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The Reproduction of Mothering: Second Wave Legacies
in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

'I took the idea that the personal is political very much to heart as a young person', the cartoonist and graphic novelist Alison Bechdel states (Terzian, 2012), positioning herself as a child of the counter-culture and second wave feminism. 'It's guided me down this road of doing this not necessarily exhibitionistic but certainly very intimate work in a public space' (Terzian, 2012). Inspired by the counter-cultural politics of experience and committed to the liberating potential of self-reflection, Bechdel's work draws extensively on her own life. The long-running syndicated comic, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (2009), documents lesbian lives and features a character, Mo, who is a cipher for Bechdel herself. The graphic memoirs that have followed recount the intersecting biographical narratives of Bechdel and her parents. The first of these, *Fun Home: A Tragi-comic* (2006), tells the story of her relationship with her father, Bruce, a mortician, teacher and closeted gay man who is highly likely to have committed suicide around the time Bechdel was coming to understand her own lesbian sexuality. The subsequent graphic novel, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), recounts her relationship with her mother, Helen, also a teacher and a prolific amateur actress, from the time of her childhood through to the tense period when Bechdel was writing, and revealing, her father's secrets and their family life. This practice of narrating the intimate, however, 'comes at a cost', Bechdel's family 'are not happy about it.' But the relationship between her family and her writing is complex: 'it's sort of a strange loop. If I hadn't had that family I wouldn't have that need to publicly talk about all this' (Terzian, 2012).

Bechdel frames the differences between her own attitudes to self-revelation and the more negative views of her parents in psychosocial terms (Bechdel, 2016). Her parents' way

of thinking was shaped by the norms and attitudes of their own time. Her mother and father were both born in the 1930s, just too early to be part of the counter-cultural 1960s, the summer of love and the political upheavals of 1968. This had significant consequences: her father never came out as a gay man and her mother did not consider herself a feminist (Bechdel, 2016). Their understanding of themselves and their place in the world was shaped by a value system that prioritised responsibility and conformity over liberation and self-expression, putting them at odds with the society of individualism and emotionality that has taken shape in the wake of the 1960s cultural revolution.

Bechdel's work takes inspiration from the counter-cultural 1960s and reflects the changes that have taken place in ideas of self and world in the last 50 years. Whilst all her work foregrounds contemporary preoccupations with identity and the self, the graphic novels in particular reflect on intergenerational experience, sexuality and subjectivity. Scholars link Bechdel's first memoir, *Fun Home*, to debates within feminism and queer theory that originate in the liberation movements of the counter-culture. Julia Watson (2011), for instance, suggests the text contrasts 'second-wave feminist concepts of gendered subjectivity and sexuality (from the 1970s) [...] to a view, both performative and genealogical, that [Bechdel] constructs as an alternative way of reading her own sexuality in relation to—and against—her father's' (133-4). On this analysis, *Fun Home* juxtaposes theories of the construction of woman (originating in the second wave) with the subsequent decade's deconstructive theories of gender, informed by poststructuralism (another product of May '68). Whilst Watson reads this move from the second to the third wave in terms of advancing theoretical sophistication, she also notes Bechdel's personal attachment to the second wave: she is 'an archiver of both family memorabilia and the larger history of second-wave feminist texts, sayings, and styles' (152).

Whether Watson's analysis is accepted or not, *Fun Home* certainly offers a complex reflection on the vastly different intergenerational experiences of a gay father and daughter in the second half of the 20th century. This article, however, is concerned with Bechdel's second memoir, *Are You My Mother?*, and seeks to chart that text's relationship with the second wave of feminism, which began in the 1960s. As will be discussed in more detail below, feminists of the second wave were keen to explore women's experiences, and to understand and analyse the relationship between women's subjectivities and the social norms and expectations of gender. Over time, many writers came to focus on the role played by relationships with mothers, during childhood and adolescence, in shaping gendered forms of subjectivity and experience (Dinnerstein, 1999; Friday, 1994; Lazarre, 1997). Petra Bueskens (2014; 16) notes the anger and frustration evident in many these accounts, which often held mothers accountable for their daughters' perceived failure to develop into fully sovereign, independent subjects (Mayo and Moutsou, 2017).

These early texts grappled with long-standing cultural fantasies about mothers tied to the modern sexual division of labour that emerged with capitalist society (Chodorow and Contratto, 1989). Alison Stone (2012) summarises this tendency, and its pervasive presence in dominant ideas of subjective development: 'in the West the self has often been understood in opposition to the maternal body, such that one must break away from the mother and maternal care-givers on whom one depends in infancy and childhood to become a full participant in the spiritual, political, or cultural values of one's community' (1). Historically, mothers, and by association all women, have been seen as objects to be escaped, rather than subjects in their own right, an entrenched situation that led second wave feminists to explore how it might be possible for women to come to see themselves as subjects. The maternal relation came to be understood as central to this.

In what follows, this article suggests that Bechdel's second graphic memoir offers an account of how people of her generation, and women in particular, might come to work through their relationship with a maternal figure cast as object by the modern sexual division of labour. The text narrates a journey from perceiving the mother as a disappointing object to seeing her as a subject in her own right. This journey is made possible by decades-long relationships with female therapists, Jocelyn and Carol. Not only does the depiction of these relationships reflect the therapeutic culture that has developed in the wake of the 1960s, it also demonstrates the psychosocial impact of second wave feminists' quest to exhume maternal figures 'from the shadows of our culture' (Irigaray, 1991; 35) and place them firmly in the symbolic, where their active role in child development, and thus their own subjectivity, can finally be seen. *Are You My Mother?* foregrounds the legacies of the feminist movement that began in the 1960s, and the psychosocial changes that this practice of liberation has brought about.

The Mother in Psychoanalysis and the Second Wave

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (2010) in 1963 was a key moment in the birth of the second wave, though the groundwork was laid decades earlier by Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2011), first published in English in 1953. Both texts addressed the plight of women in contemporary society and sought to describe and understand their oppression. Psychoanalytic ideas received consideration in both texts. Beauvoir points up the androcentrism of Freudian theory, whilst Friedan notes the appropriation of psychoanalysis in the USA to bolster the myth of the feminine mystique. However, the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism has taken many forms. As Mari Jo Buhle (1998) puts it, 'feminism and psychoanalysis [...] share a large responsibility for [...] the distinctly modern spectacle of "consciousness of self"' (3). As women became

increasingly conscious of how society and culture shape the self, they engaged with psychoanalytic discourses and practices; challenging, employing and furthering these accounts.

In the fields of theory, memoir and fiction, the turn towards the mother, and interest in her recuperation, took off in the 1970s. As Lynne Layton (2014) notes, ‘motherhood had become a primary site of Western feminist passion and speculation as early as the mid-1970s’ (162), and psychoanalysis was an important touchstone in these accounts. First published in 1976, Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1995) represents a turning point, offering an account of motherhood as a historically evolving ‘institution’ worked over by relations of power and fantasy. Rich explores how the patriarchal regulation of motherhood through myth, religion, psychoanalysis and anthropology has functioned to efface the primacy of the mother in women’s psycho-social development. She also seeks to demonstrate the disastrous effects on women of the dominant narratives about mothers, daughters and the development of subjectivity, so often written from male perspectives.

As feminists have long argued, the idea that one must give up the relationship with a maternal object in order to become a subject has specific consequences for women, who find in the world no model of subjectivity premised on identification with a woman (Irigaray, 1985). In search of alternatives, feminists of the second wave increasingly turned to object relations theory, looking for alternative theories of development that do not ignore the role of maternal care, and thus offered more promising accounts of the subjective development of women. Object relations theorists share the belief that the earliest relations are crucial for the development of individuality and agency, and hold that the shape of those relations will have effects on the way the adult—male or female—later experiences the world of others. Some feminists turned to the work of Donald Winnicott (1990b), which emphasised the specificities of maternal care and its vital role in fostering the psychic health of the child.

However, though Winnicott provides a supplement to the Freudian account of subjectivity, his work occupies an ambiguous position in relation to feminist debates ongoing since the 1970s. From one perspective, his preoccupation with the maternal role foregrounds the activity of the maternal figure in infantile development, and brings the labour involved in that care to the fore (Chodorow, 1978), contributing to challenging the effect of its concealment on philosophy and modernity itself (Irigaray, 1985). Nevertheless, feminists have also critiqued Winnicott for his relentless association of women with motherhood (Alexander, 2013; 154), expressing concern about the potential for his ideas to shore up the existing sexual division of labour, by insisting on the naturalness of maternal care, and the benefits of close relationship with one primary carer (Doane and Hodges, 1993; Gerson, 2004; Rose, 2004). He has also been criticised for seeming to insist that the mother of the new-born renounce her own subjectivity—at least temporarily—if her care is to be good enough. Madelon Sprengnether (1990) argues that Winnicott's thinking 'emphasizes the mother's presence and influence at the same time that it desubjectivizes her, substituting stereotypes of 'good' mother and 'bad' mother for the complexity of a fully developed adult personality' (186).

Bechdel, Winnicott and the Second Wave

When asked in a 2007 interview (Zuarino, 2018) whether her second memoir will focus on her relationship with her mother, Bechdel states that 'inevitably, if you're talking about relationships, you've got to talk about your mother because that is who your first relationship is with'. Here Bechdel foregrounds the centrality of maternal figures in contemporary understandings of self, other and world; ways of thinking that came to the fore in the wake of the Women's Liberation Movements in the USA and Europe. The text itself shares the second wave's concern with mothering as both cultural discourse and personal experience.

Like many of the texts on motherhood dating from the 1970s (Dinnerstein, 1999; Friday, 1994; Lazarre, 1997), Bechdel's account is written from the daughter's point of view and seeks to come to terms with the experience of mother-daughter relations in the context of a white, middle class family in the male-dominated, post-war society of the USA. Bechdel's birth in 1960, however, places her in the generation that preceded those accounts. Unlike the earlier texts, which often unwittingly drew on a Freudian account of development (Chodorow and Contratto, 1989), Winnicott's ideas provide the conceptual structure of Bechdel's entire account. Each chapter is named after a different concept from his theoretical lexicon. The text begins with 'The Ordinary Devoted Mother' (2016a) and moves through 'Transitional Objects' (1958), 'True and False Self' (1990a), 'Mind' (1954), 'Hate' (2016b) and 'Mirror' (1991b) to 'The Use of an Object' (1991a). Through this sequence, the memoir charts the development of subjectivity in Winnicottian terms. Bechdel's account of herself, and of her mother, is shaped and mediated by this particular narrative of the mother-child relation, much like the second wave feminist perspectives that draw on Winnicott to bring to light the mother's contribution.

The text takes its epigraph from Virginia Woolf, 'for nothing was simply one thing', though even the sentiment expressed here has a Winnicottian feel to it. This sense that the self, and one's story, always already depends on the stories of others, is central to Winnicott's account of development, and to the feminist object relations theory that came after (Benjamin, 1990). For Winnicott, as the text mentions, there is 'no such thing as a baby', only a being whose very survival is dependent on the care of another. The character of that care, however, is shaped by the maternal caregiver's own experiences with their carers. The story is always already someone else's story, an idea captured in the first lines of the text: 'This story begins when I began to tell another story' (4). Alison (as I will call the character, to distinguish her from the author, Bechdel) is pictured anxiously driving to tell her mother

she is writing a memoir about her father and their family secrets. Yet this point of origin is quickly placed in question. It seems, as the narrator muses whilst Alison drives, that ‘the real problem with this memoir about my mother is that it has no beginning’ (6). Instead, the idea of origin produces ‘a dizzying, infinite regress’ much like ‘how I’d understood human reproduction as a child. I was an egg inside my mother when she was still an egg inside her mother, and so forth and so on’ (7). Alison’s childhood understanding of reproduction may have been wrong, but it captures the intergenerational character of contemporary accounts of the self: the origin is always elsewhere.

This first chapter’s title, ‘The Ordinary Devoted Mother’, demonstrates the framing function that Winnicott’s ideas perform, and creates a parallel between Bechdel and Winnicott’s acts of narration. The chapter title is a direct quote from Winnicott, and an allusion to his theory that the mother must necessarily be absorbed in the care of her child during the first months. The chapter itself is marked by a contrast between this idea(l) of maternal devotion and Alison’s experience with Helen, who is depicted as critical of Alison’s self-absorption and largely uninterested in her life (14). Alison craves her mother’s undivided attention, a ‘rare treat’ in her childhood that she found ‘calming, composing’ (13). In adulthood, their interactions appear largely unsatisfactory. They speak almost daily on the phone, but these conversations generally consist of Helen offering an account of the events of her life, with little regard for either her own or Alison’s inner world. During one such conversation, when Alison has forced herself to divulge something of her life, namely the difficulties she is having making progress with her second memoir, Alison gazes at a picture of Winnicott that she has pinned above her desk. In this scene, Winnicott’s image and ideas frame Alison’s experience of her relationship with her mother. Though Alison is not a baby, the idea of maternal devotion lingers, an ideal counterpoint to Alison’s actual mother, who

fails to be the kind of devoted and emotionally responsive parent Alison, somewhat naively, desires.

As this scene demonstrates, Alison's mother looms large in her mind: 'I've been in therapy for nearly my entire adult life and have not laid my deeply felt emotions about my mother to rest' (18), she states. This comment points up Alison's investment in the therapeutic culture that has come to the fore in the last fifty years (Bainbridge and Yates, 2012). In line with the tendency of 'American discourses' to 'construct and explain problems in almost exclusively psychological terms' (Layton, 2014; 167), Alison blames the care she received from her mother for her inability to write this memoir. Not only does her dissatisfaction with the relationship make the writing a fraught process, she believes that she has also internalised her mother's 'editorial voice—precisian, dispassionate, elegant, adverbless' (23). This identification with a critical mother thwarts her creativity. What Alison wishes for, and she states this in no uncertain terms to her therapist, Carol, (21) is that she might have had a different mother: Winnicott himself.

This wish to have been mothered by Winnicott demonstrates the pull of certain ideals of maternal care on Alison's understanding of herself. She goes as far as to state that, if Winnicott had been her mother she 'wouldn't be suffering over this book, [she'd] be doing something useful' (23). She imagines that Winnicott could have provided her with the attention and devotion she craves from her mother, specifically the early infantile experience of merger that allows 'for two separate beings to be identical—to be one...' a 'mystical' and 'transcendent' experience (35-36).

Clearly Alison feels that something has been missing in the care she has received, and the text offers an explanation that goes some way to contextualising the mother-infant dyad. Using Winnicott's writing—a page of text from 'The Ordinary Devoted Mother' is reproduced in one of the panels on the page—Alison searches for reasons why a mother

might not be able to ‘give herself over to this preoccupation with the care of her infant’ (34). Besides her own death and the arrival of a new pregnancy ‘before the time she thought appropriate’, Winnicott suggests that the mother may become depressed ‘which may quite easily be reactive to something that has impinged in her private life’. Alison ruminates on a sequence of snapshots of herself, aged three months, and her mother, in which Helen appears to be adequately preoccupied with her infant. Though the pictures do not capture his image, the final photo shows a wary baby Alison looking away from her mother, at the person taking the picture: ‘the man with the camera... at three months old I had seen enough of my father’s rages to be wary of him’ (33). The text thus links the perceived failures in maternal care to the fractious character of the familial environment, where her father rages, presumably because he feels unable to fully express himself and his desire in the confines of the heterosexual nuclear family.

Winnicott’s thinking mediates Alison’s sense that something was missing in the maternal care she received, framing her reflection on how social norms—specifically the legal prohibition of homosexuality in the USA (only overturned in all states in 2003)—impacted her own childhood and development. In this first chapter, *Are You My Mother?* locates the source of the disturbance of the infantile holding environment in the psychosocial experience of her closeted father. As the text develops, however, it increasingly comes to understand the equally disturbing potential of male-dominated society itself to impact mothers, and their care, of girls in particular.

In therapy, Alison reveals that, for as long as she can remember, she has ‘been trying to heal [her] mother’ (Bechdel, 2012: 83). ‘It feels’, she says, ‘like I’m the mother’ (62). Her sense of her own maternal abandonment is further mediated by Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1981), which is also informed by Winnicott’s ideas. Miller focuses on the adult who, as a child, had to suppress their own feelings in order to accommodate a parent.

The narrator paraphrases Miller: ‘the mother who requires accommodation from her child is just trying to get what her own mother refused her’ (Bechdel, 2012: 108). She has developed a ‘narcissistic cathexis of her child’ (167) which can lead the child to develop a false self structure, as Alison believes she has (106). However, neither Winnicott or Miller address the possibility that a mother may be more likely to do this when their child is a girl, because she calls to mind the gendered qualities of nurturance and selflessness.

Informed by Winnicott’s thinking, during the 1970s, feminists sought to understand how the relentless association of women with the feminine qualities of care, selflessness and relationality, affected mothers’ relationships with daughters and sons. In her famous account of the genesis of gendered forms of subjectivity, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Nancy Chodorow argued that the bodily similarity between a mother and daughter might lead the mother to merge deeply with her, and perpetuate a closeness that leads women to identify more consistently with the feminine qualities they associate with the mother (ibid. 103). Alison Stone (2012), however, notes that, given the cultural association of mothers (and by inference all women) with care and selflessness, the daughter’s femaleness may lead the mother to seek care from their female children, rather than providing it. Women may therefore remain attached to their mothers because they continue to long for the nurturance they feel they have missed.

Alison feels she has been inadequately nurtured by her mother in a way her brothers were not. She ‘petted my two younger brothers and cooed to them, but she and I never trafficked in that sort of thing’ (85). Though the text does not link this difference to dominant ideas of gender, feminist psychoanalytic theory would suggest that Alison’s femaleness (and its association with care and selflessness) may be relevant for understanding their relationship. Faced with the gendered association of femaleness with care, Alison’s mother may have transferred her own unmet infantile desires for maternal care onto her daughter. For

Flax (1985), Orbach and Eichenbaum (1992), the mother's refusal to give herself over to her female child, and her concurrent desire to be the cared for rather than the carer, are linked to dominant ideas about gender. This may leave the daughter haunted by a sense of unmet needs, and with the imperative to look after herself.

Whilst the memoir persistently uses Winnicottian narratives of maternal care to explore Alison's experience of self, it also suggests that this interpretative frame may need to be supplemented in order to fully account for the psychosocial terrain of mother-daughter relations, in line with feminist analyses of the second wave. When Alison tries to interpret the difference in her mother's attitude towards herself and her brothers, she wonders whether her own behaviour was responsible. At one point, she links the fact that her mother stopped kissing her good night at age seven to her discovery of a picture Alison had drawn of a little girl being intimately examined by a male doctor (142-45) (the child Alison identifies with both positions). Alison wonders if her mother's refusal of affection may have been caused by her encountering this expression of homoerotic curiosity. This interpretation certainly chimes with Alison's experiences with her mother as an adult. Helen does not seem to be fully accepting of her daughter's sexuality. 'I listen to her go on and on about people I don't know, I support her, encourage her, but she doesn't want to hear about my life... I know it's partly the lesbian thing. Like she's afraid if I get a work in edgewise, it'll be cunnilingus' (62). However, this interpretation cannot account for the apparent lack of closeness Alison feels she experienced prior to age seven, when these events occurred. When Alison recounts this story to her therapist, Jocelyn draws out the gendered dimension of the encounter: 'I don't think your family was a very safe place to be a little girl' (146). Jocelyn suggests that Alison's femaleness played a role in structuring her mother's response, preventing her from providing the care and nurturance Alison needed.

Though the text does not engage overtly with the feminist perspectives outlined above, it does increasingly come to focus on the implications for women of living in a male-dominated society. Alison is keenly interested in ‘the woman writer’s peculiar challenge to cease being an object and start being a subject’ (171). This aspect of the narrative is mediated by the prominent second wave feminist, Adrienne Rich, specifically her reading of Virginia Woolf (another favourite author of Alison’s, and a writer who only joined university syllabi as a result of second wave scholarship), in her essay ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ (1995). Rich foregrounds the difficulties of being a woman writer, who meets only ‘the image of Woman written by men’ (quoted in Bechdel, 2012; 171), and the need for women to write, as an act of re-imagining themselves. Given the centrality of Winnicott’s account of maternal care to the memoir, this is an interesting inclusion. Alison connects Rich’s discussion to her own mother, Helen, who wrote poetry herself before she became pregnant with Alison, including a response to Keats’ ‘La belle dame sans merci’ (2008), written from the woman’s own perspective. Motherhood, however, seems to have silenced her: ‘what else did my mother write? Where are *her* letters?’, Alison asks (171).

Through the trope of writing, and the mediating perspectives of iconic literary women, *Are You My Mother?* increasingly foregrounds the cultural tendency to objectify and silence women, specifically women who are mothers. As the memoir develops, Alison comes to wonder about the effects of motherhood on Helen. She assumes that the imperative to submit to domestic life and prioritise the needs of her children, coupled with the volatility of her husband, must have made Helen resentful and angry (174). Alison realises that her mother’s subjection to domestic life came about on the eve of the second wave, which cast a critical eye on the ideology of femininity: ‘by the time *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, mom was stuck at home with two small children’ (172), she recounts. Casting off the

shackles of femininity and housework was impossible for Helen at that time, and Alison comes to empathise with her position: 'I guess I would have been pretty angry too' (172).

Becoming a Subject

Alison's growing ability to understand and empathise with her mother's experience puts her at odds with the enduring tendency to objectify mothers and ignore their perspective. As Jessica Benjamin (1990) notes, the entrenched demands of gender in contemporary societies tend to efface the mother's subjectivity and active role in child development. Benjamin suggests that the persistence of the existing sexual division of labour (and the association of women with selflessness and care) make it difficult for mothers to be recognised as subjects in their own right. If this is the case, how is it possible for adults of Bechdel's generation, for whom a traditional sexual division of labour was the norm, to come to recognise their mother as a subject?

In recent decades, writers and theorists have increasingly turned their attention from the daughter's perspective to that of the mother herself. Recent work seeks to explore maternal experience (Baraitser, 2009; Hollway, 2015; Stone, 2012) and foregrounds the centrality of maternal subjectivity for the capacity to, and practice of, care (Hollway, 2006). Many scholars note the early contributions of Benjamin (1990) in this context (Bueskens, 2014; Hirsch, 1989; Giorgio, 2002; Layton, 2014). As she puts it, 'it must be acknowledged that we have only just begun to think about the mother as a subject in her own right [...] She is rarely regarded as another subject with a purpose apart from her existence for her child. Yet the real mother is not simply an object for her child's demands; she is, in fact, another subject whose independent center must be outside her child if she is to grant him the recognition he seeks' (1990; 23-4).

Benjamin argues that development does not depend on the gradual renunciation of relationship through separation from a maternal object, but rather on interaction with a maternal subject. In fact, she suggests that it is only through engagement with another subject who can recognise the child as separate—and their needs as distinct—that an infant can develop their own sense of self, a position explored more recently by Wendy Hollway (2006). Benjamin (1990) turns to Winnicott's (1991a) account of the 'use' of the object in order to emphasise the need for the caregiver to be able to resist being reduced to the subjective projections of the child. It is only when they can resist this attempt at reduction that the infant can become aware of their dependence on the caregiver as a subject in their own right. For women of Bechdel's generation, subject to ideologies of gender that cast the mother as an object and limit women's opportunities to develop inter/dependent subjectivity at the same time, therapy may offer a means of transformation.

In line with second wave feminism, *Are You My Mother?* ties the possibility of change to the experience of psychotherapy. Alison's therapists loom almost as large as her mother in her psyche. With them she experiences a feminist form of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which plays an important role in challenging debilitating constructions of the mother-daughter bond set in motion by the gender relations of patriarchal capitalist modernity. 'One reason this memoir is taking so long is that I'm trying to figure out—from both sides of the couch—just what it is that psychoanalysts do for their patients' (Bechdel, 2012: 21), Alison explains. She evokes Winnicott's understanding of the process: 'he would see the mother-infant relationship as a paradigm for what happens between the analyst and the patient' (22), but Winnicott did not consider the question of gender differences in the experiences and needs of patients in this context; it was left to feminists of the second wave to draw out this dimension.

The founders of the Women's Therapy Centre in London, Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1992), originally suggested that their women patients needed the experience of another woman (here the therapist), who could contain and survive their needs for intimacy and dependence, which had been thwarted in their early development (72). In their later work, however, they altered their position, arguing that the female analyst needs to resist the pull of the ideal of selfless motherhood, and instead remain open to the possibility of asserting their own subjectivity in the context of the transference/countertransference relationship. This may not be easy for women to do, but women therapists' capacity to emerge as whole subjects 'powerfully affects the experience that both female and male patients have in the treatment and shakes up, at a very deep level, the internalized object representations of woman/caregiver' (73).

Alison's experiences with her therapists allow her to move from disappointment with her mother, longing for a missed symbiosis and a defensive false self structure, to a sense of both herself and her mother as subjects. Both of her therapists, Jocelyn and Carol, subvert the position of woman/ mother as containing and surviving object. Whilst they do contain and reflect Alison's emotional experience, they are also quite starkly interventionist, and at times reveal personal information in minor ways that they later come to realise transgress the norms of psychoanalytic therapy (274). In her first session with Jocelyn, for instance, she reveals a detail from her personal life: her own mother died when she was a teenager (113). In a later session, Jocelyn breaks the taboo of physical touch, hugging Alison after she has cried for the first time in her presence (105). But the most telling transgression comes when Alison recounts her sense that she was the 'bad seed' in the family: 'my brothers were all sweet and innocent...my parents said I was like Lucy in Peanuts' (216). In response, Jocelyn tells her that this is a surprise because, 'I have this sense that you were a very sweet kid. A wonderful

kid, in fact! Because as an adult...and this will probably embarrass you... you're really adorable!' (216-17).

It is conceivable that this moment can be read as a kind of wish fulfilment, in which Alison's inner child receives the love and care she has always wanted from her mother. From this perspective, the scene represents a problematic instance of the therapist merely giving themselves over as a perfect mother substitute. When Alison visits Jocelyn some years after their work together, she mentions the session. Jocelyn replies that 'based on what I'm learning now in psychoanalytic training, saying that to you would be against the rules...but you know what?...I'd do it again...there was enough of you that wanted a positive mother figure. You were able to take in my good feelings about you' (274). Jocelyn's awareness that she transgressed the norms of psychotherapy is interesting, and chimes with Orbach and Eichenbaum's intervention. In the session, Jocelyn asserts her own subjectivity, short-circuiting the association of women with objecthood.

This intervention takes place in a chapter called 'Mirror', which uses Winnicott's paper on 'The Mirror-role of Mother and Family' (1991b) as a framing device. Jocelyn's comment has a profound effect on Alison. She feels seen, for perhaps the first time, but she is also able to realise something about her mother: 'whatever it was I wanted from my mother was simply not there to be had. It was not her fault' (228). This suggests that her mother's inability to recognise Alison is linked to the historical contingencies of her psyche and care. The next time they speak on the phone, when the conversation goes awry, Alison hangs up on Helen without feeling guilty (229), a sign of psychic change. 'The day I hung up the phone on Mom was the last time she made me cry. Things got easier after that' (233). What Jocelyn may have been able to do, it seems, is not necessarily provide Alison with a new experience, but 'to resist being converted into an old and familiar experience' (Levenson quoted in Orbach and Eichenbaum 1993; 76). Jocelyn is able to bring her subjectivity into the

therapeutic relationship and allow Alison to move towards recognising herself as a subject, and her mother too.

In the final chapter, titled 'The Use of an Object', Alison will link this scene with Jocelyn to the experience of 'survival' on the part of the object (267). Alison persists in thinking that the reason she cannot secure the love of her girlfriend, Eloise, is because there is something wrong with her. Jocelyn reminds her that she is 'a good, kind person' with 'integrity and talent' who is actually 'adorable' (266-67). Alison tries to destroy this view: 'maybe if Eloise were happier with her job, she'd be able to love me more' (267), but Jocelyn will not allow her view to be destroyed: 'did you hear anything I just said?' she says, in particularly parental fashion (267). The next panel has a black background and features no image, only writing: 'here's the vital core of Winnicott's theory: the subject must destroy the object. And the object must survive this destruction' (267). Jocelyn has survived the attempt at destruction, bringing her subjectivity into view.

In addition to the experience in therapy, the significance of creative destruction for the development of subjective agency is explored through Alison's writing. *Are You My Mother?* demonstrates a keen interest in their interrelation throughout. Alison understands writing this memoir to be a necessary part of coming to terms with her relationship with her mother, and in freeing herself from her psychic pull: 'the only way to get her out of my head is by writing the book' (23), she tells her therapist. 'The thing is, I can't write the book until I get her out of my head' (23). Despite this dilemma, Alison intuits the well-established parallels between literature and psychoanalysis, as processes through which one might come to give an account of oneself. She notes Virginia Woolf's belief that writing *To the Lighthouse* (2017) allowed her to come to terms with, and free herself from her mother. 'When it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and

deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest' (quoted in Bechdel, 2012; 18).

Whilst Woolf's understanding of both the mechanism of psychotherapeutic action and the need to give up the mother are questionable, for Alison, experiencing the subjectivity of her therapist allows her to explore and come to terms with her mother as a subject. The chapter begins with a dream sequence in which Alison removes 'her mother's encampment' from her psyche (255)—in the form of a tumorous lump in her face—signifying her emergence into interdependent subjectivity through processes of attempted destruction and survival. Alison calls her mother to gauge her thoughts on a draft of *Fun Home*, anticipating a negative reaction. Helen, however, is conciliatory: 'I don't mind the stuff about me and dad. To be honest, you're not close to my story there. It's your perception, which is fine' (250). Helen asserts the difference between her own perspective and that of her daughter, and thus resists being reduced to a subjective perception. At that moment, Alison comes to realise that she does not know her mother's story, and that her own story and that of her mother are not the same: 'I have no idea what you went through', she confesses (251). The mother as subjective object is challenged by the real-life mother's capacity to survive and exceed the creative destruction enacted by the memoir. But this realisation is also the prompt for Alison to begin conceiving the book about her mother, another attempt at destruction that must be survived. It is plausible to interpret Alison's struggle to write this text as driven by the belief that her mother would not survive the telling, or the aggression exerted in the process of becoming a subject. Yet her mother does survive, demonstrating her understanding of the process of authorship with a quote from Dorothy Gallagher that seems to help her close the generational gap a little: 'the writer's business is to find the shape in unruly life and to serve her story. Not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story' (283). The writer attempts a creative destruction, but the family, and their truths, survive. 'At

last', Alison writes, in the closing pages of the text, 'I have destroyed my mother, and she has survived my destruction' (285).

Ultimately, the experience of therapy allows Alison to give an account of Helen not merely as a frustrating and thwarting object, but as an independent subject with her own interests, whose behaviour and experience has been shaped by the social and historical context in which she has lived. In fact, it is this therapeutic work that brings the question of gender to the fore. Alison is at pains to make clear that what she perceives as her mother's failures were most likely conditioned by her relationship with her husband, whose volatile behaviour impinged on the infant-mother dyad and inhibited her mother's ability to attend to Alison's spontaneous gestures. However, there is also a deepening sense of her mother herself as having been shaped—and thwarted (208)—by the experience of being a woman in a male-dominated society.

In a scene from therapy with Jocelyn, Alison describes how she developed a phobia of vomiting as a child. When Alison wakes her mother in the night because she feels ill, and then proceeds to vomit, her mother remarks that 'you never get sick!' (260), a comment that sets her phobia in motion: 'I guess I felt like I'd failed her, she had so many demands on her... the one thing she needed from me was that I not need anything from her' (260). Prompted by Jocelyn, Alison asks her mother what she learnt from *her* mother (262). Helen's response, without skipping a beat: 'that boys are more important than girls' (264). Though this scene takes place when Alison is in her late twenties, it is placed near the end of narrative, in the chapter on 'The Use of an Object'. There is reference here, then, to 'the power issues involved in a mother's contingent historical position' (Layton, 2014; 165), and a growing awareness within the text of Alison's mother as a historically contingent subject, and of their relationship as mediated by the norms and narratives of their society.

Towards the end of the text, in a therapy session with Carol in 2009, Alison muses on the topic of phobia, and ponders what connects her own phobia of vomiting with her mother's phobia of spiders (279). Carol wonders if 'throwing up is somehow a marker of femininity... like it stands in for things that come out of the female body... menstrual blood, vaginal lubrication, even a baby' (279), and she suggests that this fear of femininity may have been passed from mother to daughter: 'I think your mother has some resentment about being female that got passed on to you' (279). The text jumps from this scene to a talk by Winnicott (1990c) on feminism in 1964, which links misogyny to the fact that everyone, both men and women, were 'once *dependent* on a woman, and somehow a hatred of this has to be transformed into a kind of gratitude if full maturity of the personality is to be reached' (quoted in Bechdel, 2012; 279). Whilst the need to acknowledge dependence is real and vital, Winnicott's assessment arguably naturalises the still dominant sexual division of labour. The association of women with isolated caregiving has historically contributed the circumscription of female lives and continues to affect them. When Helen recounts the origin of her own phobia of spiders, the fear appears to be of being trapped and restricted: 'I was standing in the backyard by our pink peony bushes. I saw a grasshopper caught in a spiderweb... then a big black spider with yellow markings darted out and spun a web around and around the grasshopper... at first the grasshopper tried to kick its way out... but finally it was wrapped so tight, it stopped moving' (276). Alison and Helen may share a fear of the implications of being female in a male-dominated society.

That the inheritance Alison shares with her mother is at least in part related to being a woman in a specific situation is borne out in the closing pages of the text, which depicts Alison's childhood game of the 'crippled child' (287). As Alison lies on the kitchen floor, pretending that she cannot walk, her mother enters her play scenario, indulging the fantasy at work, because 'she could see my invisible wounds, because they were hers too' (287). These

may well be the wounds caused by a volatile and unhappy husband/father, but they are also the wounds historically inflicted on women by the demands of male-dominated society. As Alison states in the final drawing of the text, 'there may be a certain thing I did not get from my mother... there is a lack, a gap, a void' (288). Namely, perhaps, an experience of closeness, devotion and recognition. But in its place, she has received something arguably 'far more valuable'. This is the capacity for creative risk taking, a skill Alison shares with Helen, a lifelong amateur actor, an erstwhile poet and currently a features writer for the local paper. These examples of independent subjectivity, her creativity and bravery, ultimately connect Helen and Alison in a mature, subject-subject identification. And it is this capacity for risk taking that allows Alison finally to produce a memoir that eschews documentary and realism, offering instead a subjective, cyclical text that is its own kind of truth. It is this narrative, and the capacity to create it, that finally allows Alison to find 'the way out' (289).

Conclusion

Bechdel's text offers a close engagement with the psychosocial experiences of being a daughter in the second half of the twentieth century, and foregrounds the role feminist perspectives can play in psychic liberation. The text links Alison's subjective struggles to the norms of the 1960s society in which she was born, including the prohibition of homosexuality, which had tragic consequences for her father, and dominant attitudes towards women and their place in the world, which shaped her relationship with her mother. The text itself would have been impossible without the counter-cultural ethos of self-reflection and liberation, and the emphasis second wave feminists placed on theorising the politics of gendered subjectivity.

Bechdel's interest in psychoanalysis parallels the work of feminists in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, who drew on psychoanalytic ideas, as well as developing new ones. Her

understanding of subjectivity is informed by this feminist work, which shed light on the pivotal importance of maternal care. Alison's ability, finally, to recognise both herself and Helen as subjects in their own right is made possible by a therapeutic experience that echoes the work of Orbach and Eichenbaum. By weaving together psychoanalytic concepts and personal experience, the text explores how fantasies of the mother-woman as an ideal, selfless object have impinged on women's experiences of themselves and their mothers/daughters. It also explores how, in the context of a society where maternal subjectivity has historically been ignored and denied, leaving mother-daughter relations potentially fraught, feminism of the second wave has theorised how we might come to terms with the mother's contribution, and come to recognise her as a subject, nonetheless.

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Bechdel, Winnicott, second wave, feminism, mother

Abstract:

The graphic novelist and cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, ‘took the idea that the personal is political very much to heart as a young person.’ Though the politics of the personal have been central to all of her work, this article wagers that Bechdel’s connection with second wave feminism is particularly pronounced in her second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel’s text shares the second wave’s concern with the politics of telling stories about mothers, brought to public attention by Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born*. Following in Rich’s footsteps, Bechdel’s text grapples with the effects of the cultural tendency to objectify and silence mothers. However, it also offers an account of how developments in feminist psychotherapy challenge the debilitating dynamics of modern mother-daughter relations, pointing up the psychosocial legacies of second wave feminism.