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“Coherence Signals a Problem”: The Anti-Narrative Impulse in the Queer Memoir

What is the purpose of narrative in literature? Joan Didion’s famous maxim “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” suggests an inverse: that without story, without narrative, we are at risk of some kind of death – a metaphorical death at least, perhaps even a literal one. In fiction or nonfiction, narrative brings a sense of coherence, connectedness and progression to internal or external events, and in doing so gives them meaning. Whether the meaning thus produced is stable, or truthful, can always be debated, but as readers or listeners it is difficult not to seek narrative meaning in what we read or hear. That narrative aims to produce an effect of meaning for those absorbing it, however, hardly means that meaning is the exclusive province of narrative. The question is what kind of meaning is achieved by a text when narrative is absent or subverted.

Matias Viegner’s *2500 Random Things About Me Too* is a 2012 book that compiles a hundred lists of 25 theoretically random things, originally posted by Viegner on Facebook in response to a meme that achieved widespread circulation among Facebook users in 2009. Randomness (in theory, at least) forbids linearity, one of the pillars upon which narrative traditionally rests; to make a long series of lists readable as a book thus requires a knack for finding meaning in isolated observations and linking them to one another behind linearity’s back, if they’re to be linked at all. Kevin Killian, in the introduction to Viegner’s book, directly

connects Viegener's aptitude for the "random list" format with his sexuality, identifying *2500 Random Things* as an extension of "a long tradition of texts written by gay men in the form of fragments" (8), citing as other examples the works of Wittgenstein, the Cole Porter lyrics "Let's Do It" and "You're the Top," and Jean Cocteau's *White Paper* (with a sidelong glance at Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp"). Killian speculates that "for gay men, the truth about our lives seems to resist taxonomy in some fundamental manner" (8). In fact, as I will argue here, there is a particular strand of gay and lesbian autobiographical texts that has historically displayed an antagonism not only toward taxonomy, but toward conventional narrative techniques of all kinds. In this analysis, I'll examine the often tortuous history of gay authors' attempts to give narrative existence to their sexuality, consider the ways in which the field of narrative psychology may offer an explanation for this apparent link between homosexuality and what I've termed "the anti-narrative impulse," and examine four gay and lesbian memoirs of the last forty years that I believe exhibit this anti-narrative tendency. Viegener's *2500 Random Things* and Joe Brainard's *I Remember* (in some senses the spiritual progenitor of Viegener's book) attempt to crowd out linear narrative with a series of lists. In David Wojnarowicz' *Close to the Knives*, narrative is alternately submerged in sensory impressions and hijacked by the author's political rage at the U.S.'s homophobic and counterproductive response to the AIDS crisis. And Alison Bechdel, in *Fun Home*, takes advantage of the concurrent visual and verbal tracks permitted by the graphic memoir format to proliferate a series of alternate narratives that destabilize all attempts at a "master narrative."

Some might argue that no psychological explanation for such an anti-narrative impulse is even necessary, given the fact that the straightforward use of narrative was for so long entirely

unavailable to gay and lesbian¹ authors who wanted to write about their desires, thus making the relationship between queerness and narrative one of forced circuitousness from its very beginnings. Consider, for instance, the two earliest memoirs examined by Paul Robinson in *Gay Lives*, his 1999 historical survey of gay male autobiography. The 1889 *Memoirs* of John Addington Symonds (whom Robinson cites as possibly the very first gay man “to write an autobiography focused on his erotic life” [7]) and the 1921 *Autobiography* of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson were each written without hope of anything but posthumous publication, which finally came even more belatedly than might have been expected (1974 for Dickson and 1986 for Symonds). These memoirs are thus representative of the typical fate of gay writing prior to the second World War: suppression during the author’s lifetime, publication not forthcoming until death and/or the post-Stonewall gay rights movement had finally made self-revelation safe. The well-known case of Oscar Wilde’s extended prison letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*, which was written in 1897 but not published until five years after Wilde’s death in 1900, suggested that authorial fame (combined, in this instance, with a sense that the secret was already out) might shorten the duration of a work’s posthumous limbo, but that it could not remove the requirement of authorial death entirely.

The sheer hazardousness of writing autobiographically about one’s same-sex desires before Stonewall made another type of narrative subterfuge even more common: the projection of queer sexuality into works of fiction. The most notable post-Wildean examples of this type of

¹ It’s convenient, but potentially problematic, to apply the terms “gay,” “lesbian” and “homosexual” to writers about whom a historical consensus has formed that they felt same-sex desires, but for whom these terms would not necessarily have been available or voluntarily chosen as self-descriptors. Some of my cited sources, including Robinson, do nevertheless retroactively apply these terms, while others favor the word “queer” – which, though it may be similarly anachronistic, is understood to be more conscious of, and thus more transparent about, its own status. I have at different points in this analysis made use of all four terms, basing my choice on what seemed most appropriate to a given context.

projected autobiography may be Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, with its several homoerotic episodes and purported recasting of Proust's beloved chauffeur Alfred as the novel's Albertine, and E. M. Forster's novel of class-crossing homoerotic love *Maurice*, composed in 1913-14 but unpublished until 1971. By the 1930s, however, the move toward gay-memoir-as-such had begun, accompanied from the outset by the undercutting of narrative straightforwardness. Gertrude Stein's 1933 *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a key early instance of the tendency. The book subverts the entire framework of autobiography as a genre with its use of projected first-person, as Stein takes on the "I" of Toklas, her lover and partner of nearly 40 years, to write about their life together in the Paris avant-garde of the period. Meanwhile, Christopher Isherwood's 1938 *Lions and Shadows*, as Robinson observes, is "a deeply closeted work...which nonetheless invites a homosexual reading...It is ingeniously contrived to be perceived differently by two different imagined audiences: the general public, which is properly heterosexual, and an audience of sympathetic 'conspirators,' essentially homosexual, who will respond with recognition and pleasure to the author's carefully coded secret history" (51).² Robinson cites, for example, Isherwood's gender-neutral descriptions of his own objects of desire and his conspicuous failure to identify with heterosexual erotic displays which he witnesses and describes.

Before the dawn of the post-Stonewall gay rights movement, queer literature, whether fictional or factual, had already been marked by an intense, externally imposed need for narrative evasiveness and shaped by the techniques that could bring such trickery about, from indirectness, insinuation and code to outright jettisoning of the traditional requirements of autobiographical

² As Robinson notes, the passage of nearly forty years allowed Isherwood to renounce all such subterfuge in a second memoir, 1976's *Christopher and His Kind*, which also recalls Isherwood's life in the '30s but with all coding removed; it is essentially, as Robinson puts it, "a coming-out narrative" (xix).

form. That queer writers with an understanding of this literary history might continue to demonstrate an antipathy toward standard narrative, even after it was theoretically possible to write straightforwardly about gay sexuality, may not be surprising: old habits die hard, perhaps particularly where freedoms are newly won, tenuous and difficult to place trust in. My suspicion, however, is that the wariness of a certain stripe of queer writers toward narrative has even broader roots than mere reaction to a history of literary suppression and necessary evasion. Narrative, of course, operates in realms well beyond that of literature; it is also at work in the larger culture in which literature is written. As people, queer authors must often have found it difficult to construct private narratives of selfhood even before they confronted the demands of narrative in their work.

The subfield of narrative psychology, which examines the role of stories and storytelling in making sense of human experience, may offer insight about the impact of negative cultural narratives about homosexuality on the processes by which gay people have historically constructed personal narratives about themselves and their sexuality, whether or not they have gone on to put some version of those narratives in writing. Dan P. McAdams, who has written extensively on the importance of story and narrative in the formation of ideas of selfhood, defines personal identity as “a life story,” and writes that “in order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves” (*Stories*, 11). He further notes that “internalized and evolving life stories—what we call *narrative identities*—function to organize and make more or less coherent a whole life, a life that otherwise might feel fragmented and diffuse” (*Identity* 5). But what happens to people for whom intrinsic aspects of their identities seem to place “heroic narratives” entirely out of reach?

What happens to their narrative-making abilities when master narratives are already in place in the larger culture that categorically reject or vilify central parts of themselves?

The fate of the self when heroism, and perhaps even narrative coherence itself, is foreclosed by a culturally stigmatized sexual identity is a matter that narrative psychology has been slow to address even as recently as the 1990s and 2000s, the same years during which the humanistic disciplines were being subjected to intense revisionist scrutiny by scholars of queer studies. Bertram Cohler and Philip Hammack, two psychologists who have attempted to close this scholarly gap, have argued that “gay men and lesbians have developed a particular narrative of development counter to that of the master heteronormative narrative” (Hammack 152), but add that that this counternarrative construction “is always historically situated and dependent on the cumulative social and political activity that transforms societal attitudes toward homosexuality” (154). Cohler and Hammack, in the article just cited and in a later book on sexual identity and narrative, have examined a sequential, cohort-based series of late-twentieth-century autobiographies and memoirs by gay men that, in their estimation, display such counternarratives; one of their chief concerns is to note the way in which these counternarratives have evolved as the cultural and political standing of homosexuality has shifted. But counternarratives, though critical to any conversation about gay autobiography or memoir, are nevertheless still narratives. What I am interested in here is something more radical yet than a counternarrative. The memoirs I’ll consider below, I argue, do not intend merely to overwrite the historical master narrative about gayness with new narratives more congenial to homosexuality’s existence or acceptance. Rather, they question, subvert or reject the validity of narrative itself as a vehicle for telling queer stories. They accomplish this in a variety of ways: by dispensing with traditional narrative attributes like linearity, by privileging imagistic or emotional impressions

over narrative momentum or clarity, or by juxtaposing written narrative with actual drawn images and allowing these multiple narrative strands to comment upon one another. Narrative, as dominant paradigms tend to do, sometimes puts up resistance to its banishment from the center stage of these memoirs – to which the memoirists respond with varying degrees of awareness, irony and counterresistance, depending on their temperaments and circumstances.

If, in the somewhat ironic words of Gertrude Stein, “Remarks are not literature,” then lists, the anti-narrative weapon of choice for Joe Brainard and Matias Viegner, are surely perceived as being even less so, a judgment we continue to see in the twenty-first century in the widespread contemporary disparagement by both journalists and readers of “listicles,” articles that take the form of lists. A listicle is thought to be more quickly producible than a traditional narrative article and to have required less thought and effort to assemble – which, if true, must mean that transitions and linkages represent the greater part of the difficulty in writing a coherent linear narrative. Could it be, in turn, that this process is so arduous because coherence and linearity may in fact be unpropitious or even unnatural – conditions which require effort and force on the part of the author to overcome? If so, then queer authors, who often bring to the act of writing an already well-developed understanding of the effort and force that may be required to make one’s personal sexual narratives palatable to others, are likely to have an especially acute awareness of the ways in which narrative coherence may be illusory or even oppressive.

Brainard’s *I Remember* and Viegner’s *2500 Random Things About Me Too* are not merely lists – they could be said to be lists of remarks, thus doubling the likelihood of their not being taken for “literature.” But both books consciously and insouciantly embrace that un-literary status, while also denying that they are even memoirs. Viegner instead categorizes *2500 Random Things* as a “procedural experiment that comes to resemble a memoir” (Killian 8), while

I Remember seems to exist entirely without category. The Granary edition's jacket copy declines to categorize or explain the format of *I Remember* in any way; only at the level of the Library of Congress data ("3. Authors, American—20th century—Biography") does the book finally succumb to the demands of taxonomy.

I Remember in fact needs little explanation for the reader: the entire book takes the form of entries ranging in length from a sentence to a paragraph, each beginning with the words "I remember."³ Brainard was born in 1941 in Arkansas, spent the '50s as a teenager in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and worked as an artist in Boston and New York in the '60s and '70s, and his memories are full of the pop culture, clothes, pastimes and general ephemera of those times and places. Though the entries sometimes follow free-associatively from one another ("I remember Pat Boone and 'Love Letters in the Sand' ...I remember Teresa Brewer and 'I Don't Want No Ricochet Romance'"[13]) or appear to reference the entry immediately previous ("I remember marbles...I remember *having* marbles more than I remember *playing* marbles" [66]), very few entries are dependent on other entries for their meaning. The juxtaposition of items whose only commonality is that Brainard remembers them tends to dissipate the suspicion that he has any agenda in writing these items; putting over an agenda would seem to require momentum more sustained than these disconnected nostalgic reminiscences could offer – would seem, in fact, to require narrative. But Brainard's seeming uncalculatedness, it soon becomes clear, is a calculated effect (indeed, the book would be much less interesting if the reader did not quickly perceive this), and Brainard certainly does have an agenda, which is to ensure that the past is preserved

³ The 1975 Granary edition compiles, without demarcating the divisions between them, the contents of four previous "I Remember" collections: *I Remember* (1970), *I Remember More* (1972), *More I Remember More* (1973) and *I Remember Christmas* (1973).

not in sanitized, homogenizing hindsight, but with all its idiosyncrasy, triviality, conflict and emotion intact.

Brainard distills the discordant, secret, individual nature of personal memory in dozens of entries that complicate or resist the canonical cultural memory of the decades in question: “I remember ‘come-as-you-are’ parties. Everybody cheated” (25). “I remember how boring newsreels were” (65). “I remember rumors about what Marlon Brando had to do get his first acting job” (78). Perhaps his most culturally discordant memories of all, however, are those of queerness – not simply Brainard’s own, but a secret queerness diffused throughout the superficially heteronormative mass culture of the ‘40s, ‘50s and ‘60s. The first few pages set the tone and establish a trail of breadcrumbs:

I remember the first drawing I remember doing. It was of a bride with a very long train. (7)

I remember when, in high school, if you wore green and yellow on Thursday it mean that you were queer. (9)

I remember when, in high school, I used to stuff a sock in my underwear. (9)

I remember that for my fifth birthday all I wanted was an off-one-shoulder black satin evening gown. I got it. And I wore it to my birthday party. (9)

By the fourth page, the sex becomes real and explicitly queer:

I remember my first sexual experience in a subway. Some guy (I was afraid to look at him) got a hardon and was rubbing it back and forth against my arm. I got

very excited and when my stop came I hurried out and home where I tried to do an oil painting using my dick as a brush. (10)

This is closely followed by items about strangers putting their hands inside Brainard's underwear at the MoMA movie theater or exposing their genitals for him to touch. And his experience doesn't seem isolated. He also remembers "Moley, the local freak and notorious queer" (16). He remembers Liberace, Rock Hudson and Montgomery Clift. He remembers the boy whose high school love letter to another boy caused a scandal. He remembers queer bars and his encounters in them. He remembers how easily non-queer things, like underwear ads, could be repurposed for queer uses. The effect of remembering queerness nonlinearly, interspersed among other evocations of '40s and '50s life, is both to homoeroticize the everyday and to normalize homoeroticism – an effect that is the more pronounced because Brainard seems to regard the American culture of those years not only without antagonism, but with affection. Little of the content of *I Remember* is about "politics" per se (either sexual or otherwise), an omission that helps the book achieve a tone of innocence and sets the stage for Brainard's retroactive queering of America's "innocent" past – which is itself, of course, a political act.

In *2500 Random Things About Me Too*, Matias Viegner references Brainard almost immediately:

I remember reading Joe Brainard for the first time and how I wasn't taken by *I Remember* at all, until I got about a third of the way through. Memories are cumulative and Brainard's book proves the futility of linear narrative in relation to the past. Each entry thickens and complicates Brainard's life or his "identity." At the end there's a kind of cloud of Joe, a mass of being there or having been there (17)

And, two items later:

I remember thinking I would never write my own *I Remember*. What would be the point? (17)

Narrative may indeed be futile, but Viegener's linear progression through Brainard's book nevertheless increased its impact on him; two entries borrowing Brainard's "I remember" format do not a sequel make, but Viegener is paying tribute to Brainard here even as he disavows any point to doing so. *2500 Random Things* applies this same sort of self-reflexive irony to many subjects, chief among them the supposed randomness of Viegener's own project, which comes in for all kinds of contradictory analysis. He frequently questions the validity, authenticity and usefulness of narrative, supposedly the opposite of randomness:

Narrative is overrated. An addiction to transparency. A simple-minded need for linearity to organize a set of data. It doesn't have much to do with real life. (14)

I think many stories are stories by virtue of our wanting to make random details into narratives. (24)

Narrative is something created by the reader's need. (25).

What I loved about the Language poets was their use of parataxis: the list, the pieces strung together one by one, nothing but proximity or semiotics to connect them. (45)

So fiction is a lie, plot lines, one thing at a time. (130)

But from the seventh list onward he admits to "narrative creep" in his own lists:

I am running out of random things and it's a struggle not to turn away from randomness toward stories, strategies, lies, bluffs, extended anecdotes, etc. (27)

I seem to have given up avoiding narrative. (41)

Random: could be anything, but usually isn't. (59)

If I keep going, everything I think is random will recur and then you will find a pattern. Duration exhausts randomness. (80)

There's nothing very random about these lists. I edit them though, to seem random. (236)

They are randomesque. (236)

It seems I can't stop my random things from turning into stories. (238)

Indeed, if there's one major discovery the reader can take from *2500 Random Things*, it's that seemingly unrelated pieces of information on a given topic, accumulating at intervals, can in fact become a story. Viegener's mother, his friend Kathy Acker, and his cancer-stricken dog Peggy each receive recurring mention in his lists. Stitch by stitch, these mentions form threads that run beneath the calculated nonlinearity of the whole, in very much the way that Viegener describes the "cloud of Joe" forming as he read *I Remember*: as we read, we gather the sense of these people (or dogs) "having been there." Viegener's mother and Kathy Acker are dead but still strongly present in Viegener's thoughts and lists, and the narrative closure to which death pretends is indeed thwarted by the nonlinearity of Viegener's observations about them. Peggy, meanwhile, is dying as Viegener writes, and he unrepentantly presents the story of her decline as a linear, if frequently interrupted, narrative. Aesthetically speaking, Peggy's story is like a

classical Greek column over which Viegener daily pitches a tent patched together from 25 random items he found around the house – though its gravity doesn't prevent Viegener from mocking the authorial use he's making of Peggy or the others:

I keep thinking that at key points, like a third of the way through, I need a plot point, like Kathy Acker's death. (94)

And I'm holding back my ace, the death of my mother two years later. (94)

Peggy is still alive. What is wrong with me? Did I unconsciously want to stage her death just for the dramatic arc of my hundred lists? (225)

I feel like my list should conclude with Peggy's death. It would give the sense of an ending, a narrative resolution. (250)

Is Viegener's gayness connected to his evident facility with this "randomesque" format, as Killian suggests? Killian seems to have taken his cue from Viegener himself, whose 11th list contained the observations

[Writing lists of 25 random things] is like a combination of John Cage and Joe Brainard, writing yourself out in bits and pieces. (60)

Both of them were gay too. Can a gay man's life be told only in fragments? (60)

Viegener had also written facetiously, in an earlier list that in fact sums up much of the content of *2500 Random Things*:

Some things I've strived to cut out of my writing: family, identity, lovable animals, references to other books or artists, being gay, using fragments, and trying too hard to unify parts. (30)

Although he includes plenty of items about the men he's had sex with, Viegener is less self-consciously analytic of his gayness than he is of his randomesque-ness. Wayne Koestenbaum, however, in his review of the book, expands upon Viegener's term "parataxis" (i.e., juxtaposition without connection), linking it to the act of picking men up for casual sex and to a post-liberation, pre-AIDS period when that practice was a happy norm for a critical mass of gay men:

Cruising is paratactic, as Renaud Camus long ago demonstrated in his book *Tricks*. Tricks, unconnected, are a Netflix queue. (*The Birds* doesn't lead to *Interiors*; *Interiors* doesn't lead to *Body Double*.) Parataxis allows Viegener to do justice to sex's randomness, but also to the sublimity of this particular guy landing right here in my lap...*2500 Random Things* captures the excitement of [the '70s and early '80s], when there seemed to be...sex everywhere, theory everywhere, death everywhere. (1)

Camus' *Tricks*, published in 1981, shares with *2500 Random Things* not only its chronicling of that "sex everywhere" era, but its format: it is a list, albeit one fleshed out with narrative description, of Camus' own sexual encounters over a few months in 1978 – 25 of them, no less. In linking the two books, Koestenbaum's suggestion is that casual sex with other men, pushed to the social margins and fragmented there into a serial experience of tricking, gave gay writers (Camus, Viegener, presumably others) practice in evading other kinds of narrative convention and continuity.

The first 15 years of the AIDS epidemic, before the discovery of protease inhibitors that made it possible (in the first world) to manage the disease, were themselves destroyers of narrative convention and continuity in the lives of several generations of gay men: premature individual death and the decimation of an entire community acted as brutal disruptors of the life

stories that the Stonewall riots and subsequent gay rights movement had suddenly made it possible to imagine for themselves. Against a background of AIDS memoirs from the period that strove desperately to make some kind of narrative sense of the injustice of this glut of premature death, David Wojnarowicz' *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* stands out for the clarity of its recognition of the gay community as the victims of multiple master narratives – governmental, religious, cultural – of the disease, and for its consequent militant refusal to engage written narrative on any terms but its own. Wojnarowicz, who emerged from an abusive childhood and a late-adolescent period of hustling on the streets of New York City to become an iconoclastic multimedia artist and AIDS activist, wrote the eight pieces collected in *Close to the Knives* in the last years of his own life; they detail, in particular, the death from AIDS-related pneumonia of Wojnarowicz' best friend and former lover Peter Hujar and Wojnarowicz' own HIV-positive diagnosis and decline (he died in 1992, the year following the book's publication, at age 37).

The pieces in the book, which Wojnarowicz described as “a fusion of fiction and nonfiction” (Carr 5), are of disparate structure and length, and are resistant to both internal and external chronology (though Hujar died in 1987 and one piece, “Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch Tall Politician,” is identified as the text of a 1990 lecture). But the narrative intransigence of Wojnarowicz' memoir goes deeper than mere form. Two of the book's early⁴ pieces, “Losing the Form in Darkness” and “In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins,” are impressionistic descriptions of Wojnarowicz' movement on foot or by car through particular locations – an abandoned warehouse by the docks

⁴ “Early” in terms of placement in the book, not in terms of time of the pieces' writing or the time they depict; all of the pieces in the book except “Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness...” are undated and many are unlocatable in time beyond “probably the late '80s.”

of the Hudson River and an area of the southwestern U.S. that includes Arizona. These writings convey a vivid sense of place and of the sensory impressions, mental associations and memories that accompany Wojnarowicz' actions – which include, in each essay, anonymous sexual encounters. But neither sex nor travel nor Wojnarowicz' analysis by themselves seem to drive the writing in these accounts: the point is instead the juxtaposition or comingling of all these elements and the mood they convey in combination. For the sake of space, I've compressed the below excerpt from "Losing the Form in Darkness" to give a sense of what a description of sex by Wojnarowicz can include:

Inside one of the back ground-floor rooms there are a couple of small offices built into the garagelike space. Paper from old shipping lines scattered all around like bomb blasts among wrecked pieces of furniture...I placed my palms against the hard curve of his abdomen, his chest rolling slightly in pleasure. Moving back and forth within the tin-covered office cubicle, old soggy couch useless on the side, the carpet beneath our shifting feet reveals our steps with slight pools of water...He is sucking and chewing on my neck, pulling my body into his, and over the curve of his shoulder, sunlight is burning through a window emptied of glass. The frame still contains a rusted screen that reduces shapes and colors into tiny dots like a film directed by Seurat...In loving him, I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand, smoke blowing backwards into the room, and sputtering planes diving low through the clouds...In loving him, I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life. (16-17)

Here, the physical setting of the encounter (the paper, the footstep puddles, the light) and the figurative images associated with it (the cigarette, the diving planes, the great houses and stirring seas) compete with the sex itself for vividness. Wojnarowicz' use of tense also shifts back and forth between past ("I placed my hands..."), present ("sunlight is burning"), and predictive future ("would soon slide"), creating a sense that the event's chronology is unimportant compared to the momentary impressions it generated. Even at full length, the passage contains no mention of orgasm for either party; however important such closure might have been during the actual encounter, Wojnarowicz did not consider it essential to the rendering of the episode.

"In the Shadow of the American Dream," meanwhile, describes the associations that form in Wojnarowicz' mind as he drives through the American southwest:

The city during the day was bathed in a hot white sunlight; a steel-pounding heat coursed off the walls of miragelike architecture in the waves of desert wind. There was a distant energy surrounding everything like fear because there was nothing about the architecture that the eye could settle on...It was an architecture of a population anticipating impermanence or death...All along the sidewalks were the people reduced to walking; the desperation of whole families sitting in lethargy on the curbsides lost to the sounds of automobiles...Owning a vehicle, you could drive by and with the pressure of your foot on the accelerator and with your eyes on the road you could pass it quickly...so that the speed of the auto and the fear centers of the brain created a fractured marriage of light and sound. The images of poverty would lift and float and recede quickly like the gray shades of memory so that these images were in the past before you came upon them. It was the physical equivalent of the evening news. (31)

There is probably no such thing as a “typical” Wojnarowicz passage, but this last excerpt is characteristic of his style in one important way: it threads together strong visual and sensory impressions with a commentary on external phenomena that can’t refrain from becoming political. In the later essays in *Close to the Knives*, this political commentary becomes increasingly pronounced and aggressive and takes a variety of forms, from the bald list of political and religious villains in “Postcards from America”’s “Seven Deadly Sins Fact Sheet” to the pointed linkages between AIDS inaction, resistant art, homophobia and violent abuse in “Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch Tall Politician” to the bitterly reflective 100-page elegy to Wojnarowicz’ sometime friend and fellow outsider Montana Hewson⁵. As Wojnarowicz himself moves closer to death, his writing gives the cumulative sense that conventional structures of all kinds, however expedient they may be as cudgels for the beating down of reviled communities, are useless as crutches or comforts in a time of catastrophe. The rules of conduct and expression have been turned against him and his fellow deviants; why would he adhere to them in fighting back? Wojnarowicz understands, without fully accepting it, that no final sense can be made of a world in which he and all his friends and lovers have died, or will soon die, preventable deaths, and he resists the false comfort of writing in a way that would imply otherwise, that would create the illusion of justice or even of coherence in the way the AIDS crisis is unfolding.

The crisis in *Fun Home*, the 2006 graphic memoir by Alison Bechdel that tells the entwined stories of her closeted father and her own coming out/coming of age as a lesbian, is one of private, rather than public, history, and the book has yet a different relation to narrative

⁵ Hewson is identified by name in Cynthia Carr’s *Fire in the Belly*, but is referred to in the piece (“The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole”) as Dakota, possibly for the same legal reasons that Wojnarowicz details in a note at the beginning of the essay.

coherence from any memoir I've discussed. As a graphic memoir, *Fun Home* is already, by definition, deploying narrative differently from the way any text-only memoir would or could; as comics theorist Hillary Chute has noted, the fact that graphic stories unfold simultaneously in text and images means that they have two narrative tracks available for authorial use. There is a case to made, however, that *Fun Home* complicates the two-track narrative conventions of its own medium in much the same way that the textual memoirs I've looked at complicate their single-narrative ones. Robyn Warhol notes that Bechdel herself has spoken of a space between the image and the words of a graphic memoir, and contends that “[*Fun Home*] operates...on many more narrative levels...than two, because both the visual and the verbal subdivide into multiple separate and overlapping narrative tracks, creating narrative elements that ‘work with’ the space between images and words” (2). Warhol points out, for instance, that within the text of *Fun Home* there is a division between dialogue (spoken by the characters) and voice-over narration (spoken by the authorial voice); while both of these forms of text have been used by comics artists since long before Bechdel, her memoirs employ them with exceptional nuance and complexity. Warhol further demonstrates that Bechdel's images act as a commentary on the text, sometimes supporting it, sometimes complicating it, and at other times contradicting it (as when, for instance, Bechdel's images reproduce the perspective of her childhood self while her adult commentary plays alongside it).⁶

In addition, Warhol extends earlier analyses by Ann Cvetkovich and Valerie Rohy of one particularly characteristic feature of Bechdel's memoirs, their extensive and detailed visual

⁶ The multiplicity of narrative tracks and competing commentaries in *Fun Home* bears some resemblance to Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony (multiple voices), dialogism (speech whose meaning derives from its relationship to other speech) and heteroglossia (multiple speech styles in dialogue), which he saw primarily as phenomena of the novel. However, no terminology appears to have been coined as yet that takes into account the possibility that a visual narrative may itself function as a voice or speech style, as can be the case in graphic narrative.

representation of archival materials – records of Alison’s childhood that include family photos, maps, her own journals, and representations (including textual reproductions) of the books she read. Warhol believes that these archived items comprise a narrative of their own, but as Cvetkovich and Rohy have shown, Bechdel’s drawn archives also have implications for *Fun Home*’s sense of the past and of queerness, and for the plane of queer history where the two converge. Rohy points out that the notion of history, which has so often rendered queerness invisible, “is particularly charged in queer communities, where the remedy for repression is an ad hoc ethic of full disclosure” (343). She adds, however, that for queer people there is tension between the desire for a queer past painstakingly preserved by empirical (including archival) methods, and a distrust of “conventional history – that is, the distinctly ideological collective fantasy of a past shaped by linear time, origin and telos, cause and effect” (343). Rohy concludes that Bechdel’s “proliferation of archives...offers a way for *Fun Home* to inhabit disparate narrative and temporal models, learning what each one enables and forecloses” (344).

These analyses give a good idea of the self-questioning, self-disruptive narrative techniques that are at work in *Fun Home*. My own concern, for the purposes of this essay, is less to extend this argument for the book’s narrative unconventionality than to examine an irony that results from it: namely, that Bechdel’s constant subversion of all notions of a “master narrative” for her family’s past actually produces an unusually rich sense of narrative fullness and satisfaction in the reader -- at least in the case of *Fun Home*. The somewhat less enthusiastic popular, critical and scholarly reaction to Bechdel’s second memoir, *Are You My Mother?*, whose story overlaps significantly with *Fun Home*’s but is this time refracted through Bechdel’s mother, provides a comparison point that may shed light on the particular factors that contribute to *Fun Home*’s almost classical effect of narrative wholeness.

Fun Home has been an extraordinarily successful book on multiple levels, as will be clear to anyone who glances at its jacket copy. The back cover of the Mariner paperback edition lists 23 newspapers and magazines, ranging from the “serious” to the popular to the LGBT-catering, that chose the book as “a Best Book of the Year.” The inside flap notes the awards the book was nominated for or won (including three given by gay organizations, one specific to graphic narratives and the very mainstream National Book Critics Circle Award) and the five major bestseller lists on which it appeared. It seems possible, in fact, that *Fun Home* may be among the all-time best-selling memoirs by out gay or lesbian authors, a distinction made even more significant by the fact that it is explicitly about queer themes and includes depictions of lesbian sex that are, literally, graphic. Furthermore, the book’s success and visibility continue to grow in its recent incarnation as a critically lauded off-Broadway, then Broadway musical.⁷ All this suggests that an unusually wide spectrum of readers and theatergoers, including many who are not LGBT-identifying, have found *Fun Home* a satisfying story; its successful transition from graphic memoir to musical, in particular, implies an appeal that transcends the graphic memoir format and even the page itself. How has this book, whose narrative dissonances have been convincingly established by scholars like Cvetkovich, Rohy and Warhol, managed to produce such an un-dissonant response in so many different kinds of readers?

I would argue that what Rohy calls the “radical uncertainty” (343) of *Fun Home*, its constant efforts to destabilize its own central narrative, in fact produces in the reader a paradoxical sense of balance, of the richness and variety of life’s possibilities, and of justice rendered. Bechdel considers her father’s story from multiple perspectives – the present, the past,

⁷ In early May 2015, the Broadway production of *Fun Home* was nominated for 12 Tony awards, tying with one other show for the highest number of nominations this year.

her own, her mother's, her father's as best she can guess it. To flesh out and enrich her story, she recruits and reproduces not only the family archives but the larger world of literature, from *The Wind in the Willows* to Proust to Colette to *The Great Gatsby* and beyond. As with the archival materials, Bechdel allows her literary sources to both bolster and undercut the case she makes about her father, but because these literary sources are known outside her family circle, they have the added function of pulling meaning into the family story from the outside world and of extending meaning back out from it – of relating the Bechdels' history to a larger set of stories and meanings. Still not content with the wealth of perspectives she has amassed, Bechdel even evokes a parallel universe in which her father is able to pursue his desires as freely as she is her own, including alternate endings for his story. First, she imagines a differently tragic ending in which he's claimed by AIDS instead of suicide:

When I try to project what Dad's life might have been like if he hadn't died in 1980, I don't get very far. / If he'd lived into those early years of AIDS, I tell myself, I might very well have lost him anyway, and in a more painful, protracted fashion. (195)

This imagined future is closely followed by a more radical one in which Bruce Bechdel's story erases Alison's entirely:

There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that's a problematic line of thought. For one thing, it makes it harder to blame him. / And for another, it leads to a peculiarly literal cul de sac. If my father had "come out" in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother...where would that leave me? (197)

The fact that Bechdel renders her father's story in so many lights, from so many angles, with support from his favorite literature, with alternate endings, and with such visibly scrupulous efforts at fairness, has an ironically reassuring effect on the reader. Bechdel's honesty about the uncertainty of her project makes us feel secure even as we are destabilized, and the impossibility of knowing the full truth about her father makes it possible for her to present a world in which contradictory interpretations can all be true at once, so that we feel the potential of life as opposed to its futility. The reader is likely to end the book feeling that Bechdel has done justice both to her father's story and to herself as storyteller, and it's this sense of literary justice done that allows Bechdel to offer the reader a sense of closure even in the face of the final unknowability of the story's truth.

In *Are You My Mother*, Bechdel applies to the story of her mother many of the same narrative techniques she employed in *Fun Home*. She again makes use of painstakingly recreated family archives, literary and scholarly external sources (particularly the works of Virginia Woolf and the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott), and the points of view of multiple observers of her mother's life (though her father can't be enlisted posthumously for this purpose, Bechdel strives to fill out her roster of perspectives by incorporating the insights of two of her own long-term therapists). Yet the narrative impact of *Are You My Mother?* is palpably different from that of *Fun Home*; among other things, it's difficult not to feel that the stakes for this second memoir are lower. As a closeted gay man of a certain era, Bruce Bechdel is the center of a story that's not merely an individual tragedy, but a cultural one with a resonance beyond itself. Bechdel's mother, by contrast, is neither closeted nor dead⁸, and her story resists categorization as tragic⁹;

⁸ Bechdel's mother, Helen, died in 2013, the year after *Are You My Mother?* was published.

⁹ The subtitles Bechdel chose for *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* – "A Family Tragicomic" and "A Comic Drama," respectively – confirm this tonal difference in her parents' stories.

thus there is less mystery surrounding her life and less representative urgency in the quest to do justice to her story – the reader may feel so, at least, even if Bechdel herself appears as invested in the telling of this tale as she did in her father's.

Queerness, it seems, is important to *Fun Home*'s effect in this regard, and in an additional one: its dual portraits of queerness, Alison's and her father's, appear to create a classical effect of narrative balance and symmetry even though they are in fact not symmetrical at all—certainly not in terms of the fates their queerness has met with. This sense of queerness in historical conversation with itself isn't present in *Are You My Mother?*, where the task of providing symmetry falls, rather anticlimactically, to Bechdel and her mother's shared status as living women with relationships to a queer man. *Are You My Mother?*'s commentary on queerness is thus less central, less direct and more diffuse than its predecessor's, and it's perhaps not coincidental that its sense of narrative closure for readers is likely to feel less complete. *Are You My Mother?*, then, demonstrates one possible result when queer narrative techniques are applied to non-queer subject matter: an aesthetic dissonance between the iconoclasm of the method and the normativity of its subject.

“The notion of a queer autobiography is a contradiction in terms,” wrote literary scholar Brian Loftus in 1997. “If the genre of autobiography demands the stability of both an ‘I’ and its genealogy to inhabit a coherent narrative, ‘queer’ disallows the neat articulation or possibility of either” (33). Loftus draws upon ideas formulated by queer studies pioneers Gayle Rubin, Diana Fuss and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to the effect that heterosexuality depends for its conceptual existence on homosexuality but can only acknowledge its so-called opposite through the act of silencing it, and concludes that queer autobiography is thus “a tradition without a base of reference” and one that “cannot exist, properly speaking, except as silence” (31) – silence which

nonetheless exerts a pressure on the dominant discourse and thus makes its presence-through-absence felt. Loftus might hold, then, that narrative instability in queer memoirs has its origin in their authors' instability as cultural or political subjects, and thus, ultimately, in their queerness itself. The cultural and political events of the intervening years, however, have complicated questions of queer invisibility, instability and silence; queer subjectivity surely means something different in a landscape where gay couples can legally marry in a majority of American states from what it meant in 1997, when it was not yet fully clear that the AIDS crisis might eventually be contained. Two of the memoirs I've discussed, Joe Brainard's and David Wojnarowicz', precede Loftus' analysis and might reasonably be encompassed by it; whether the currently active Matias Viegner and Alison Bechdel are "unstable 'I's" in the sense Loftus means is less certain – nor is it clear whether "silence" is a term that can be applied even metaphorically to a best-selling book whose musical incarnation is now filling houses on Broadway. Is the anti-narrative impulse I've discussed a largely historical impulse, then, that is likely to fade as gay lives and stories are ever more thoroughly absorbed by the cultural mainstream? The examples of Viegner and Bechdel suggest that a queer anti-narrative tradition is still carrying on even in a time of unprecedented possibility for the construction of visible, stable queer narratives, on both the cultural and personal levels. In fact, the very mainstreaming of queerness means that a potentially new front is opening in the long-running guerrilla war between queer writers and dominant narrative practices: in an age when "gay normativity" is less and less a contradiction in terms, we may begin to see queer writers taking arms against dominant *gay* narratives. This may be the beginning, in fact, of an era when "gayness" and "queerness" are less conflatable than they once were – when "queerness" becomes the point of resistance against narrative normativity of all stripes, whether gay, straight or other.

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