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Landing on the Patio: Landscape Ecology and the Architecture of Identity in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

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In the late 1970s, after five decades of hibernation, the porch reemerges in American architecture and home design. This reawakening, dramatized by an influx of do-it-yourself builders manuals and television shows on the topic of home improvement, reveals a shift in how Americans thought about issues of space in and around the home. The porchless homes of the 1930s, ushered in by Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style, and Gustav Stickley's Craftsman design, gave way to blended decks, canvas awnings, and the revival of the wraparound porch in the 1980s. In an effort to salvage the home as the family seat, and amidst a growing workforce (women made up over half of the country's full-time workers at this point), a lengthening workday, and economic recession, Americans reconstructed the porch on a tighter budget and with their own two hands.

In one such do-it-yourself manual entitled *Porches and Patios: Home Repair and Improvement*,[1] expert architects and contractors guide novice builders through the processes of planning and building different kinds of porches and patios. While the title of the volume suggests that the text's primary concern is the construction of porches and patios, what lies beyond the title's colon offers an additional lesson for readers—that in affixing a porch or patio to the home, the home is improved or even made to be whole with the addition of the new structure. The inverse of this is, of course, that the home, bereft of porch or patio, is insufficient and in need of human attention to make it truly habitable. Even more, the list of topics the text covers, located on the cover of the book, leaves no stone unturned. Nestled between the main title of the book and a list of subtopics that includes "Sun," "Rain," and "Bug Shields," readers are reminded that, in building a home, we ultimately "Return to the Wraparound." If only by suggestion, the editors of the volume reintroduce, alongside techniques of finishing an edge and embedding flagstones, a timeless sense of American architecture and design, as well as a feeling of coming home to one's roots on the porch.

I begin with this flashback to 1981 not just as artifactual evidence of the porch's reemergence in American architecture and design, but because, and as I demonstrate in this essay, narratives that spend time on the porch, like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, put productive pressure on limited and limiting formulations of inside vs. outside and culture vs. nature. Indeed, the rhetorical appeal of books like *Porches* and *Fun Home* goes beyond what Susan Stanford Friedman calls the "figurative art of language," or the mere exploration

of a communication system or medium.[2] The rhetorical appeal of graphic texts relies on their ability to both reveal and magnify the "widespread categories of social thought [that] shape how we understand human experience."[3] For instance, the opening invocation of *Porches*, aptly titled "Making the Outdoors Habitable," intensifies the already troubled relationship between indoors and outdoors (read: human culture and nature). It is here that a text like *Porches*, a graphic narrative in its own right, most vividly reinforces indoor/outdoor and culture/nature binaries. Readers may now comfortably assume that what is called "the Outdoors" was never designed for human habitation—that "the Outdoors" must be molded and shaped for human dwelling. In its final phase of construction, *Porches and Patios* grants readers permission to harness the tools necessary to complete their own weekend porch or patio project, to once again "make the outdoors habitable," and therefore hospitable, to all.

While *Fun Home* is neither builder's manual or home improvement guide, it is the quintessential example of a narrative in the graphic medium that displays the tension that exists between porch and patio. Published in 2006 at the tail end of the production of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, a comic strip that ran in newspapers across America from 1987 to 2008, *Fun Home* constitutes Bechdel's first book-length graphic memoir. The narrative is as much a memoir of Bechdel's childhood and adolescence as it is a biography of her family and their house in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. The book chronicles Bechdel's struggle to understand and come to terms with her lesbianism, her father Bruce's latent homosexuality and eventual suicide, and her mother Helen's distance and discontent. The story is also very much about the family's Victorian-Gothic home, which we see develop and change alongside Bechdel and her family. Over the course of the narrative, we witness the house in various stages of development: its "birth" in 1860, its eventual rediscovery and remodel by the Bechdel family, and the weather and human-related damage it sustains over the years. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to Alison Bechdel, the author, as "Bechdel," and Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*'s protagonist, as "Alison."

As Bechdel complicates the familiar (and familial) spaces of front porch and patio, so to delineate the differences between these ideological and material spaces, she moves beyond the mere hybridization of the spaces. If she constructs the home's front porch and back patio—their style and basic design, their function, and their locatedness and role for the Bechdel family—it is only in an effort to demonstrate the equally important possibility of recasting the spaces. As a result, *Fun Home* revises historical notions of the porch as a public, outdoor, and visible space related to heterosexual courtship, labor, and privacy, in order to recast the home's back patio as a space for the familial instead. Thus, Bechdel designs complex spaces in which binaries of culture and nature, inside and outside, and domestic and public are scrutinized and made pliable. At stake in my

rendering of *Fun Home*'s textual landscape, as well as the spatio-material landscape of the Bechdel home, is a reading that brings into relief the tension that exists when queer bodies—homosexual or otherwise socially Othered—move in the public sphere. Furthermore, a reading attuned to issues of identity and landscape provides tools necessary to codifying characters' experience between public and private spheres, sites otherwise considered liminal and therefore theoretically "off limits" or unimagined.

To reiterate, the persistence of the material/physical home into nature via the spaces of porch and patio upsets hard lines of indoors and outdoors. As a result, porch and patio become public, open-air stages for moments of tension, connection, and disclosure Alison and her family members experience. To that end, Bechdel's unique graphic approach to representations of these conditions necessitates a language that is equally visual in its scope and composition. For this reason, this essay turns to landscape ecology and thus extends the import of Richard T.T. Forman and Michel Godron's germinal text on the subject from 1986, *Landscape Ecology.* Terms expressly located within landscape ecology like edge, migration, and matrix, paired with queer interventions into the already established discipline of landscape ecology, provide a fresh critical vocabulary with which to discuss *Fun Home*.

For instance, I consider porch, patio, and the house alongside concepts of matrix and edge to point to an emergent link between Bechdel's narrative and issues of landscape. In landscape ecology, matrix and edge refer to a "homogenous mass in which small differentiated elements appear" and "outer band, which has an environment significantly different from the interior of the patch," respectively.[4] In addition, I distinguish Helen's movement from the domestic space of the home to what Stacy Alaimo calls the "undomesticated ground" of the patio, as migration, rather than relocation or simple movement. Migration, which Forman and Godron define as movement-based adaptation in response to climatic and other conditions associated with the changing seasons allows species to "avoid unfavorable environmental conditions and utilize favorable ones."[5] Understanding Helen's migratory move from the home, a realm in which Helen struggles to relax and find pleasure, to patio, where she is free to rehearse her lines, foregrounds these spaces in the narrative, and suggests their material significance as sites of meaning and complex interaction.

While landscape ecology takes as its primary focus issues of landscape and ecological theory, the approach is a truly interdisciplinary one, resting at the crossroads of ecology, geography, wildlife biology, forestry, landscape architecture, and agricultural science.[6] As William Howarth observes, landscape ecology offers useful metaphors for land and landscapes by employing a "situational ethic of landscape" as a continuous history that is always evolving.[7] Based on this view of land, landscape ecologists ask new questions

about regions: What are they? What do they give or take? How do they alter or influence?[8] Building on Howarth's definition of landscape ecology, Gordon Brent Ingram identifies this field of inquiry as one consisting of "interdisciplinary approaches for studying the interplay of biophysical ecosystems and human communities—including culture."[9]

Howarth and Ingram find particular relevance in what landscape ecology offers feminist and queer theories, and vice versa. Howarth recognizes feminist theories and landscape ecology as dedicated to both methodologies of describing the contexts of reality, and the use of ethical, situatedness-based metaphors and approaches.[10] Both approaches help one another along, in that they try to "avoid distinctions between natural and disturbed regions and use a new spatial language to describe land by shape, function and change."[11] For Ingram, whose work bridges the gap between landscape ecology and queer theory, the interaction between the approaches sheds light on the biophysical and empirical descriptors in investigation of social networks and physical sites of sexual minorities.[12]

In order to establish the porch and patio as particular landscapes within a larger web of connection, it is necessary to understand the foundation that supports the Bechdel home itself. The Bechdel home comes out of a shift in American architectural design. Born of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania's "one brief moment of wealth from the lumber industry, in 1867"[13] the Bechdel's Victorian-Gothic Revival house exemplified high style emblematic of the Victorian age. In her discussion of porches in *Home Sweet Home: American Domestic Vernacular Architecture*, Davida Rochlin explores the evolution of porches in American architectural design, pointing out that air pollution, automobile noise, television use, and central air conditioning, among various other causes, contributed to the retreat of Americans indoors and the decline of the porch in the mid-twentieth-century.[14] Like Rochlin, Charles McKay recognizes the decline of porches as a convergence of various factors, adding to Rochlin's list the economic constraint in building brought on by the Great Depression, and the creation of the U.S. Housing Authority, which advocated inner-city (porchless) housing projects for the poor.[15] Unlike Rochlin, however, McKay very specifically pinpoints the fall of porches in American architecture to the period between 1918 and 1937, a period defined by war, economic depression, and the introduction of a new futuristic style of domestic design attempting to replicate art deco sensibilities.[16]

Concomitant with McKay's analysis, Bechdel points out that by the turn of the twentieth-century, Beech Creek's economy had steadily declined. By the time Bruce and Helen Bechdel purchased the home in 1962, it was in desperate need of repair: "It was a shell of its former self. The shutters and scrollwork were gone. The clapboards had been sheathed with scabrous shingles."[17] In these early pages of *Fun Home*, the home emerges as a character, and undergoes the same kind of development traditionally reserved for human subjects. Indeed, the

construction of the home, and more specifically the porch, as flawed and in need of repair, takes place alongside the formation of her father Bruce as both "Old father, old artificer" (a reference to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the title of Chapter 1), and the mythological figure of Icarus.

Bechdel emphasizes the connection between Bruce and the house by opening *Fun Home* with a brief narrative of the structure's emergence and its remodel alongside an introduction to Bruce. It is clear that Bruce's greatest achievement is not his family, or the life he has made in Beech Creek, but his "monomaniacal restoration of our old house"[18] that spanned almost two decades. Bechdel writes of her father, "It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word."[19] The material objects that make up the Bechdels' lives come into sharp focus—the "gilt cornices, the marble fireplace, the crystal chandeliers, the shelves of calf-bound books"[20]—against Alison and her brothers, who "couldn't compete with the astral lamps and girandoles and hepplewhite suite chairs. They were perfect."[21]

Accompanied by a panel that features a close-up image of the porch's supports, Bechdel's first and most direct reference to the porch notes, "all that was left of the house's lumber-era glory were the exuberant front porch supports"[22] (fig. 1). This image of the porch is among many in the first few pages of *Fun Home*. Panels that feature the porch show up on the cover of the book, in the front matter, on Chapter 1's title page, and several other times as Bechdel familiarizes readers with *Fun Home*'s landscape. In fact, Bechdel's description of the porch here constitutes the eighth time we see the porch in as many pages. The visibility of the porch in *Fun Home*'s early scenes suggests the structure's prominence in the narrative, as well as its visual and symbolic impact.

Figure 1. Panels from p. 9. Excerpted from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

Where the front porch's location at the entranceway of the house necessitates aesthetic elements of design like iron spools and spindles, the patio, often located at the back or on the side of the house, is deliberately informal and is typically an open air structure composed of a masonry platform set at ground level.[23] This is indeed the case for the Bechdel's patio. While Bechdel provides no information regarding the evolution of the house's patio between the period of 1867 when the house was built, and the purchase of the house by the Bechdel's in 1962, she does draw two consecutive frames that give readers a rare view of the back of the house in its entirety before she moves beyond her discussion of Bruce's remodel of the porch. These illustrations are accompanied by some text: "He [Bruce] would cultivate the barren yard . . . into a lush, flowering landscape"[24] (fig. 2). In the first panel, the pre-1962 house exhibits two small, covered spaces that resemble patios. In the next frame, the home has been transformed in the space of the gutter (understood as the actual passage of time), and a vast patio with a rooftop extends almost the full length of the home.

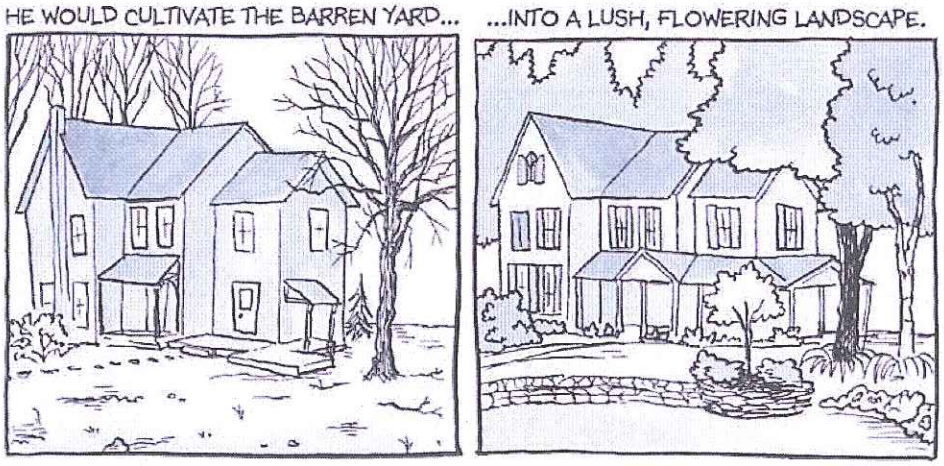

Figure 2. Panel from p. 10. Excerpted from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

Bechdel does not account for the space of the patio in the same way she does the front porch. Indeed, the porch and patio support very different events. Bechdel relies upon "the gutter," or the white space between comic panels, to shuttle the reader between the pre-1962 house and the house Bruce has remodeled. She chooses to subtly "explain" the patio's development in the white space of the gutter, as well as the drawn space of the frame, rather than through

text. All of this happens within the context of the broader topic of this essay, that is Bruce's ability to "perform . . . dazzling displays of artfulness."[25] Already, the distinction between porch and patio is palpable, illustrated by Bechdel's choice to visually *and* textually account for Bruce's remodel of the front porch, and the textual silence Bechdel takes regarding the back patio's redesign. Moreover, in that the patio is physically located at the back and on the side of the house, and the porch is located in the front of the house and serves as entranceway, Bechdel reiterates the oppositional nature of the spaces. For instance, Bechdel consistently marks the front porch as a place for the Bechdel family to sit, stand, and look[ed] outward, never as a place for the family to examine one another.

In one of the only scenes in which all of the members of the Bechdel family are seen together, Bechdel demonstrates the family's talent for keeping up appearances on the front porch. Bechdel utilizes the space of two panels to illustrate the family's, and in particular Bruce's, "skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear what they were not . . . that is to say, impeccable"[26] (fig. 3). In this scene, the family poses for a photograph before church. Bruce photographs the family, all of whom gaze blankly back at Bruce with their hands at their sides. In an opposing frame, the family poses for a photograph on the porch before church, this time with Alison positioned behind the camera. Other than Alison taking up the camera, not much changes in the transition between frames; the family remains on the porch, hands at their sides, staring blankly in the direction of the camera. The family's inability to connect physically in both instances, illustrated by their consistent lack of affection for one another, makes evident a subsequent inability to connect emotionally on the space of the porch.

Figure 3. Panel from p. 16. Excerpted from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

Although both Alison and Bruce physically face the members of their family to snap the photographs in these scenes, their gaze is always mediated, or even interrupted, by the filter of the camera. This fact inhibits sight beyond the scope of their pose, and again Bechdel insinuates that much lies beneath the surface of the interaction. Furthermore, Bechdel's choice to repeat the image in close coordinates with only minimal difference in its composition serves to reinforce several key concepts involving the performance. First, these illustrations operate to re-establish Bruce's propensity to display "useless ornament," as Bechdel thought these to be "embellishments in the worst sense . . . lies."[27] Also, Bechdel suggests that, while the family in many ways "was a sham," ultimately a family of performers interested in telling stories, they were a family nonetheless, and "did live in those period rooms" together.[28] Barrie Greenbie calls the front porch the "ideal stage for defining the impressions that we want to convey."[29] In that these scenes display the falsity of the family's harmonious relationship, the photographs also provide artifactual evidence that could, to the viewer of the photograph, suggest otherwise.

Finally, as if to magnify the image of the family's masquerade in our mind's eye, Bechdel fashions layers of meaning within a single panel to suggest a complicated point of view. She utilizes three different framing devices within this one comics frame itself: the frame through which the photographer sees his/her subjects, the frame produced by the porch's iron supports, and the traditional border of the panel. Bechdel's construction of the panel in this way reminds

readers that there is never just one way of reading *Fun Home*'s panels. Just the opposite, Bechdel's method of triply framing the panel serves to shine a spotlight on the porch and the activities that take place there. At this early point in the narrative, Bechdel risks (over)exposing her family for what it truly is. This is a risk Bechdel must take, however, if *Fun Home* means to complicate traditional conceptualizations of porch and patio.

If Bruce's uneasiness with his family is especially visible on the porch, Helen's aversion to the domestic realm is most palpable inside the house, amidst its various landscape elements, both natural and human-made. Bechdel makes clear that despite Bruce's discomfort with the family, he enjoys spending time inside the house, as he has an affinity for molding the domestic sphere of the home to reflect a more cultured existence beyond the confines of Beech Creek. Helen, on the other hand, is held captive to Bruce's passion for interior design, as well as her children's constant presence. Two of the three matrix criteria articulated by Forman and Godron help to clarify Helen's migration to the patio: the house functions as a "homogenous mass" in which small, differentiated landscape elements appear, as well as the binding material that surrounds and cements independent elements.[30] These are "mirrors . . . bronzes, [and] multiple doorways," "gilt cornices . . . marble fireplace . . . crystal chandeliers [and] shelves of calf-bound books," and "silk flowers, glass flowers, needlepoint flowers, flower paintings and, where any of these failed to materialize, floral patterns.[31] As is clear, the house supports multiple and seemingly contradictory elements at the same time. Indeed, elements of glass, bronze, marble, and crystal coalesce to shape and adorn the home. While bronze, marble, and crystal occur in nature, their shape and use as fireplace and chandelier contribute to our notion of the home's landscape as particularly formal and detached from the natural landscape. Bechdel warms up the home by including flower iconography, as well as the "calf-bound books" that make up Bruce's library, in her description of the home's landscape. The blending of both "human-made" landscape elements, such as glass and bronze, and "natural" landscape elements, such as flowers and animal skin, diversify the home's landscape, establish the home as matrix, and complicate hard lines of human and nonhuman, culture and nature.

In addition to matrix, the Bechdel home is what Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson call a "disciplinary space," wherein a very narrow range of activities is sanctioned, practiced, and experienced."[32] For Helen, sanctioned activities include taking care of her children, preparing meals, and doing laundry. Unsanctioned activities include practicing the piano or working on her master's thesis. This is most clearly exemplified when her practice at the piano is interrupted by the demands of her children, which occurs multiple times in the narrative: "I'll make lunch in fifteen minutes" Helen barks without looking up from her sheet music. "Mom, how come you never go outside?" Alison's

brother asks Helen as she practices "Nocturne" on the piano in another scene.[33] At yet another time, Alison sits beside her mother on the piano bench as she practices "Grand Valse Brillante": "Did Chop-in write in chopsticks?" asks Alison.[34] "Sho-PAHN. No. Don't bother me now" Helen responds with obvious frustration. Bruce seems more sensitive to Helen's time to practice, but only slightly, and it is still evident that Bruce's attention is on the home. "Helen? Don't stop. I'm just showing off your house to some friends," Bruce calls from somewhere outside of the scope of the frame.[35] Her time to practice, the "sustenance" of her "creative solitude,"[36] is therefore mediated, and often interrupted, by her role as wife and mother. While Bruce is able to practice his "unwholesome interest in the decorative arts"[37] inside the home freely, Helen is unable to enjoy herself inside the home and must do so elsewhere.

It comes as no surprise then that Helen migrates from the inside of the house to the outdoor space of the patio in order to practice her lines. To reiterate, migration is a movement-based adaptation that involves the avoidance of unfavorable environmental conditions for more favorable ones.[38] The open, favorable space of the patio can be understood via Stacy Alaimo's concept of an "undomesticated space," in that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency.[39] Additionally, the patio functions as an edge, the space Forman and Godron describe as an outer band significantly different from the interior of the space.[40] While the patio is connected to the domestic realm of the house, it extends beyond it into the natural realm of the yard and grants Helen a space where she can take up her own performance and rival that of Bruce. Over and against the front porch as a space for the exhibition of the family's deception, the hybrid space of the patio constitutes a new site for Helen's artistry that both extends beyond the home, and is wholly removed from the stifling environment of the front porch.

In her study of Southern literature and culture, Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon finds that for women, the porch, as a liminal space situated between the private world of the family and the public world of the community, often leads back to the domestic sphere or the home's interior.[41] As we have seen in the previous scenes featuring Helen on the porch, Donlon's assertion regarding women characters in literature of the South applies to *Fun Home* as well. When Helen is on the front porch, she is firmly situated within her role as mother and wife. However, this is not the case on the patio. In that Bechdel sets up the porch and patio as contrasting spaces, the patio can lead out, pointing to landscapes beyond the domestic sphere. Understood as an edge, rather than as a space simply situated at the boundary between private and public spheres, the patio constitutes a pathway for Helen's migration.

While Helen's migration to the patio frees her from the home Bruce finds that he is able to express his feelings on the patio by shedding his everyday

performance as a straight man. The division of porch and patio is never more forcefully depicted as complicated than in the scenes featuring Roy, the Bechdel's sometimes-landscaper, sometimes-babysitter. Our first glimpse of Roy is, of course, on the front porch. He does not stay here for long, however, as Helen meets him at the front door and directs him to the back of the house where Bruce and the kids are working on the yard (fig. 4).[42] When Bruce and Roy appear together for the first time, it is in the second tier of the page. They are situated on opposite sides of a long panel that spans the entire width of the page: Roy appears on the far left, Bechdel's brother is in the middle, and Bruce and his children are on the right side of the panel.

Figure 4. Panel from p. 94. Excerpted from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

The location of Bruce and Roy in the panel can be better understood through a discussion of panel construction. In his germinal text *Comics and Sequential Art*, noted comics artist Will Eisner writes that a long, stretched out panel typically conveys a lengthy amount of time.[43] In the context of the scene between Bruce and Roy, the length of this panel works to both lengthen the amount of time Bechdel wants the reader to spend on the panel and emphasize the shared gaze of Bruce and Roy, rather than connote a span of time within the scene. "Roy!" Bechdel's brother yells from the center of the frame. This exclamation, the panel's only word balloon and therefore only moment of dialogue, not only functions to announce Roy's arrival, but interrupts the gaze shared by Bruce and Roy. However, in that the word balloon is drawn in the center of the page and in the path of the couple's gaze, our own reading trajectory is slowed, or even suspended, in the space of the panel. Therefore, the intervention of the word balloon is a productive one; readers must pause before reaching Bruce on the far right of the frame, and in the process, more deeply consider Roy's significance and involvement in the narrative.

In addition, Bechdel's brother's moment of recognition reminds us of the fact that Roy plays a key role in the family. While he is not a frequent visitor in the narrative readers have access to, his role as "yardwork assistant/babysitter" assures readers of the potentially recurrent presence at the home, as does Bechdel's brother's excitement, Roy's playful affection for the children, and Bruce's behavior in the scene with Roy. Roy's happiness is demonstrated by how he reacts to seeing the children: he hoists Bechdel's brother over his shoulder and encircles the remaining children in an embrace. Bruce is similarly excited by Roy's arrival, as he cracks a rare smile as he briefs Roy on the progress of their work on the backyard's flagstones.

Bechdel creates pathways of interpretation by drawing our attention to these points of interest in the panel. Focal points are achieved when a perpendicular line from opposite corners of the panel intersects with a diagonal from the remaining corners (fig. 5).[44] As a result, the comics artist points to "vital object[s] or action[s]."[45] A focal point, therefore, is a place or a set of places where the reader's eye first engages before moving on to absorb the rest of the scene. In the scene between Bruce and Roy, for instance, the visual enactment of Bruce's affection for Roy is produced through the combination of text and image, as well as the positioning of focal points. Bechdel not-so-subtly suggests a deeper, more physical attraction felt by Bruce for Roy before the men move to the patio to relax: "My father could not afford a chauffeur/secretary. But he did *spring* for the occasional yardwork assistant/babysitter" [emphasis mine].[46] In the panel that accompanies this bit of text, Bruce has indeed "sprung" for Roy; in a physical display of his attraction, the long handle of the shovel Bruce holds

doubles as an erection, as it extends from his groin and points up in Roy's direction (fig. 4).

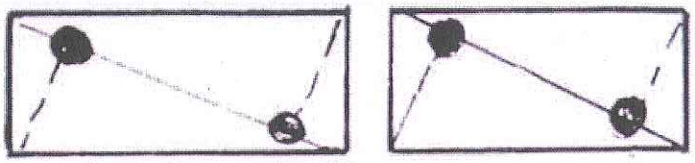

Figure. 5. From p. 151. Reprinted from *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* by Will Eisner. Copyright © 1985 by Will Eisner. Copyright © 2008 by Will Eisner Studies, Inc. With the permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

By Eisner's calculations, the focal points of this panel are Roy's smiling face on the top/left of the panel, and Bruce's hand resting near his groin on the bottom/right. Just as Eisner's line predicts, the handle of Bruce's shovel guides readers' eyes from one focal point to the other. The next panel in the narrative, which is in the first tier of the next page, features Bruce holding two bottles of beer and Roy reclined on a chair with his own hand resting upon his groin. Just as before, the focal points guide our attention diagonally, from the lyrics of a song featured in the scene on the top/left of the frame, to Roy reclining on the chair. As Sara Ahmed points out, the lines we follow "function as forms of 'alignment,' or as ways of being in line with others" (15).[47] Ahmed's analysis of lines serves a dual function in the context of this scene. First, Ahmed speaks to the spatial quality of Bruce and Roy's relationship in this panel. More significantly, however, Ahmed confirms the role of the line Bechdel creates through panel construction. Here, the handle of shovel extending from Bruce's hand diagonally toward Roy's face functions as a mechanism for alignment, the apparatus by which Bruce and Roy are perhaps "out of line" with heterosexual culture at large, and "in line" with one another on the patio.

Of course, this constant redirecting of eyes to focal points is intuitive, and therefore may be lost on the casual comics reader; the practice of how eyes consume images—that is, the movement of eyes from one focal point to the other—is something Bechdel is certainly aware of. Nevertheless, through the "deeply crafted, intensely structured" panel, Bruce and Roy's union is able to take place.[48]

It is important to note that Bruce and Roy do appear together briefly inside the home. In a series of three concurrent panels and a few subsequent panels later in the narrative that seem to foreshadow a later scene on the patio, Bruce and Roy appear in the home before Bruce's enormous bookshelf. "This was great," Roy

says, as he hands Bruce Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, a book he has borrowed from Bruce's collection.[49] Bruce takes back the book and, in turn, offers Roy F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As a means of qualifying the exchange, as well as situating Bruce and Roy's relationship as illicit, Bechdel writes "Part of dad's country squire routine involved edifying the villagers—his more promising high school students. The promise was very likely sexual in some cases, but whatever else might have been going on, books were being read."[50] Later, Bechdel resurrects the scene within the context of a discussion of how Bruce resembles Jay Gatsby. As if to foreshadow the scene on the patio, Bechdel renders a remarkably similar scene through the construction of focal points, as Bruce offers Roy a glass of sherry and Roy reclines on a chair. Bechdel uses this scene to set up the later meeting between Roy and Bruce on the patio in a couple of ways. First, this meeting appears before the patio scene in the narrative. More importantly, the meeting is interrupted by Helen, who appears in the doorway to tell Bruce he has forgotten to pick up their son John at his cub scout meeting.[51] If the exchange of texts is symbolic of Bruce and Roy's sexual union, Helen's interruption functions to prematurely end their exchange.

It is not surprising then that Bruce's courtship ritual is able to take place and conclude not on the porch or within the home but on the patio, as "traditional middle-class notions of porch courtship rest on presumptions of heterosexuality."[52] In stark contrast to the staged family photographs taken before church, which function to bolster the (false) image of the happy nuclear (and heterosexual) family structure, the patio, as both edge and hybrid space, must not conform to the cultural and traditional standards of the front porch that Donlon alludes to. Instead, the next panels, which feature Bruce offering Roy a beer as he reclines on a lawn chair and the children playing happily on the patio, grant readers photographs of a new family; in Helen's absence, Bechdel "re-parents" the family. Alison even recalls the specific song playing on the outdoor speaker Roy has helped to install: "The feelin's the same as bein' outside of the law . . ."[53] While the lyrics of the song remind us of the illicitness of Bruce and Roy's relationship, they also underscore the productive tension between inside and outside always already present on the space of the patio. While poet Frenchy Jolene Hodges, in her poem "Belle Isle: (Central Park of Detroit)," insinuates that patios are more about working, seeking privacy, and hiding unsightly items than they are about creating a showplace,[54] *Fun Home*'s patio turns this conceptualization on its ear, offering a patio that promotes leisure, enjoyment, and togetherness.

Bechdel's reversal of the meanings attached to porch and patio imbues the spaces with political relevance and consequence, as queer bodies become visible publicly. In contrast to what both the home and the porch represent, the patio generates a context for the kind of analysis put forth by Mortimer-Sandilands and

Erickson in their collection *Queer Ecologies*. Like Howarth and Ingram, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson offer the concept of queer ecology as an amalgamation of theories and approaches best suited to articulate and emphasize the always-present environmental-spatial dimension of sexual politics,[55] as well as the "locations and co-productions"[56] of identity formation. Queer ecologies, in their multiple contexts and connotations, offer a critical analysis of the ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically.[57] "It is our task," Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson write in their introduction to the collection, "to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding."[58] Landscapes, therefore, are organized to produce, promote, and prohibit particular kinds of sexual identity and practice.[59]

Whereas the organization of the home and porch prohibit Bruce's ability to be what Donlon calls "out on the porch," Bechdel's organization of the patio as a public, open-air edge, and her arrangement of the patio as that which extends beyond the confines of the house and is oppositional to the porch, produces and promotes Bruce's ability to exercise his attraction to Roy. On a related note, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson conclude that what is significant about public sex in the public space of a park, for instance, is that it is public, in that it "overtly challenges heteronormative understandings of what is appropriate behavior for public, natural spaces."[60] Bechdel's depiction of Bruce and Roy's union on the patio illustrates her commitment to making visible Bruce's subtle resistance to heterosexuality, despite his seemingly complacent situatedness within a heterosexual family structure. If only briefly, Bruce has moved from the closet to the patio; like Helen, Bruce migrates from spaces like the porch and house where he must hide parts of his identity, to one where it is safe to be gay.

The multiple ways in which Bruce and Helen express themselves on the back patio visually enact the broader tension between indoors and outdoors Bechdel takes up throughout the narrative. The patio functions for Bruce and Helen as an example of what McKay calls the classic American "public theater," a place where domestic drama plays for a passing public.[61] While McKay deals more directly with the disappearance of porches beginning in 1937, and their recovery in the late twentieth-century in African American cultural memory, his consideration of the porch as a kind of theater that bridges the gap between the domestic and public spheres proves useful in the context of *Fun Home*. The patio also serves as a location of escape and complex exploration for both Bruce and Helen. For Donlon, a discussion of the porch always requires that readers maintain a "realistic view of troubled families."[62] *Fun Home* certainly meets this requirement. Given that a view of the porch will always be filtered through our

nostalgia of the space, Bechdel's depiction grants readers the opportunity to revisit and perhaps revise what the porch symbolizes.

The alliance between mother and daughter in the artistic act is a turning point, as well as an invaluable experience, for Helen and Alison (fig. 6). It is, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out, a significant factor in the strengthening of relationships between mothers and daughters: "By entering and expressing herself in some more dominant art form . . . the daughter can make prominent the work both have achieved . . . Mother and daughter are thus collaborators, coauthors separated by a generation."[63] Out of this collaborative relationship, Helen emerges as what DuPlessis calls a "maternal muse." This figure departs from the traditional/patriarchal notion of the muse as one who gives access to feelings or knowledge that she herself cannot formulate.[64] By reworking the back patio into a stage for Helen to practice her lines, Bechdel creates an open-air platform for Helen's grief, as well as a way for her to deal with grief—that is, through expression and connection with her daughter beyond the confines of Bruce's domestic domain.

Figure 6. Panel from p. 154. Excerpted from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

On the space of the patio, *Fun Home*'s inhabitants have the ability to participate in worlds previously obfuscated by their subjectivity. Bruce and Helen's migration to the patio allow them to renegotiate and cultivate new relationships, as well as participate in behaviors and activities prohibited to them. In this way, the home's patio is closer to what A. J. Downing has termed the "open porch." While Downing's "open porch" physically resembles the front porch of the Bechdel home, as it is an addition to the front door with just enough room for a couple of seats[65] the openness the term implies may better suit the patio offered in *Fun Home*'s pages. In that the qualities that make the front porch "open" in Downing's definition do apply to the Bechdel's front porch, they also apply to the patio. *Fun Home*'s complex visual-syntactical landscape makes possible innovative, generative modes of inquiry that minimize the distance between humans and the landscapes they inhabit.

Notes

1. Time-Life Books, *Porches and Patios: Home Repair and Improvement* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life, Incorporated, 1981).
2. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy," in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, ed. Marianne DeKoven (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 17.
3. Ibid., 17.
4. Richard T.T. Forman and Michel Godron, *Landscape Ecology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), 108, 159.
5. Ibid., 362.
6. Ibid., 3.
7. William Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 76.
8. Ibid., 76.
9. Gordon Brent Ingram, "Fragments, Edges, and Matrixes: Retheorizing the Formation of a So-Called Gay Ghetto through Queering Landscape Ecology," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 256.
10. Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," 76.
11. Ibid., 76.
12. Ingram, "Fragments, Edges, and Matrixes," 254.
13. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2007), 8.
14. Davida Rochlin, "The Front Porch," in *Home Sweet Home: American Domestic Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Charles W. Moore, Kathryn Smith, and Peter Becker (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1983), 28.
15. Charles McKay, "The American Front Porch as a *Lieu de Mémoire* in African American Literature" (PhD diss., Drew University, 2008), 2, ProQuest.

16. Ibid., 56.
17. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 8.
18. Ibid., 4.
19. Ibid., 7.
20. Ibid., 5.
21. Ibid., 14.
22. Ibid., 9.
23. Time-Life Books, *Porches and Patios*, 7.
24. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 10.
25. Ibid., 9.
26. Ibid., 16.
27. Ibid., 16.
28. Ibid., 17.
29. Barrie Greenbie, *Spaces: Dimensions of the Human Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 42.
30. Forman and Godron, *Landscape Ecology*, 159.
31. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 20, 5, 90.
32. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 26.
33. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 35.
34. Ibid., 132.
35. Ibid., 31.
36. Ibid., 133.
37. Ibid., 31.
38. Forman and Godron, *Landscape Ecology*, 362.
39. Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 16.
40. Forman and Godron, *Landscape Ecology*, 108.
41. Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 101.
42. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 94.
43. Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 34.
44. Will Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 151.
45. Ibid., 151.
46. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 94.
47. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.
48. Hillary Chute, "Introduction: Women, Comics, and the Risk of Representation" in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 178.
49. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 61.
50. Ibid., 61.
51. Ibid., 65.

52. Donlon, *Swinging in Place,* 137.
53. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 95.
54. Donlon, *Swinging in Place*, 42-3.
55. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erikson, *Queer Ecologies*, 12.
56. Ibid., 5.
57. Ibid., 5.
58. Ibid., 5.
59. Ibid., 26.
60. Ibid., 12.
61. McKay, "The American Front Porch," 2.
62. Donlon, *Swinging in Place*, 132.
63. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 94.
64. Ibid., 94.
65. Rochlin, "The Front Porch," 26.

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