CHAPTER 11

Performative Texts and the Pedagogical Theatre: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* as Compositional Model

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Alison Bechdel's text *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is a rich, multimodal text we have incorporated into many of our freshman- and sophomore-level Honors composition and general education first-year seminar classes. Depending on the course and audience, we have approached *Fun Home* from a number of angles: generically in relation to the Bildungsroman, as a memoir, as a Gothic novel, as a graphic novel, and, more specifically, as a model of performativity[1] embedded by and within the text as well as within the writing process. Regardless of our varied approaches to teaching the text, we recognize that *Fun Home* both performs and is about identity performance; it prompts students and instructors alike to recognize the performed identities of the readers, characters, text, and author.

A strength of Bechdel's novel is her complex and performative layering of alphabetic text, images, and spatial relationships, as well as her inclusion and layering of familial and canonical resources. Each layer adds complexity to the graphic memoir and it quickly becomes clear that a reader must, like

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Alison,[2] develop diverse skills to "read" these textual layerings well. Many traditionally aged, starting college students focus mostly on alphabetic words to discern the meaning of a given text; however, learning to recognize reading as an active performance that requires shared participation can help students envision a fuller picture of reading as an iterative process. To grasp an overall understanding of *Fun Home*, it is necessary to examine the interrelations between alphabetic text, images, and spatial layout, as well as the gaps or differences between these modalities that often reveal discrepant, ambiguous, or ironic meanings.

Bechdel's memoir illustrates how graphic novels can represent the process of identity formation and the recognitions needed to understand how our identities are, largely, created or performed. Alongside deconstructing seemingly private and publicly performed identities, *Fun Home* brings to the fore the reciprocal conventions and iterative rehearsals that shape one's social roles and sense of self. Perhaps the performative process of identity formation, as represented in the novel, is summed up best by a brief analysis of the cover image of the 2006 edition of *Fun Home*. This image displays, at once, a drawing of a silver-tinted photograph of a young Alison looking wistfully at the reader, who views her father in profile. The image serves as a distorted mirror, wherein the audience member's face is literally laid over those of Alison and her father in a palimpsest of reflective gazes. Each layer alters the signification of another. Similarly, the title's echo of a "fun house" hints at the varied connotations of this particular combination of words: a fun home, used ironically given that Alison does not recognize her childhood home as "fun"; a funhouse, which represents the distorted qualities of identity formation and familial narratives; and, more practically, as a shortened version of the words "funeral home," which is where Alison's father works until his untimely death. We experience these textual meanings, alongside the drawn graphic of Alison and her father, the literal feel of the slick and shiny cover, and, if we read carefully, Bechdel's embedded hint toward identity formation (as seeing oneself simultaneously projected onto the characters depicted distorts both characters and reader).

Bechdel's novel encourages close, intertextual, feminist, and queer readings. The texts and images contained within the pages of *Fun Home* mirror[3] the identity discoveries made by the characters and hint at the potential identity discoveries (whether familial, gendered, sexual, or intellectual) our students may experience. These layers of identity make the text particularly applicable to our early-career students as they are learning to develop and negotiate their beliefs beyond those they have institutionalized throughout

their childhood and adolescence. These negotiations can be scary, and many students identify with Alison's struggles, whether or not they are able to identify with her sexual orientation. It is rare for one of us to have students in a class who have not hidden parts of their identities from other people for fear of being dismissed or, even worse, punished.

As we engage with students in deeper analyses of these relationships between performing the text in our classrooms and the characters' performative discoveries throughout the narrative, students develop new understandings of how performance as a concept—including the performance of composition—can support their ideas. They realize that composition extends well beyond the words and sentence structures they use to convey a claim; composition is an ongoing and performative process that is part of their lived realities. The students who reach this understanding see how their compositional voices should reflect the subject matters they discuss. Thus, many students begin to see writing as a creative and exploratory process, which moves them beyond their preconceived notions of academic scholarship. In fact, these varied approaches to reading and generating texts, applied more broadly, demonstrate the pivotal role the humanities play in eliciting curiosity, social understanding, and personal growth.

In this chapter, we investigate *Fun Home* as an artifact framed using our pedagogic performances across differently focused composition and seminar-based courses. We put forward the concept of "pedagogical theatre" to illustrate how strong pedagogy should be fluid, flexible, shifting, nebulous, and always in rehearsal. Like the characters in Bechdel's graphic memoir, we continually negotiate our relationships with students, our relationships with texts, and our relationships with writing. We co-write in a unified and collaborative voice to reinforce our claim that strong pedagogy is also collaborative, that strong scholarship is an exploratory process, and that strong writing should reflect the content contained within.

The Pedagogical Theatre

Generally speaking, our classrooms are most often the sites of pedagogical theatre. As Bryant Alexander argues in the introduction to *Performance Theories in Education: Power, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Identity*, "the classroom, with teachers and students engaged in the processes of education establishes culture" (ch. 1). Cultivating this culture is central to developing a successful pedagogical theatre space in which learners feel safe to explore, act, and rehearse paradigm-shifting performances of identity, which might

include a new-found identity as a writer. In essence, the classroom "becomes a practiced place; a site in which diverse beings come together in order to engage and negotiate knowledge, systems of understanding, and ways of being, seeing, knowing, and doing" (ibid.). Thus, performance studies-based pedagogy incorporates active learning methods and is self-reflexive.

Beyond a literal classroom performance space, we also propose that a pedagogical theatre can serve as a conceptual framework to help us consider teaching as iterative, interactive, and ever-adaptive. In this section, we examine how our own and our students' roles in this classroom theatre stem from both individually contextualized and socially scripted behaviors. We explore the ongoing and reciprocally evolving relationships *between* the performance of the instructors and the performance of the students' identities within this classroom performance space—and we suggest that no single actor can function without influencing another. Finally, it is important to note that a pedagogical theatre is enhanced when we study a text, such as *Fun Home*, that embraces and models performativity.

Richard Schechner's notion of "restored behavior" is one avenue through which performance studies scholars conceptualize "performance" beyond formal artistic practice and into a broader social context. In the 1960s, Schechner articulated that:

> Restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances. These difficult terms express a single principle: The self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theater of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational processes. (36)

The repertoire, or store, of symbolic gestures and codes of various social roles is repeated and rehearsed until the self is embodied, shaped, and "hardened" into a more definite sense that is increasingly apparent to others and instinctive for the actor. Goals of what we deem "pedagogical theatre," then, are to recognize these institutions and behaviors as "hardening" processes, to analyze how these processes come to exist, and to question why people participate in them.

The second portion of Schechner's definition extends these ideas. He writes: "Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behavior' and 'is always subject to revision'" (Schechner 36–37). Institutions and identities

alike are created by a process of repeating behavior. Any particular behavior may be encouraged or dissuaded, depending on an institution's goals. In a pedagogical theatre, we deconstruct the social and internal pressures that encourage or dissuade particular (and already rehearsed) behaviors. We hope that the use of performance as a conceptual paradigm helps students to better understand how our world is made of symbolic and systemically rehearsed behaviors, as deemed appropriate by the institutions in which we all participate. It is through our own performative pedagogical philosophies that we model these complex processes for our students. In fact, it is common for performance studies-influenced educators to see both teaching and reading as performative acts, if not performative arts. How the concept of performativity might influence or even enhance the pedagogical practices of instructors from other disciplines has been explored far less often.

From this particular interdisciplinary perspective, our teaching of *Fun Home* highlights how different performance modalities mutually mirror, distort, and shape each other. The concept of performativity might help students and instructors become comfortable with and curious about such interrelationships and ambiguity. Discussing restored behavior can help students to better understand the layers of multivalent pressures on both individuals and groups to embody or portray an identity in a particular manner. In class we often invoke performance concepts as means to cultivate deeper critical, creative, and reflexive thinking about reading.

In the graphic novel, Alison experiences a transformative coming-of-age in which she not only learns new critical and affective approaches to reading, but also negotiates new relationships with a series of teachers and mentor figures. Her education is informed by her overbearing father (who also happens to be her English teacher), her somewhat distant mother (who is, in fact, an actor), as well as a college professor, her grandmother, siblings, fellow students, and various friends and lovers. In addition, Alison's newly forming self-understanding is influenced by a series of feminist, queer, existential, and literary writers alongside the fictional characters and theoretical ideas she encounters as she devours copious resources to form her personal canon. In fact, a major facet of Alison's growth in the novel stems from her learning how to read complex literature and images. She then expands on her learning and applies these new skills to interpret her past, the performative constructions of gender and sexuality, and human motivations and desires. Each of these applications opens up spaces that demonstrate how one kind of reading may sometimes be discrepant or disparate with another kind of reading.

Throughout the memoir, Alison's iterative performance of reading is visualized through highlights, cross-outs, doodles, marginal notes, and other marks, including, at one point, smears of her blood. These various marks construct a "scriptable" text in which the reader's rehearsal of codes and meanings actively remakes new significations, often in a messy and tentative way. Furthermore, such marks provide students with models to engage with texts by inscribing their own interpretations and remarks onto them in an ongoing and consciously constructive process of close reading. This process is social and individual; Alison's mentors and teachers help her discover new approaches to reading, in some cases by inscribing their comments on her writing. From this palimpsest, Alison forms a more holistic sense of self. As a character, she constructs and rehearses her identity and, as an author, she creates and revises her journal, letters, school papers, and ultimately the graphic memoir itself.

Shared mimetic performances, between classroom actors and textual acting, extend the performativity embedded in *Fun Home* beyond the graphic memoir and into the realm of lived realities and socially rehearsed behaviors. In doing so, the performance context has the potential to produce a self-critical, meta-cognitive, multimodal collaboration between teachers and students, among students, and between readers and text. In our own case, we extend this mimetic collaboration and the concept of a pedagogical theatre to our shared relationship as educators. But, perhaps most importantly, given that we teach composition, we hope students learn to see that a successful writing process, like an effective rehearsal process and an effective learning process, is rarely "finished" but remains shifting, fluid, and provisional.

Thus, in a composition classroom, a pedagogical theatre occurs where and when a written text:

- is reflexive of teaching and learning activities;
- generates mutually influential relationships between the performance of the text and the performance of the readers;
- encourages students to critique "hardened" identities or institutions as constructions and consider the underlying performative processes that create the identity or institution in question;
- illustrates how identity formation is rehearsed;
- emphasizes the use-value of process over product, especially in learning and composition.

Conceiving of writing as a "rehearsal process" helps students see that writing means more than words on a page, arranged into sentences, or paragraphs, or even chapters. In fact, if we maintain that writing is rehearsed, then we should consider some of the experiences we create to help students negotiate this rehearsal process.

Composition in Practice

In our pedagogical theatres we focus largely on "doing" or, to use theatre terminology, "action." Composition instructor Jason Todd argues that "we don't learn by listening, but by doing. Content delivery is only one component of effective teaching, and despite what most of us learned in school, it is not the most important" (11). Todd bases his argument on Bill Tucker's observations about flipped classrooms in *Education Next*: "instruction that used to occur in class is now accessed at home, in advance of class. Class becomes the place to work through problems, advance concepts and engage in collaborative learning" (82). As Todd summarizes, "in short, the classroom becomes a place for active and engaged learning" and he posits that graphic novels are excellent resources to help students learn in active ways.

To foster action, to help students "work through" the "problems" of reading a challenging text such as *Fun Home*, and to integrate the social skills we learn together in our collective lives, we employ a variety of traditional and non-traditional educational approaches. Our class activities might include visual, spatial, somatic, or collaborative explorations. In this section, we detail select activities that have illuminated our study of *Fun Home*. Additionally, these practical exercises largely enhance and embrace the concept of pedagogical theatre by honing our attention to reflect on the conscious and unconscious performances present in the narrative and behavioral texts. Such reflection goes a long way toward engendering understandings that extend beyond the walls of the classroom, which demonstrates that pedagogical theatre can potentially exist anywhere.

Visual

One of the most powerful ways to help students develop proficiency in visual reading strategies is to design lessons that ensure they must rely on visual rather than verbal media to convey their ideas. Many of these techniques could be described as "boardwork," wherein students—sometimes

after preliminary discussion in small groups or pairs—write or draw their responses to a prompt on the board using different techniques, such as concept mapping, theme webs, or collaging.[4] Collaging involves students writing and drawing fragments, quotes, and/or doodles on the board as a form of brainstorming; later, the collage can act as a springboard for discussion as the students elaborate more in-depth responses prompted by others' collaged elements.

To push students to learn how to articulate their ideas beyond words alone, we have also used artistic collage and other visual and creative media. We might provide a prompt, such as: "Create an artistic initial response to your first reading of *Fun Home*." The students are provided with art materials: paper, crayons, pencils, markers, tape, wood, glue, paint, pipe cleaners, images, and a host of other tactile and visual tools. Using only these materials and no words, the students create a visual response to represent their initial reaction to the text, which may be abstract or realistic. Because students are generally more confident using verbal or written communication to convey their ideas, asking them to use artistic and creative means of communicating may feel uncomfortable to them. Oftentimes, students worry that they are "not artists"; however, because a variety of materials are provided, they need not rely on their drawing skills alone. Collages of images and other material objects are common products of this exercise and, upon completion of their artwork, they switch with a classmate. They then interpret their partners' projects, with no input from the partners, before the original artists can clarify their intended interpretations. In so doing, students learn how visual representation is integral to making sense of our daily lives and why it must thus be carefully read. In fact, the fullest understandings can only be reached by conducting multiple readings, no matter how simple the initial representation seems to be. This exercise encourages students to consider why deconstructing the complex visual representations of *Fun Home* is significant in developing a clearer understanding of the graphic text.

Projecting and annotating a single panel is yet another visual technique that encourages students to see how, like this artistic project, one element from a graphic novel might evoke multiple interpretations—some potentially conflicting. Students may underline, circle, and point out small details, whether these are aspects of the alphabetic text, the graphic figures, the spatial layout, or the relationships between these layered elements. The students then write brief notes about their chosen feature(s), which forces them to focus on the granular level of textual analysis that close, critical

reading requires. Often, the most revealing moments of this exercise occur when students choose to annotate the same feature of the text, but their annotations divulge different possibilities of meaning. Thus, students are faced with a visual representation of divergent interpretations, which encourages them to embrace that reading is not a univocal performance. With more advanced students or with repeated training, modeling, and rehearsal, this activity can be codified by requiring that each student (or group of students) annotates multiple meanings for different features of the text. When students can articulate disparate interpretations, they can more consciously discuss and better evaluate the merits of those interpretations; this skill is often one of the most difficult but rewarding to teach and one that employing graphic novels as a learning tool can facilitate with uncommon ease.

Spatial

Assuming emphasis is given specifically to the arrangement, layout, and relationship between figures, panels, and spacing (and that an exercise incorporates analysis of how these elements relate to each other and to time), spatial exercises like storyboarding and graphic writing often go beyond merely representing visual modalities and can be useful in helping students decode complex spatial arrangements. Hillary Chute notes, "A comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn't drawn as by what is: it is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments" (455). Beyond making temporal connections, spatial relationships also often convey important information regarding the figures' emotions and experiences, and the characters' perspectives about the events depicted. All of these elements are encoded in subtle ways that many students initially need help to parse.

Introducing students to a basic vocabulary used to interpret graphic novels—such as gutter, frame, bleed, panel, and graphic weight—aids students' growing perceptions of spatial design and the meanings such design might convey. This vocabulary can be supplemented with vocabulary adopted from visual arts, cinema, or theatre. When students have a basic grasp of potential terms they might use to identify spatial features and the temporal or emotional cues these terms invoke, students are more likely to pick up on these cues and appreciate their significance as they read.

We have both employed *Fun Home* as a model to assist students to think spatially. One potential exercise is to have students create a storyboard to represent a revelatory moment from their own lives, such as Alison's textual realization that she is, in fact, lesbian (Bechdel 74). As one might in film, students create a frame-by-frame outline of their own experience, mostly using visual imagery, to convey the basic arc of their story. From the storyboard, students might create a graphic representation, adding alphabetic text into the mix and revising the initial storyboard to ensure the visual and textual imagery work as a unit to convey their intended meaning and illustrate the passage of time. In fact, when students create their own graphic texts, the sophistication of their composition skills often increases because they learn to coordinate and layer spatial and temporal cues into their visual and verbal stories.

Somatic

In conjunction with teaching *Fun Home* alongside other texts written about sexuality and gender,[5] we have assigned similar projects that prompt self-reflection and critical thought about systemic social norms and the performative processes that constitute these normative institutions. In short, we ask students to engage in activities that encourage them to feel as if their routine gender comportment, identity, or expression is altered in some manner, or we ask them to imagine an empathetic response to another person's identity performance and act "as if" they experience that identity for a specified amount of time. Such activities could include engaging in various types of cross-dressing, physical activities (say, a dance class or a pick-up football game), acting in ways that are less typical of the student's self-defined gendered norms, or walking from the classroom to the bookstore and back imagining the potential experience "as if"[6] one identified as genderqueer, differently abled, or visibly non-white. The choice to complete a preferred activity is an important component necessary to provide agency to students as they explore.

Such assignments do not depend on a conventional binary system, since one's self-defined identifications are specified in terms of each student's habitual patterns, behaviors, norms, and performances. We want students to experiment with performing identities beyond their own in an attempt to understand Alison and her father's experiences, as well as the lived experiences of people who populate our students' lives. We also want our students to feel relatively safe in doing so. As students tackle these often ideologically

challenging assignments, they should not put themselves or others into situations in which they would be unduly stressed or feel danger; should students fear they might experience significant discomfort, a viable option is to provide an alternative assignment in advance.

Students first describe the gender norms[7] to which they already subscribe in an effort to better understand their initial gender performance and establish a baseline for the activity. Next, they define the social contexts and norms that drive their chosen activity. They are coached to consider how the gender-performance activity pushes them to reflect on their own sense of identity by clearly articulating the performative choices related to gender expression and physical comportment that they make as they complete the exercise. When carefully guided, many students are able to recognize that their behavioral choices frequently reflect and reinforce a binary way of thinking about gender. Because students approach the activity as participant-observers and are encouraged to reflect deeply about the understandings the activity generates, they can often see how their actions and reactions are influenced by surrounding institutional contexts and cultural ideals. Furthermore, they sometimes discern how, through their choices, they unintentionally participate in the further hardening of processes that create problematic social institutions and practices. Perhaps more importantly, because during the exercise they imagined what it might be like to live life with an identity different from their own, students often conclude the activity better able to empathize with other people.

Students commonly report that these assignments are revelatory. One self-identified female student who typically wore jeans, sweatshirts, and little or no make-up, for example, was shocked to see how differently her mother treated her when she wore stereotypically feminine dresses and make-up as a part of the assignment. Another student, who experimented with a genderqueer look, discovered that this look was actually their preferred gender expression and, gaining confidence through this prompt, began transitioning to a new-found gender identity. A third student, who explored campus "as if" she identified as a heterosexual white male, saw other people in ways she hadn't considered before. Though she was mostly imagining, she reported that she became more aware of how other seemingly heterosexual white males on campus unknowingly caused reactions in people's behavior as they went about their day. She observed that women or seemingly genderqueer students often gave the young white men more space than they were granted themselves. As we integrate these exercises alongside our study of *Fun Home*, we find that a wide variety of students are

consistently inspired by Alison's gender and sexual explorations, which provide them with the impetus to explore different behavioral repertoires, identities, comportments, and expressions when they participate in these activities. Thus, the exercises encourage students to reflect on how gender and other social roles are constructed and performed both internally and externally and how rehearsed behavior is a primary component of these constructions.

Collaborative

Many of the exercises and assignments we've discussed require students to work together. In fact, collaborating is central to theorizing and practicing pedagogical theatre; without actors and audiences there would be no exchange of ideas. Furthermore, pedagogical theatre invites students and instructors to serve in both actor and audience roles. Without purposeful and precise attention to collaboration, the theatrical metaphor that undergirds this chapter would be incomplete; thus, in this section we provide examples of how we engage in collaborative activities with our students.

When students literally act out or stage sections of text, they learn to rehearse a variety of skills such as collaboration, role-playing, filling in temporal gaps, and configuring a three-dimensional space. They must also interpret images, symbols, and alphabetic texts to realize which parts of their understanding of the novel are merely inferred and then discern whether to leave out or include these inferences in performance. In our experience, some students resist the idea of using performance as a medium with which to digest another text because they feel acting puts them on display and exposes them to their peers' scrutiny. One way we have dealt with this fear is to lower the stakes by allowing small groups to rehearse in different rooms and, if they require it, to only perform for the instructor and one another. By contrast, some classes have readily embraced creating theatrical performances and, in these cases, we have sometimes used venues where other students, friends, professors, and staff members act as an audience. Either way, we emphasize the imperfect and provisional nature of the performance and reinforce that even the seeming failures of the students' stagings often illuminate the text and help us to explore our sense of self.

Another collaborative activity that has proven useful is to suggest or require that students co-author papers or engage in collaborative writing assignments. While this practice is commonplace in other fields—especially in the sciences—most humanities courses implicitly emphasize an ethic of

solitary endeavor and supposedly meritocratic individualism by enforcing that students write their papers alone. The benefits of co-authoring assignments are manifold. To begin, students have two or more viewpoints on an assigned text, which makes finding multiple or more sophisticated interpretations of it easier. Co-authoring prompts students to more explicitly plan and utilize the various steps of the writing process as well as develop a better awareness of the underlying processes that generate sound research, organization, tone, sentence structure, and argumentation. Furthermore, shared writing assignments help students overcome writer's block by providing a partner with whom they can discuss and share ideas, and incorporate the idea of an authentic audience—the peer collaborator—into the actual writing process, which reinforces the notion of audience as an important tenet of compositional rhetoric. Students learn important skills from each other and will often invest much more effort in peer review when a grade is shared rather than individualized. While it is true that a few students may resent collaborative writing because they fear one student might shirk their responsibilities, there are techniques to ensure accountability. Individual students can write narratives detailing the writing process. Students can choose their own partners. We might scaffold a structure that breaks the paper into smaller, scheduled steps and require check-ins with student groups that start when the assignment prompt is initially given and conclude only when the final paper is due. Indeed, we co-author this chapter because we believe in the many benefits of collaborative authorship and modeling the techniques we ask of our students.

What is challenging about these types of collaborations is that the players must abdicate partial control of the exercise to other participants. This challenge works on two levels: at the level of peer-to-peer, wherein students must learn to trust their peers in order to truly collaborate well; and on the level of instructor-to-student, wherein the instructor must learn to trust the students and let go of total control of the classroom experience. Shared authority, which on the surface is generally celebrated, is also potentially unnerving because it means allowing your work to be influenced by and dependent on other people's ideas and work ethics. Thus, in close collaborations, like those outlined in this section, it is possible that a student's or an instructor's idea might be challenged, but it is equally possible that a challenge, at first perceived as a threat, might also deepen and strengthen one's initial ideas. In fact, many of our best ideas, exercises, and pedagogical successes have stemmed from moments of potential conflict and/or challenges to our own and other students' original proposals.

A Performative Model for Reading

Fun Home is largely *about* performing—and audiencing—myriad intertextual and intersectional types of readings that push students to integrate their academic experiences into their lived experiences. Due to its modeling of such connections, many students find Bechdel's memoir particularly relevant, and in class we often explore these connections using performance theory. For example, the layering of canonical and non-canonical literary and artistic texts in *Fun Home* might be read as performative intertextuality, wherein the inclusion of the conceptual frame "performative" reinforces the meaning-making potential of the intertexts and highlights that these texts are both framed *within* their own contexts and also selected by Bechdel *to* frame a theme that further develops Alison's character. Relatedly, Bechdel highlights intersectionality, which illustrates how one identity performance influences, supports, or even negates another identity performance in a regenerative iteration of identity formation. Performative intertexts and identities are further influenced, enhanced, and/or altered by performative contexts like the walls of the classroom, the parameters of an assignment, the plot of a graphic novel, or the panels of a comic, which frame the performative acts themselves. Thus, the inclusion of performance theory has enhanced our studies of *Fun Home* and prompted students to think creatively about critical analysis of the text and how its meanings might be synthesized from other texts and structures of lived reality. Practically, generating the deep connections required by these highly theoretical concepts teaches students to better connect their thoughts in composition and in class discussions. Finally, a main goal we seek to achieve within our pedagogical theatre is to acknowledge and deconstruct the ways that texts, identities, and contexts interrelate to craft a generative, full-fledged performance that is the lived reality we mutually experience and know.

In the graphic novel, Alison's identity recognitions largely stem from reading and rereading, which prompt her continually expanding awareness of her own and others' performative identities. In one of our interdisciplinary Honors classes, studying *Fun Home* helped students understand theoretical ideas they had read about but previously found difficult to conceptualize. Despite initial struggles, students were surprised to see that, upon rereading, they *could* apply Michel Foucault's theories about power and institutional norms to better understand the pressures and assumptions that shape Alison's emerging intersectional identity. The idea that overlapping, competing social norms—whether bureaucratic or

familial—exert mutually informing pressures on one's expression of self, sexuality, and gender suddenly made intuitive sense to many students. Likewise, when we watched Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman*, students drew connections to Alison's examination of a queer archive to inform her relationships and developing construction of self with Cheryl's recovery of a racially-coded, cinematic archive for similar purposes. Again, multiple readings, students saw, were necessary to find—or create, as it were—a sense of one's place in history and a greater sense of one's identity.

Daily Life Performance

As students in this class improved at applying challenging theoretical ideas to *Fun Home*, they also began to apply these theories to their lived experiences. Reading and rereading, which is in itself rehearsed behavior, prompts Alison to become aware of how social institutions define and place limits on possible behavioral performances. For example, when Alison expresses that she doesn't care "if the necklines" of her dress and undershirt match, her father requires her to change clothing (Bechdel 15). Alison must wear feminine attire, deemed appropriate by her father (and, likely by extension, society), despite her preference for wear mismatching necklines or less traditionally feminine attire altogether. The behavior she is required to perform does not support how she identifies in the world. Thus, as Alison reads and rereads various sources, her gender performance becomes more subversive of the existing norms to which she was required to conform as a child. Because of her developing awareness, Alison eventually refuses to perform in accord with her father's gendered expectations. Her journey illuminates how our own behaviors incorporate the external and internal pressures placed upon us to act in a particular manner and can help students recognize the ways in which we might intentionally or unintentionally reify social norms by rehearsing the behaviors commonly associated with them.

Anecdotes from students suggest that, like Alison, their reading and rereading of *Fun Home* led to their questioning of normative social expectations and, on occasion, their embracing of unexplored components of their own identities. For instance, in one of our classes, an exercise science major questioned why male and female athletes had different protocols for spotting and weight-lifting in their training regimens. Another student examined the gendered rhetoric behind the national "Little Black Dress" campaign and critiqued the posters used to advertise this campaign as based,

in part, on assumptions that reinforced gendered stereotypes. In one class, despite little prior experience with women's or gender studies, students' final papers focused on complex topics ranging from radical queer critiques of consumerism, representations of Westernized identity in *Persepolis*, homosocial norms in *The Illiad*, the neuroscience of transgender phenomena, debates about Beyoncé's brand of third-wave feminism, and the erasure of historical context in the camp musical *Victor/Victoria*. In short, students readily brought their new-found knowledge to bear on their professional and personal interests. Several years later, students still remark on how revelatory *Fun Home* was as they formed their own emerging identities and values near the start of their college careers.

What is clear from these examples is that the textual and intertextual performances of Bechdel's graphic novel influence students' understandings of the ways various texts (including behavior) work together to generate shifting meanings. Furthermore, in a pedagogical theatre, we explore the ways these meanings collide with and support social expectations and norms, and interrogate how our own rehearsed behaviors support and/or subvert these expectations. The layers of intertextuality in the classroom and in daily behaviors move beyond the narrative of the text we study and co-mingle in a single space, which David Osbon suggests might be explored as "transmedia intertextuality" (21). Relying on Marsha Kinder and Henry Jenkins, Osbon asserts that transmedia intertextuality occurs when a "particular narrative is presented across a range of [media] formats with different levels of interaction" to create "a potential performance environment in which an audience member can assemble their own interpretation of the narrative from the range of platforms and genres to which they have access" (21). Though Osbon goes on to discuss a particular multimedia artistic performance, we can apply this definition of transmedia intertextuality to our pedagogical theatre wherein the layers of performance occur in a wide variety of mediums that eventually come together. In particular, studying and learning to deconstruct these different levels of meaning, especially as they are presented within a graphic novel, may enhance students' developing understandings of intertextual performances. Furthermore, this continual process of connecting their analysis of a particular text and then synthesizing that text across another text or into their lived experiences can help students to better understand the complex constructions that undergird the world in which they live.

Graphic Novels and Pedagogical Theatre

Despite common misperceptions, comics and graphic novels are not an inherently "easy" medium, but rather a complex one that demands simultaneous engagement with several modalities and reading strategies. Nonetheless, many students find graphic texts approachable. This approachability may help instructors to more safely introduce students to queer and intersectional identities, which are topics that many of our students have not had the opportunity to consider, much less to discuss in a public setting. As Aimee Vincent states:

> Comics are in some ways the best kind of text available for such a potentially difficult discussion [about queer identities]. While I strongly oppose the concept that comics are an "easy" text to read, there is still popular perception that they are easy. When introducing a concept that has the potential to be difficult even for engaged and respectful students, a non-threatening medium like comics may diffuse some of the tension. (113–114)

The perception among many students that comics are "easy" results in fewer students erecting barriers to engaging with the ostensible content when comic readings are assigned, which potentially translates into students erecting fewer barriers as they learn to think through the ideologically challenging concepts of sexuality and queer identities. With a college-aged protagonist, *Fun Home* offers a text that students generally find compelling due to the immediacy of its imagery and its relatable plot. We find that we can use this general interest to help beginning college students carefully decode the graphic memoir's intricate motifs. Indeed, graphic novels and comics help students see how a text, which at first glance may seem simple and straightforward, can reveal a bewildering array of complexity. In teaching comics, we scaffold increasingly sophisticated reading practices and encourage students to read and reread with these different scaffolded layers in mind. Furthermore, in *Fun Home*, the medium discloses the underlying complexity of gender and sexual identities, a topic too many students initially view as straightforward, but that requires an array of interpretive and critical skills to fully comprehend.

Fun Home offers students a model of a queer reader: Alison is someone who compellingly reinterprets canonical texts and actively seeks out neglected texts to supplement her learning. She brings personal experiences to her reading of literature and uses literature to illuminate her personal life. In doing so, she employs the power of figuration—both graphic and

literary—as a means to comprehend and come to terms with changing relationships, sexual identities, and her own mortality. She thus resists conventionalized meanings and investigates different narrative and interpretive possibilities through means such as research, imagination, discussion, hypothesis testing, journaling, modeling, close reading, revision, and mapping. At one point, Alison rereads the same text as her father—a fashion spread of a male model with an open jacket—through a subversively queer lens that desires the butch accoutrement, though it should be noted her father's gaze is queer, too, as his gaze desires the model beneath the garb (Bechdel 100–101). The actual reader, who reads the book over *their* shoulders, is offered a "looking-glass" for seeing how one's critical perceptions can be shaped by different objects of desire within the same image, and the reader rabbit-holes down a mise en abyme of shifting and ever-multiplying diegetic levels. This example is one of many that shows how the processes of interpretation are never straightforward or easy for Alison; in fact, students—whether queer or not—can identify with Alison precisely because she foregrounds a confusing, anxiety-provoking, trial-and-error approach to engaging with texts and composing one's own as they, too, learn to understand and write about difficult literature.

Epilogue

In our practice as instructors teaching mostly first- and second-year college students, we find that, through helping our students understand the iterative processes of performing and audiencing, we can help them to better understand critical reading and writing processes as iterative. Moreover, seeing the classroom as a space for the rehearsal of not only academic skills, but also identity performance and socialization, affords us and our students an arena to test and explore new relationships and repertoires of behavior, as well as approaches to learning and engaging with the world. That such performances are fluid and fallible, at least in the context of the pedagogical theatre, allows students the freedom to question the norms, values, and institutions in which they partake. Students can then, hopefully, create their own pedagogical theatres as they incorporate their new-found performance repertoires into their daily lives and learning process.

The graphic memoir *Fun Home* has proven a particularly valuable text to introduce students to several interlinked concepts related to reading, writing, and performance. Most readers are able to embrace the medium of the graphic novel and, at least partly, identify with some of Alison's struggles.

More importantly, though, the text's own performances—of close reading, composition, and identity formation—model the reflexive processes required to hone one's critical reading and composition skills, whether the skill level be that of an early-career college student or seasoned professor. *Fun Home* acts to show how literature, art, and, by extension, the humanities play a vital role in developing self-understanding, social awareness, and a holistic approach to life beyond the classroom. Ultimately, our goal in teaching *Fun Home* is to generate learning practices within ourselves and our students that will extend beyond the classroom's pedagogical theatre and into the theatre of the greater world.

Notes

1. Informed by prominent scholars since the 1960s, the term "performativity" and the practices related to it have shifted and grown tremendously. In this chapter, we intend the term to reflect the process of creating behavior and human practices that rely on an audience's response to one's own actions or a text. For further explication, see Austin (1962), Schechner (1985), and Butler (1988).
2. Throughout this chapter we use "Bechdel" to refer to the author of the graphic novel and "Alison" to refer to the character in the text.
3. In fact, mirrors are a pivotal material object within *Fun Home*, as is the concept of "mirroring," which is related to mimesis, a central notion of theatre and performance studies. To mirror another is to rehearse behavior by performing the behavior more than once. As we continue these rehearsals, the iterative behavior becomes embedded into our identity until we no longer think about the behavior and it becomes "second nature" and a part of who we are. Consider how children learn by watching others and adopting their words and mannerisms. In short, we are taught to perform beginning in infancy. The pioneering social psychologist Charles Horton Cooley (1922) terms this process the "looking-glass self." The many mirrors depicted in Bechdel's text reflect this process to the reader. Discussing the notion of "mirrors" with students and the roles mirrors play in the text often leads to incredibly fruitful and animated discussions.
4. Concept mapping depicts ideas students generate, written in bubbles, to show the relationships between each idea using arrows and a hierarchical arrangement, which creates a visual representation of the cognitive structure of students' reading practices. Theme webs use various themes from the text (often chosen by the instructor) as nodes in a circular diagram. Students are asked to physically draw connections between these thematic nodes and then justify the connecting line they drew. For example, each small group could be

assigned a different theme and given a different color marker to complete their part of the web of thematic connections.

5. Such as Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* or Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory."
6. The concept of "as if" is a contemporary restating of Constantin Stanislavski's "magic if," which is a staple of contemporary acting technique in the US. For more information see *An Actor Prepares* (1936).
7. We focus on gender norms here because *Fun Home* is the foundational text to prompt these explorations. The activity is easily adaptable to other non-normative and socially visible identity positions.

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