BREAKING THROUGH PANELS: EXAMINING GROWTH AND TRAUMA IN
BECHDEL’S FUN HOME AND LABELLE’S ASSIGNED MALE COMICS

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ABSTRACT

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Comics featuring LGBTQ children have the burden of challenging cis/heteronormative versions of childhood. Such examples of childhood, according to author Katherine Bond Stockton, are false and restrict children to a vision of innocence that leaves no room for queer children to experience their own versions of childhood. Furthermore, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community has taken a “progressive”-based approach to time, assuming that newer generations have avoided the trauma of the past because ideas about sexual orientation and gender have advanced with time. Newer generations of the LGBTQ community forget that many have struggled for change to occur, instead choosing to forget the wounds of the past. By analyzing two comic works—Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel Fun Home and Sophie Labelle’s web comic series Assigned Male—I argue that we must let go of our suspicion towards LGBTQ child characters and open ourselves up to what can be learned from them. I also argue that both the past (with its wounds and trauma) and the future must be accepted into the present in order to give children the childhood they desire, rather than the childhood we recall. Both Fun Home andAssigned Male demonstrate that childhood is far from the simplistic happy time of life and can be just as fraught with complication as adulthood. Rather than try to protect children from this, these authors argue that we should empower children to locate their own sense of authenticity, in terms of both gender and sexuality. I argue that children are full of possibility and wisdom to guide current populations and change the future for the better through their struggles.
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INTRODUCTION. TIME DOES NOT HEAL ALL WOUNDS (AND MAYBE IT SHOULDN’T): COMICS UTILIZING TRAUMA TO UNCOVER QUEER CHILDHOOD

I recall sitting in Sociology 101 after we watched a documentary about transgender children. During this documentary we got a firsthand look at the lives these children lead—their desires, their pain, and the challenges they faced to gain recognition not only by their families, but also by their peers. After the film was over, our instructor, in a serious tone, asked, “If this was your child, would you allow them to transition?” Many people in the class were not sure how to answer and indicated it was a complicated issue. Some argued that children should be allowed to transition, while others argued that children were too young to decide those things and therefore, should not be allowed to transition until they were older. While I agreed with the former group, my initial reaction to the discussion was different from the rest of my class. I asked myself, “why are we still so suspicious of LGBTQ children?” As I read more accounts about people who knew they were trans in childhood, I found I often returned to this question. Some people even felt as though their childhood had been stolen from them because they were forced to live the gender they were assigned, as opposed to the gender they were. I saw news stories where children were bullied and abused, some committing suicide at young ages because they were unaccepted as gay or as transgender. In a sense, it is understandable that parents fear for the lives of these non-conforming children living in a cis/heteronormative society. When children are forced into a sexual orientation or gender they do not identify with, wounds are opened and reopened throughout their lives. Trauma caused by abuse, harassment, shame, and violence can haunt children when it comes to gender and sexuality. Despite this, adults often see children as innocent creatures, incapable of being touched by adult secrets or able to understand their own gender. Children are often only viewed for their future potential, instead of their
potential in the present. So, why are we so suspicious of LGBTQ children? My hope is that through this thesis, I can turn the LGBTQ child from a figure who we find odd—one who does not match with normative ideas of childhood—and instead, embrace what these children can teach us about gender. Whereas many believe that children can only have a sense of self as an adult, I argue we have been viewing a child’s sense of self awareness in the wrong light as children can be empowered to own their queer identity when their parents allow them to develop a sense of self as they grow. Childhood, open with possibility, is far more complex than we have ever allowed it to be and it is a disservice to fit children into a mold that will cause them suffering. Children offer much more to society when they are respected and given space to create their own identities.

This question of suspicion and fear of the LGBTQ child drew my attention to the LGBTQ child as literary figure. As a literature student with an admiration of the graphic novel and comic, I was interested to see how the genre might impact the experience of these figures. Two works became the central focus of this thesis: Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home, a very well-known graphic novel about Bechdel’s childhood with her father Bruce, and Sophie Labelle’s Assigned Male, a lesser known but popular series about trans preteens and teenagers that features a young, intelligent character named Stephie. Children are often seen as figures who need molded when it comes to sexual preference and gender. They are seen as pure and full of innocence because of their lack of knowledge. Yet, the characters in Fun Home and Assigned Male do not completely fit this mold. In Fun Home, Alison (which I will use to refer to the character and Bechdel will be when I reference the narrator/author) is aware as a child that her family is not the conventional, heteronormative family one sees in It’s a Wonderful Life or The Brady Bunch. She can sense the tension and shame in her family home even without the cause of
those two things being named. As an adult looking back on her childhood, she understands the cause of these feelings was because her father lived in the closet and fiercely protected this shameful secret. Although her childhood is filled with moments of warm nostalgia, it is also filled with neglect and abuse that threatens to pull her down to the same trap of secrets and shame. However, in a moment of support and kindness her father assists her in escaping his experience, allowing her to publicly claim her lesbian identity.

Whilst Alison is focused on her own childhood from an adult perspective, Assigned Male’s protagonist, Stephie, is a character that has a child’s body, but speaks like we would expect an adult to. Stephie is confident in her image and regularly challenges adults who misgender her, pry into her transition, or refuse to accept her true gender identity. Although readers may find such a confident, intelligent child suspicious, Stephie as a figure represents the capability of children to have the knowledge to understand their own gender and to change the world around them with their knowledge. Through this remarkable character, Labelle makes a strong argument that we harm children when we only think of them in a two-dimensional image of innocence and naivety. Rather, to protect children and their own sense of childhood, adults must be willing to learn from their children in order to challenge transphobia. Furthermore, while Stephie is not interested much in the past, she encourages her readers to think of the future and how we can avoid the trauma that plagues many LGTBQ children in the present. My evaluation of Stephie as a character is contrasted against Judith Butler’s Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performativé, which takes the position that injurious language can be countered if we give it enough time to be reframed. Labelle’s work, on the other hand, argues that action must taken immediately when hate speech occurs; otherwise, it can grow to become more traumatic with time. In support of Labelle’s call for action, I examine this adult notion of “innocent” childhood
using Katheryn Bond Stockton’s book *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Stockton argues that adults often thrust a version of childhood on children, which attempts to separate adolescents from the dangers of adulthood. Such a “fantasy” simply is not possible as “[the] child is precisely who we are not and in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fancy…” (Stockton 5). Stockton’s argument asks the adult to acknowledge that their vision of childhood is based on a nostalgia. It’s based on what they believe childhood should be, not what childhood actually is. Labelle and Stockton embrace childhood for what it could be in the present rather than the past. On the contrary, while Butler’s work isn’t about childhood, her call for action, unlike Stockton and Labelle, seems based on opportunity occurring in the future.

Time plays a valuable role in both *Fun Home and Assigned Male*. Bechdel’s work focuses not only on her past as a child, but also on the effects of her father’s experiences (his living as a closet homosexual) on the family. Although there is a lot of devastation in Bechdel’s childhood, we also see a strong desire to hold on to her father’s memory, to understand his upbringing and youth, and finally to understand how she did not follow his path. Bechdel’s work contradicts a more recent trend among the LGBTQ community to forget the past (its harms, its figures, its actions), to close its wounds, and to move on. Such a thought process assumes that progress has come with time rather than struggle. However, Alison is able to separate shame from homosexuality because she has seen her father struggle to do exactly that. Yet, to heal and forget can be a dangerous thing that lulls one into the dangerous trap of contentment. Queer theorist Heather Love warns against the contemporary trend of celebrating recent steps of progress as a detraction of attention from the issues that still affect queer populations today. Even if there are some who are able to have their queerness accepted by a society that previously
loathed and rejected it, there are others who are not as fortunate and continue to be harassed.

Love explains:

“Advances” such as gay marriage and the increasing media visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence. One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it—the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others. Social negativity clings not only to these figures but also to those who lived before the common era of gay liberation. Given the new opportunities available to some gays and lesbians, the temptation to forget—to forget the outrages and humiliations of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization—is strong than ever. (9; emphasis Love’s)

Love’s quotation here not only speaks of those living today who are still not accepted by society and are suffering because of it, but also speaks of those in the past who were treated horribly in their own time. To simply heal and never again bring up the wounds caused by traumatic events in the LGBTQ community—such as the AIDS epidemic or the more recent Pulse nightclub shooting—takes from those who have suffered and died due to injustices against the LGBTQ community.

Furthermore, by choosing to forget those important and excruciating tragedies and memories, newer generations will likely inherit the consequences of those wounds being reopened when discrimination and hate speech against LGBTQ populations occurs. In this way, while many believe distancing themselves from trauma will allow them to heal, this actually
allows trauma to be an immobilizing source of power. For my understanding my trauma, I look to psychoanalysis scholar Cathy Caruth and her book *Unclaimed Experience*. Caruth begins by examining Sigmund Freud’s analysis of 16th century Italian poet Torquato Tasso’s epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*, where “…Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight” and later, while walking through a magic forest, “[he] slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again” (qtd. in Caruth 2). Caruth goes on to explain that while Freud sees the story as an example of “traumatic neurosis” (a “unwitting reenactment of an event one cannot simply leave behind”), Caruth argues that the narrative is about the witness of the voice “that is paradoxically released *through the wound*” (Caruth 2; emphasis Caruth’s). According to Caruth the beloved’s voice represents a witness to “the past he has unwittingly repeated…a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.” (3) She goes on to explain:

> What the parable of the wound and the voice tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma, both in what it says and it the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 4)

My interpretation of Caruth’s argument—that trauma speaks of a truth that is not understandable or accessible until that wound speaks— suggests that listening to our wounds of the past is the only way to see the effects caused by these wounds and to keep them from reoccurring. In the
story of Tancred and Clorinda, Tancred only understands the wounds he has caused once he hears his beloved’s voice, as he does not recognize her in the suit of armor or the body of the tree. Likewise, when the current generation disguises trauma only in the forms of unpleasant reminders—as actions that happened, are over, and offer nothing more—they will be stunned when those events repeat because they allowed those mistakes to continue.

Children are full of possibility and hope for change. Many adults teach children and guide them with previous histories, hoping that children will change old patterns to make a better future. The notion of a child’s possibility draws me to the figure of the LGBTQ child and how they can directly be used to convey the importance of holding on to the wounds of the past to prevent future wounds. Both *Fun Home* and *Assigned Male* use a queer version of time—where the past and the future are always seeping into the present—to dictate the character’s response in the now. Alison reflects on her childhood memories and experiences with her father as a means of determining how to separate herself from the family tragedy, while Stephie takes the trauma she experiences in the present and makes that trauma into learning experiences to create a better future for other LGBTQ children. These two works make compelling arguments for how decisions in the present can make use of trauma in the past (Bechdel) or future (Labelle) to prevent trauma for other generations of LGBTQ individuals. Progress simply does not occur, and society simply does not become wise with time—it is the actions of those in the LGBTQ community that make the difference.

I will end this introduction by making a case for how these works use the visual element of the comic to make their arguments. As *Fun Home* is about Alison’s escape from the family secret of her father’s homosexuality, many moments in her childhood memory reveal this symbolically. For instance, in many scenes when Alison discusses her father’s compulsive,
violent obsession with the family image, he or the house often appear in shadow. The shadow’s darkness contrasts the lightness of the child in scenes where both Bruce’s shadow and Alison are in the same panel. In all likelihood, these shadows are creative insertions by Bechdel to demonstrate the haunting secret of her father’s closet. *Assigned Male*, on the other hand, uses the visual to blur the line between childhood and adult by portraying Stephie as a young teen (who looks younger than her age) with the language we would expect to see in an adult. By doing so, Labelle disrupts the image we have of the unknowing, defenseless child. Stephie is a child who is capable of defending herself and teaching those around her about gender. The conventions of the comic genre function differently for each work; yet in both cases, these young characters demonstrate the need to give children autonomy over their gender and sexuality by recognizing that childhood cannot be equated with innocence and must beckon a passing on of knowledge. *Fun Home* and *Assigned Male* argue that we must trust children over the stereotypical image we have of the child.
CHAPTER I. REBUILDING A HOME, REVISITING A CHILDHOOD: TRAUMA IN *FUN HOME* AND ANALYZATION OF THE “CATCH”

“Is it so unusual for the two things to coincide? What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’d inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.”— (Bechdel 231-232)

Scholars studying *Fun Home* tend to view Alison as a witness— one who documents her family’s complicated and messy history. Anne Cvetkovich, in her article “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home,*” claims that this narrative should be treated not only as an archive of 20th century queer historical events, but as an archive that reveals the more personal history of the Bechdel family. The latter history is one that that would not be known without the graphic novel Bechdel created. In studying *Fun Home*’s account of the Bechdel family history, I focus specifically on the secret of patriarch Bruce’s homosexual desires, which the parents hide from the public and the children. The house, because it hides Bruce’s homosexuality in a number of ways, functions as a beard (an object/person meant to conceal a person’s queerness). While the secret is hidden by Bruce, he finds other ways to express his queerness through the aesthetic of the house itself or through his daughter, Alison. At the same time, while Alison is growing up (at least up until she leaves for college), her parents are the ones who push her to adhere to a heteronormative notion of childhood and, through the tension within the household, to see sexuality as illicit and something to be ashamed of. As she enters puberty, Alison begins to
follow her parents’ behavior of lying and concealing but, upon entering college and encountering an out, queer culture, she refuses to hide her queer identity and finds a surprising ally in her strict, off-putting father. In fact, it is only Bruce who offers any form of support when Alison comes out as an adult, which is a stark difference from the neglect and abuse she grew up with. However, after her father’s sexuality is revealed Alison recalls several moments where her father showed her snippets of queer culture and knowledge, despite hiding his own sexuality. Such moments suggest that although Bruce feared being outed, he did not wish to fully conceal himself or his children from queer culture or his identity. Yet, while *Fun Home* ends with Alison able to live as an out and proud lesbian, her father dies with his community believing he was a straight, “ideal” family man.

“Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” develops a dialogue between *Fun Home* and two other graphic novels: Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* which is about her experiences growing up during the Iranian evolution and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* which is about his family’s experiences during and after the holocaust. Cvetkovich places *Fun Home* in a graphic novel tradition that intertwines personal and family history with major historical traumas, arguing that: Like Satrapi and Spiegelman, Bechdel serves as an intergenerational witness who explores the ongoing impact of traumatic histories on successive generations and into the present; each of their texts in its own way is haunted by questions about the effects of growing up in the vicinity of powerful combinations of violence and secrecy, including forms of secrecy that in the interest of protecting children’s innocence seem only to harm them. (Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 133)

In other words, Cvetkovich is saying that Alison acts like a bridge between Bruce’s historical past as a closeted gay man and its effects on the family. The secrecy and trauma itself becomes
an inheritance as it carries on from Bruce, the parent, to Alison, the daughter. Based on this belief, Cvetkovich argues that *Fun Home* is a text about Alison navigating through her trauma filled childhood where the Bechdel parents raise her surrounded by secrets and “violence”—specifically Bruce’s temper towards his wife and children. Alison is not able to avoid the inheritance of her father’s past because of her experience with these secrets and instances of violences. However, this specific form of inheritance leads me to ask a question then: if Alison receives these inheritances from her father, including the trauma he causes and the secrecy he embeds in the home, why does *Fun Home* end with the suggestion that Bruce has saved Alison from something?

On the last page of *Fun Home*, we see two panels: one where the truck that killed Bruce is driving towards the reader and the second one where Bruce reaches out to catch Alison as she jumps into a pool. Bechdel concludes, “He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (Bechdel 232). Cvetkovich offers an interpretation of *Fun Home*’s ending by stating:

> With this messy story of a father who is neither hero nor victim, crafted from an aesthetic power that is also linked to compulsions both psychic and sexual, Bechdel keeps history indeterminate. *Fun Home*’s queer witnessing deserves to be part of its highly successful and well-deserved reception, since it provides such a compelling challenge to celebratory queer histories that threaten to erase more disturbing and unassimilable inheritances.

(Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 126)

In other words, she suggests that the “catch” here could be an understanding that separating oneself from the past can ultimately do more harm than good. Cvetkovich further analyzes the
moments where Alison imagines if her father had lived as an out queer man where Alison would likely not exist:

> By playing out the alternative histories in negative as well as positive ways, Bechdel reminds us that there can be no self-congratulatory separation of past and present, as though her father’s life would never happen now and her lesbian identity is safety cordoned off from his. By constructing a more complex intergenerational connection between herself and her father, she doesn’t disavow the relation between his homosexuality and her lesbianism, between his femme tastes and her butch style, between his fussy home decorating and her compulsive drawing. (Cvetkovich, “Drawing the Archive” 124)

Cvetkovich claims that Alison’s connection to her father past is an unavoidable inheritance. Although I agree with Cvetkovich’s sentiment about the value of remembering all that one inherits from history, both good and bad, I argue that this does not completely capture the sentiment of the “catch.” I agree that this intergenerational connection is valuable in the context of Fun Home; Cvetkovich demonstrates how Alison gains a sense of self and queer history from studying her father’s life as a queer man. This being said, she is still born to a different era and subject to the experiences of that era, just as Bruce is subject to the experiences of his era. Others might claim that the differing time period of existence may free Alison from many of the Bruce’s burdens. The acknowledgement that Bruce and Alison were under the different restrictions of their time periods brings us back to the question: how exactly did Bruce “catch” his daughter? Although we can see how Bruce’s survival was in peril from being forced to hide his queer identity (both in reference to the “survival” of his existence as a queer man and his literal
survival as Alison speculates her father may have killed himself to avoid being outing), how does the past save Alison from her father’s fate given she was not susceptible to the same pressures?

As much as I agree with Cvetkovich’s argument that *Fun Home* insists on the importance of all inheritances from the past, both ugly and beautiful, I argue that her claim does not capture the full importance or meaning of the “catch.” In addition to embracing the messiness and pain of the past, *Fun Home* argues that the past—embodied in an older generation that was shaped by closet and the traumas that come from living in the closet—can save the younger generation.

**How Shame is Embedded in the House**

*Fun Home* argues that shame can be inherited and that the shame felt by a prior generation (such as the pre-Stonewall era which Bruce occupied) can help to save a younger generation (represented by Alison in the context of *Fun Home*). Throughout the graphic novel the most threatening presence is Bruce’s shame over his homosexuality, a presence that is felt in his treatment towards the house and every member of his family, including his young daughter. In early chapters the reader comes to understand that Alison sensed her father’s shame for as long as she could remember. *Fun Home* insists through the character of Bruce Bechdel that shame over homosexuality and the experience of shame whilst living in the closet affects not just the individual who lives in the closet, but others as well. Bechdel uses the Gothic Restoration family home that Bruce refurbishes to depict the complex and contradictory ways trauma impacts the family. Bechdel also demonstrates how the family home conceals Bruce’s homosexuality, creating tension for the children living in the home.

The house itself symbolically presents an interesting dichotomy in that it both hides Bruce’s homosexuality by helping Bruce present the image of a heteronormative home with a mother, father, and three children while also being a means to express himself via the “dazzling
Alison immediately acknowledges her father’s incredible gift for crafting beauty, comparing him to the mythological inventor Daedalus. However, while most people also saw this skill, they rarely saw the physical and emotional abuse that often occurred because of Bruce’s obsession with image, which is connected to the illicit nature of his sexuality. Alison, however, is quick to point out the holes and contradictions in this image that others cannot see. Bruce is able to create beauty when it comes to the aesthetics of the house and he can compose what seems to be a happy family, but when Alison wishes to connect with her father on a meaningful level as a child seeking love and guidance, the image Bruce creates is tainted by the distance between himself and the family. In multiple instances, all of which were family moments he created, Bruce removes himself from the scene once it is set. For example, in a panel depicting Bruce taking a photograph of the family before church, Alison says, “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (Bechdel 16). On the next page, Bruce is in church, staring at altar servers as they pass whilst the other adults are staring forward (the children are staring in the same direction as Bruce, but I would attribute this to their youth). Both scenes depict an attempt to fit the heteronormative vision of a husband and father: a church-going man who takes pictures of his family and sits in the front row of church. However, both pictures are disrupted by Bruce’s lack of presence. In the panel where Bruce is taking photos, he is not standing with his family for the photo, but rather, organizing the picture so it looks pristine. In the church panel Bruce is not looking forward with the other adults, but instead staring at the church officials as they pass by. Alison punctuates this difference in the church panel, stating, “He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (Bechdel 17). The moment could be seen as a displays of artfulness” in rebuilding a decadent home with a feminine aesthetic (Bechdel 9-10).
strong jab against Bruce due to its harshness, but the language also calls attention to the
difference between the image and the real—what Bruce wanted people to see and what Alison
now knows as an adult.

Perhaps the most startling scene of Bruce’s obsession with the house is when Alison, as a
child, had desired a fatherly moment that was interrupted by Bruce’s obsession with the house.
While riding a lawn mower with Alison, Bruce steps off and leaves her to finish the lawn alone
so he can plant a tree (Bechdel 23). In these panels, Alison describes the feeling of absence she
felt years after her father’s death:

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

What I see in Bechdel’s writing is a lot of attention to Bruce physically being there while his
attention is actually going to the house. This scene shows a moment where Bruce could have
guided and spent time with Alison by staying with her on the lawn mower, helping her finish the
chore. However, this heartwarming picture is disrupted yet again by his lack of presence.
Contrary to the panels where Bruce is sitting close behind his daughter, when Alison is on her
own she is shown either watching her father longingly as she rides by or driving away from him,
representing the distance being created between them.

Alison continues to point out how the house conceals queerness behind a heteronormative
facade. She presents us with a scene where she and her brothers surround a beautifully decorated
Christmas tree as their father watches from the side, stating, “Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit” (Bechdel 13). What Alison demonstrates here might be further explained by Katheryn Bond Stockton’s assessment of growing up in The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century, which involves “marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (4). This path, which is the heteronormative path, is considered the only means by which a child can grow out of childhood. In this sense, if the house is a space where Bruce can express his queerness without being publicly outed as gay to his community and the children help to “authenticate his exhibit,” then perhaps the children are meant to help conceal his queerness by proving he has taken the heteronormative path of reproduction.

Although Bruce’s wife and children are a means to make the house pass on a heteronormative level, the children consequently are punished when that image is disrupted. The graphic novel demonstrates the divergence between the image Bruce wants to portray and the pain and dysfunction behind that image. As Alison notes, “Daedalus, too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects,” (11) Bruce’s obsession with remaining in the closet extends to his family through stress and trauma. In a set of panels that contrasts with the children surrounding the Christmas tree, we see Bruce becoming impatient and then abusive towards Alison’s brother, Christian, for not being able to hold the Christmas tree still. Alison, who is watching It’s a Wonderful Life as the scene occurs, acknowledges the inconsistency between Jimmy Stewart’s character and Bruce by stating, “It could have been a romantic story, like in It’s A Wonderful Life, when Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed fix up that big old house and raise their family there. But in the movie when Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone…It’s out of the ordinary” (Bechdel 10-11). The scene indicates that this is far from the first time Bruce
has used violence when his children fail to uphold the image of perfection he desires. These moments of tension and violence also extend to the family matriarch, Helen. Just as Bruce is compared to Daedalus, Helen is compared to multiple women of literature who have had their spirits broken by the men they marry, such as Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* and Isabel from *Portrait of a Lady*. The reader learns that Helen and Bruce met during a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* in which Helen played the lead. Regarding their relationship, Alison states, “I speculate on what attracted my father more—the role, the actress, or my mother herself,” suggesting perhaps that Bruce may have desired Helen for her acting ability and potential to support his image (Bechdel 69). However, Alison also points out that their marriage often erupted in violence and yelling that often broke her mother, taking the “luminous” woman that is seen in her passport photo and turning her into the worn down “dull” woman forced to pretend that she is a happy wife and mother (71; 72).

These panels, along with Bechdel’s observations, draw connections from happy family moments to the trauma caused by her father. Every perfect image Bechdel provides has a history of trauma and pain; therefore, there is never truly a perfect moment. The house as such becomes a place of constant stress, as it that can never truly hide the shame of homosexuality, particularly for the children living there. When Alison describes her father’s angry abusive personality, she refers to it as the minotaur who Daedalus had “hid…in the labyrinth—a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another…and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril…escape was impossible” (Bechdel 12). She further says that the minotaur also had the ability to appear suddenly and without much provocation and shows this in a panel where a family dinner is interrupted when Bruce throws a vase (21). As Jennifer Lemberg argues in “Closing the Gap in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home,*” “Bechdel points to the
challenge as well as the importance of seeing past her father’s constructions in her depiction of the house. But as she makes very clear, the order of the house belies the chaos of the life lived within it, not just her father’s shame but also the messiness of everyday family interactions” (Lemberg 132). Lemberg further explains that the images portray the chaos and confusion the Bechdels live in that are not seen in the posed photographs that mark each chapter (Lemberg 132). To portray this disorder, Lemberg uses a scene in *Fun Home* where Alison is unable to find a pair of scissors in the midst of activity taking place in the small space by her two brothers. Helen is lounging on an older piece of furniture while Bruce is sitting in a cramped position on the floor (Bechdel 17). For Lemberg, this scene reveals what Bruce could not design or control—the house’s inability to function as a proper family space. Unlike the photographs Bruce composes of his family (as seen in the aforementioned pictures before church), the function of the house fails to serve as a comfortable house for the family.

Lemberg further claims that the panel placement on each page conveys Bruce’s desire for order and the disorder that results from that desire. She states, “On [page 20], Bechdel employs an arrangement used only rarely in the book, with four rectangular panels of the same size evenly laid out. In their symmetry, the panels convey the sense of order her father strives to achieve in his obsessive attention to his surroundings. Looking more closely, however, we find images of an upstairs interior that is perfectly arranged but also unsettling, just as Bechdel describes” (Bechdel 20). The arrangement of panels that Lemberg is referring to is one of the few instances where all the panels are of equal size and arranged evenly. However, the way the décor is presented inside these panels is disorienting and uncomfortable to look at. The angles feel

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1 Lemberg uses a quote from *Fun Home* which describes how the house’s decorative interior often confused guests and intentionally concealed shame. The quote states, “In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it. Mirrors, distracting bronzes, multiple doorways. Visitors often got lost upstairs.” (Bechdel 20)
unnatural (some higher up than we would expect to see) and the halls feel long. Lemberg also argues that, “[the] more visible human figures in the upper-left and lower-right panels include Bechdel as a child and a representative visitor to the house who stands, confused, before a large (funhouse) mirror that seems deceptively like yet another doorway. Both figures are simply drawn, so that the daughter who lives there and the unnamed guest seem similarly lost” (Lemberg 132). By comparing the child to the visitor, the child is isolated from the house they grew up in and no more comfortable in the home than a stranger. The house, as Bruce uses it to conceal his shame, leaves no room for the child to grow and exist.

One of the more difficult aspects of the secret and its embodiment in the house is that the shame belonging to her father threatens to become an inheritance. The possibility of inheritance occurs often when Alison is seeking affection from either her father or her mother. We learn that affection in the house was a rare action not just between wife and husband, but also between Bruce and his children (Bechdel 68). Alison recalls attempting to kiss her father goodnight, but when she grabs his hand instead, she “[rushes] from the room in embarrassment” (Bechdel 19). She further explains, as we see young Alison walking through the halls of the home, that “This embarrassment on my part was a tiny scale model of my father’s more fully developed self-loathing. His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it” (Bechdel 20). On the same page, we see a panel where a visitor gets lost and almost walks into a mirror, a symbolic example of how the house’s dazzling displays which are meant to “conceal” Bruce’s homosexuality would cause others to lose their way inside the house. Likewise, the child gets “lost” trying to perform acts of affection toward Bruce, whose obsession with image, and the anger resulting from protecting that image, makes him inaccessible.
The effects of her father’s abuse and the chaos of the house itself lead Alison to reject the ornamentation her father uses as a means of expression in preference for the “unadorned and purely functional” (Bechdel 14). Alison expresses her discomfort with the ornamentation not only because it left little room for smooth, comfortable family life, but also because the ornamentation itself connected with something false about their family. She states, “I developed a contempt for useless ornament. What function was served by scrolls, tassels, and bric-a-brac that infested our house? If anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies” (Bechdel 16). The use of “lies” accentuates the hidden nature of the ornamentation. For Alison, they are a representation of a distant father whose chaotic moods and lack of affection make him more of a myth to his daughter than a parent. As Alison makes her statement about the ornamentation being lies, we see her cleaning one of the decadent lamps while Bruce’s shadow hovers in the background. Although the child does not notice the shadow, the viewer is drawn to it, perhaps caught off guard by its darkness compared to the light color in the rest of the panel or that the dark presence is so close to the innocent, unaware child. In the next phrase she explains, “My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret” (Bechdel 16). The shadow seems to confirm that even though Alison, as a child, did not realize the source of the shame – literally the dark secret of her father’s homosexual encounters with teen boys—the effects of the secret could not be hidden completely and manifested itself through abuse and obsession.

The panel described above is hardly the first time we see Bruce’s image connected to the presence of shadows. In one panel, Bruce is seen carrying a pillar in front of the house, which is shrouded in darkness, as Bechdel states that historical restoration was “his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word” (Bechdel 7). With the visual of the shadowed house behind
Bruce along with Bechdel’s statement that the house, his primary source of queer expression, was his “passion,” seeing Bruce engulfed by the shadow of the house symbolizes the house’s lack of separation from the secret and Bruce’s obsessive relationship with the secret itself. One other notable use of the shadow with Bruce is when Bechdel tells her readers that the “constant tension was heightened by the fact that some encounters could be quite pleasant. His bursts of kindness were as incandescent as his tantrums were dark” (Bechdel 21). In the two panels that are drawn for the quote, Bruce is reading a story to Alison and then sings a lullaby to her while shutting off her bedroom light. This shrouds Bruce in a shadow, conveying how her father’s abuse, even in pleasant times, contributed to the dysfunction in the family and Alison’s unease. Bechdel, in order to capture that tension and anxiety she felt as a child, relates it symbolically by using the minotaur and the shadow—things that are hidden and secretive, but could become visible at any moment.

Alison’s mother Helen is also distant towards her children and, like her children, is negatively affected by the pressure to keep Bruce’s secret. Throughout the graphic novel, Helen shares Alison’s dislike of Bruce’s ornamentation and later, grows to dislike the house entirely (Bechdel 14; 216-217). However, while Alison from a young age declares a determination to separate herself from the immaculate, image-obsessed Bruce, Helen, having been worn down by her husband and “ground in the very mill of the conventional” by staying with Bruce and going to live with him in his small town, resists leaving Bruce until the secret of his sexuality is revealed (72).

Furthermore, Helen reflects Bruce in several ways; as Bruce devotes himself to the house, Helen devotes herself to the craft of acting and music. While Alison appreciates her mother’s genius in these endeavors, she also resents them for taking her mother’s attention.
Alison notes that, like her father, her mother was often isolated and focused on her work, which inspired a “familiar resentment” in Alison (Bechdel 133). While Alison acknowledges that it seems “childish, perhaps, to grudge [her parents] the sustenance of their creative solitude,” she also understands her parents’ creativity as a means to alleviate their unhappiness, as she continues to say, “but it was all that sustained them and thus all-consuming” (Bechdel 133-134). Alison simultaneously respects her mother’s creativity and loathes how it isolates her. In a series of panels, Alison shows herself as a child asking for her mother’s attention while she is playing piano and is either told by Helen not to “bother” her or puts off making Alison (approximately 4 or 5 at the time) lunch in favor of playing piano (Bechdel 132-133). This complication of feelings—adoring the devotion her mother pays to her creative outlet while feeling neglected by her mother’s preference for her art over her children—drives Alison to seek the same fulfillment in her art (in her case, drawing). As Bechdel explains, “From their example, I learned quickly to feed myself. It was a vicious circle, though. The more gratification we found in our own geniuses, the more isolated we grew” (Bechdel 134). Ultimately, the children follow their parents’ lead and choose to bury themselves in their own creative pursuits.

Another result of this dependency, paired with the Bechdel’s obviously troubled marriage, is that Alison begins developing obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bechdel 135). Although she only names herself as having OCD, she associates the word “compulsion” with her family’s isolating preference for their passions and creativity over each other, which causes tension between Helen and Bruce. As Alison reads Dr. Spock in an attempt to understand her compulsive behavior, her parents start having a fight over Bruce’s absence from family dinner in the background (139). The scene makes a clear connection between Alison’s fear, her attempts to “self-soothe,” and the hostility of her parents, neither of whom were, or perhaps even could,
soothe Alison. In a panel where the members of the family are seen through each window of the home, separate, frustrated, and alone, Alison states that “our selves were all we had” (139). This is also one of the first times we see Alison begin to follow her parent’s example by devoting herself more to the world of art than to one of human connection. Just as her father buried himself in the rebuilding of the home and her mother in her music and acting, Alison begins to distance herself from her parents through her drawing.

Despite this isolation, her mother did desire for her children to transcend her mistakes (Bechdel 31). Alison expresses this idea as she, her mother, and brothers witness their cousin putting a trailer on a property. As after Alison details how many of her relatives still live within the same area, Helen warns Alison and her brothers, “Don’t you kids get any ideas about dragging a trailer into the backyard. After you graduate from high school, I don’t want to see you again” (Bechdel 31). Despite her family’s locality, Alison becomes confused by why her “cultured mother, who had studied acting in New York city, would live [in Bruce’s hometown] cheek by jowl with [her husband’s] family” or in other words, continue to live in the small town that clearly did not match what she desired out of life (Bechdel 31). Helen’s choice to live in a town she hated becomes an example of Helen feeling she had no choice but to follow Bruce. While Helen wants her children to transcend her mistakes, she also often teaches them go along with Bruce’s obsessions as a means to alleviate his anger and violence, even if she objects to it. In one instance, Alison’s brother John makes a harmless joke about his father’s peace-sign tie, which sends Bruce in a tizzy to change it. Helen’s response to the encounter was to tell the children, “No comments on his appearance. Is that understood?...Good, bad, it doesn’t matter” (Bechdel 19). Such a scene shows that while Helen had wanted her children to become independent, she could not encourage them to do so around Bruce’s obsessive nature. In another
more shocking panel Bruce spanks Alison because the vase was too close to the edge of the table. Helen, wide-eyed and holding Alison’s sobbing brother Christian, is clearly horrified by the punishment, but does not step in to stop Bruce from hitting Alison. Helen, who dislikes her house, town, and the way her husband punishes their children, cannot escape the inheritance despite having no blood relation to Bruce. Through the marriage and living in the house, she inherits the shame and anxiety belonging to her husband. This explains Helen’s motivation for the children to escape their small town yet, being so worn down, she couldn’t escape until the secret was revealed to their daughter.

Compulsions are just one possible inheritance Alison develops as an effect of Bruce’s secret. As both Bruce and Helen are clearly too tangled up to easily free themselves from it (with Bruce clinging to his image of respected family man and Helen clinging to her marriage), Alison begins to struggle with lies starting with her sexual development, namely, her first period. Alison starts writing a journal around age eleven, in which she strives to be as accurate as possible (Bechdel 162). Although she struggles with an obsession with accuracy throughout her childhood, the moment her diary begins to omit things coincides with a number of events; specifically, in regard to my argument, around the time of her first period and when her “father’s secret almost surfaced” (Bechdel 159; 153). The latter incident refers to is when her father is brought to court for offering to buy alcohol for minors, though in actuality he was caught for attempting to seduce a teen boy. In addition to her father nearly being outed, Alison notes that her puberty came just as “Watergate” (Richard Nixon’s scandal that resulted in his resignation) was approaching its end (Bechdel 155). As the chapter progresses and Alison starts her period and begins foraying into masturbation, Bruce also struggles with the shame of nearly being outed. In fact, the chapter begins with Bruce telling Alison about therapy and, while shamefully
averting his eyes, stating, “I’m bad. Not good like you” (Bechdel 153). Throughout the summer, Bruce deals with charges of providing alcohol for a minor, as his actual charge—pursuing teen boys—was too scandalous to say out loud (Bechdel 180). Simultaneously, as the summer goes on, Alison has a harder time not omitting subjects, which leads to the diary becoming a false document that was “no longer the utterly reliable document it had been in my youth” (Bechdel 162). Particularly, Alison omits her period (referring to it as “How horrid!” or “ning”) and, until she is sixteen, does not at all refer to masturbation, which she started doing shortly after her first period (Bechdel 170).

The parts of her life that Alison omits are paralleled with the courtroom’s omission of Bruce’s homosexuality, which Fun Home refers to as “the real accusation [that] dared not speak its name” (Bechdel 175). Ironically, just as Alison covers up the shame of receiving her period with “how horrid!”, she uses the same phrase in her diary to describe her father’s charges and the possibility they may move (Bechdel 174). These incidents demonstrate Alison’s fear that her own sexuality could be revealed and judged, just like it could have for Bruce. In a family where hidden sexuality is engrained in the home and structure of the family (where the family represents a “straight” persona), being revealed threatens to destroy everything the family has worked so hard to hide (just as the scandal of Watergate lead to Nixon resigning). The shame that Bruce feels about the possibility of being outed, as expressed when he says, “I’m bad,” shows in Alison who does not tell her mother about her period for as long as possible. The period, regardless of its natural part of sexual development, ends up being something that must be confessed and revealed, an unfamiliar and daunting act in the Bechdel household.

At first, the diary is rather mundane and meticulous as a truthful record, but Bechdel reports that, as she moved closer to adulthood, her diaries “gave way to vagaries of emotion and
opinion. False humility, overwrought penmanship, and self-disgust began to cloud [her] judgement” (Bechdel 169). Alison begins repeating the mistakes of her parents by making use of fictions and hiding secrets, something she resents so much she ceases to write in her diary for months, during which time she reveals to her mother that she had her period. She struggles for a long time about whether or not to tell her mom, as she states, “I’m only estimating that this episode took place in December. There’s no mention of it in my diary. By the end of November, my earnest daily entries had given way to the implicit lie of the blank page, and weeks at a time are left unrecorded” (Bechdel 186). Although the blank pages are temporary, the use of “implicit lie” here indicates a disappointment about the lack of recording or rather, the knowledge that any filled in pages will likely be a lie, as they previously had been. As the diary allowed her to use codes to refer to it, it seemed to delay the inevitable need to reveal the truth of her period. However, as we know that the confession to her mother took place while she was not writing in her diary, there is a possibility that the verbal confession led Alison to use truth whereas the diary allowed lies. The confession also sets Alison’s path apart from Bruce because while Alison tells her mother about her period, her father narrowly escapes confessing his homosexuality. In comparing her father’s situation to Oscar Wilde’s, Bechdel notes her father’s reaction to the judge’s decision that the charges would be dismissed after he completed therapy, saying that “My father did not provoke a burst of applause in the courtroom, as Oscar Wilde had, with an impassioned plea for the understanding of ‘such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan’” (Bechdel 180). That is to say, the court hid Bruce’s homosexuality and he took the deal in order to maintain the privacy of the closet.

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2Famous Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde sued John Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensbury, for libel when the latter left a calling card reading, “For Oscar Wilde, posing as Somdomite.” Wilde dropped the case (at a significant financial loss) when, due to the evidence Queensbury had planned and already brought to court, he was all but guaranteed to lose and faced criminal prosecution. Despite Wilde dropping the case, the evidence Queensbury
The Importance of (Non) Identification in *Fun Home*

Throughout her childhood, Alison longs for affection and attention from her parents that she does not receive. In addition, she longs to identify with her parents, but never fully does so. This is not just because of Bruce’s hostile nature (though that’s certainly part of it) but because Bruce tries to express his queerness through his daughter by forcing her to wear female clothing and decorating her bedroom with feminine décor. The purpose of identification, for both Bruce and Alison, is to fill a void left in them—Alison attempts to fill the desire for connection that is lost in her distant family, and Bruce is trying to fulfil his desire to live as a homosexual man. Just as the hostility in the household isolates the family from one another (particularly, Alison from her parents), Bruce’s desire to express femininity through his daughter drives them to “perpetual escalation” to argue (Bechdel 98). However, this failure for father and daughter to find identification with one another, at least enough to fill their perspective voids, ultimately encourages Alison to search for fulfillment through her true desires, i.e. her desire for women. As such, by searching for this desire, Alison eludes the isolation that comes with trying to find the self with the other.

Alison is driven to seek fulfillment elsewhere because she experiences the negative consequences of her father using her as the other (little more than a prop) to express his feminine style first-hand. Alison establishes this tension between daughter and father by using novelist and critic Marcel Proust’s (who is well-regarded by both Alison and her father) description of used against Wilde led to his arrest and another trial where he was convicted for gross indecency (for acts of homosexuality that would not qualify as sodomy) and sentenced to two years of hard labor (Linder “The Trials of Oscar Wilde: An Account”). The quote from the gross indecency trial (referring to the relationship between biblical character Jonathan and David) was part of Wilde’s response to prosecutor Charles Gill’s question, “What is ‘the love that dare not speak its name’?” To summarize, Wilde argues there is nothing “unnatural” about a relationship between an older and a younger man. Whereas Wilde uses his moment in court to reject the notion that queer relationships are shameful, Bruce, out of shame, allows the courts to hide the “unspeakable” crime of pursuing teenage boys (Linder “Testimony of Oscar Wilde”).
inverts: someone who wishes to dress, act, or otherwise embody traits that differ from their gender/sex. She further explains, “Proust refers to his explicitly homosexual characters as ‘inverts.’…It’s imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex. But in the admittedly limited sample comprising my father and me, perhaps it is sufficient” (Bechdel 97). In the case of Fun Home, Alison typically expresses her queerness through masculine dress and style while her father expresses his queerness through his preference of feminine style.

When Alison is a child, Bruce often uses his parental position to make her dress more feminine. Bechdel recalls when she was a younger child, her father didn’t consider her input in how her room was designed and, instead, her father had her put up flower wallpaper (Bechdel 7). He also always made sure Alison wore clothes in a manner he deemed appropriate, demanding the necklines on Alison’s dresses “match” or that she wear jewelry to dress less “like a missionary” (15; 98). For Alison, Bruce’s push for her to be more feminine and his protection of the beautiful, heavily ornamented house led her to rebel and develop a taste for the functional. As Bechdel writes, “My own preference for the unadorned and purely functional emerged early…I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (Bechdel 14-15). Although we have seen multiple instances where Bruce punishes Alison for compromising his vision of the family or the house as an expression of his queerness, this is a direct case of Bruce’s secret being thrust upon Alison as she becomes an unwilling means for expressing his sexuality; it is because of Bruce’s insistence that she comes to prefer a masculine style. Unbeknownst to her father, his expression of femininity through Alison impedes her own means of expressing homosexuality.
Furthermore, because “gayness” is a secret, she lacks the means in childhood to give a name to her lesbian identity. Nonetheless, given their expressions of queer identity, father and daughter fail to connect. Such a failure is made worse without the caretaking and affection of Alison’s father. In many ways, Bruce can not see Alison as a person in her childhood—she is an “extension” of him, less a person on her own than an object that allows Bruce to express his appreciation for feminine style (Bechdel 13). If she is not acting as a prop for his feminine expression, then she is there to help him do chores to keep the house (which hides Bruce’s queerness) functioning as it should. The difference is that while the house is an inanimate object—valuable and important to Bruce in multiple ways, but inanimate nonetheless—Alison is a being full of her own desires and needs, which are not being satisfied by her father’s demands for her to dress feminine or his distant, sometimes violent parenting.

However, in her pre-teen to teen years, there is one point of calm for Alison and her dad—their “shared reverence for masculine beauty” (Bechdel 99). Alison offhandedly comments that her father should get a suit with a vest and Bruce agrees he should. In the scene, they are both looking at and admiring a model in a magazine wearing the suit. They appreciate the image for different reasons: Alison for its appearance and Bruce for its sexual desire (Bechdel 99). Bechdel also comments, “But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls—subjectively, for myself. The objects of our desire were quite different” (Bechdel 99). This moment of peace and recognition, however small, does direct Bruce away from using Alison as a means of identification, and directs it towards his actual desire—the male body. In her book, Identification Papers, Diana Fuss states:

Identification is an embarrassingly ordinary process, a routine, habitual compensation for the everyday loss of our love-objects. Compensating for loss may be one of our most
familiar psychological experiences, coloring every aspect of our relation to the world outside us, but it is also a profoundly defamiliarizing affair, installing surrogate others to fill the void where we imagine the love-object to have been. (Fuss 1)

For Fuss, identification is the means of fulfilling a missing piece within us by searching for it in “surrogates” or the other (a figure, often another person, we use as a means to try and fulfill ourselves). She goes on to explain, “In perhaps its simplest formulation, identification is the detour through the other that defines a self” (Fuss 2). Identification occurs multiple times throughout *Fun Home* and creates many of the graphic novel’s most profound moments. Bruce attempts to identify with his daughter by having her wear feminine clothes and decorate her room in feminine décor. As Bruce’s wishes to embody femininity himself, but cannot without drawing suspicion, he instead expresses femininity through his daughter, who can embody the feminine while being socially accepted.

However, while Bruce intentionally forces Alison to adhere to gender norms to serve his need to express femininity, he inadvertently provides moments where Alison can try to find identification with the other. This is largely her desire to manifest masculine beauty. When Alison and her siblings are young, Bruce would hire young men to be “babysitters” and to help with chores around the house (Bechdel 95). While Bruce finds the young men he hires to work for him attractive, Alison found their masculinity admirable. When her father hired Roy, one of the first boys Bruce pursues, she recalls how “[Bruce] would cultivate these young men like orchids” while Bechdel states she “admired their masculine charms myself. Indeed, I had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age” (Bechdel 95). Later, as an adult Alison finds a picture of Roy wearing underwear among her father’s belongings and struggles with the picture as she believes it to be something that should be disturbing to her, yet she finds the visual
appealing. Bechdel tries to make sense of this by stating, “In fact, the picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged?” (100). She quickly answers her own question and links it to a connection with her father— “Perhaps I identify too well with my father’s illicit awe” (Bechdel 101). As with the magazine, Alison finds the same masculinity her father desires sexually to be the same she finds beautiful.

Although one might read the above passage as Alison identifying her father, what she is actually saying is she identifies with his “illicit awe”—the feeling that what she desires should be off-limits. Alison acknowledges that she should feel ashamed, but rejects it, instead claiming her own desire for the aesthetically pleasing masculinity that Roy possesses by putting the illicitness on Roy’s age rather than the photo itself. On the other hand, Bruce never outright claims his desire, but tries to hide it, albeit poorly. Such a moment takes place after Bruce’s death and Alison’s coming out that demonstrates to the audience how Alison is able to separate homosexuality from shame in a way her father could not. Alison uses this photo to reject shame by acknowledging the masculine aspects she finds visually pleasing while also subtly realizing that the photo is illicit, not because of homosexual desire, but because Roy is underaged. On the other hand, by trying to hide the photo and purposely making the subject a teen Bruce cannot separate the shame in the same way. Bruce is further imprisoned in the “hidden,” leaving the “revealed” only as evidence for his shame (Bechdel 101).

**The Significance of “The Catch”**

The masculine beauty that Alison finds so desirable eventually appears to her in the form of a butch woman entering a diner. Alison recalls being a young child and having lunch with her father when the woman walks in. Alison has mixed feelings about seeing the woman, stating that
she was a “most unsettling sight,” yet Alison is also in awe of her (Bechdel 117). In recalling her amazement, Bechdel states, “I didn’t know there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they’ve never spoken to but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy” (Bechdel 118). For Alison, this the first time she has seen masculine beauty worn by a woman, which is her desire as a lesbian. However, the moment of identification is interrupted by her father, who Bechdel states “recognized [the woman] too” as he asks in reference to the woman, “is that what you want to look like?” (Bechdel 118; emphasis Bechdel’s). Alison, unsure of how else to react, lies and says, “no,” in a move similar to how her father had hidden his own sexuality (119). Just as the diary opened her to the possibility of lying, this scene represents the danger of Alison following her father’s footsteps as Alison is pressured to lie about the woman. However, there is an important realization that Bechdel makes as she states, “But the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years…and perhaps it haunted my father” (Bechdel 119). Faced with a queer figure, Bruce encounters the thing he fears the most; being out and known as queer for all of society. For Alison though, the vision of the woman opens a world of possibilities. Despite being raised under the shroud of the family secret and at times being at risk of inheriting patterns of shame over her sexuality, Alison realizes there is an alternative path.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Alison comes out once she leaves the shroud of the family home, her father’s beard. Previously, when Alison had been introduced to queer culture, it had been when Bruce and the children leave not just the home, but the small town where Bruce was born and raised. Alison recalls going on a trip to New York with her father and siblings, noting that “it was quite a gay weekend all around” and being enthralled by the “cosmetic masculinity” and meeting a gay couple, one of whom is an illustrator (Bechdel 190-191).
Likewise, when Alison leaves for college and is away from home, she decides to come out as lesbian. The discovery occurs shortly after Alison leaves for college and is required to take a class on *Ulysses*, one of her father’s favorite books. Not knowing about her discovery and trying to help her prepare for her literature class, Bruce gives Alison the book *Earthly Paradise: Colette’s Autobiography* under the guise of learning about 1920s France (Bechdel 205). Upon reading *Earthly Paradise*, Alison finds herself compelled by the “sensualism” of Colette and, after reading a number of texts about homosexuality, decides to come out and visit the gay student union (Bechdel 207; 209). At first, Alison feels hesitant about her decision, displaying the same fear that originally drove her father to conceal his own homosexuality. During a panel that shows Alison having sex with her girlfriend, Joan, she acknowledges this fear by stating, “in true heroic fashion, I moved toward the thing I feared,” and by approaching her fear, Alison is able to embrace the pleasure. Alison declares, using the metaphor of Odysseus, “Yet while Odysseus schemed desperately to escape Polyphemus’s cave, I found that I was quite content to stay here forever” (Bechdel 214).

Although she does not know it at the time, this bravery is something Bruce admires and encourages. This is likely because while Alison is able to live freely as a lesbian woman, Bruce is still confined to the house and its shame. However, in their last interactions Bruce and Alison’s relationship begins to improve slightly as Bruce embraces Alison’s coming out and, upon learning about her father’s homosexuality, Alison attempts to connect with him once more despite years of distance and isolation. The trip home shows Alison and Bruce spending time together, but the trip simultaneously accentuates their diverging paths. Whereas Alison develops a sense of courage, Bruce reveals his fear for the first time. Bruce first confesses his fear in letters to Alison by stating, “There’ve been a few times I thought I might have preferred to take a
stand. But I never really considered it when I was young… At forty-three I find it hard to see advantages even if I had done so when I was young” (Bechdel 211). In the letter, he establishes a belief that even if he had come out, he did not foresee it being any easier or making him any happier. Later, when Alison visits home, she brings up a protest occurring back at school against a movie with negative gay stereotypes, which was meant to be an entry point to discussion, by her own admission. Bruce snorts, attempting to put up his guard back up as he always had but this time, Alison was able to see “the fear in his eyes” (Bechdel 218-219). Nonetheless, Alison and her father continue talking and Alison leaves her copy of Kate Millett’s *Flying* for her father to read. Bruce, in a correspondence with Alison, more directly shares his reverence for bravery with his daughter, writing, “I’m flying high on Kate Millett. Started reading it the day you left. It just pulls you in. God, what guts.” (Bechdel 224).

Bruce’s supportive reaction to Alison’s coming out is sharply contrasted with Helen’s reaction, which is disapproving at best. In a panicked attempt to keep the secret under wraps, Helen writes the following to her daughter: “My life is tied firmly at this time to family and work, and I see your choice as a threat to both of these. I imagine that, if in the long run, your choice turns out to be a serious one, I could live with it, but I truly hope that this does not happen. There are some dangers that your idealistic outlook seems not to have faced” (Bechdel 77). Alison is obviously hurt by the reply (she buys a knife, cuts her finger, and rubs the blood on the diary page) but is primarily confused and prompts her mother to elaborate on the danger, which leads Helen to reveal Bruce’s homosexuality and his pursuit of teenage boys (Bechdel 78-79). Although the revelation is shocking, it encourages Alison to approach her father and, with the secret lifted, Helen to finally think about leaving the house and divorcing Bruce. Alison speculates that this very decision could have been the reason her father killed himself, too afraid
to come out as his daughter had done (Bechdel 27). Although Alison and Helen develop the bravery to leave the secret behind, Bruce cannot seem to do so.

Before his death, Alison tries to have a conversation with her father about his homosexuality. As they are driving to a movie, Alison asks if he “knew what [he was] doing when [he] gave [her] that Colette book,” to which Bruce reluctantly replies, “I guess there was some kind of…identification” (Bechdel 220-221). The conversation, unfortunately, does not go much further and too soon her father stops replying without ever verbally revealing his secret. In the images on the page, Alison is looking at her father, but Bruce continues to look forward, never once peering at her during his “shamefaced recitation” (Bechdel 221). Alison appears disappointed with the anti-climactic conversation and stares forward as well, accepting that her father would never follow her path. Although Alison’s attempt to reach out falls flat, something significant occurs in this scene when Bruce says there was “identification.” As Bruce as previously tried to find identification with his daughter, the act of giving her the book that would lead to her coming out suggests there was a void he was hoping to fill within himself when he gave her that book. Bruce’s answers serve as evidence that he gave Alison the book intentionally; although he says he did not know what he was doing, he confesses, “It was just a guess,” implying he at least suspected she was gay (Bechdel 220). After Alison asks about the book, she does not speak, but rather allows Bruce to tell her about his early gay experiences. Eventually, he reveals to her, “When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl” to which Alison replies, “I wanted to be a boy!” (Bechdel 221). It is one of the only moments in the graphic novel where Bruce claims his desire by saying “…I really wanted to be a girl” (Bechdel 221; emphasis mine). Before this, Bruce has expressed his desire to embody the feminine through his daughter, but in this instance, although he does not say he is gay, he does say that he wanted to express
femininity himself. The use of the word “identification,” if we follow Fuss’s example, suggests that while Bruce was trying to find himself through his daughter’s using the book, the book also allows a moment for Bruce to claim his own desire. It is the closest that Bruce ever comes to coming out and although he never truly comes out, giving Alison the book allows him a moment to claim his own identity and do so in the safe space of his daughter’s company, rather than using her as a prop to conceal his desire. Combined with Bruce’s admiration for bravery, we can interpret his giving Alison the book as Bruce doing something he had wished for himself—guidance and support for his queerness.

**Conclusion**

Although Bruce dies before he can ever come out, he gives his daughter the support to continue on her path as an out lesbian woman. Some would question whether Alison was truly in danger of living in the closet like her father given that she had already decided to come out before receiving her father’s approval. In addition, since Bruce grew up in the 1940s/1950s, he would have been vulnerable to the intolerance and difficulties of his era, which would have been much different when Alison came out. To some extent, I agree with the notion that Alison showed little to no signs of considering hiding her sexuality as her father had done; in addition, since she came out in 1980, she certainly would not have had the same pressure as she might have if she lived in the 1950s. In a series of panels, Alison imagines herself being a 1950s butch woman and asks the question, “Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era butches? Or would I have married and sought succor from my high-school students?” (Bechdel 108). In the images accompanying this statement, the butch woman carries a more-than-passing resemblance to Alison. However, the man in the image staring at the butch woman also has an uncanny resemblance to a young Bruce. Showing the two pathways in this scene, Alison
acknowledges that from her position as an out woman living near the end of the 20th century, she cannot be sure she would have the bravery to come out and could have very easily followed her father’s path.

The moment in the car that Bruce and Alison are both able to claim their desires is pivotal however, because it symbolizes the best inheritance one generation can give to another—the bravery and support to claim one’s own identity. The discussion of Colette’s book, initially disguised as information about 1920’s France, eventually becomes not only the book that gives Alison the push she needs to come out but the strength that pushes Bruce and Alison to admit their true desires. Although Bruce does not have the courage to come out himself, the literature he gives Alison proves his support of her, even if he cannot accept her support in return. By giving her the guidance and the support, Bruce frees Alison from the shame and fear that haunted him. He frees homosexuality from the family shame by not treating her coming out as something shameful, but as an act of bravery. It is his fear that kept Bruce imprisoned by the specter of shame. Bruce’s catch is significant because it not only allows Alison to fly where he could not, but also because she inherits what Bruce himself could never achieve—freedom from the shame and secrecy that followed Bruce throughout his life.
Canadian comic artist and author Sophie Labelle is unapologetically blunt in the above statement, much like the rest of her work. Despite being an illustrator, Labelle is largely known for her sarcastic tone, deep rage, and her discussion of horrific scenarios that trans individuals face on a daily basis. When isolated from the rest of Labelle’s work this Facebook post could potentially drive away her audience, or at least, the cisgender audience. Cisgender readers may expect that an artist whose work argues for equality and often educates cisgender readers would be focused on making transgender characters understandable and relatable. However, facing the daily harassment, misgendering, and violence not just directed at Labelle herself, but to the trans community at large, Labelle’s comics drip with weariness and boiling anger. It is a voice that has gone unheard too long.

Many would read Assigned Male and question whether her curt approach to her comics, especially the ones that feature negative interactions between transgender and cisgender characters, is truly the best way to fight for equality. Her comics are often humorous and serve to draw out the ridiculous and problematic approaches of cis/heteronormative thinking. As these views are often represented through cisgender characters, some may fear that Labelle is being unfair in her representation of cisgender readers, and as such, her tactics negate her arguments
for equality. Critics who object to Labelle’s approach may question if she is not in fact making more enemies than friends. Is she perhaps hurting her cause by isolating allies from her work and by criticizing cisgender individuals so frequently? Notably, Labelle often targets transphobic cisgender characters in her comics, positioning them as the under-educated, hateful villains of these interactions. However, she does occasionally challenge allies for their treatment of trans individuals, teaching them to avoid stereotyping, misgendering, or spreading misinformation. Labelle does not follow the adage “honey is sweeter than vinegar” for good reason as she is using words and images in her comics to resist treatment that has been allowed for too long. Specifically, she is using Assigned Male’s protagonist, Stephie, to resist through her words and her appearance.

Stephie is a young teen trans girl who argues against the transphobic or narrow cis/heteronormative structures of gender within the world of her comic series Assigned Male. Stephie, as a character, can be just as blunt as Labelle. While Stephie is the primary voice of Assigned Male (although Assigned Male also features other LGBTQ characters), her words and appearance embody a mixture of ages. Stephie is drawn as a youthful preteen/teenage girl of twelve or thirteen (though the series began when Stephie was younger) who appears even more childlike than her current age. Contrasting with her appearance however, Stephie’s vocabulary, grasp of trans terminology, and outspokenness mark her as much older and wiser than she appears. She often has the upper hand over adults and sees through any attempt to silence or disempower her and other transgender children. Any time a cisgender adult or child (though most often an adult) tries to thrust their cis-centered world view upon her, Stephie retaliates with her knowledge and quick tongue. It would be easy to say that Labelle’s characters are poor characterizations of children and in fact, there have been people who have accused her of this. I
pose instead that Stephie is not meant to be a perfect representation of a child. With the comic’s blunt, sometimes over-the-top style and its use of Stephie’s intriguing characterization, audiences might be suspicious or confused and ask what are we to make of a child who speaks and thinks like an adult? What do readers do with a comic that interprets what might read by some as cisgender errors as moments of serious acts?

I argue that such questions make the mistake of approaching the comic from a single angle and trying to fit Stephie into a cis/heteronormative version of how a child acts, speaks, and thinks. To understand Assigned Male, readers must embrace a queer vision of childhood where Stephie and other children are capable of being more multi-dimensional than the vision of childhood society at large holds. In the world of Assigned Male, Stephie and other children have the capability to understand themselves and their gender, despite the denial of those around them. Trans child characters often take the role of teacher both within the world of Assigned Male and toward the readers of Assigned Male, with the goal of teaching adults what needs to be done to eliminate these instances of trauma for future generations. To do so, Stephie teaches trans children how to use language to respond to these potentially traumatic experiences.

**How Rage, Vulnerability, and Trauma Create the Need for Stephie**

In addition to her ability to be both child and adult, Stephie wields rage in a way that gives her strength against hate while also demonstrating vulnerability as a means of comfort and call to action. In the cis-centric and heteronormative world that Assigned Male sees, Stephie uses a balance of vulnerability and rage to make herself heard and to break stereotypes that deny children autonomy over their identity. While a unique character in herself, Stephie is hardly the first literary character created with this purpose. Author Dorothy Allison wrote in the afterword of the 20th anniversary edition of her novel Bastard Out of Carolina (a novel about a young girl
named Bone who is physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by her stepfather) that although the main character was based on her life, she did not intend for Bone to be Allison herself. Rather, by creating Bone she “…had invented a loved creature to set against the memory of helplessness and rage. I wanted to invent a stronger, more resilient character…” (Allison 315). Allison’s description resembles largely how I see Stephie: She is a strong character who is able to endure the rage and hatred set against her. She is a person who is fighting for her right to exist. Likewise, Labelle equips Stephie with the language capability of an adult to endure and challenge instances of trauma that occur to trans children, powered by her rage at a situation where injustice occurs against the trans community. However, for Labelle to also create a space of support and safety for trans children, Stephie must also have a childlike vulnerability that reminds the audience that not only are these children susceptible to trauma simply because they are trans, but that as children they are vulnerable to the beliefs of the adults around them. Although children can understand their own gender and develop a language to express that understanding, adults are ultimately the ones who make guidelines for how children should express their gender and what gender they should identify as. Even as a fictional character in a comic series, Stephie represents a population that demands to be heard and seen, and not just regarded as something fictional or non-existent. In other words, she draws our attention to the fact that these intelligent children with non-conforming genders exist and are harmed by society’s treatment of them. A reader who sees Stephie as a “bad” characterization of childhood ignores the fact that Labelle, using Stephie, argues that children are much deeper than the innocent, cis/heteronormative vision of childhood we have thrust upon them.

In order to delve into Stephie’s rage and vulnerability in the face of trauma, we first must understand the cis/heteronormative version of childhood and why it is largely false. For this, I
look to Kathryn Bond Stockton, author of *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Stockton argues that the innocence we assign 20th century (and I would further argue 21st century) children is harmful because it is a trick of memory. The innocent child is a “fantasy” that adults thrust upon children and try to protect. As childhood is “fundamentally foreign” to adults due the fuzziness of memory, this protection sometimes comes at the expense of children who do not fit that fantasy (Stockton 5). She also explains, “[given] that children don’t know this child, surely not as we do, though they move inside it, life inside this membrane is largely available to adults as memory—what can I remember of what I thought I was? —and so takes us back in circles to our fantasies (of our memories)” (Stockton 5). For Stockton, adulthood and childhood are too far apart for adults to have a stable enough memory of childhood and, as such, this unstable memory creates a vision that simply is not true. Adults seek to project a version of childhood based on a nostalgic idea of what childhood was, not realizing that that particular version of childhood never existed. Rather, this false childhood is the childhood the adult feels they wanted.

Projecting this nostalgic idea of childhood onto children comes at a price as there is a possibility that a child will grow into an adult without the chance to live their authentic self in childhood. Such a child does not get the childhood they want, but rather, the adult gives the child the childhood they think they should have. Labelle would likely agree with Stockton’s assessment that projecting that fake vision of childhood onto the child, regardless of the child’s desires, pressures children to adhere to a childhood that they do not want. In a comic from one of Labelle’s books titled *My Dad Thinks I’m a Boy?!*, we see Stephie and her father (who is throwing a fit on the floor) shopping for Halloween costumes. Stephie explains to the reader, “Oh, and last year, at Halloween, I wanted to go trick-or treating as a space sorceress…but then
my dad threw such a tantrum at the store that I agreed to go as a *superhero* so he would calm down” (Labelle “One of my objectives...”; emphasis Labelle’s). There are a few layers to this scene. Stephie is forced to forfeit the costume that she desires—the one that fits her gender more closely—in lieu of the costume her father desires for her, placing his version of childhood over hers. This also confirms that Stephie’s father does not see her as his daughter yet as he wants the costume that codes more as “male” than the costume that codes more as “female.” Also, if we apply Stockton’s assertion that adults hold on to a version of child that does not exist, there is an interesting role reversal occurring. Stephie acts as the parent (as she agreed to the superhero costume to calm her father’s tantrum) and her father becomes the child (being he is the one throwing the tantrum). Such a switch in roles is a shocking demonstration of how Stephie’s father has stolen her childhood for himself.

There is yet another scene where Stephie uses rage, language, and knowledge to defend her vision of self and childhood. Stephie enters a debate with a cisgender boy, explaining, “I am a trans girl. Trans is an *adjective* here. It means that I am a girl... and that I am also trans” (Labelle, “#344”; emphasis Labelle’s). The boy first tries to insist that Stephie was not “born a girl,” and then when she rejects this statement, the boy tries to say she was not “biologically a girl,” after which he grows frustrated with her. Finally, Stephie blurs out “You’re the one using words to *delegitimize* my girlhood!!!” (Labelle, “#344”; emphasis Labelle’s). In this case, the boy attempts to oppress Stephie by insisting that her identity as a girl is false and something that can be undermined because of her transness. Stephie refuses to accept this, explaining that the boy is using language in an attempt to take away her girlhood, the boy “delegitimizing” her girlhood here suggesting that her identity as a girl is false. Although the boy accuses Stephie of “only playing with words,” Stephie insists that the boy is trying to apply a narrow definition of
girl on her. The boy’s definition is linked to an idea that being a “girl” is only authentic if it follows the “biological” definition, which for him is based on chromosomes and genitalia. Stephie insists that biology is much more complex and that she was born a girl, but the narrow definition the boy (and often society) uses was “assigned” to her (Labelle “#344”). The word “trans” does not undermine that she is a girl but presents one way a person lives as a girl. The frustration that Stephie expresses in this comic represents the experiences where, while trans individuals might be accepted as their gender now, there are some who will always believe that trans men and women only become so later. By that, we assume that someone is either boy or girl as decided by their genitals or chromosomes until they decide to transition, rather than people who are born a gender, marked as something different based on this narrow definition, and then confirm their real gender later. Such thinking contributes to this overall idea that trans children cannot determine their own gender or are confused because we believe so strongly in the existing categorizations. Stephie argues that deepening our ideas of “girlhood” (or boyhood or accepting non-binary genders) allows people access to their own gender.

To this end, anger and the resulting forthrightness that rage enables gives Stephie and other characters a space to correct and discuss behaviors that can be oppressive and traumatic. One comic shows Stephie having a conversation with a transgender boy who seems to be criticizing the harsh style of Labelle’s comics. He says, “If trans people can make fun of cis people, cis people should be able to make fun of trans people too,” to which Stephie replies, “You do realize how big a difference there is between the use of humor as a tool against oppression and the use of humor as a way to reinforce oppression?” (Labelle “#185”). When the boy counters that “comedians” would not do that on purpose, Stephine explains that the purpose of criticizing those comedians is to ensure they understand why such behaviors are harmful.
Here Stephie points out that the boy, by focusing so much on the fairness of using humor to “make fun” of a group, has failed to understand why a cisgender comedian making fun of trans people can be used to oppress them by reinforcing stereotypes or supporting the idea that trans individuals are a group that deserved to be mocked. On the other hand, a transgender comedian can utilize humor to prevent that error. This is because cisgender individuals occupy a space of privilege in society that transgender individuals do not. There is something interesting about this comic in that it is not a cisgender person that challenges Stephie, but a transgender one. This is perhaps Labelle’s way of acknowledging that it is not just cisgender readers who may object to her approaches, but members of the LGBTQ community may also disagree.

Two potential sources of trauma that Labelle frequently addresses in her comics are misgendering and deadnaming. Labelle focuses on these topics to draw attention to experiences of vulnerability for trans individuals, as well as to show support for those who feel vulnerable. These comics either occur in short one-panel comics, such as one where the reader sees an exasperated Stephie along with the words, “Misgendering a trans person is violent” or in multi-panel comics where the characters act out scenes in which misgendering or deadnaming occur (Labelle “Misgendering a trans person is violent”). Although there are multiple reasons why these forms of trauma leave trans individuals particularly vulnerable, it is primarily because they reference the way trans individuals lived before they came out as trans and can potentially be used to undermine their true gender. Although many see misgendering or deadnaming as a mistake (and Labelle frequently addresses what one should do if this mistake occurs), it can still
cause harm as it may draw people back to the traumatic experience of being assigned and forced to live as the gender they never identified as. Also, this opens the possibility of a trans person’s own history against them.

This is further reiterated during a series of comics which focuses on Stephie’s cisgender boyfriend Frank’s soccer team. Frank’s teammate asks him if he knows what Stephie’s “name [was] before she transitioned?” (Labelle “#363”). Frank is appalled by the question and rebukes it when the teammate uses curiosity as a reason. Frank resists the teammate’s statement that there is no harm, stating, “Not when what you’re asking for can be weaponized against someone” (Labelle “#363”). It might be tempting to suggest that Frank’s teammate is simply a transphobic individual who intends to use Stephie’s deadname against her. However, the audience learns that the teammate’s parent is transitioning, as he states, “My Dad is transitioning, but no one will tell me anything because apparently, I’m too young to understand” (Labelle “#360”; emphasis Labelle’s). Rather, it is suggested that the boy simply does not realize that the name is a deadname and therefore, a harmful memory for Stephie. Labelle views these instances as cases where vulnerability must be remedied with careful vigilance, not just by the trans community themselves but also their friends and family privileged with such information. Although some may not have the intention of causing harm (and not every trans person sees deadnaming or misgendering as harmful the same way Labelle does), Frank’s reaction indicates that she does not want others to know and that, even if she did not mind her deadname being revealed, it is not Frank’s place to do so. When the child responds, “well, I wasn’t thinking of using it against her,” Frank responds, “Yes, but that information can only strengthen the idea that she’s not ‘entirely’ a girl” (Labelle, “#363”). What is particularly interesting about this scene is that where the parents have refused to educate Frank’s teammate (supposedly because his age would make it impossible
for him to understand) despite his parent being trans, Frank, a fellow cisgender child, steps in to educate him.\(^4\) This not only contradicts ideas about Labelle treating cisgender characters unfairly or simply as villains, but places an importance on both transgender and cisgender children being taught and educated so that they can teach others as well.

Although Labelle often addresses misgendering and deadnaming as potential forms of trauma, other types of trauma can occur because of stereotyping used against transgender individuals. In these comics, Labelle argues that even if adults are woefully unaware of how these images and stereotyping are harmful to the child’s perception of self, the children will likely be aware of it themselves. In one comic, we see a child, sitting nervously on the couch, as their family laughs at a man wearing a dress. Labelle explains that each time this happens, “a trans girl gets more scared to come out” (“Every time you laugh at the idea…”). Assigned Male once again structures a scenario where the child is in a position of knowledge over the adults around them. The difference is the child’s knowledge does not empower them but makes them afraid for how others (family and friends) would react if they were to come out as trans. Such a move on Labelle’s part not only supports her and Stockton’s argument regarding the “fantasy” of childhood being a lie but also demonstrates what happens when adults are not educated or corrected on their behavior. Unchecked, a lack of knowledge can keep a child living in fear over what might happen if they are outed.

The above comic also demonstrates another flaw with the fantasy of childhood: when the adult sees the child as figure of innocence with no knowledge (or at least, no knowledge that adults can trust), they stunt their ability to learn from children. When adults acknowledge that

\(^4\) Frank originally entered the series as a transphobic child who is in the same class as Stephie and, much to their mutual distain, are paired together for an assignment. After learning from Stephie and developing feelings for her, Frank becomes an ally and frequently defends Stephie against transphobia.
they can learn from children, they can then better learn how to serve their needs and make society a better place for them. Often times in *Assigned Male*, this involves children taking roles we often associate with adults, such as educator or lecturer, while adults, before they can occupy these roles themselves, must learn from their children. In *Assigned Male*, the most successful parents are those who seek knowledge from their children.

Just as Stephie and her friends occupy a position typically associated with adults by becoming educators, the adults in these situations are the ones who often, at least initially, need to be educated. As such, until they are educated they will likely be prone to mistakes that can either cause trauma or pry open wounds. For example, the comic titled “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?” features a transgender boy and his mother who are engaged in a power struggle. The boy’s mother, refusing to accept or learn about her son’s needs, instead attempts to use her parental position to try make her son into a girl. The son grows angry over his mother’s actions (referring to him by the wrong gender, burning his clothes, and calling him “ungrateful”), and her refusal to learn from him (Labelle, “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?”). Furthermore, the boy’s mother takes moments where she could have showed her son support and acceptance, and, in an almost childish manner that resembles the tantrum thrown by Stephie’s dad in “One of my Objectives…”, continues to fight with her son.

The boy’s mother in “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?” represents a parent who does not offer her son protection and, if anything, her tactics cause him distress. Based on Stockton’s ideas that we protect a vision of childhood that is held, we can read the boy’s mother as someone who is protecting the image she holds, but not her actual child. She tells her son in the first panel, “In my heart, you’re still my little girl” (Labelle, “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?”). This mother’s ideal version of her child is to see him as his assigned gender, yet,
because she is unwilling to let go or listen to him, she runs the risk of losing her son to her vision of childhood. Her insistence, Labelle argues, does not protect her child and instead, harms him.

By contrast, Stephie’s parents learn from her how to meet her needs and how to educate other adults over the course of Assigned Male’s production. Unlike the “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?” comic where the boy’s mother becomes a child herself, Stephie’s parents regain and are respected in their parental position once they respect and encourage their daughter’s understanding of self. In a comic that features Stephie and her father, Labelle tells her audience exactly how to overcome the fear parents may have over their children. In the comic, her father asks Stephie, “What will the neighbors say?” and discourages her against being a “precocious educator” (Labelle, “Fears of parents…”). In response, Stephie takes the ownership of her voice and tell her father she will answer their questions and reassures him that she is capable of doing so. Above all, Labelle offers that the best thing a parent can do is “love your child” (Labelle, “Fears of parents…”). This comic displays a scene where support is given not just to the child, but the child’s voice. Stephie makes it clear that she plans on meeting any objection with information and words. In this way, Labelle acknowledges a parent’s desire to protect their child but, in a situation where protection is not always an option, instead encourages the parent to allow the child their own voice. Although we have seen comics where Stephie’s father falls short in his support, we also see comics where he begins to question transphobia himself. Stephie’s father begins to learn from his daughter and adjusts his expectations of childhood. Specifically, he acknowledges that his daughter will have to take the lead when it comes to establishing her identity and his job, as a parent, will be to protect her where he can by challenging transphobia when he sees it (Labelle, “#111”). In this way, Stephie’s father, who once threw a tantrum over a Halloween costume, regains his adult and parental status once again, whereas the boy’s mother
in the “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?” comic is reduced to childlike behavior and is unwilling to change. The difference between the two parents is that Stephie’s father eventually begins to understand that he was protecting an ideal at the expense of his daughter, a lesson that the boy’s mother does not learn. In this way Labelle demonstrates that protecting a child based on an ideal image of childhood is misguided and can lead to parents hurting their children while protecting that image. In the world of Assigned Male, an adult fails to protect their children when they shelter them from knowledge pertaining to gender. Adults, however, can protect their children when they educate themselves, defend their child’s self-knowledge, and challenge transphobia when it occurs.

Even Stephie’s mom, who historically has been supportive and willing to learn throughout the series, continues to learn from her daughter. In one early comic, Stephie’s mom accidentally calls her by her deadname while asking her to do a chore, causing Stephie to become depressed. Her mother immediately corrects her mistake and, upon seeing that she has reopened one of her daughter’s wounds, tells her to forget the chore so they can go get ice cream instead (Labelle, “#132”). The mistake is unintentional and the reader can tell by her reaction that Stephie’s mom is remorseful, but Stephie is hurt nonetheless. Stephie explains, “I’m not mad at her when it happens. But it makes me panic, I can’t help it… I think being forced into a gender you’re not is traumatizing” (Labelle, “132”). The comic does not make Stephie’s mother a villain like it does other adults, but it also does not remove the pain that deadnaming causes. The difference is that while Stephie’s mother makes a mistake, unlike the boy’s mother in “Why Are Trans Children So Mean?!?”, she immediately calls her daughter by her correct name and makes sure to comfort her. This comic, in a sense, chooses to take the attention off Stephie’s mom’s
actions and puts it on how Stephie feels. The mother, by comforting her daughter, also focuses on Stephie’s feelings and makes her pain the central concern over chores and her own feelings.

In most other comics, Stephie’s mom, unprompted, defends her daughter and corrects other people regarding trans children. In comic #350, Stephie’s mother and another woman are having a conversation where the woman claims that Stephie’s mom must have “a lot of strength and courage to have a transgender child.” Stephie’s mother, horrified, responds, “Are you telling me you would have kicked her out of the house? Or forced her to hide and repress who she is, at a high cost to her health and self-esteem?” (Labelle, “#350”). In this comic, Labelle demonstrates her mother’s understanding of the “cost” of denying Stephie the autonomy to transition and uses language to challenge what the other mother calls “a compliment” (Labelle, “#350”). Stephie’s mother, as with her father, becomes an educator due to her willingness to learn from her daughter and to protect her. This not only limits future instances of trauma against her daughter but also allows Stephie’s mom to better defend and protect her daughter. In Labelle’s world, the child is able to be a child when they are given the power to understand their gender and the parent is able to be a parent when they are willing to be educated by their own children.

**Excitable Speech and Using Speech - How Trans Children Can Utilize Language**

The trans child’s ability to use and understand language as a means of defense becomes more vital when it comes to hate speech. Conventional wisdom would argue that children should be shielded and protected from hate speech at any cost, and they should not be required to defend against it. Certainly, I can agree with that sentiment, but in reality, one cannot fully control whether or not their children will encounter hate speech. Once the hate speech is heard, Labelle argues that there are really only two choices: address it or let it go unchecked and risk further
escalation. For Labelle, the latter is simply not an option. In one comic, Stephie tells an adult about a boy who has been harassing and humiliating her because she is trans, to which the child replies that he “[hates] transgender people and [thinks] they would be better off dead” (Labelle “This kid harasses me and finds every way…”). The adult foolishly replies, “Well I’m neutral on this issue, so I’m sure I can find a solution that will satisfy both of you. How about trans people get harassed less, but spend half of their lives in a deep coma?” (Labelle “This kid harasses me and finds every way…”). The adult’s stance is ridiculously unfeasible and, even if we were to take it as legitimate, still condones harassment and violence against trans individuals. This comic asserts that there can be no neutrality or letting go when it comes to hate speech. It also argues that just as children are able to be taught language to defend themselves, children can also be taught hate as it was a child who initiated hate speech against Stephie.

While this comic is filled with ridicule and sarcasm, it also serves as a reminder to Assigned Male’s readers that while we might be startled or caught off guard by a child who is capable of adult language and logic, perhaps we should be caught more off guard by children who must deal with such adult issues such as hate speech and violence against the LGBTQ community. The world of Assigned Male walks this fine line between providing a humorous space that is comforting for trans children and engaging with elements of real world tragedies. The trans children in Assigned Male are all too aware that from young ages they must be capable of establishing boundaries and defending themselves from language because, unlike the cis/heteronormative children, they are almost guaranteed to be exposed to trans hate speech. In the structure of Assigned Male, Labelle often recreates scenes of traumatic experiences that can be all too familiar to transgender people, such as parental rejection, harassment, misgendering,
and physical violence. Stephie, in many instances, is able to fight back or undermine the harassment, but the pain she experiences naturally still hurts.

In these moments, her adult logic and wisdom saves Stephie from falling into complete despair. For example, there are multiple comments where Stephie encourages self-care and reassures feelings of hurt and pain. Stephie talks about when she feels depressed because of her treatment as a trans individual in “#270.” Lying in bed, she explains, “Sometimes, when you’re trans, it hurts… It feels like your transness is a burden on everyone. It feels like the whole world doesn’t want you. But it’s a lie” (Labelle, #270; emphasis Labelle’s). Such an example displays a sense of self-doubt and vulnerability we normally do not see in Stephie, yet the logic and understanding that the hate speech is not by any means true saves Stephie from being defeated by hate. Stephie’s wisdom not only keeps her from being overcome, but also gives her the ability to set boundaries that protect or heal her. In multiple comics, Stephie argues for the importance of children to be able to establish their own boundaries. One comic shows Stephie snuggling a pillow with the words “It’s always OK to be weak or to feel powerless. Self-care is important” surrounding her (Labelle “It’s always OK…”). In “#295,” we see Stephie thinking about the trauma she endures on a regular basis, noting “Being trans often means facing daily reminders of how much some people hate us” and how challenging it is to “keep on living when your siblings are being abused, discriminated against…murdered” (Labelle “295”). After this moment of intense sadness, Stephie ends on a resilient note that gives a sense of purpose to an otherwise difficult reality, stating, “But every now and then, the intense joy of being myself takes over the rest. Some pay a higher price for living authentically” (Labelle “295”). In this particular comic, Stephie shows how self-love and “living authentically” allows her to persevere against hate. We might typically see such wisdom and self-confidence in an adult; however, in this comic it gives
the child the ability to logically pinpoint that harm against trans children demonstrates a flaw with society. As she explains in another comic, “The most difficult part about being trans isn’t being trans itself, which is actually pretty awesome in my opinion, but having to deal with everything society puts trans people through just to humiliate them” and Stephie follows up by stating proudly, “Don’t feel sorry for me because I’m trans. Be angry at our society’s transphobia instead!” (Labelle “The most difficult part about…”). Furthermore, in these comics, Stephie joins the emotion and fear we associate with childhood with the confidence and logic we associate with adulthood. Once again, Stephie demonstrates that if children are capable of hearing hate and statements which deny their existence, they are equally capable of being instilled with the knowledge and confidence to oppose these views.

It is significant that the voice of reason and action is personified in the body of a youth. The children of Assigned Male, especially Stephie herself, function as children who are experiencing the current treatment of trans children; however, these children are aware of the harm the trans population faces and are knowledgeable about the history of gender (often because she must set straight inaccuracies in debates). For example, when a trans boy is asked by his teammate if he feels “society has been making progress lately,” the trans boy responds, “Well you know, trans people used to be revered as divinities and spiritual leaders…so I see any kind of ‘progress’ as being very relative and often disappointing” (“#362”). With his knowledge of history, the boy is able to assess and contradict the dangerous idea that society has only “progressed” when it comes to its treatment of trans people, and instead challenges that previous eras in history have treated their trans individuals as people to be “revered” and respected. He is also able to respond to his friend in a way that easily, yet firmly explains why this line of thinking about “progress” is misleading.
In another comic, Stephie uses her profound language skills to passionately plea to the reader in order to inspire action. Here, the comic combines anger and vulnerability with heartbreaking beauty. After the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, an attack in which a man opened fire in a gay club and resulting in the deaths of 49 people, Labelle released a comic that featured a sad and frustrated Stephie, who thinks the following:

How do you thrive when every day is a constant war against your body and mind? All the small things that burn your skin and make it thicker and thicker until you can’t feel anything but you still know that the world is hostile to your very existence? When simply being becomes potentially dangerous for you, when do you draw the line between words and knives? How do you find happiness? (Labelle “How do you thrive…?”)

Interestingly, this takes a sharply different, bleaker perspective than other comics. The comic takes this heart wrenching moment to remind the audience that children are observing these acts of violence and able to process what it means. Thinking about this comic in the aftermath of a tragedy, the text in one way suggests numbness, yet the depth of the language itself suggests intense feeling and emotion, such as when she says, “when do you draw the line between words and knives?” The statement is a weight for the young girl to bear, yet the simple question: “How do you find happiness?” suggests that little consolation is offered. By this, I mean it is only understandable that a child witnessing these events occur would only logically conclude that this act of hate demonstrates a lack of acceptance for trans individuals. Furthermore, the logic, put in other words questions how one can truly be happy if they can see and understand acts of hate reflected in hostility, but are expected to keep going in spite of it. Such language in its raw style is meant to use logic and emotion to incite action. In response to the Pulse shooting, the “Assigned Male Comics” Facebook page posted a comment in a thread saying, “to [LGBTQ]
communities: be proud. To allies: be angry.” (Assigned Male Comics, “to communities…”). The line “when do you draw the line between words and knives?,” despite its placement with “simply being” as dangerous, is a question that is actually to be directed towards allies. Let us place her question in other terms—“you say you support us, but when are you going to take steps to help protect us? Why is this our fight alone?” Labelle is pushing against the danger of inaction here, which after the Pulse shooting is very real not only because there needs to be a push for action in the first place (the event is not enough to spur action, Stephie must incite it with words), but because the sadness and pain of this event runs the risk of being forgotten the farther we get from it. Finally, in order to use the anger of this event to address society’s transphobia and hate, as Labelle asks us to do, we first must accept that this is not solely a LGBTQ tragedy, even if the victims belonged to that community—rather, it is a tragedy belonging to all of society because hate was allowed to turn into violence before drawing that line.

The Pulse shooting is already fading in memory only a year and a half later, with only an occasional recollection of it when gun control is debated. The farther away from the event we get, the more distant we get from it emotionally and in memory. It is important to note that while Stephie does not frequently delve into the past herself, she and other trans characters still make a case that when events such as the Pulse shooting occur, they should not just be mourned and moved on from. Stephie does not argue that we should focus on every single wound that has been made against the LGBTQ community. Her focus, however, is in changing the things that can and should be changed in the now in order to prevent future instances of trauma. Each present moment must be used as a potential space for change to ensure the safety and happiness of future children. Labelle’s ideas have similarities with those of the theorist Heather Love. Love explains in her book *Feeling Backward* that there is a troubling desire to leave the past and its
figures behind when looking towards the future. She uses two figures to demonstrate this feeling that others may feel about the past. Lot’s wife is used as an example of a character who “clings to the past and is ruined by it” and Love notes that she “has taken a new resonance for queers in the decades since Stonewall” (Love 9) 5. While it was once the case that admitting homosexual feelings meant acknowledging one’s status as a tragic figure, gay liberation has opened multiple escape routes from those doomed cities of the plain” (Love 9). Those who favor leaving the past behind for brighter futures are no longer damned to be victims of tragedy; however, whilst they are not necessarily damned to such a fate, tragedy and disaster still occur. As Stephie laments above, can we truly find happiness when we allow these specters to hang over our head—especially when we do not act in the face of such horrific events? Love somewhat agrees with this assessment. Following theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s lead, she instead makes use of the character Odysseus who, when facing the dangerous call of the sirens, is able to escape because, “even as he looks backward he keeps moving forward” (Love 9). Love argues that, “Odysseus offers an ideal model of the relation to the historical past: listen to it, but do not allow yourself to be destroyed by it” (Love 9). In regard to the events such as Stonewall that Love focuses on, Labelle is not interested in them, at least in terms of Assigned Male. However, she does agree with Love’s assertion that progress should not be celebrated while we forget or ignore the events that have cause pain and misery. Labelle argues that while future generations should not allow themselves to be engulfed as tragic gay figures, they must continue to remember and utilize tragedies to order to prevent such harms from occurring.

However, there are some who would argue that the future offers a distance that provides an ideal space for change. Judith Butler has argued in multiple works that with time, words that

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5 A Biblical figure, Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt while looking back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
were once designated to be hate speech could be reclaimed by the community they were meant to hurt and the harmful meaning separated from the word itself. For Butler, this is an effect of time, as she explains in her novel *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*:

Those who seek to fix with certainty the link between certain speech acts and their injurious effects will surely lament the open temporality of the speech act. That no speech act has to perform injury as its effect means that no simple elaboration of speech acts will provide a standard by which the injuries of speech might be effective adjudicated. Such a loosening of the link between act and injury, however, opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back, that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link. (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 15)

In this passage, Butler argues that word does not inherently cause harm. Rather, connotations formed by context and history can be broken when given enough distance, allowing those suffering from hate speech to react. The best example of this thought process occurs in Butler’s essay, “Critically Queer,” where she discusses how the word “queer” has turned from hate speech to a means of describing identity through performance. The performance in this instance is repetition, as Butler explains, “If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes a prior action, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices…In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force” (Butler, “Critically Queer” 19; emphasis Butler’s). Furthermore, following the ideas she outlines in *Excitable Speech*, Butler claiming
words rely on rebelling against an entire history of meaning built by repetitive use of such a word. Butler argues that:

“This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said. What is also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity” (Butler, “Critically Queer” 19; emphasis Butler’s).

Butler argues in both works that history must be overcome in order for a word to be reclaimed or hate speech to be stripped of its harming power. History itself establishes the meaning behind these words through repetitive use, and thus time is needed to create a distance which allows hate speech to be disconnected from its harmful intentions and be used in ways that can benefit those targeted for harm.

However, while Butler makes a convincing argument, Labelle’s comics portray hesitation toward placing such a weight on allowing time to progress enough that words can be challenged or reclaimed. Rather, Labelle argues that the time to act against hate speech is the time it occurs. One such comic that displays this call for action is “Pretending to be an assh*le...” In this comic, an adult man makes the statement, “People like you should be sent to concentration camps,” twice under two different contexts. In one instance, he claims the statement was a joke and implies that anyone bothered by it are too easily “triggered” (Labelle, “Pretending to be an assh*le…”). In the next panel, the man makes the same statement, but this time he insists that he means it. A narrator (presumably Stephie) comments on the man’s statements by saying, “Pretending to be an assh*le normalizes violence and abuse that same way being an actual
assh*le does” (Labelle “Pretending to be an assh*le…”). The implication that Labelle makes here is that time, rather than distance, allows reinterpretation, which can actually become something like a joke—which seems harmless to others—and through repeated and undisturbed use, can allow others to use it to cause injury. Allowing such distance is thus a danger that makes Labelle weary. Furthermore, the distance that Butler suggests we make use of is not effective according to Labelle. Through the hundreds of comics Labelle has created, one thing has been consistent in each of them—that immediate action is the best course of action whether it is to comfort a trans child after making a mistake, correcting strangers who lack knowledge about trans issues, or confronting hate speech when it occurs, regardless of the context. In this way, Labelle agrees more with Mari Matsuda, a scholar whose ideas Butler finds issue with. Matsuda bases her beliefs on J.L. Austin’s idea of “illocutionary act,” which is described by Austin as when something that is verbalized is “at the same time doing something; the judge who says, ‘I sentence you’ does not state an intention to do something or describe what he is doing; his saying is itself a kind of doing” the acts are further supported by “linguistic and social conventions” (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 17). Butler explains Matsuda’s take on the illocutionary model of hate speech by stating:

In Mari Matsuda’s formulation, for instance, speech does not merely reflect a relation of social domination; speech *enacts* domination, becoming the vehicle through which, that social structure is reinstated. According to this illocutionary model, hate speech *constitutes* its addressee at the moment of its utterance; it does not describe an injury or produce one as a consequence; it is, in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination (Butler 18).

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6 Butler however, makes the distinction that even if we follow Matsuda’s belief that language is systematic domination, it can be disrupted (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 19).
Matsuda makes a similar argument to Labelle in that harm is enacted the moment hate speech is said. The very performance of stating the word, not that it has been repeated, causes harm. Such immediate harm can therefore, according to Labelle, only be fought in the present, or else there is a risk that repetition can cause harm more than help.

**Conclusion**

Stockton states that the desire to preserve and “delay” children from “sexuality, labor, and harm” so they can be “[sheltered]…from these domains” is “a kind of dancing on the knife-edge of delay. How can children be gradually led by degrees towards domains they must not enter at all as children?” (Stockton 62). Stephie, through her adult language and intelligence, demonstrates that the best way to protect children is not to keep them naïve or from making choices over their gender, but to give them the power and education to defend themselves. Children who are empowered through language have a much greater potential to elude the social oppression and condemn situations that could cause further trauma. Despite Stephie’s adult qualities, she represents a future generation that, with the understanding of self and intelligence to teach others about trans individuals, can eliminate hate speech and trauma against trans children. Although there is an obsession with clinging to the childhood we remember in the past, we should be looking to give future generations the childhood they deserve. In one comic, we see Stephie holding a child with the words, “Be the person you needed when you were younger” (Labelle, “Be the person…”). To create children who can protect themselves and wield control over their past, we must guide them and give them information they need to do so. In the world of *Assigned Male*, order and happiness is restored when parents protect and support their child, willingly learn about their child, and when parents do not force children into a
cis/heteronormative version of childhood. Stephie symbolizes the importance of giving children the ability to create their own versions of childhood.
CONCLUSION. IN THE NAME OF POSSIBILITY

In this thesis I have moved through childhood backward and forward, discussing how we can be haunted by the past, by progress, and by speech. We have also learned how all three of these things, with careful logic, analysis, and consideration, can allow us to make the best use of our present to make a better world for future generations. We have done a disservice to children by trying to limit their exploration of identity. By clinging to the idea that children are incapable of understanding their sexuality or gender and only viewing childhood as a cis/heteronormative experience, they have been denied the opportunity to live their own childhood. Rather, the adults that impose this narrow view of childhood instead use children as a stand-in for the childhood they remember nostalgically. As such, children are in danger of only following the cis/heteronormative path of development, as Bruce attempted to do. Alison and Stephie break away from this path, but it is not without resistance.

In Fun Home, Alison struggles to live with her father’s shame and self-loathing. The image that Bruce worked so hard to produce—a devoted family man who loved his town and showed his devotion through his perfectionist attitude—lead to an obsessive nature that left little room for his children to grow, and forced his standards, his cautiousness, and even his own expression of sexuality on his daughter. Bruce risked leaving his daughter with more bad than good. However, Alison’s careful examination of her childhood and relationship with her father allowed her to understand the truth that, although Bruce was not a tragic victim, he was also not a villain. Instead, the expectations that society held over him were, in turn, held over his children, specifically Alison as a queer person. Although Bruce neglected Alison for much of her childhood, he is there when she needs him most—when she takes the leap to come out. Bruce’s support and acknowledgment, although it does not offer every answer regarding her childhood,
not only confirms her decision to leave behind the house and the shame associated with it, but also helps her to understand that her father’s shame did not come from being gay itself, but from him hiding it out of fear. This is confirmed by Bruce’s reverence for her bravery and the acknowledgement of his long-standing fear. The book does not offer total closure, nor a happy ending, as Bruce’s death—his fall—occurs as a result of his fear and shame (at least if we are to follow Alison’s suicide theory). Bruce’s life, filled with suffering, self-hatred, and fear not only left him with a number of open wounds, but also left his family with wounds as well. However, with these wounds Alison is able to forge a more peaceful, authentic life for herself. Bruce and his queerness therefore cease to be a specter and instead serve as a reminder that the inheritances we leave do matter; they matter a lot.

In Chapter 2, I examined how Sophie Labelle’s web series Assigned Male offers a narrative more centered in the present, but with an eye always on the future. Stephie, a character abundant with complexity, takes the image of an innocent child and makes it into a force to be reckoned with. In the world of Assigned Male, children become the educators while adults become the learners. To achieve this, the series is filled with intelligent, capable children who are empowered through knowledge, exploration, and the self-confidence to claim their gender. However, this does not save them from hate and abuse from society at large. That being said, Labelle clearly argues through Stephie that sheltering children or forcing them to adhere to cis-centric ideas of childhood is not the way to protect them. Protection can only occur through language and understanding. Children must be allowed to ask questions, to challenge ideas they disagree with, and to refute hate speech. In Assigned Male’s world, adults are restored to parenthood when they learn from their children how to fulfill their needs. However, the burden is not only on the parents in this series, but also on the children as well to create a better future. We
cannot continue with the assumption that progress functions linearly, growing as time goes on. Progress instead relies on the actions of the society and individuals in the LGBTQ community. Both Alison and Stephie act to prevent future trauma, but the LGBTQ community at large cannot do so by ignoring old wounds that can be reopened at any time. Wounds must be allowed to scar and serve as reminders so we do not allow history to repeat. Only then can childhood, true and free childhood, can be protected and live without the trauma of the past.

Author Carolyn Dinshaw in the introduction of her book *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* analyzes the song that serves as the book’s namesake, *The Smiths’* “How Soon is Now?” Written by front man and lead singer, Morrissey, Dinshaw argues that “How Soon is Now?” captures the rich, in-depth ways that past and future vitalize the present. History and the actions of the past are built on more than a linear timeline, but rather, are made by connections and needs. Dinshaw writes,

But this practical way of understanding *now* in fact points us to different ways of thinking of time beyond worst visions of a mechanistic and constricting linearity that leads bleakly, infinitely onward. Time is lived; it is full of attachments and desires, histories and futures; it is not a hollow form (not a ‘hateful of hollow”) that is the same always. The desolate image of time conjured by Morrissey is of a succession of moments, free floating and empty; but in contrast and actuality, his *now* is really not empty at all: it is constituted by his ‘purposes and activities,’ needs and attachments. (Dinshaw 4)

Dinshaw’s argument points to the real issue of leaving the past behind and only looking towards the future: we leave ourselves missing out on possibility. The present offers an opportunity for vision to become real, pain to lessened, and hope to be found, but it can only happen if the LGBTQ community interweave the present with both the past and future. Childhood, led by
youth and wonder, is not a stage of life we should mark as simple. Childhood should be marked by learning, growth, and experiencing all the world has to offer. *Fun Home* and *Assigned Male* embody this vision of childhood through pain, longing, and above all, the possibility to continue learning.
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