012 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.
- 11 For example, see the *New York Times* article or the review on *National Public Radio*’s “All Things Considered”.
- 12 Although Bechdel does make mention of cathexis in this play scenario—“there was a change, a mutual cathexis going on . . .” (p. 287) there is no articulation of this term, or its attendant historical and theoretical roots. Thus, while Bechdel calls upon psychoanalysis, and its terms and theories, to characterize her interpretation of her relationships, they form a wedge that forces her further away from her autobiographic project than the other cognitive mechanisms in play in this story. Her “Freudian slip,” as it were, about cathexis cannot obscure the fact that she is ascribing to a more contemporary—and neuroscientific—understanding of how memory is structured (and recalled). By engaging a psychologically, and cognitively, complex narrative structure, Bechdel troubles the generic constraints of life narrative and its preoccupation with reliability.

BIOGRAPHY

Genie Nicole Giaimo is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at Northeastern University (Boston, Massachusetts). She specializes in contemporary American literature. Her dissertation project, “Unable to Remember, Unwilling to Forget: Cognition, Perception, and Memory In The Contemporary American Memoir”, merges cognitive neuroscientific precepts with close-reading techniques to nuance and broaden criticism of life writing. In addition to presenting at a number of professional conferences such as Narrative, ACLA, MLA and NEMLA, she published an article in *Language and Literature* in 2010. An avid online writer, she contributes to the music magazine *Mule Variations*, as well as the popular culture journal *The Orris*. She also has a blog related to her interest in neuroscience and life narrative, Visual Memoir: <http://memoryandvisuality.blogspot.com/>