Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home* (2006), an autobiographical “family tragicomic,” is no typical coming-out narrative. While Bechdel does narrate her journey from a young girl who desires masculinity to her eventual identification as a lesbian, this story is told alongside her attempts to understand, in the context of her family history, her father’s sexual relationships with young boys and his later suspected suicide. Indeed, Bechdel worries at one point in the novel that it was her own coming out that caused her father to jump in front of the bread truck that killed him. Bechdel’s narrative is a remarkable exploration of family history, queer desires, and the struggle to make her father posthumously present and knowable. The novel is frequently read as part of a new wave of graphic narratives that take as their subject historical narrative, memory, and trauma. One of the earliest such narratives was Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, which Ariela Freedman argues “redefined the potential scope and claims of the genre of the graphic memoir.” According to Freedman, after *Maus*, the scope and range of graphic narratives widened to include the fields of autobiography and history, staking a claim...
on wider readership and legitimacy. Yet as Ann Cvetkovich suggests, *Fun Home* queers the focus on trauma and history in texts such as *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* because it challenges “the relation between the catastrophic and the everyday,” making “public space for lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful.” The novel insists on reading the trauma of a lesbian daughter alongside larger, more recognizable events, locating Stonewall and Watergate in the context of the Bechdel family’s history. For Cvetkovich, *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 and is part of yet unassimilable into these narratives.

Recent work by queer theorists such as Carolyn Dinshaw, Elizabeth Freeman, and Heather Love has dealt with what Valerie Rohy outlines as the “ahistorical” offense of making claims to a history of queer sexuality by employing creative methodologies that emphasize contingent connections, temporal multiplicities, and affect as modes of queer history. Queer history, as Rohy describes it, is always an “optical illusion” because of the necessary limitations of reading sexual identity in the past through the vantage point of the present. Rohy points to the various archives represented in *Fun Home*, from the family library to Alison’s diary, and argues that they offer “a way for *Fun Home* to inhabit disparate narratives and temporal modes, learning what each one enables and forecloses.” Bechdel explores the many available stories about her family, refusing one truth and instead opening up contingent possibilities so that the novel unfolds, as Monica B. Pearl suggests, “neither chronologically nor through prolepsis and analepsis, but through a layered telling, adding additional information and impressions over the story as it has already been told.” In Pearl’s reading, she emphasizes the graphic genre’s unique illustrative ability to juxtapose text and meaning, which, in the context of Bechdel’s investigation into her father’s closeted homosexuality, makes it a queer reflection on surface and substance.

*Fun Home* contributes to queer historiography in part by refusing to settle on one understanding of the truth about Bechdel’s
father, his sexuality, and the author’s relationship to him. Instead, it insists on piecing together the past from a variety of angles. Though Bruce Bechdel’s death is described at the beginning of the book, the narrative returns multiple times to fill out the details, depicting the truck that hit him and the road on which he was killed in many different panels. Bechdel, interviewed in advance of the release of her second graphic narrative, Are You My Mother?, explains that reproducing a newspaper page for one of her comic pages exemplifies her storytelling process: “A newspaper is filled with thousands of stories. Every daily paper, every day is filled with all these little glimpses of people’s lives. And so, when I’m telling this story about my family I’m very carefully culling little tidbits of things and putting them in a particular order in order to make a narrative, but it could just as easily be some other order, some other story.” Bechdel’s narrative emphasizes the plurality of perspectives contained in her family’s history—not content with a final version, she continues to hint at many different ways in which to view life growing up in her childhood home.

As a form, graphic narrative incorporates multiple voices—the narrative voice, the speaking characters, and the visual representation—into single frames. The interplay between image and text means graphic narratives always speak in at least two registers: sometimes connecting image and text, sometimes depicting an image that seems irrelevant to the text, and sometimes using the relationship between image and text to come to a fuller picture of a scene. Scott McCloud’s influential Understanding Comics argues that reading comics is akin to putting together pieces of a puzzle. By pulling together the panels or “fragments” of the narrative, the reader becomes an active agent in the creation of meaning. McCloud describes comics as “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion” (65, emphasis in original).

McCloud argues that the panel is the comic medium’s most important icon, “act[ing] as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided” (99). Will Eisner further describes the visual language of the panels—their size, spacing, shape, and relation to each other, and the duration of the activity within the panel—as
comprising the “grammar” of comics. As Hillary Chute suggests, it is necessary to see panels as “boxes of time,” from a split second to hours in duration. The architecture of the comic page—the configuration of these boxes—is thus a space for play with chronology, sequence, and narrative time. As readers move across the unconnected moments on the page, they create closure, smoothing out the comic’s fractured representation of time. This quality of comics inevitably represents narrative as irreconcilable, multiple, and constructed. As Jared Gardner explains, comics draw attention to “the excess that refuses the cause-and-effect argument, the trace that threatens to unsettle the present’s narrative of its own past (and thereby of itself).” The spaces between panels both insist on and resist closure, demanding that any closure the reader might create for herself or himself be recognized as, much like queer history, an unstable optical illusion.

The importance of the visual field in the novel has been remarked upon, notably by Jennifer Lemberg, who reads _Fun Home_ as being about how the artist comes to be a witness, and Pearl, who suggests that the visual field is the place where Alison finds agency. To approaches such as these that emphasize thinking through the visual in graphic narratives, I contribute a reading of _Fun Home_ that centers on the learned, embodied, and arduous work involved in seeing. This article thus maps the ways in which Bechdel’s novel explores the process of seeing: Alison’s childhood resistance to feminine looks; the looks that connect her and her father; and, finally, her situated and limited perspective in the construction of her family’s history.

**How the Lesbian Daughter Sees**

*Fun Home* describes Bruce Bechdel as being obsessed with the visual, from the family home, to Alison’s appearance, to his own stylized masculinity. The first chapter of the book details the obsessive way in which Bruce restores and maintains the family home. Bruce’s obsession with design draws Bechdel to write: “He used his skilful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not.” Alison rebels against her
father’s proclivity for ornamentation, remarking as she dusts the family home, “My own decided preference for the unadorned and purely functional emerged early.” Just under the panel in which this remark appears, a young Alison explains: “When I grow up, my house is going to be all metal, like a submarine” (14). Alison’s aesthetic develops in opposition to her father’s preference for embellishment and adornment; her desire is to surround herself in a visual landscape that is completely other to the home her father so painstakingly restores. Bruce’s stylizing efforts extend beyond the family home and toward Alison in his insistence on adorning her in feminine dress and accessories. Much as she resists the visual landscape that her father creates in the home, she also struggles against his vision of her gender presentation— one fight over a barrette notably extends over seven panels. From the barrettes, to pearls, to skirts, Bruce’s aesthetic preferences are forced onto Alison’s body. Opposite a panel that depicts her father taking a photo of the family posed in front of the restored home, Bechdel includes her own image of the family watching television, eating popcorn, and playing inside the house—her own portrait of them “really” living (17). Placed side by side in the narrative, the images relate to each other not only in their comparison between external and internal—where Bruce’s image seems to be the surface and Bechdel’s portrait a more realistic portrayal of life in the family’s home—but, more simply, as two ways of seeing the family. Bechdel’s image competes with her reproduction of her father’s vision of the family: both images are constructions of a family portrait.

The visual realm is thus experienced by young Alison as a patriarchal sphere of control—a sphere with which she must negotiate to claim her own vision and gender identity. A poignant scene that has hitherto been overlooked in critical engagements with Fun Home illustrates the process of Alison discovering how the visual field might constrain her as a young woman. First, a panel depicts Bruce handing over a rolled-up document to Alison, directing her not to open it because it is “dirty” (111). Alison looks suspiciously at the rolled-up paper and decides that it looks clean enough. In the last panel of the page, however, she disobeys her father’s wishes
and unrolls it. As she gains visual access to the image through this act, the viewer turns the page in a similar act of unfurling to reveal the image: a calendar page containing an image of a naked woman (figs. 1a–1b). This visual memory is thus replayed in the graphic narrative in a way that involves the viewer in the act of looking with Alison. The reader not only turns the page as Alison unfurls the paper, she or he is also positioned above Alison’s shoulder, looking at the image with her. “I felt as if I’d been stripped naked myself, inexplicably ashamed, like Adam and Eve” (112). By positioning the reader over Alison’s shoulder, Bechdel encourages us to experience this shameful moment of seeing with her.

A later panel shows Alison watching as her brothers discover the calendar. Positioned high above them, sitting in a tree, she sees their excitement as they view the image of the naked woman. Alison watches them look at the image, keeping herself at a distance (112) (fig. 2). Again, the reader as viewer is positioned above her shoulder, looking upon the scene with her. That same afternoon Alison, her brothers, and Bruce visit a nearby strip mine. There, she sees another calendar depicting a naked woman hanging in the miners’ office. Bechdel writes, “As the man showed us around, it seemed imperative that he not know I was a girl.” Alison tells her brother to call her “Albert” instead of “Alison” (113). These pages show Alison’s feelings of constraint as a young woman—namely the way in which she sees how women are to be looked at, displayed, and sexualized. In the same way that Alison develops her aesthetic in opposition to her father in resistance to his visual landscape, Alison disidentifies with the woman depicted in the calendar. Notably, this disidentification occurs through a claim to a masculine name—Alison uses language in this instance in her attempt to mask the fact of her female body.
However, vision and the visual field also allow Alison to cultivate her own desires in opposition and resistance to what she is seemingly supposed to see. Pointing to the connection Bechdel makes between drawing and her first orgasm, Lemberg argues that drawing also functions for Alison as an outlet for queer desires that, “under her father’s vigilant maintenance of her femininity and oppressive social norms, are continually held at bay.” Lemberg suggests that it is precisely in the visual field that Alison is able to find space to articulate her own needs and fantasies. For example, during a trip to Philadelphia, Bruce and Alison eat at a local diner and Alison spots her first bull dyke (fig. 3). Alison’s wide eyes emphasize the text in her depiction of the incident: “I didn’t know there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts.” From Alison and her father spotting the woman in the top panel, the bottom panel shows Bruce and Alison shifting their gazes to each other. “Is that what you want to look like?” asks Bruce, schooling his daughter in her visual appearance. Alison knows that the response her father desires is “no.” Bechdel writes: “What else could I say?” Despite her father’s stern warnings about looking a certain way, this glimpse of female masculinity is described as a sustaining force for young
Alison. The “surge of joy” that she feels when she sees the bull dyke articulates a visual connection—the bull dyke is someone she has not spoken to but “know[s] by sight.”18 The field of the visual is a place where Alison’s father exerts a certain control over her and, at the same time, where she is able to articulate a particular kind of resistance. It is consistently drawn in *Fun Home* as constraining as well as opening up to alternative possibilities.

Similar to how she retains the image of the bull dyke and disavows identification with the pinups, Alison persistently works through a certain kind of queer resistance in the field of the visual, staking a claim to ways of seeing that run in opposition to what is given to her. Another scene that has yet to be mentioned in academic engagements with *Fun Home* further emphasizes that the novel is not only about Alison learning to see her father but also about how young queer Alison navigates the visual more generally. At fourteen, when Alison’s friend Beth attempts to persuade her to go to a high school football game, Alison explains, “I don’t wanna go to the game. I hate football” (181). As Beth flips through an issue of *GQ*—which Alison had managed to obtain by explaining that she was thinking of becoming a fashion designer—and comments on the attractiveness of the magazine’s male models, Alison looks at her friend. In response to Alison’s lack of interest in the football game, Beth remarks, “So don’t watch it. The point is to see people” (181–82). Alison misses the point of attending the football match precisely because she does not “see” correctly. This is emphasized by her focus on her friend, who “correctly” turns her desiring gaze to the pages of *GQ*, a magazine that Alison reads with a desire for masculinity not as an object but subjectively for herself.

Instead of going to the football game, Alison and Beth stay home and rummage through Alison’s father’s closet, dressing each other in men’s suits and admiring their appearances in the mirror. Bechdel narrates the play as feeling “too good to actually be good” (182). Alison’s gender and sexual play in these panels is contrasted with watching the football game or reading *GQ*—her gaze at herself in her father’s clothes in the mirror provides her with a different, oppositional form of visual pleasure that she cultivates for herself. Rather than spending the afternoon at the football game
looking at people, Alison engineers the afternoon to involve looking in the mirror at her and Beth’s masculine play. Refusing one kind of desiring look at the football game, Alison instead cultivates another in her father’s wardrobe and mirror. *Fun Home* narrates these poignant visual moments as integral parts of Alison’s childhood, during which she is otherwise confronted with normative gender regulation by her father and by the wider world. However, it is precisely the field of the visual to which Bechdel retains a commitment, finding not only normative scripts but pleasure as well. From her cross-dressing to her fascination with the image of the bull dyke, Alison is able to fashion alternative visual narratives, resisting what she is supposed to see and instead creating different kinds of visual knowledge for herself.

**Bruce and Alison See Each Other**

The visual field in which Alison and Bruce find their own distinct language for performing queerness runs counter to the vision of a heteronormative family. Pearl argues that “one of the narrative threads in *Fun Home* is that the family, especially father and daughter, communicates better by way of literature than through actual direct verbal discourse.”¹⁹ A reviewer makes a similar pronouncement, concluding his review with the statement: “What ultimately brought [Bechdel] and her father together, in fact, were books.”²⁰ Despite the temptation to read the connection between father and daughter in *Fun Home* as existing primarily on the literary plane, I suggest that the field of the visual joins Bruce and Alison just as much as, if not more than, the many books they share, discuss, and argue over. Overemphasizing the role of literature and books in the text overlooks and arguably impoverishes the genre in which Bechdel chooses to tell the story, negating the many ways in which Bechdel visually negotiates a relationship with her father. Bechdel represents the connections between Alison and Bruce through her multiple ways of formatting graphic narrative panels as much as she does through literary references.

Marianne Hirsch argues for the importance of considering how familial looks “create and consolidate the familial relations among the individuals involved, fostering an unmistakable sense
of mutual recognition.” In other words, Hirsch draws attention to the importance of identity confirmation through a familial economy of looking in which, for example, looks exchanged between mother and son create and solidify the relationship between and identities of the two. In considering her relationship to her father along the field of vision, Bechdel locates a queer crossing where queer does not lie outside familial identification but cuts across it. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads “queer” as a particular kind of “crossing”: “The word ‘queer’ itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root –twercw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), and English athwart.” In Tendencies, Sedgwick investigates how queer crosses the lines of gender and sexuality, resisting a model of “homosexuality-as-gender inversion.” She defines queer as something more than a reversal of gender and instead considers “passionate queer things that happen across the lines that divide genders, discourses, and ‘perversions’” (xiii). Despite Bechdel’s deployment of the term invert to describe both herself and her father—a term that suggests a model of homosexuality-as-gender inversion—she represents her relationship to her father through a queer crossing. Not only are Alison and her father both attracted to a particular stylized gender crossing—with Alison desiring masculinity and her father desiring a certain feminine ornamentation—but this crossing also occurs in the visual field, where Alison’s and Bruce’s looks cross. Bechdel considers how her father translates his own desires through her girl body and how Alison plays out her own masculinity on his body, demonstrating the kind of crossing that Sedgwick understands to be intrinsic to the term queer.

In one panel, Bechdel depicts her gaze and her father’s reflected in the mirror as they assess each other’s appearances while preparing to go to a wedding (fig. 4). Bruce dresses up Alison in the femininity that he wants to embody while she, in turn, finds an outlet for her desired masculinity in and through her father: “While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him . . . [h]e was attempting to express something feminine through me.” The graphic panel contains multiple crossings. Alison and Bruce’s gazes cross as they look at each other in the mirror. The reader’s gaze
can be positioned behind either Alison or Bruce, moving the reader’s perspective between each of theirs. Father’s and daughter’s crisscrossing looks are emphasized by the crossing lines of the speech bubbles so that Alison’s words are positioned above the reflection of her father’s head in the mirror and her father’s words float above her reflection. Finally, the narration in the panel moves from one side to the other, ensuring that the reader crosses back and forth in order to follow the long-standing argument over Alison’s appearance that Bechdel describes as “a war of cross-purposes.”

A similar intersection of gazes occurs in a panel where Alison is depicted perusing fashion magazines and recommending items to her father. While positioned over her shoulder, Bruce looks at a male fashion model along with her. The two of them are again drawn in such a way that their gazes meet—but meet in a complicated middle. “I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls—subjectively, for myself,” writes Bechdel (99). Dressing each other up, Alison and Bruce adorn each other in the kinds of clothes they desire for themselves. They displace their own desires onto one another, creating mirrors of themselves—mirrors through which they see both each other and
the two of them together. The way in which these crossings bring father and daughter close to one another surfaces in a panel where Bechdel’s hand holds two pictures: one of her father and one of herself, at similar ages (120) (fig. 5). Aside from finding what she sees as physical similarities between the images of father and daughter, Bechdel inquires into the erotics behind them, asking if the boy who took her father’s photo was his lover as the girl who took Alison’s photo was hers. Bechdel positions herself in the place of both one of her own lovers and—possibly—one of her father’s, crossing their perspectives through her own gaze at the photos. This page also emphasizes the formal similarity between photos and graphic panels. As photographs contain the gaze of the subject, the photographer, and the viewer, panels contain similar multiple looks—a formal characteristic that Bechdel deftly manipulates to emphasize her relationship to her father through vision as queerly crossed.

*Fun Home*’s moments of crossed gazes are contrasted with a moment in which the communication between Alison and her father disappoints. The moment occurs in a scene in which Alison and Bruce drive to see a film when Alison is an adult. In the car, Bruce and Alison verbally acknowledge their cross-gender desires, with Bruce admitting, “When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl . . . I’d dress up in girls’ clothes,” and Alison responding, “I wanted to be a boy! I dressed up in boys’ clothes!” (221). However, their gazes never meet during this exchange. Bruce stares straight ahead the entire time, and Alison looks away dejectedly at the end
of the conversation. The failed connection between the two of them is represented by Bechdel through the field of the visual. Bruce and Alison’s queer moments of recognition are represented through crossing gazes, while this moment of disappointing disconnection is represented as a failure to see each other.

Bechdel configures the comic panel as a space where multiple looks intersect: from Alison to her father, to Bechdel and the reader, the panel holds multiple looking possibilities. Bechdel thus reconceptualizes Chute’s description of panels as “boxes of time,” instead creating boxes of looks in which the graphic narrative not only permits play with narrative time but can also incorporate numerous looks. Bechdel uses these possibilities to depict the connection between Alison and her father as an intersecting gaze, the crossing of their gender and sexual desires. Bechdel’s story joins Alison and her father through these moments of erotic looking. The familial look in this case becomes entwined with and inextricable from a queer look. The two do not only look at each other as father and daughter; their gazes at each other are bound up with their queerly gendered and sexual desires. They confirm for each other their positions not only as father and daughter but as inverts alike. The meeting of their gazes on the bull dyke, their intersecting gazes in the mirror, and their shared gaze at the man in the magazine: these cross-gender, inverted, and queer desiring gazes are, in Bechdel’s narrative, the instances in which Alison’s and her father’s gazes exceed the dominant family economy of looking and provide moments of queer mutual recognition.

**Bechdel’s Hands at Work**

Fun Home’s narrative spirals nonlinearly around the truth rather than providing a definitive conclusion, and Bechdel’s insistence on her own embodied vision is essential to this contingent production of her knowledge about her family and her father. Along with placing the reader over Alison’s shoulder in many scenes to position her or him as witness to Alison’s vision, another primary means through which Bechdel theorizes a situated, embodied vision is through the reproduction of her hand—visible in pan-
els where she holds up redrawn family photographs—throughout the book. Her hand is especially notable in a two-page centerfold of a photograph of the Bechdel family’s babysitter Roy as it is drawn precisely where the reader’s hand might be holding the page of the book (fig. 6). The hand invites the reader to see as Alison sees, to witness her own witnessing of the photographs. As Bruce presumably touched Roy, enacting his desire, Alison too touches Roy—touches his photograph and a material manifestation of her father’s desire for him. The reader places her or his thumb over the top of Alison’s thumb, touching her touching Roy. From the photo of Roy held by Alison’s life-sized hand, to the photos of her family beach holiday, to the photos in which
she reads so much similarity between herself and her father, Alison’s hand is a persistent presence. And its presence references Bechdel’s hand as the reproducer of the photographs—they are drawn rather than directly inserted into the narrative as photos, reminding readers that we are not seeing the photos themselves but Bechdel’s careful and intricate reproductions of them.

This reading of Bechdel’s hand as representing a partial and thus limited perspective can be emphasized by turning to the connection between the hand and technologies of vision in the work of American artist Lisa Oppenheim. Oppenheim’s *The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else* (2006), an exhibition composed of fifteen images screened and looped from a 35 mm projector, contains the photographer’s hand as a subject in photos. For the piece, Oppenheim sourced pictures taken by US soldiers in Iraq from photo-sharing websites such as Flickr. Each of the fifteen photos she chose is of a sunset. Oppenheim then photographed herself in New York City positioning the prints of the Iraqi sunset photos atop her own sunset views, deliberately making her hand visible holding the photo she was photographing. Just as Bechdel draws her hand holding a drawn photograph, Oppenheim includes her hand as subject of her images (fig. 7).

Oppenheim’s piece performs the idea that time passing—the sun setting—is relative to a particular time and place. In addition to the photos’ layers of reproduction, Oppenheim’s projection draws attention to how each image would look different in another minute. The title’s assertion that “the sun is always setting” suggests the never-ending setting of the sun, but the timing of Oppenheim’s photos highlights the limited perspective any one person has of this constant action. Further, in the insistence that the sun is always
setting “somewhere else,” Oppenheim underscores how an image might gesture toward not only what is present but also what is absent. Her hand’s presence indicates that while her work points in other directions, it only gives the viewer visual access to her direction—the direction in which her body is pointed. Oppenheim’s body masters the direction the viewer is given. Her hand is the hand that scrolled through US soldiers’ Flickr accounts, her hand pressed the download button on these images, and her hand holds each photo over the sunset that her body directionally faces. The viewer sees what Oppenheim constructs, and her hand emphasizes this construction. As she holds up the image of the Iraqi sunset, it writes over her New York City sunset. But Oppenheim does not really give the viewer access to both sunsets—she foregrounds the partial perspective of watching the sun set. The sun is always setting somewhere else, making the always-setting sun something that the located viewer can never grasp in its entirety. What Oppenheim’s work contributes to thinking about Bechdel’s hand is this particular stress on location—or on Bechdel’s embodied vision. The visibility of both hands emphasizes that the artist’s vision is limited and that the viewer’s vision is mediated through her or his body. Further, Oppenheim’s hand and her images draw out precisely the kind of work that Bechdel’s hand references.

Bechdel reproduces the work that seeing constitutes—her body labors through a graphic novel to come to some understanding about her family, her father, and her sexuality. Hirsch argues that “reading” family photographs is a kind of work because they are located “in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life.” Annette Kuhn similarly draws attention to the work involved in seeing family history through photographs—the individual memories contained within “spread into an extended network of meanings,” so that family photographs are starting points more than conclusive evidence. Bechdel extends this emphasis on the labor of seeing family history through her artistic practice. She is known to photograph herself in each pose that every character in her comic will take in each panel and to use these photographs as reference shots when drawing, further accentuating how her vision involves
bodily labor.\(^{27}\) What the reader sees, then, is not just an image that Bechdel has drawn but a scene that Bechdel has acted out, photographed, and then drawn. In both Bechdel’s and Oppenheim’s work, the presence of the artist’s hand references the laborious reproduction—the mediation of vision—that it has carried out and that is not represented. Further, the artists’ hands enunciate vision itself as work: we learn to see what we see.

Bechdel’s emphasis on the slow process of vision, of vision as requiring extensive labor, might also be read in relation to the work of reading a graphic narrative. On any one page, readers of graphic narratives might be confronted with multiple images at once, asked to take in an abundance of visual information rapidly. Bechdel represents vision in her graphic narrative as requiring extensive labor. This is indeed not unlike the labor of reading a graphic novel, where the immediacy of each page’s visual information cannot be fully apprehended upon the turn of the page. The slow work of the artistic hand thus references both the process of Bechdel coming to see her family and the labor required of the reader of the graphic genre, who must piece together all of the visual information on the comic page.

Vision in *Fun Home* is intimately connected to Bechdel’s bodily labor. For Walter Benjamin, the age of mechanical reproduction represented a new kind of speed that he characterizes in terms of a shift in the body. Describing how lithography was replaced by photography, Benjamin explains: “For the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens. Since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech.”\(^{28}\) Benjamin does not only narrate a shift from lithography to photography, but connects this shift to a shift in bodily emphasis—the slow hand is replaced by the rapid eye. If lithography requires the slow labor of the artistic hand, the camera is likened by Benjamin to the rapidity of visual perception. The reemergence of the laboring hand in Bechdel’s work emphasizes not only the slow pace of learning to see but also a return in graphic narrative from the eye...
to the seeing body. The rapidity of photography is slowed down through the comic artist’s hand as she carefully and laboriously reproduces photographs—Bechdel’s hand is not the “free” hand to which Benjamin refers.

**Conclusion**

*Fun Home* is committed not only to articulating a kind of learned visuality but also to linking this visuality to a bodily history. In one panel, Alison’s hand is shown holding a photograph of her father as a young man wearing a woman’s bathing suit (fig. 8). The text box reads, “He’s wearing a women’s bathing suit. A fraternity prank? But the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant.” Alison’s characteristic hand appears holding the photo, emphasizing her bodily presence as she attempts to unpack precisely what his body is doing. The viewer sees her body drawn into the panel, holding the image of her father’s body that she has drawn into the novel. Her body mediates the viewer’s connection to her father while at the same time drawing attention to her mediation as the only way through which she is able to give us access to him. In moments like these, Bechdel reminds us that vision is always mediated by bodies that have their own histories of vision—bodies that see from particular perspectives and that have particular relationships to the field of vision.

**Notes**

Figs. 1–6 and 8 are from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. © Copyright 2006 Alison Bechdel. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company and The Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.


3. Freedman, “Drawing on Modernism,” 126. For Freedman, *Fun Home* makes further claims on legitimacy for the graphic genre through Bechdel’s frequent citation of and more implicit allusions to high modernist literature.


23. Bechdel, Fun Home, 98.


29. Bechdel, Fun Home, 120.
Sam McBean recently completed her PhD in the English and Humanities Department at Birkbeck, University of London. Her thesis critiques conventional understandings of feminism’s temporality as linear, singular, and progressively chronological and, through readings of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and visual culture, imagines new models and figures for thinking feminism’s timing. She has work published or forthcoming in the edited collections Beyond Citizenship? Feminism and the Transformation of Belonging and A Handbook of Feminist Theory and the journals Feminist Review, Feminist Theory, and Sexualities.

Figure 8. Photo of Bruce. Fun Home