



## Mother Wound, Creative Collaboration and Relational Healing: Examining Graphic Vignettes from *Are You My Mother?*

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### ABSTRACT

This article will examine the American cartoonist and writer Alison Bechdel's memoir *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) through the lens of graphic medicine. I will approach her experience of not receiving emotional support, validation, and appreciation from her mother as a "wounding" ("mother wound") to engage more comprehensively with the process and difficulty of the incomplete/ongoing nature of healing. Conceptual frameworks such as Bethany Webster's "Mother Wound," Sigmund Freud and Dominick LaCapra's idea of "working through," and Ian William et al.'s "Graphic Medicine" have been engaged with to argue that Bechdel's experience of seeking and engaging in years of therapy and creative collaboration with her mother is an attempt to understand her self in relation to the m(other). In self-picturing her suffering, Bechdel portrays the inter-subjective experiences of surviving a wound and the arduous task of seeking and receiving formal and informal care. The graphic format of the memoir, with panels, speech bubbles, illustrations of hand-written diaries, and hand-drawn photographs, allows Bechdel to visualize the complicated mother-daughter relationship. The memoir is a testament to the entangled and non-linear nature of trauma, memory, and the possibilities that creative collaboration offers for relational healing.

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## INTRODUCTION

American cartoonist Alison Bechdel is originally known for her work on the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which ran from 1983 to 2008. With the publication of her graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in 2006, she attained both critical and commercial success. *Fun Home* was later turned into a musical that won the 2015 Tony Award for Best Musical. Her second memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, was released in 2012. Both memoirs have garnered significant academic attention for their meditations on queer identities (Rohy 2010; Tolmie 2010; Bauer 2014; Quinan 2017), the genre of life writing and graphic memoir (Lemberg 2008; Warhol 2010; Giaimo 2013), and representations of mental illness, namely, obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression (Diedrich 2014; Barounis 2016). Some attempts have also been made to address the ideas of psychoanalytic therapy (Magnet 2017), therapeutic possibilities of writing (Clewell 2017; Critchfield & Pula 2015), critique of writing as a reparative exercise (Gregory 2019; Tong 2012), and examination of complicated parent-child relationship (Youssef 2016; Ruggemeier & Scheurer 2019; Kellond 2020; Precup 2020). For instance, Tammy Clewell (2017), in her analysis of the memoir, has identified the “mother issue” that “extends to every aspect of Bechdel’s life, including the painstaking and time-consuming process of creating her graphic memoir” (Clewell 2017:53) and how Bechdel has internalized her mother’s editorial voice and wants from psychoanalysis, a “self-knowledge, the knowledge of how the answer to the painful riddle of her personality might well be her mother” (Clewell 2017:54). Heather Love (2012) in her reading of the memoir, calls it Bechdel’s “sustained probing of her mom problem” (Love, 2012). However, neither Clewell nor Love approach the mother-daughter relationship through the idea of ‘wounding’ that complicates the processes of creative collaboration and healing. Although Rebecca Chaplan notes that for Alison Bechdel, “seeing and understanding one’s inner life, assisted by the relationship with the analyst, brings freedom”, and recognizes that “the act of writing the memoir is an essential part of the process of working through and achieving psychic health” (Chaplan, 2014: 346), she too does not provide a sustained engagement with the idea of a wound in the mother-daughter relationship, and the role that therapy plays to facilitate the healing of that wound. Hence, there has not been sufficient engagement with the memoir, *Are You My Mother?*’s specific potential to examine the “mother wound”—traumatism arising from the emotional absence of mothers—and how it relates to creative collaboration and relational healing, as well as the memoirs’ significant contribution to graphic medicine. Quinn Eades argues that “a wound has the power to gather others around. It suggests an ongoingness, a state of injury that is deep that gashes through psyche as well as flesh” (Eades 2017: 184). Hence, I argue that approaching the mother issue/problem as a wound rather than as an ‘issue’ or ‘problem’ allows us to engage with the process, difficulty, and incomplete/ongoing nature of healing more comprehensively and understand how it relates to memory and temporal complexities. This article therefore explores the potential that Bechdel’s memoir offers for theorizing the relationship between trauma/wound, creative collaboration, and relational healing.

The idea of a ‘wound’ is popularly found in discourses relating to corporeality or medical/clinical experiences. However, scholars have argued that “[s]ome theories of wounding can make claims on the body politic without a cut, burned, maimed, or physically hurt person at their centre” (Brown 1993, Cohen 2010, as cited in Solomon 2022). This is because although the body is often the site of violence, in certain cases, like relational attachments between parents and children, the absence of parental care in the form of appreciation, security and affection can also cause wounds to the

child's psyche. In the last couple of years, the term 'mother wound' entered popular usage among communities of mental health practitioners after psychologist Bethany Webster examined in detail the definition, symptoms and effects of the 'mother wound' and published it, first in her blog in 2014, and subsequently in her book *Discovering the Inner Mother: A Guide to Healing the Mother Wound and Claiming Your Personal Power* (2021). Although ideas of the mother-daughter relationships in relation to separation and individuation have been studied previously (Chodorow 1978; Boyd 1985; Lerner 1985), Webster's work led to the re-emergence of interest in mother-daughter relationships and specifically 'mother wound.' The wound I trace emerged from Bechdel's inaccessibility to her mother and inability to forge a sufficient emotional or physical bond with the m(other) in her childhood.

In the subsequent discussion, I will analyze the visual representation of images, panels, and speech boxes in order to explore two key questions posed by Bechdel's work. Firstly, I will investigate how Bechdel portrays the effects of intergenerational trauma. By employing the conceptual framework of the 'mother wound', I will examine specific vignettes from the text to gain insight into the childhood experiences of parental neglect, lack of affection, and criticism, and how these experiences lead to emotional wounds. Secondly, I will explore how Bechdel visually depicts the process of seeking therapy and working through her trauma, and examine the significance of these visualizations in expanding the scope of our understanding of the intricate nuances and unhurried nature of the therapeutic process. These sessions create a safe space for contemplation, emotional expression, introspection, and the intricate process of accessing and accepting care, as well as addressing and working through trauma. In the absence of physical injuries, the graphic format becomes indispensable in portraying suffering through facial expressions, body language, color, speech bubbles, and panel sizes, among other visual elements. By combining words and images, Bechdel embarks on a journey to unearth recurring patterns, derive meaning from seemingly mundane life events, and find ways to structure her non-linear narrative.

Finally, I will investigate the collaborative relationship between Bechdel and her mother in the creation of the memoir, as well as Bechdel's engagement with the concept of healing. Specifically, I will explore whether healing Bechdel's 'mother wound' also facilitates healing for both her mother and herself. To support this argument, I will analyze vignettes that demonstrate the creative collaboration between the mother and daughter, particularly in the realms of writing and editing. This analysis will highlight how their co-production enables a deeper understanding of the self and the other. Building upon the notion of creative collaboration, I will then examine the potential for liberation within this collaborative process, seeking to understand the possibilities of collaborative healing. Bechdel effectively utilizes the visual format to illustrate the complex and intertwined experiences of emotional wounds, memory, temporal complexities, creative co-production, and ultimately, relational healing.

## **MOTHER WOUND**

This section begins by defining 'mother wound' and discussing its characteristics. Subsequently, I proceed to examine the complex and contradictory nature of the mother-daughter relationship within Bechdel's memoir, substantiating my claims through a multitude of illustrative instances. By doing so, I argue that Bechdel's memoir, *Are You My Mother?* serves as a testament to her personal struggle stemming from a wound inflicted by her mother's dearth of attention, affection, and appre-

ciation.

When *Fun Home* (2006) was published, it was hailed as “the most ingeniously compact, hyper-verbose example of autobiography to have been produced. It is a pioneering work, pushing two genres (comics and memoir) in multiple new directions, with panels that combine the detail and technical proficiency of R. Crumb with a seriousness, emotional complexity, and innovation completely its own” (Wilsey 2006). However, six years later, when Bechdel published her second memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, it received a mixed reception: “Its tone is therapized and flat. There’s no real narrative. Mixed in are multiple undigested chunks of text from writers like Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and Alice Miller” (Garner 2012). The crucial distinction is that *Are You My Mother?* intentionally lacks a “real narrative” because Bechdel is seeking to recall, examine, comprehend, and narrate a wound (here, the “mother wound”) while simultaneously navigating a difficult relationship with her mother. The narrative therefore is complicated and non-linear. This is evident in her interview with Katie Roiphe: “I feel ridiculous complaining about my mother. She was like a pretty good mother; well, maybe she was not. It’s such a huge taboo to say anything bad about your mother” (Interview, Strand Book Store 2012: 16:01).

Psychologist Sherry Gaba, in her contribution to the popular online platform, *Psychology Today* delineates the concept of the mother wound as “a deficit in the mother-daughter or mother-son relationships that is passed down through generations, and is a reflection on how we have experienced parenting and how we parent” (Gaba 2019). She notes that children who have been raised by mothers grappling with alcoholism, substance addiction, untreated or undiagnosed mental disorders, or those who exhibit a general emotional aloofness and diminished attentiveness towards their offspring may struggle with the mother wound”(ibid). She asserts that adults who are dealing with a “mother wound” often look back on their childhood and can identify issues such as: “[c]oncerns about not being loved by their mother or not being loved as much as other siblings or family members, difficulties in relating to the mother on an emotional level, always trying to do better or to be perfect, to attempt to gain your mother’s attention and acceptance and feelings of having to protect, care for, or shelter your mother rather than her protecting, caring for and sheltering you” (Gaba 2019). Another recent, more comprehensive definition was put forward by psychologist and writer Bethany Webster in *Healing the Inner Mother* (2021). She identifies four kinds of mother wounds— personal, cultural, spiritual and planetary, of which the first two are relevant for examining Bechdel’s relationship with her mother: (i) personal mother wound refers to a “set of internalized limiting beliefs and patterns that originate from the early dynamics with our mothers that causes problems in many areas of our adult lives, impacting how we see ourselves, one another, and our potential” (Webster 2021:24), and (ii) cultural mother wound, which refers to “[t]he systemic devaluation of women in most aspects of patriarchal cultures, rooted in colonization, that has come to dominate much of the world, and the dysfunctional imbalance in the world as a result” (ibid).

Although Bechdel never uses the term ‘mother wound’, she constructs a narrative that exemplifies the symptoms of the wound throughout her account of growing up as Helen Bechdel’s daughter. She does so to work through the pain of the experience (the concept of ‘working through’ is discussed in detail later) and heal from the traumatism. The mother wound theory suggests that “[f]or some women, healing the ‘mother wound’ will bring them closer to their mothers, and for others, it will create more distance. One cannot know at the outset which way it will go. Nevertheless, in either case, the

healing and empowerment of the daughter is the primary result” (Webster 2021: 26). However, in the case of Bechdel’s memoir, the notion of healing is not as straightforward as a climactic reconciliation, but rather intricate and convoluted. Bechdel embarks on writing the memoir to express her profound love for her mother (Interview, Strand Book Store 2012: 10:31) and to endeavor to address her ‘mother wound’ of yearning for validation and approval from her mother. Although her memoir does not elicit the desired approval from her mother, it does not lead to increased alienation or detachment. Instead, there appears to be an indirect, unspoken contentment fostered by the memoir. The experience not only facilitates the daughter’s healing but also, to some extent, that of the mother, as elucidated in the final section on creative collaboration and relational healing.

The initial mention of ‘therapy’ by Bechdel coincides with a reference to her mother: “I’ve been in therapy my entire adult life and have not laid my deeply felt emotions about my mother to rest” (Bechdel 2012:18). In the panel, she is depicted sitting across from her therapist, Carol, and assumes a slouched posture with arms crossed over her abdomen, akin to tending to a stomachache, except this time it pertains to a psychological wound. Her physical stance represents a traumatic wound imprinted on her psyche. Another time, Bechdel forges a maternal attachment with her therapist (later, analyst) Jocelyn. After her first session, she writes in her journal, “I want Jocelyn to be my mother” (Bechdel 2012:51), indicating that Bechdel’s longing for a maternal connection with her therapist entails a desire for a role reversal in which her inner child can heal and be nurtured. Bechdel recounts to Jocelyn the game of the ‘crippled child’ that she used to play with her mother, which she devised after feeling envious of the disabled children she encountered at the hospital where she received corrective shoes as a child. In this case, envy is linked to the yearning for the attention bestowed upon these children by their caregivers, a form of attention that Bechdel lacked in her own life. Pretending to be a crippled child served as her means of attracting her mother’s attention, a form of attention that was otherwise absent from her life (Bechdel 2012:19-20).

In *Graphic Women* (2010), Hillary Chute argues that trauma is thought of as repetition, and one might perceive the force of comics as an act of visual repetition (Chute 2010:182). This notion holds true in the narrative presented by Bechdel, wherein she repeatedly revisits the memory of her mother abruptly ceasing to kiss her when she was seven years old. In another instance, Helen refused to hug or kiss Bechdel as she left home for college: “Mom and I didn’t hug or kiss goodbye. We hadn’t touched in years” (Bechdel 2012:219). The memoir also includes a scene where a young Bechdel is taken aback when asked if she loves her mother.— “my family never talked about love. I’m quite certain no one had ever said that they loved me. But instantly, I knew that all I wanted was to assure her that I loved her. I had to be careful how I replied, though. Too enthusiastic, I’d seem disingenuous. Too slow, and I might miss my chance forever. Now I see that no degree of sincerity or alacrity on my part would have sufficed” (Bechdel 2012:87). Accompanying this text is an illustration, depicted as a full-page splash (figure 1), which employs a high-angle framing technique.

This framing positions the viewer’s perspective above the subject of the frame, creating a sense of looking down upon the scene. The illustration portrays Helen seated on what resembles a therapist’s couch, while Bechdel stands nearby, conveying a feeling of overwhelming powerlessness. This illustration bears resemblance to the panels in which Bechdel later depicts her interactions with her therapist, as they face each other directly. However, in these latter panels, Bechdel is able to freely express herself, unlike the earlier depiction where she appears almost speechless when confronted with her

mother's inquiry about her love for her. These instances of diminished physical contact and emotional intimacy suggest a deepening of the maternal wound.



Figure 1: Helen Bechdel and Alison Bechdel.  
From *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel (86). Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

Likewise, Bechdel candidly reveals a significant aspect of the “mother wound” during a therapy session with Jocelyn (figure 2). She confesses, “I always call her, she never calls me. 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...It's like I am the mother" (Bechdel 2012:62). This lack of reciprocity in their relationship indicates a heightened experience of emotional pain. Bethany Webster describes this dynamic as a dysfunctional form of emotional "enmeshment," wherein the mother utilizes her daughter as a narcissistic tool to redirect attention and praise back to herself, leaving the daughter overwhelmed by her mother's needs (Webster 2021).

The extent of this enmeshment becomes more apparent when Bechdel acknowledges her desire to impress her mother with her memoir draft while simultaneously fearing her mother's negative reaction to its anger (Bechdel 2012:10). This internal conflict serves as a symptom of the "mother wound," wherein the daughter's sense of self-worth and decision-making is contingent upon receiving acceptance from her mother (Webster 2021).

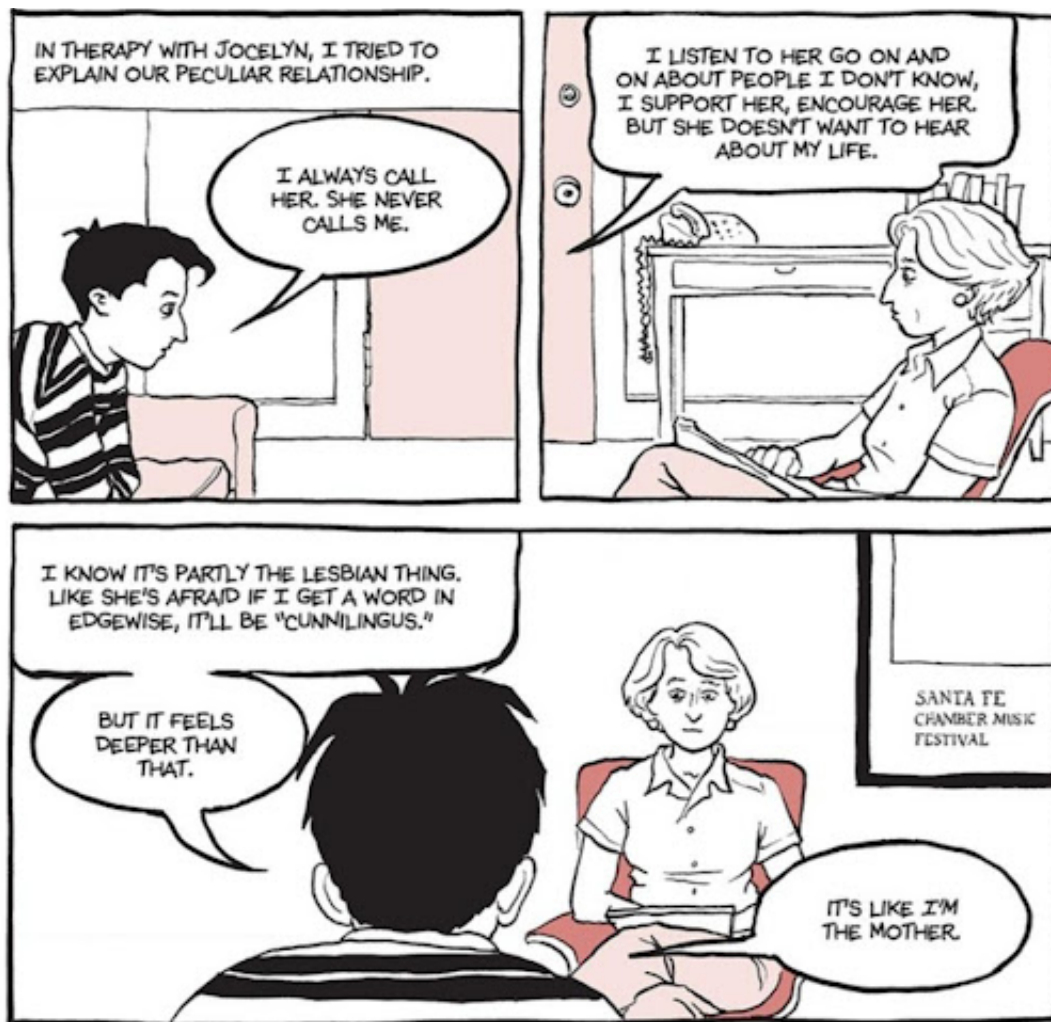


Figure 2: Alison Bechdel in a therapy session with Jocelyn.  
From *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel (62). Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

Emma Lieber suspects this enmeshment as she poses the following inquiry in her examination of Bechdel's literary works: "does one speak of the father—in all of his impossibility, in all of his melancholy, in all his resonance with oneself, peas in a pod, as different can be—to explain him, to exorcize him, to honor him, but also to have a way, years later, to speak finally about the mother?" (Lieber 2020: 17). Consequently, the memoir's dedication, "to my mother, who knows who she is," bears significant weight, as it serves as an endeavor to comprehend Bechdel's complex relationship with her mother, rather than a pursuit of understanding the mother herself. By examining this relationship within the framework of wounding and collaborative creativity, one can delve into inquiries regarding healing.

## SELF-PICTURING 'WORKING THROUGH'

This section will examine the manner in which Bechdel engages in the act of portraying her psyche's 'invisible suffering' and depicting the challenging experience of undergoing therapy. I begin by providing a definition of the terms 'working through' and 'graphic medicine,' followed by an analysis of how Bechdel captures, through intricate illustrations, her process of working through her mother wound. I contend that by visually representing her ordeal of suffering, seeking assistance, and recovering, Bechdel showcases the profound understanding that can be derived from interweaving personal reflections on trauma, memory, and illness with a comprehensive visual element. Furthermore, Bechdel's memoir broadens the horizons of the field of graphic medicine as she exemplifies the possibilities that the visual format presents for addressing the intricate, repetitive, and non-linear expressions of trauma and memory. Her practice of depicting her suffering through the juxtaposition of words, images, colors, speech bubbles, angles, and panel sizes, despite the absence of physical injuries, assumes great significance in portraying sufferings that lack overt physical manifestations.

Let me begin by defining 'working through': although it operates within multiple theoretical fields, I refer to the delineations of working through as outlined by Sigmund Freud and Dominick LaCapra. : "Freud used the term *durcharbeiten* or, in its nominal form, *Durcharbeitung*, to describe a repetitive, lengthy psychic process – or work – during which the resistances affecting a patient are overcome, at least partly" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1967 as cited in Ganteau 2020). Freud explains: "This working-through of the resistances may, in practice, turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst. Nevertheless, it is part of the work which affects the greatest changes in the patient, and which distinguishes analytic treatment from any kind of treatment by suggestion." (Freud 1950:155–156). I argue that Bechdel uses writing and drawing, aided by therapy, as a tool to "work through" her "mother wound." However, as the definition of working through suggests, there is no assurance of attaining a gratifying resolution or achieving full closure and reconciliation.

In 2007, Dr Ian Williams coined the term 'Graphic Medicine'. The concept derives from the conviction that comics can offer an engaging, powerful, and accessible method of delivering illness narratives. It combines "the principles of narrative medicine with an exploration of the visual systems of comic art, interrogating the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium" (Williams 2015:127). Moreover, Graphic Medicine is a countercultural antithesis to the dogmatism of medical knowledge. It originated with the intention of giving voice to the marginalized community of sufferers and caregivers, representing their lived experiences. These experiences, which were previously invalidated by the established medical system, are now being creatively and effectively



expressed through patient and caregiver narratives. Therefore, Graphic Medicine can be understood as a transformative movement that challenges the prevailing scholarly approaches in healthcare. It offers a more comprehensive and inclusive outlook on medicine, illness, disability, caregiving, and receiving care (Squier, 2015,2, as cited in Venkatesan & Peter, 2019). Furthermore, Williams examines three approaches to depicting illness: 'The Manifest,' 'The Concealed,' and 'The Invisible.' The first and second categories involve portrayals of conditions where the signs of illness or scars are visibly marked on the body or intermittently present, while the third category refers to conditions where psychological suffering outweighs physical stigmata (Williams 2015:119). For the purpose of my analysis, I will focus on the third category, where the signs of illness are not inscribed on the skin but give rise to psychological suffering - specifically, mental illness and distress. In its essence, Bechdel's memoir serves as a testament to the field of graphic medicine and the richness that art possesses in unraveling the intricacies and subjectivities of both illness and the healthcare experience. To exemplify this, it should be noted that individuals who have never undergone therapy may inadvertently overlook the clinical aspects involved. Bechdel adeptly portrays her therapy sessions, which later transition into analysis, with a meticulous attention to detail. These depictions showcase Bechdel in various postures, such as hunching over or resting her face in her hands, while positioned in front of her psychotherapist (Bechdel 2012: 64, 71, 97, 216, 217). Additionally, she portrays herself reclining on a couch, facing away from the psychoanalyst (Bechdel 2012: 21, 152, 279). Each instance further reinforces the notion that psychoanalysis is geared towards establishing a long-term association. Similarly, Bechdel articulates the anguish that individuals suffering from mental distress may undergo when they are compelled to re-experience their traumatic experiences with each subsequent therapist. In the process of transitioning from Jocelyn to Carol, she documented her frustration, stating, "[i]t was sometimes frustrating, starting from scratch with a new therapist, retreading ground I felt I'd covered with Jocelyn a decade earlier" (Bechdel 2012:129).

Bechdel employs visual representation as a means to comprehend, scrutinize, and construct a narrative surrounding the subjective encounters that arise from the therapeutic process. Shoshana Magnet notes that "[r]ather than being filled with profound insights and moments of exciting, emotional discovery, Bechdel's memoir shows how the process of therapy is often filled with the banal and petty details of one's life, details that, when examined from multiple angles repetitively, again and again, can reveal emotional truths" (Magnet 2017: 217). Bechdel illustrates numerous instances of realization that Bechdel experienced while navigating her fears, thoughts, memories, and dreams during therapy sessions. For instance, Alison's attempt to make sense of her mother's refusal to kiss her goodbye is also one of processing emotions of shame and guilt. During this interaction, Alison is depicted as seated on a couch, with her back slouched, one arm resting across her lap, and the other placed upon her forehead. Across from her is Jocelyn, her therapist, who is seated on the same couch, holding a writing pad on her lap. Alison confesses to Jocelyn about a drawing she made at the age of seven—a depiction of a doctor cleaning a young girl's genitalia, accompanied by the caption. "Doctor cleaning a little girl's tee-tee place" (Bechdel 2012:143). Subsequently, when her mother discovers the drawing and expresses a desire to discuss it with Bechdel, she experiences shame and fear, leading her to retreat and isolate herself in her room. During therapy, she contemplates the notion that this particular incident may have prompted her mother to cease kissing her goodnight, as she is told, "you're too old to be kissed goodnight anymore" (Bechdel 2012:144). In the psychotherapy session, Bechdel admits to feeling immense shame about the incident; illustrated by her posture and dialogue "I'm still like, frozen with shame about it/ what a little pervert" (figure 3) (Bechdel 2012:145).



Figure 3: Alison Bechdel in a therapy session with Jocelyn.  
From *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel (145). Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

In this particular instance, Bechdel engages in a process of narrativization, wherein she not only comes to a realization but also describes the process of working through her emotions and thoughts in order to derive meaning from them. The use of a visual format in her work serves to accentuate this process of meaning-making within the context of therapy, as it provides insights into the inner workings of Bechdel's wounded psyche. Furthermore, this incident serves to highlight the mother's failure to acknowledge and validate Bechdel's natural childhood curiosity regarding the human body without attaching any sexual connotations to it. Rather than being a moment of open and secure communication and learning about the body, the incident becomes associated with shame when the mother withdraws and refuses to engage in a discussion about it. Additionally, Bechdel's utilization of the visual format serves to expose the ineffable nature of confronting and working through complex, unpleasant, and deeply personal subjective experiences.

In an interview with Adam R Critchfield and Jack Pula (2015), Bechdel says: "My relationship with my mother was my fundamental template for all my other relationships[...], And my point of access to all of that was Donald Winnicott. There was something incredibly appealing to me in his ideas about what is going on between the mother and the baby that felt very reparative to me. I felt very seen and understood by Donald Winnicott and that in turn made me want to understand these elusive concepts that he was talking about". (Critchfield & Pula 2015:404).

Alison Bechdel uses pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's object relations theory to unpack the effect that her early childhood experiences had on her later life and relationships and identify the moments of wounding between her mother and her past infant self. Chase Gregory observes that Winnicottian concepts "provide a blueprint both for the structure of the novel and for the structure Alison imposes on her own life to make sense of her many neuroses" (Gregory 2019:76). She uses Winnicott's writing as a tool to work through and better understand her subjectivity and her

relationship with the mother.

Bechdel's use of the graphic format gives us an insight into how the experience of trauma, memory and healing are non-linear and complex in their temporal manifestation. She combines various plots, including her life, her mother's life, and her father's life, and also offers glimpses into the imagined lives of Winnicott and Woolf, among others. Her demonstration reveals that the endeavor to comprehend oneself is not a linear process transpiring in isolation. Instead, it is an intersubjective encounter embedded with numerous temporal complexities. *Are You My Mother?* incorporates visuals, re-drawn photographs, speech balloons, thought balloons, captions, descriptions, and quotes that encapsulate both the present and the past, thereby showcasing the intricate non-linear attributes of memory and trauma that necessitate the labor of recollection, analysis, and visualization to comprehend one's emotional wounds. Chute (2010) argues that women's graphic narratives today are often traumatic because "the cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register, which is central to its importance as an innovative genre of life writing" (Chute 2010, 2). In other words, the graphic format serves as a suitable medium for Bechdel to artistically depict her subjective individual experience and transition from one traumatic memory to another without the constraints of a chronological structure. In the *Wall Street Journal* interview (2012), Bechdel said, "I needed the graphic format, the grammar of the narrative; to manage all these strands...the (plot) jumps around in chronology, like one second I'm an infant, next I am 50 years old and on the phone with my mother." Again, speaking to *Harvard Gazette* (2022), she said, "So much of writing for me is ... figuring out how to sequence things, how to figure out what comes next in the story or argument. And I find that it's only by engaging in that process that I learn what the story is about or what I'm trying to say" (The *Harvard Gazette*, 2022). This approach of portraying life events in a non-linear manner allows the reader to acquire a multi-dimensional and intimate comprehension of the narrative.

Here is an example of how effective the graphic format is in visualizing complex temporality in storytelling and allows for a richer, more deliberate engagement with one's self and wounds: in chapters 5 and 6, a sequence of images is recurrent, each one progressively more comprehensive: Alison Bechdel, in her early twenties, conversing with her mother over the telephone. It is one of the first times, Bechdel discusses the news of a book contract for a volume of *Dykes to Watch Out For*. However, Helen responds with apprehensions, "Isn't that a rather narrow scope?" / "I mean, won't it limit what you can do next?" / "You're not going to use your real name, are you?" / "I would love to see your name on a book, but not on a book of lesbian cartoons." The conversation devastates Bechdel ("This knocked the wind out of me"). After almost 47 pages, another image emerges: this time, the panel portrays Alison having just ended the call with her mother, who persistently tried to convince her to publish the 'lesbian cartoons' under a pseudonym ("But what if someone recognizes your name?") The agony caused by her mother's emotional unavailability and Bechdel's sense of shame are vividly depicted in the image of Alison's posture (leaning on a table with her hand on the phone) and sobbing. The whole scene occupies sixteen different panels across three pages. The image of her hunched over, visibly wailing with her mouth open, is a large image occupying two tiers of a three-tier page, emphasizing the magnitude of the wound (figure 4 (a)).

Most enriching is, however, what happens after another three pages— the image recurs, only this time, Bechdel is staging the scene. We can see a Canon camera on the lower-right panel taking a photograph of her in a hunched posture (figure 4 (b)). The next panel shows Bechdel investigating the image (possibly in preparation for drawing them in the memoir). In short, Bechdel uses the

graphic format to self-picture her suffering and work through by posing, staging, and visualizing in the present, events of the past to understand her own wounding. The medium of comics allows for the incorporation of non-linearity, seamless integration of flashbacks, dreams, and the juxtaposition of events, avoiding any sense of disjointedness. As readers, we are granted access to Bechdel's complicated emotional life, which provides us with an understanding of the intricate and recurring temporal manifestations of trauma and memory. Ultimately, Bechdel's memoir provides an opportunity for a deeply engrossing encounter in which individuals affected by imperceptible psychological ailments, distress, intergenerational trauma, emotional wounding and suffering can discover comfort and affirmation within the confines of the numerous panels.



Figure 4 (a): Alison Bechdel after a conversation with her mother.  
From *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel (229). Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

## CREATIVE COLLABORATION AND RELATIONAL HEALING

This section looks at how Bechdel co-produces the memoir with her mother. This process allows Bechdel to critically reevaluate her relationship with her mother and discard the notion of assigning blame to her. The creative partnership enables the mother to perceive herself through the lens of her daughter's narrative, resulting in her acceptance and admiration of Bechdel as an individual separate from herself, who fulfills both the roles of her daughter and a writer.

Bechdel introduces 'writing' and 'mother' together in the first chapter, presenting them as inherently intertwined in her life. This is iterated in *The Writing Cure* (2020), where Emma Lieber identifies that Alison Bechdel received from her mother "along with nutrients of all sorts, language" making her

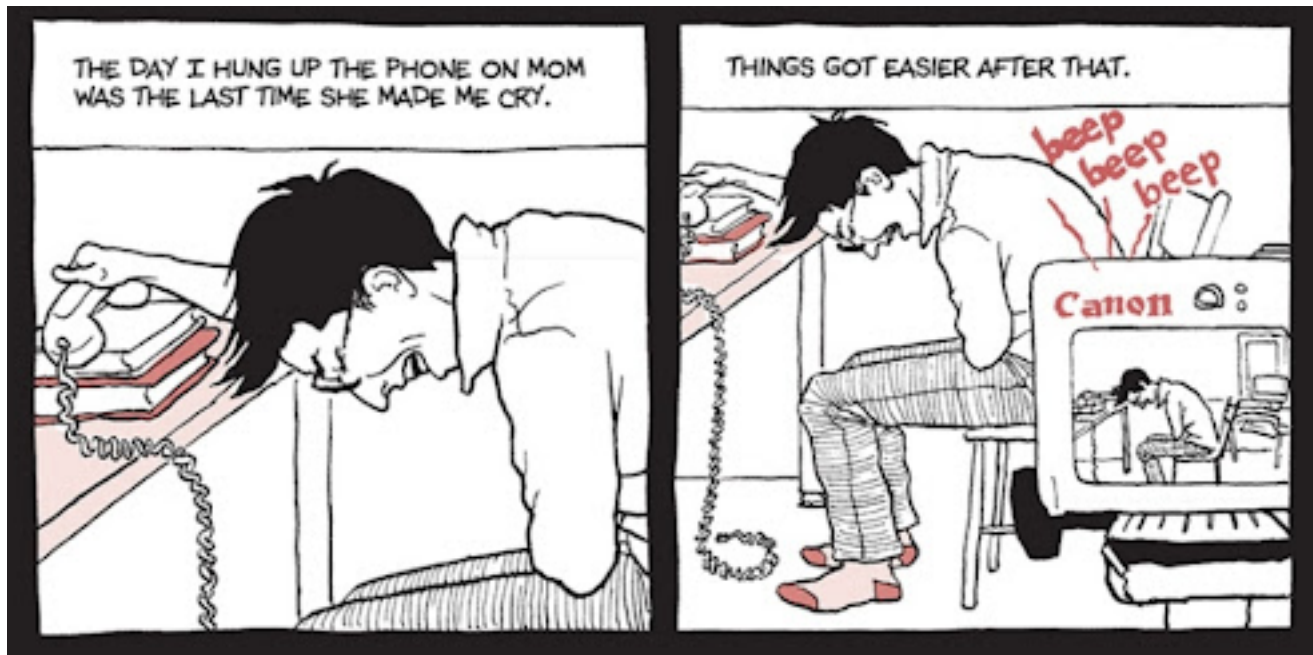


Figure 4 (b): Alison Bechdel staging to illustrate the distress she felt after her conversation with her mother. From *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel (233).  
Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

“well-positioned to tell this story, perhaps more self-consciously than most” (Lieber 2020: 13). Bechdel’s initial foray into writing took the form of diaries, which later paved the way for her transformation into a memoirist. In her earlier memoir *Fun Home*, Bechdel highlights how her father gifted her a journal, thereby initiating her into the world of writing. However, during a period in her life marked by the severity of her Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Bechdel’s mother took charge and assumed the responsibility of transcribing her thoughts into her journal each night. This unique collaboration provided Bechdel with a sense of solace and tranquility, as she fondly recalls the rarity of receiving her mother’s undivided attention. She says, “getting her undivided attention was a rare treat. It felt miraculous actually— like persuading a hummingbird to perch on your finger” (Bechdel 2012:13). The extent of Bechdel’s mother’s inattentiveness, as perceived by the author, is underscored by her comparison to the arduous task of coaxing a hummingbird to perch delicately upon one’s finger.

However, the exercise of writing together becomes an association that extends into her adult writing life, with her mother ultimately becoming the force—the editor and critic who enriches her memoir writing. Here, the mother takes on the role of an “editorial voice” (figure 5), becoming, in an informal way, the co-author of the memoir. This experience of writing together serves a therapeutic purpose. For instance, Bechdel observes that Helen’s comments are “excellent” but “pertained strictly to matters of style” (Bechdel 2012:193). This reveals a dimension of healing — Helen allows Bechdel to write about their relationship based on her own understanding and perception, entrusting her daughter with the overall narrative and content of the memoir, and only offers commentary on the style, despite previously expressing criticism by stating: “the self has no place in good writing” (Bechdel 2012: 200). Helen’s ability to simultaneously accept Bechdel as the author in control of her own narrative

while nurturing Bechdel's inner child by providing suggestions is indicative of a restorative connection. Initially, the act of diary writing and subsequently memoir writing becomes the means by which they can be most intimately connected emotionally and physically with each other.

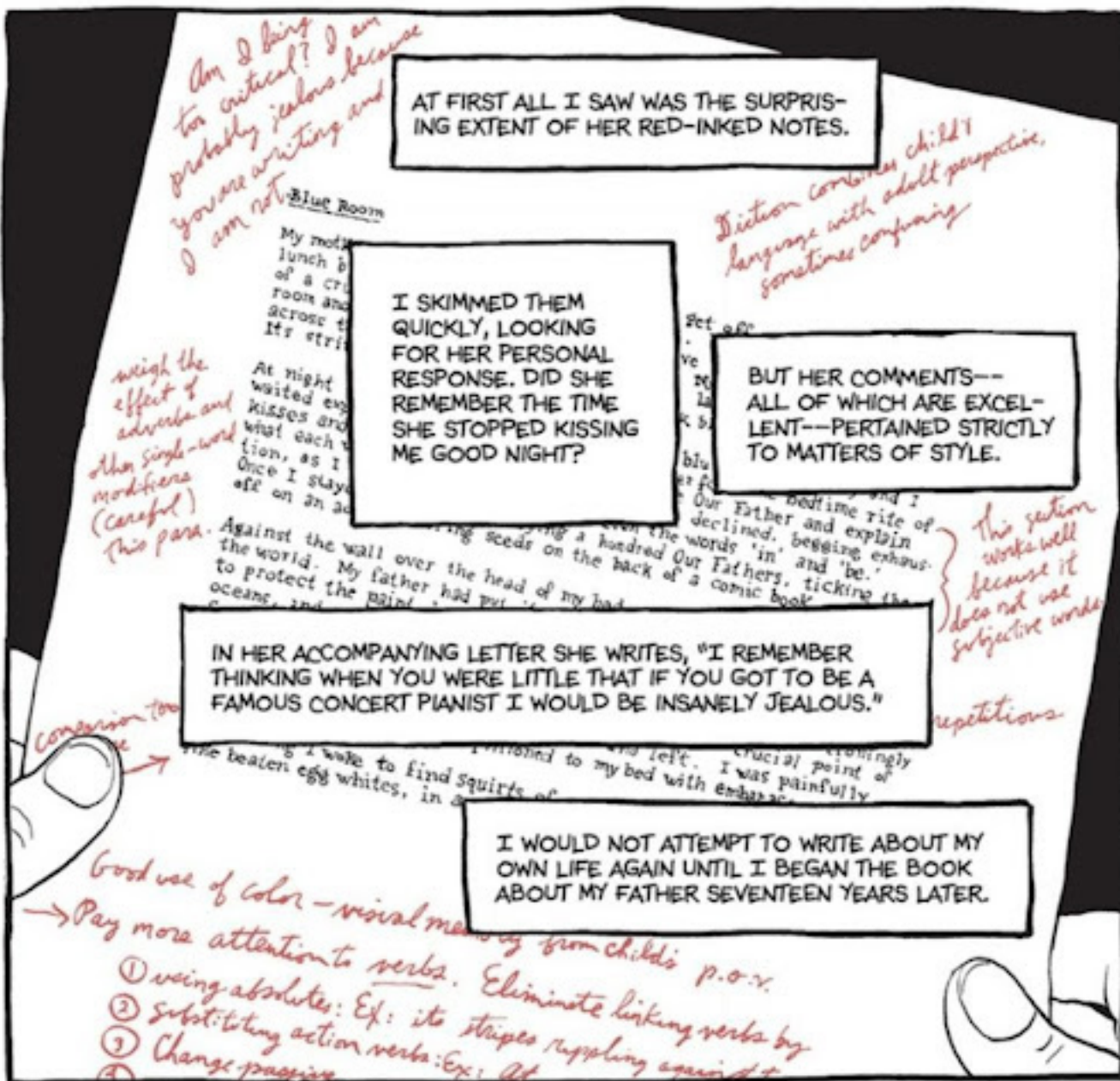


Figure 5: Helen Bechdel's comments for Alison's draft.

From Are You My Mother? by Alison Bechdel (193). Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel.

Though it is easier to blame the mother for her lack of attention and care for her daughter, Bechdel opts to envision and analyze their shared history. She discovers that as an infant, despite her mother's strict breastfeeding schedule, she was underweight and had to transition to bottle-feeding after six weeks. She refers to this incident as "our failure" that "must have been deeply frustrating for both

of us." She infers that a "pre-emptive rejection could have been set in motion" causing each to "withhold in order to foreclose future rejection" (Bechdel 2012:60). She acknowledges that her mother is a highly capable, good enough mother (Bechdel 2012: 9). This admittance comes from a deeper knowledge of how "systemic forms of discrimination limit parents' abilities" (Magnet 2017:217). Kellond too argues that the wounds of the mother "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 a male-dominated society." This refusal to assign blame is once again apparent when Bechdel declares to Carol (her psychoanalyst): "You are facilitating my healing" (Bechdel 2012:82)—the same Carol who had previously asserted in a therapy session that Bechdel was writing the book to heal her mother. This connection between writing to heal the other and experiencing personal healing further demonstrates that Bechdel never intended the memoir to serve as a medium to place blame. Instead, Bechdel depicts an alternative possibility in which both the mother and the daughter played a role in the emotional distance that emerged, rather than solely attributing blame to the mother.

Despite her disapproval of Bechdel's work and sexuality, Helen ultimately helps Bechdel all through her professional life, demonstrating that the experience of extending care is subjective and often influenced by one's inter-subjective relation to the other— she gives her daughter old love letters written by her late husband, consenting to the use of it as material for the book, reads and edits chapters of the memoir, offers criticism and feedback, and financially supports her when she struggles to make a living from her lesbian comic strip, even though she believes that it would bring a bad name to the family. Bechdel reveals to Ben Greenman, "I developed some empathy and compassion for my parents and their erratic parenting techniques because they were creative people who wanted to do other things, and that's okay[...] In a way, my book about my mother is complaining that she didn't pay more attention to me. Still, she demonstrated so wonderfully how to pursue one's own creative life like that is a much more useful gift than any kind of immediate attention." (BAMorg 2015: 18:13)

As the memoir ends, the daughter and mother reconcile over their shared wounds. What began as "I can't help you, you are on your own" (Bechdel 2012:9) by Helen becomes "Christian wrecking my garage, and Bechdel is wrecking my life" (Bechdel 2012: 165) and "the self has no place in good writing" (Bechdel 2012:200), to finally "it has clear themes, it's a meta book" (Bechdel 2012: 285). She reads out a portion of an essay to Bechdel that affirms her as a writer— "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" (Bechdel 2012: 283). Bechdel notes this transition: "At last, I have destroyed my mother, and she has survived my destruction" (Bechdel 2012: 285). This idea that the subject must destroy the object, but the object must survive indicates a reconstruction or reorientation that offers a direction of healing. Although Bechdel's formulation sounds paradoxical, this paradox implies the incomplete and relative nature of healing.

Speaking at the Graduate Center at CUNY, Alison Bechdel reveals, "[my] mother was very upset when I started drawing *Dykes to Watch Out For* under my own name. But she came around over the years even though I went on to write these very intimate stories exposing her personal life to the world at large, she somehow understood...she respected that I needed to do this on some level and that was a tremendous gift from her." (The Graduate Center: 2015: 1:00:45). Towards the end of her memoir, Bechdel revisits a childhood memory of a game called the "crippled child," that Blanco (2021) argues was the "first time (Bechdel) started "writing" (or making up stories), and the experience was special because her mother went along with the pretense" (Blanco 2021: 44) by giving her imaginary leg

braces and special shoes (a way out) resulting the “crippled child” to heal (“I think I can get up now”) while acknowledging the mother’s own wounds (“she could see my invisible wounds because they were hers too”) (Bechdel 2012: 287). The memoir ends with, “there was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. There is a lack, a void. But in its place, she has given me something else. Something I would argue is far more valuable. She has given me the way out” (Bechdel 2012:288). Bechdel inherits her mother’s love for language, which she utilizes as a strategy to express her own emotional pain. Through their creative collaboration, Helen and Alison view each other not only as mother and daughter but also as fellow creatives. Their collaboration facilitates a form of healing that is ongoing and relational in nature. Bechdel’s book exposes the landscape of personal and familial dysfunction and wounding, while also highlighting the potential for collaboration and healing for both the self and the other.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have examined Alison Bechdel’s memoir *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* from the perspectives of literary trauma narratives, graphic medicine, and the potential for relational healing through creative collaboration. In doing so, I have explored the concepts of “working through” and “mother wound.” I contend that Bechdel grapples with a mother wound where her role as a daughter is inverted, and she finds herself assuming the role of a mother to her own mother. Writing and drawing become her mechanisms for comprehending herself and her relationship with her mother. Bechdel invites readers into her therapy sessions and visually portrays her traumas, allowing them to witness and grasp the process of psychological recovery. By self-picturing her experiences of wounding and the arduous journey of seeking and receiving care, Bechdel constructs a non-linear and complex narrative that provides insights into the experiences of suffering that lack physical manifestations. Through her engagement with these intersubjective networks of creative collaboration and therapy, Bechdel separates herself from her mother and finds meaning in the experiences that caused her wounds. This paves the way for relational healing for both herself and her mother.

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