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WILD HORSES: Gender Performativity and Non-Belonging in *The House on Mango Street* and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

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“A forma do cavalo representa o que há de melhor no ser humano.

Tenho um cavalo dentro de mim que raramente se exprime.”

(Clarice Lispector, *Seco Estudo de Cavalos*)

Abstract

This research aims to comparatively analyze the gender performance and sense of non-belonging in relation to Esperanza and Alison, protagonists, respectively, of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. I claim that Esperanza and Alison experience the same feeling of non-belonging, which is heavily influenced by their gender performances that deviate from the compulsory norms of their communities, even if they come from different backgrounds, and challenge gender roles in their own unique ways. While Esperanza, as a Chicana, attempts to reconcile her heritage to whom she wishes to become, Alison defies her father's ideals to live truthfully according to her own beliefs and wishes. To achieve the stated objective, I rely not only on theories of non-belonging and gender performativity, but also on the concept of subjectivity. Before comparing Esperanza and Alison, I also make an individual analysis of each character to understand them as subjects and unique individuals. This study shows that the two characters choose to act in different ways in dissonance from the heterosexual matrix, especially in what concerns their gender performance, which makes them be perceived as unusual by those on their surroundings. Moreover, they share a conflicted feeling of (non-)belonging, but only Alison is able to eventually find by the end of her narrative a community to which she feels she belongs.

Key-words: non-belonging, gender performance, subjectivity, Sandra Cisneros, Alison Bechdel, comparative studies.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo analisar comparativamente a performance de gênero e o senso de não-pertencimento de Esperanza e Alison, protagonistas, respectivamente, de *The House on Mango Street*, de Sandra Cisneros, e *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, de Alison Bechdel. Alego que Esperanza e Alison experienciam o mesmo sentimento de não-pertencimento, que é fortemente influenciado por suas performances de gênero que desviam das normas compulsórias de suas comunidades, ainda que elas tenham diferentes vivências e desafiem os papéis de gênero cada qual de sua maneira. Enquanto Esperanza, como Mexicana-Americana, tenta conciliar sua herança cultural com a pessoa que quer se tornar, Alison desafia os ideais de seu pai para viver de maneira verdadeira consigo mesma. Para alcançar o objetivo estabelecido, conto não somente com teorias de não-pertencimento e performatividade de gênero, mas também com o conceito de subjetividade. Antes de comparar Esperanza e Alison, também faço uma análise individual de cada personagem para entendê-las como sujeitos e indivíduos únicos. Este estudo mostra que as duas personagens escolhem agir, de formas diferentes, em dissonância da matriz heterossexual, especialmente no que concerne suas performances de gênero, que as fazem ser percebidas como incomuns por aqueles que as cercam. Além disso, elas compartilham um sentimento conflitante de (não-)pertencimento, mas somente Alison é capaz de encontrar, ao final de sua narrativa, uma comunidade a qual sente que pertence.

Palavras-chave: não-pertencimento, performance de gênero, subjetividade, Sandra Cisneros, Alison Bechdel, estudos comparativos.

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Introduction

“It’s really unnatural. Er... I mean, **unusual**.” (Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*)

Judith Butler states that “social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood . . . the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms” (*Undoing Gender* 2). Taking as a premise that gender is a social norm, as is further discussed in this study, most gendered desires of an individual are not necessarily born from within, but, rather, constructed by implicit conventions. Those desires that do not comply with the norms have limited viability and lead to deviant performances of gender. Protagonists, respectively, of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Esperanza and Alison put on performances that defy these conventions of gender, which both result in and are the result of their conflicted feelings of (non-)belonging.¹ Given this circumstance, the aim of this research is to make a comparative analysis of Esperanza’s and Alison’s gender performance and sense of non-belonging in order to understand how two women from distinct upbringings and social contexts, who challenge gender in contrasting ways, can experience the same feeling of non-belonging. I claim that, even coming from different backgrounds and challenging gender roles in their own unique ways, Esperanza and Alison share this conflicted sense of (non-)belonging, which is heavily influenced by the divergent performances of gender they choose to enact.

The only daughter in a family of seven children, poet and novelist Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago, in 1954. In her literary pieces, the author’s experience as a Mexican-American woman is shared by her protagonists, whose stories, despite fictional, relate to Cisneros’s

¹ In this research, these books also are referred to as *Mango Street* and *Fun Home*.

personal life. The sense of non-belonging that can be observed in her characters, for instance, is also experienced by the author, who has affirmed to be “always straddling two countries . . . but not belonging to either culture” (qtd. in Doyle, *Haunting* 54). Cisneros has admitted in an interview, as well, to write about themes that damaged her while growing up, such as abuse, which is “why [her] writing is always dealing with sexuality and wickedness” (Literary Hub, 2020). Along with *The House on Mango Street*, one her most notable works is *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, “A collection of stories whose characters give voice to the vibrant and varied life on both sides of the Mexican border.”² Besides her literary career, she has an academic background, having taught in institutions such as the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Currently, Cisneros lives in Mexico and is recognized as one of the most influential Chicana writers in the United States.³ Her groundbreaking work, that embodies characteristics of both prose and poetry, is commended for voicing the struggles of women of color, especially Chicanas, helping to present their perspective to a wider audience.

Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, one of the objects of this study, tells, in vignettes, a story about Esperanza, a Mexican-American girl who lives in Mango Street, a Hispanic community in Chicago, in a house she does not like, to where she moved with her family after living in many different places — some of which she cannot remember. As both protagonist and narrator, Esperanza expresses her own feelings about the lives of the women who surround her and the destiny that seems to await her, from which she wishes to escape. Her understanding of womanhood is constructed mostly from the expectations her family and community lay on her of what she should be and from her observations of women in her neighborhood. Esperanza, therefore, witnessing different forms of violence against the Mango

² www.sandracisneros.com/books

³ www.sandracisneros.com/mylifeandwork

Street women — and, eventually, being a victim herself —, associates these lives — which, to her, mirror the future she is supposed to follow — to Mango Street itself and her own heritage. The character's will to escape home, her identity as a Latina, and the gender norms that state how she, as a woman, should behave is a consequence of the sense of non-belonging Esperanza develops while growing up.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1960, Alison Bechdel started her career as an artist with the series of comic strips *Dykes to Watch Out For*, published from 1983 to 2008. Despite the humorous tone of the strips, one of Bechdel's jokes, known as the Bechdel test, became a metric used worldwide to analyze women's representation in movies: to pass the test, a movie must 1) contain at least two female characters that 2) talk to each other about 3) something other than a man.⁴ Bechdel is also recognized for her critically praised graphic memoirs *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* — that was awarded an Eisner trophy and was adapted into a Tony Award winning musical — and *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*. Bechdel, in her work, “is preoccupied with the overlap of the political and the personal spheres, the relationship of the self to the world outside”.⁵ It is noticeable in her comics, for instance, themes such as gender performance, sexuality and family relationships.

In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, an autobiographical graphic novel that also composes the *corpus* of this research, Alison Bechdel reflects about her father's death, her relationship with him, and the ways they both challenge gender and sexuality, as well as about her (lack of) attachment to home. Having grown up in a non-affectionate family, Alison also attempts to contemplate love and intimacy and analyze her parents' marriage and her own romantic experiences. The narrative comprises events that happened in different years and are told non-linearly. Alison, thereby, is able to go back and forth in her story in order to compile

⁴ In a 2015 interview to *Vulture*, Bechdel stated that the Bechdel test is “not conclusive or definitive. It's not meant as a serious metric [...] You can certainly have a feminist movie where there's only one woman — or no women.”

⁵ dykestowatchoutfor.com

enough evidence to support her several arguments about her father's life and her own; she believes, for instance, that they are inversions of each other in the sense that she denies performing femininity as a way to "compensate for something unmanly" (98) in him, while he forces femininity on her for it is his wish to perform it himself. Ultimately, *Fun Home* elucidates Alison's process of self-identification as a woman who does not comply with the expected gender performance, not only by being a lesbian — although her sexuality also defies the norms of womanhood — but by her refusal to belong in a gender prototype.

Despite the lack of critical works that relate *The House on Mango Street* to *Fun Home*, the pertinence of contrasting the two texts lies on their shared focus on female characters who challenge gender roles and who feel out of place in spaces in which they are supposed to belong. Moreover, an analysis of two characters who come from different backgrounds and have different experiences permits to discuss how women can undergo the same feeling of non-belonging for distinct reasons and in divergent ways, regardless of being part of the same group. Lack of belonging and gender defiance, however, are not the only similarities Alison and Esperanza share with each other. The autobiographical aspect of *Fun Home* is also present in *Mango Street*, even though Esperanza is a fictional character.⁶ In addition, Esperanza's need to escape the place she lives in is mirrored by Alison, who manages to leave her home in Beech Creek. Back home for her father's funeral, who she believes to have committed suicide, Alison thinks: "I'd kill myself too if I had to live here" (125). Notions of home and space, then, play an important role in both narratives.

Although the mentioned autobiographical aspect that can be found in the two novels is relevant to the analyzed stories, the personal lives of Cisneros and Bechdel are not within the

⁶ In the 10th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros reveals in the introduction that, initially, the novel was supposed to be a memoir, but it "evolved into a collective story peopled with several lives from [her] past and present, placed in one fictional time and neighborhood" ("Introduction" 5). Thus, despite no longer being a memoir, some of the events depicted in the novel were either experienced by the author or by people she knows.

scope of this study, i. e., the proposed research will investigate solely what is contained in the pages of *Mango Street* and *Fun Home*. The reason for this delimitation is that this study will examine two characters, Esperanza and Alison, as protagonists of works of fiction. Therefore, to understand how the characters are constructed, their motivations and their feelings, only the content of the two novels are pertinent, since what is beyond them cannot be used as literary evidence for theories about the characters.

Considering, thus, that the proposed analysis is centered on the referred characters, an understanding of notions of subjectivity is necessary in order to investigate each character's individuality. To investigate Esperanza and Alison is to examine them as subjects, to trace their identities from their beginning to what they become by the end of the texts. Since the characters are both first-person narrators, i. e., they tell their own stories, choosing what or not to include and deciding how to describe the events, even the narrative itself becomes an indication of their subjectivity. I consider the concept of subjectivity to investigate the central themes of this study: sense of non-belonging and gender performativity.

Subjectivity, as is further discussed, is deeply related to identity, and, according to Clayton Chin, so is belonging. The author states that, "while identity has been widely criticized as too broad and vague, belonging in critical social theory offers a complex and dynamic sense of identity that highlights its discursive, multiple and contested nature" (9). An analysis of Esperanza's and Alison's individualities allows an understanding of the complexity of their identities that causes the conflict in their sense of belonging.

Identity is also connected to the way gender relates to the being. According to Sandra R. G. Almeida, "the construction of an essentialist vision of the sexual difference that endorsed the belief in fixed identities based on alleged innate qualities" is due to the concept of gender that used to be "automatically connected to the concept of sex, in its biological connotation, as a univocal category that determined the roles of individuals in the society," which reinforced

“the conviction in female inferiority in counterpoint to male superiority” (20).⁷ It is only when the concept of gender starts “being conceived as an element that is social and culturally constructed by the relations between men and women” that identity loses its fixed status in relation to gender. Hereafter, identity and gender evolve as concepts until the theory of gender performativity, coined by Judith Butler and taken as a major concept in this research, is put forth, claiming that “gender is not from the order of the being, but of the action and the performance” (21).⁸ It is considering gender as performance that Esperanza’s and Alison’s relations to womanhood will be assessed in this study.

This investigation is guided by a general objective, which is to make a comparative analysis of Esperanza’s and Alison’s gender performance and sense of non-belonging in the novels *The House on Mango Street* and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, respectively. In the achievement of this goal, the following specific objectives are also pursued: a) to explore Esperanza’s and Alison’s identities as individual subjects; b) to describe in which ways gender and womanhood are challenged in each novel; c) to map textual evidence of Esperanza’s and Alison’s feeling of non-belonging; and d) to associate Esperanza’s and Alison’s gender performativity in face of gender expectations to the characters’ lack of belonging.

To fulfill its objectives, the proposed study, which is under the scope of gender studies — as it relies on Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which postulates that gender is not essence, but, rather, the constant repetition of a set of implicit and concealed social conventions — and comparative literature, consists on bibliographic research about the contemporary

⁷ Translation my own. In the original: “Corroborando essa visão dualista e tradicional dos espaços, o conceito de gênero por muito tempo esteve ligado automaticamente ao de sexo, em sua conotação biológica, como categoria unívoca que determinava os papéis dos indivíduos na sociedade, reforçando, assim, a convicção na inferioridade feminina em contraponto à superioridade masculina. Deu-se, dessa forma, a construção de uma visão essencialista da diferença sexual que endossava a crença em identidades fixas com base em qualidades supostamente inatas” (Almeida 20).

⁸ Translation my own. In the original: “o conceito de gênero passou a ser concebido como um elemento social e culturalmente construído das relações entre homens e mulheres . . . O texto de [Gayle] Rubin se torna . . . uma influente fonte para a teorização magistral de Judith Butler . . . sobre a noção de performatividade de gênero, segundo a qual o gênero não é da ordem do ser, mas sim da ação e da performance” (Almeida 21).

novels that compose the *corpus* and the concepts on which this investigation is based. It is composed of three chapters, besides this introduction and my final remarks.

In Chapter 1 - Challenging the Norm: Subjects Who are Out of Place, I draw a literature review about non-belonging, subjectivity, and gender performativity, with special focus on the works of Donald E. Hall and Judith Butler. I also contextualize the theories presented in the chapter in the narratives *Mango Street* and *Fun Home*. These theories are used as base for the close reading conducted in Chapter 2 – A Place Outside the Window and Chapter 3 – Odyssey to the Self, in which I conduct an analysis, respectively, of *Mango Street*'s Esperanza and *Fun Home*'s Alison to understand their subjectivity and individuality, as well as to acknowledge their unique performances of gender and their conflicted feelings of belonging. Moreover, I refer to other researchers' works on these narratives to support the arguments I propose. Finally, the concluding remarks of this study put together a comparative analysis of these characters and readdress the objectives, allowing me to confirm my hypothesis, that is, Esperanza and Alison, although coming from different upbringings and social contexts and challenging gender in contrasting ways, experience the same feeling of non-belonging.

It is expected that this research contributes to literary studies by contrasting two authors who are not often investigated together, but who share themes of relevance for contemporary discussions about gender and belonging. Considering, too, that the formal aspects of *Fun Home* and *The House on Mango Street* diverge from those of usual canonic literature — since the first is a graphic novel, also known as a comic book, and the latter, for being written in vignettes that may be read either individually or as part of a bigger story, does not follow the expected patterns of a narrative⁹ —, this research might also be pertinent to amplify academic production of different forms of literary texts.

⁹ As shown in Gravina (2021).

Chapter I: Challenging the Norm: Subjects Who are Out of Place

“The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process.” (Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*)

Notions of Non-belonging

The two literary works that compose the *corpus* of this research — Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* — have not previously been put together in a comparative literary analysis. Despite the lack of material that juxtaposes these two texts, they have been chosen for this analysis because of, not only, but mostly, two of the themes they share: the feeling of lack of belonging to a specific place or group of people, and the struggle or refusal to act according to gender norms. In other words, in this analysis, I will investigate Esperanza and Alison as individual subjects who share the feeling of non-belonging and who put on deviant performances of gender.

One theoretical challenge I need to address is the small amount of critical works that associate the concepts of gender performativity and non-belonging, for the latter is a term mostly used to describe the situation of immigrants and refugees. It is often related to people who are in a physical and cultural place of which they are not originally part and to which they can never fully belong because of their upbringing in another place in a different culture. Taking into account the definition of non-belonging I will adopt in this research, which will be

more detailed ahead, it is coherent to think about other types of belonging that also can lead subjects who do not conform to a certain group to social ostracism.

From the two characters investigated in this research, Esperanza is the one who better approaches the classic characteristics of a non-belonging being. As a child from a Mexican family who lives in a Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, USA, Esperanza is neither an immigrant nor a refugee, but, still, she struggles with her Chicana identity, not being fully Mexican nor fully American, and being, thereby, unable to completely fit in in either of the two cultures, but also feeling uncomfortable in this in-between place. In this sense, it would be possible to pursue a broader investigation of Esperanza's lack of belonging in relation to her Chicana identity, exploring in more detail aspects of the Mexican population in the USA in order to understand the ways in which a Mexican-American child, or, more specifically, a Mexican-American girl, is an out-of-place element wherever she stands. In this research, however, I choose to focus on one aspect of Esperanza's sense of non-belonging, which is the very characteristic that connects her to *Fun Home's* Alison: her refusal to perform gender in the way her community expects her to do. In *Mango Street*, Esperanza witnesses the women from her neighborhood go through different kinds of oppression by men, from psychological to physical violence, and, eventually, she becomes a victim of sexual abuse, an event that makes explicit that, despite Esperanza's efforts to run away from a destiny that she believes to await her, she is still a Mango Street girl. Her refusal to accept this fate, to belong to a group of women that have had their wildness tamed, is a crucial trait of Esperanza's personality, one that is also responsible for her out-of-placeness. The following passage — in which Esperanza summarizes the story of her great-grandmother, a woman she admires, a wild horse who has been tamed — exemplifies Esperanza's intention of escaping her apparent destiny:

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (Cisneros 10-11)

With that in mind, for the purpose of this research, I adopt the premise that Esperanza's deviant behavior in relation to her gender is strictly connected to her Chicana identity, for the gender roles she questions and, ultimately, refuses are the ones prescribed by her community, by the cultural mix of Mexico and the United States in that specific area of Chicago. For that reason, when discussing Esperanza's sense of non-belonging, it is not enough to consider only the space in-between where she is. It is also impossible to analyze her gender performance without locating her standpoint. I argue, therefore, that her gender performance is a consequence of her sense of non-belonging and a result of the attempt to reconcile her heritage to the woman she wants to become.

While Esperanza's story incorporates the discussion that is usually brought up by the term "non-belonging" — i. e., the lack of integration to a single country felt by people who are placed between two cultures —, the same does not happen with Alison. The protagonist of *Fun Home* is born in the USA and has an American family, which means that, unlike Esperanza, she does not struggle between two cultures. In other words, her sense of non-belonging has nothing to do with her Americanness. Still, in the comic book pages, Alison expresses the

feeling of sticking out because of, among other features such as her obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), her deviant performance of gender. Hence, the connection between Esperanza and Alison explored in this research lies in the similar way they speak about not belonging somewhere, and in the reason for that lack of belonging: their performances of womanhood that do not meet the standard.

Thus, for the purpose of this work, I consider “non-belonging” not as a term used specifically for the struggles of immigrants, but I use it to refer to the general feeling one has of not being part of a place or a group. More specifically, in relation to Esperanza and Alison, I adopt the concept of gender non-belonging, not meaning that they do not identify themselves as the gender they are assigned to be — since neither of them is transgender —, but that they both act in dissonance to what each of their communities expect them to be.

For critical theory, it is paramount to stipulate conditions that must be met to affirm that someone has a sense of non-belonging in a certain group. In other words, if I am stating that Esperanza and Alison do not belong, it needs to be defined what it means to belong. Tiffany Jones argues that “belonging is cast as an ongoing project of becoming via everyday practices, enacted in multiple and shifting locations, rather than stable group membership” (83). Based on this concept, it is interesting to think of “woman” as a group in which to belong to it is not enough to simply be a woman, but to constantly execute a set of habits, acting appropriately to what defines a woman as such. Regarding the definition of “woman,” Judith Butler argues that “the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category” (*Gender Trouble* 6). If neither the affiliation to a group nor the group itself is stable, the very possibility of belonging is questionable. According to Clayton Chin,

To belong is to feel natural and unthreatened in a group. It is to understand and be understandable to other members of that group; to be able to recognize and be recognized within. In this sense, belonging is both a status, something held, and a practice, the ability to navigate the symbols, ideas and institutions of a group (Ignatieff, 1993: 10). [...] Belonging seems to entail recognition in some form. To belong, others in the group must see me as belonging and I must recognize myself as belonging. Similarly, belonging also entails identity. (3)

If belonging is based on mutual recognition, it is not enough to be accepted by a group because of the appearance of belonging: one must also feel comfortable enacting the practices of this group. Correspondently, it is insufficient for one to consider oneself as part of a category if the other members reject them. In *Mango Street*, even though Esperanza is not rejected by her community, she is seen as different, “with all those books and paper” (Cisneros 110), but she is also “a girl who [doesn’t] want to belong” (109), embracing the characteristics that make her stand out. She, nonetheless, also speaks melancholically about non-belonging, comparing herself to neglected elements of the street: “They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city” (74).

Similarly, Alison feels uncomfortable in her childhood having to follow her father’s standards of gender and femininity because the performance she would like to put on is a deviant one. She, however, in her adulthood, encounters mutual recognition within a group of homosexuals and relates feeling joy about it: “I went to a meeting of something called the “Gay Union”, which I observed in petrified silence. But my mere presence, I felt, had amounted to a public declaration. I left exhilarated” (Bechdel 76). Such joy of belonging is not experienced

by Esperanza, who does not write about events concerning her life after Mango Street — possibly and probably because, at the end of the narrative, she still has not either left the neighborhood or reached adulthood.

Notions of Subjectivity

Based on what was above considered about Esperanza and Alison, it is safe to affirm that these two characters — because of their different backgrounds and ways of living, and also because of the different communities and groups of which they each are part — have unique identities, i. e., unique sets of characteristics that make them who they are as persons inserted in a society. Their individualities, along with their beliefs, their personalities, and their place among certain groups, ascertain their status as subjects in the world and to the world.

Esperanza and Alison, as first-person narrators of their stories, express their subjectivities throughout the texts. In fact, the texts themselves only exist as products of their subjectivities. In other words, since they are not impartial observers of a story that is someone else's, Esperanza's and Alison's retelling of events, the considerations they make, the feelings they express and the judgment they exercise are all strictly connected to their individual experiences as subjects who are both agents of events in their control and subjected to events outside of their control. This means that the same events narrated in *Mango Street* and *Fun Home* would be told differently had the narrators been other characters or someone who is not part of the stories. The texts that are accessed by the readers are told from these characters' perspectives, and, according to Donald E. Hall, in his account of the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity usually attributed to René Descartes, "one's perspective is always partial, imperfect, or, in other words, human", which means that these narrators have limitations that "include, of course, [their] ability to know in any full or reliable way [their] 'selves (3).'" In this sense, the subjective aspect of these narratives opposes objectivity for their lack of impartiality. Also, what the reader knows about the characters' selves is only what the characters think they know about themselves and choose to share with the readers in the texts.

Hall, in his book *Subjectivity* (2004), offers an account of how the meaning of subjectivity changed throughout history. Among the definitions he provides, the following,

which shows how heavily associated to identity subjectivity is, is more accurate to the concept this research adopts to discuss the characters of Esperanza and Alison:

often used interchangeably with the term “identity,” subjectivity more accurately denotes our social constructs and consciousness of identity. We commonly speak of identity as a flat, one-dimensional concept, but subjectivity is much broader and more multifaceted; it is social and personal being that exists in negotiation with broad cultural definitions and our own ideals. We may have numerous discrete identities, of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., and a subjectivity that is comprised of all of those facets, as well as our own imperfect awareness of our selves. (Hall 134)

On this basis, then, someone’s subjectivity is not merely individual, as it closely relates to the person’s place within the world, i. e., her culture, her beliefs, the way she acts to perpetuate or to defy the *status quo*, her status in the society, the oppressions she suffers and the privileges from which she benefits, etc. Subjectivity, thus, is an amalgam of the characteristics of a being, of their multiple identities, that defines how they see the world. Although Hall, in the presented definition of “subjectivity,” briefly distinguishes identity from subjectivity, he gives more detail on the matter in the following passage:

one’s identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. (Hall 3)

One crucial aspect of the difference between subjectivity and identity that Hall reiterates above is that subjectivity implicates a certain level of self-awareness. In this sense, it is safe to assume that both *Mango Street* and *Fun Home* deal with their protagonists' subjectivities — Esperanza and Alison, as first-person narrators of their own stories, constantly reflect about their identities throughout the narratives. Considering that the critical concept of subjectivity “invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (Hall 3-4), by analyzing Esperanza's and Alison's subjectivities in order to understand from where their sense of non-belonging comes and how they acknowledge and deal with it, this research recognizes the limitations of the characters' knowledge about and power over their own identities.

In *Subjectivity*, Donald E. Hall explains that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, identity went through a politicization process, which allows readers today to enjoy literature not only for leisure, “but also for reasons that are politically driven and connected to agendas well beyond aesthetic understanding” (5). According to him, “part of our continuing struggle to understand the different ways in which identities are socially valued, interrogated, and replicated is through the process of reading, studying, and critically engaging with a wide variety of cultural texts” (5), and there lies the ultimate relevance of analyzing texts such as *Mango Street* and *Fun Home*, which manifest the voices of women from different groups and cultures that struggle in various ways with their identities.

Affirming that, in literary criticism, the definitions of “text” have been expanded, Hall argues that “the textuality of the self as a system of representations has, itself, become a singularly important arena of investigation and speculation,” and that “in exploring subjectivity, we are in effect exploring the ‘self’ as a text, as a topic for critical analysis, both in and beyond its relationship to the traditional texts of literature and culture” (5). On this basis,

Esperanza and Alison are themselves texts to be explored, as well as *Mango Street* and *Fun Home* are expressions of the characters' selves, an overflow of their subjectivities.

Having established that subjectivity is closely connected to one's standpoint, the matter of agency is naturally one to be discussed in relation to a subject. To have agency, as I consider it for the purpose of this research, is to have both the possibility of choice and control over the consequences of this choice. In this sense, what is the degree of agency that Esperanza and Alison have? The answer to this question is further detailed in Chapters 2 and 3, but, from the beginning of this investigation, it is clear that both characters have limited agency in their childhood and teenage years and that, in their search for themselves and in the establishment of their subjectivities, their ultimate goal is to have agency enough to live their lives like they desire. According to Hall (124), "[agency], its possibility and practicality, brings us face to face with the political question of how we can motivate ourselves and others to work for social change and economic justice". He also believes that

in probing agency, we are, in effect, tackling the fundamental question of responsibility: in personal action, in aesthetic creation, in inter-personal norms and social valuations. For theoreticians of subjectivity, especially those of late, a central concern is how we should – and to what extent we even have an ability to – change society through concerted individual action, and the ways that cultural representation can, does, or does not abet those changes. (Hall 5)

Based on that, it is my understanding that subjects who have high levels of self-awareness of their identities and enough agency should, of course, strive for their own safety and comfort, but also work to ensure that underprivileged people from oppressed groups, too, get to live dignified lives. The problem with that, as Hall poses, is "the extent [an individual

has] an ability to” cause enough impact in order to promote social change. Politicized literature that, as previously mentioned, go beyond the entertainment realm, such as *Mango Street* and *Fun Home*, can promote a discussion of agency to people who lack it by allowing them a better sense of self-awareness when meeting characters such as Esperanza and Alison that, in some way, might connect to the reader. For one to recognize oneself in the other, even if this other is a character, is to get a better understanding of themselves as a subject and to start to acknowledge ways to make their voices heard and have their needs met, and “that very small degree of agency, attended often by acute anguish and profound distress, is subjectivity as we continue to experience and live it today” (Hall 15).

It has been established, so far, that subjectivity implies a degree of self-awareness, a recognition of one’s identities. It is not an easy task, however, for a person to retain two or more identities that appear to be contradictory or that overlap, making it hard to distinguish one from the other. This is the case with *Mango Street*’s Esperanza, who lives in a blend of two cultures. In Hall’s *Subjectivity*, the author highlights the contributions from W. E. B. Du Bois, “the most important early philosopher examining the lingering effects of slavery and impact of continuing racism on the psyches and self-conceptions of African-Americans” (38). As an American black man, Du Bois has two identities that simultaneously collide and merge — that of an African and that of an American —, and he, being “one of the first theorists of multiple subject positions” (Hall 38), wishes to keep both. Because of his experience, Du Bois “recognizes that identity for many people is not a perfectly seamless whole, but hyphenated and at times internally contestatory, even as the desire for internal integration and wholeness may remain the elusive ideal” (Hall 38). Esperanza and her in-betweenness illustrate Du Bois’ words: the character expresses throughout the text the desire of belonging, another “elusive ideal,” but her internal struggle to deal with her opposing identities hinders her ability to fully

acknowledge her subjectivity, which complicates the achievement of both internal and external integration.

Although subjectivity and agency are often politicized and deeply connected to social matters, not all theories of the subject agree that agency should be used to promote change. Hall, for instance, sheds light on Freud's ideas on the content:

Freudian notions of subjectivity do not imply agency through political or group self-awareness, but rather agency through the consultation of, and direction by, an authority figure. In fact, broadly speaking, psychoanalytic theory in its early Freudian manifestations comes into inevitable conflict with most theories of politicized subjectivity because to the extent that it implies agency, it is fundamentally a theory of agency in the pursuit of social normalization rather than one of agency in the urgent contestation of any unjust social values. The agency offered by Freudian theory is, most often, that of fostering and finding less anguished or conflicted conformity. (Hall 62)

In other words, Freudian thought suggests that agency should be used not to work towards social change, but internal change. Ultimately, it is an attempt of belonging, but the path would be to fit into a mold instead of extrapolating it and finding/creating a community that also rejects normality, which, arguably, does not lead to complete belonging, since part of individuality is compressed to the appearance of its non-existence, hindering one's comprehension of their own subjectivity. Donald E. Hall, however, does not dismiss Freud's contributions to the field of subjectivity, since "individual and social life is always a series of negotiations between personal or micro-group desires and broad communal needs" (62). In using her agency, thus, a subject must be able to balance the efforts to fulfill her own needs

and the efforts to give assistance to marginalized groups or individuals; otherwise, her own subjectivity could be neglected, leading, perhaps, to a reduction of her degree of agency.

Author-character of *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel herself is intrigued by Freudian theories. Despite making more active use of psychoanalysis in her second graphic novel *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* — in which she explores her relationship with her mother while, simultaneously, portraying her process of writing *Fun Home*, that depicts vulnerable parts of her family —, Bechdel's first memoir depicts people with afflictions that are strongly connected to the pains studied by Freud. In an interview given to *The Vermont Cynic*¹⁰, Bechdel, commenting about her interest in Freud, states that she “found his ideas really relatable growing up in this family with weird gender and sexual issues. Everybody in [her] family liked men. [Her] mother liked men and [her] father liked men, and it was a confusing situation for a little girl.” The confusion Alison felt in her childhood is noticeable in *Fun Home*'s pages, and the reader follows her development into an adult with a better understanding of herself and of her family.

Alison's journey, then, like Esperanza's, has Freudian characteristics of agency in the sense that, by acknowledging parts of herself that she failed to understand in her childhood, Alison arguably feels less anguish and internal conflict. On the other hand, she does not do so with conformity: in fact, she embraces her non-conforming characteristics, especially regarding gender and sexuality, and finds a community in which her sense of belonging is more flourished because of the traits she shares with other members of that community, in opposition to how she feels in the familial setting. Alison and Esperanza, in their individual journeys, are able to take actions to validate their subjectivities and refuse playing roles they do not agree with. Nevertheless, since “[one] is never theorized as completely free to assume whatever identity one wishes, to move freely across the lines of gender, race, or class” (Hall 55), they can “only

¹⁰ vtcynic.com/culture/arts/writer-talks-fun-home-and-freud/

[exercise] agency within the context of continuing gender expectations, as well as the realities of economics and tradition” (109). Alison and Esperanza can be agents of their own lives and express their gender the way they decide to do, but they are still bound to a society and its conceptions. In this sense, one can only pursue freedom when in shackles. As Hall puts it, “[no] one is ‘free’ here; all act within networks of social power that can be altered and interrogated but never simply ignored or repudiated” (109).

Notions of Gender Performance

The subjectivities I investigate in this research are heavily associated with gender, with the way Esperanza and Alison express themselves in relation to what is expected from them as women, and with their reactions to the consequences of their deviant performances. In *Subjectivities*, while Hall examines remarkable events and tragedies in history, he recognizes that society's beliefs and traditions change at a very slow pace. He mentions, for instance, the tragedy of slavery and its lingering effects that still make life significantly harder for black people all across the world. Society's conception of gender and the chauvinist expectations that come with it also take a long time to change, which, as stated by Hall, is visible in pieces of media that target children, such as Disney movies, that not only depict but also enforce outdated gender roles. According to the author,

While certainly alternate gender ideologies are now perceptible in children's film, television, and print culture, we should hardly wonder at the slowness with which norms such as those of masculinity and femininity metamorphose. Twenty-first century children are still being hailed powerfully by the blatantly sexist belief systems of decades and even centuries past. (Hall 90)

With that in mind, the gender expectations that are laid on Esperanza and Alison are not necessarily a reflection of their generation's concept of gender, for they remain from what previous generations experienced and shared¹¹. We are expected to replicate behaviors that are seen as belonging to one gender or the other — in binary terms —, to give a performance that

¹¹ *The House on Mango Street* was published in 1984. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is dated from 2006, but, since it tells the author's story, who was born in 1960, most of the events depicted happen until the early 80's. Considering that, I will assume that both stories take place in roughly the same period in matters of how men and women were expected to act, and that the differences between the expectations laid on them are based less on the time in which they lived than on the culture in which they grew up.

resembles that of a prototypical man or woman, and this expectation is settled according to our biological sex in the moment we are born. Philosopher Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, discusses the problematic of differentiating biological sex from cultural gender and equivocally taking biological sex as a factual concept. Although her very compelling arguments could enhance this discussion on gender, I decided not to focus on this matter for its lack of relevance to the literary analysis proposed in this research.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is the central concept I adopt in my analysis of Esperanza's and Alison's behavior in relation to their gender. The theory of gender performance assumes that gender, instead of something intrinsic to the subject, is a set of behaviors constantly performed by people to imitate being or having a certain gender in order to establish and renovate their status as being or having this gender. Performances of this kind, consciously or not, are sought by people for them to belong in the society, avoiding punishment and social ostracism. Despite the elementary characteristic of this exposition of the concept, it offers a grasp of Butler's ideas that lead her to affirm that "what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" ("Performative Acts" 520).

Instead of attempting to define what is a woman or how one becomes a woman, Butler questions the very necessity of a seamless concept of woman. According to the philosopher,

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body

is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (*Gender Trouble* 185)

In other words, one's gender identity does not define their acts, it is their acts that constitute their identity. Considering Butler's argument, a person who claims to be a woman and is accepted as such is not so because there is an essence of woman inside her, but because she performs as a woman, thus establishing her reality as a woman. One's performance, then, constitutes one's gender instead of reflecting a gender that is prior to "acts, gestures, and desire". The philosopher argues, furthermore, that performativity is "not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (*Bodies that Matter* 12). The aspect of repetition that constitutes gender is resumed further in this chapter. For now, it suffices to accept the premise that it is in this reiteration of norms that gender is materialized. What Butler affirms, in other words, is that the constant repetition of these norms conveys the impression that they are natural, as opposed to cultural conventions. Gender, in this sense, becomes itself the norm. Once again, I borrow Butler's words:

A norm is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law. A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization . . . Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce. (*Undoing Gender* 41)

On this basis, because a norm is not institutionalized as the law is, it is not always easily perceived. In concealing the conventions through their repetition, gender develops itself into a

convention and becomes, too, implicit. It becomes discernible, then, only in its effects, in the consequences of gender, such as the ostracism in which falls one who refuses to reiterate these norms. As Butler poses, “The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it” (*Undoing Gender* 42). To consider someone deviant and divergent in relation to gender norms, thus, as I do with Esperanza and Alison, is only plausible within the norm. The only way for them to be considered deviants is in the existence of the norms they reject; otherwise, the very concept of gender would not abide. My analysis of Esperanza’s and Alison’s gender performance is sustained on the very norms which it criticizes and to which they both oppose.

In her critique of Simone de Beauvoir, Butler states that “[if] there is something right in [her] claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (*Gender Trouble* 45). Moreover, Butler extrapolates Beauvoir’s arguments to claim that, if there is indeed a distinction between sex and gender, as suggested by Beauvoir, “then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender”, i. e., “‘woman’ need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and ‘man’ need not interpret male bodies” (152). What the philosopher suggests with this reading is that gender is not limited by sex, since it is a becoming, which results in the inevitable conclusion, unforeseen by Beauvoir, that the binarity of sex does not ensue the binarity of gender: “[if] sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex” (152). Butler adds:

Consider the further consequence that if gender is something that one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought

not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort. (*Gender Trouble* 152)

Gender, in this sense, is a status that needs to be constantly renewed through the repetition of behaviors and reiteration of norms, considering, too, what was suggested earlier in this section. As previously argued, if belonging entails mutual recognition (Chin 3) and is an “ongoing project of becoming [...] rather than stable group membership” (Jones 83), gender, like belonging, is unstable and requires mutual recognition — one must simultaneously recognize herself as a woman and be recognized by other women as part of the group in order to have her gender validated. The status of “woman” is, hence, achieved and reaffirmed through the nonstop repetition of what is considered female behavior. But what actions define a woman? Gender, besides repetition, is also imitation: to be a woman, one must imitate being a woman, i. e., watch how women behave and perform that same behavior or an approximate one.

The necessity of imitation for a gender status is exemplified in *Fun Home*, where Alison’s womanhood is confronted by her father, who is not part of the “woman” category, but wants his daughter to be prototypically feminine, trying to force on her clothes and accessories designed for girls, which she dislikes. Basically, Alison’s father wants her to imitate being a woman, but not just any woman: the model of femininity he admires. Being uncomfortable with what she so far understands as feminine, for Alison a sense of belonging to a group of women only comes when she encounters, in her childhood, a butch woman (see Fig. #1 and #2).

Fig. #1 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, pp. 117-118



Fig. #2 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 119.

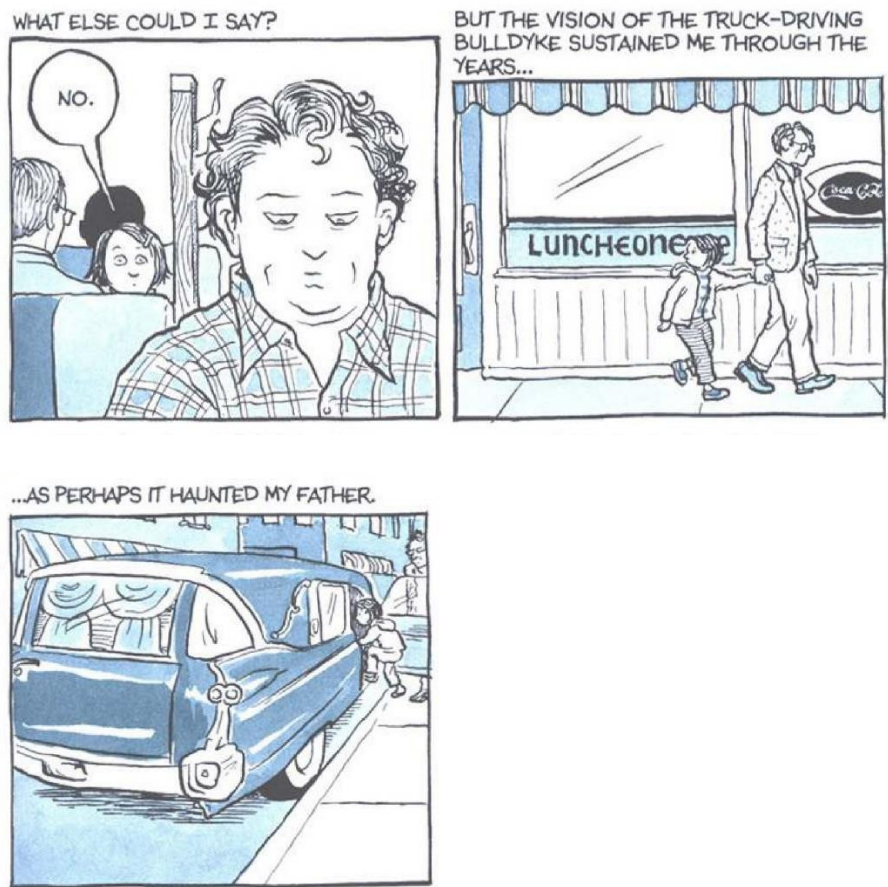
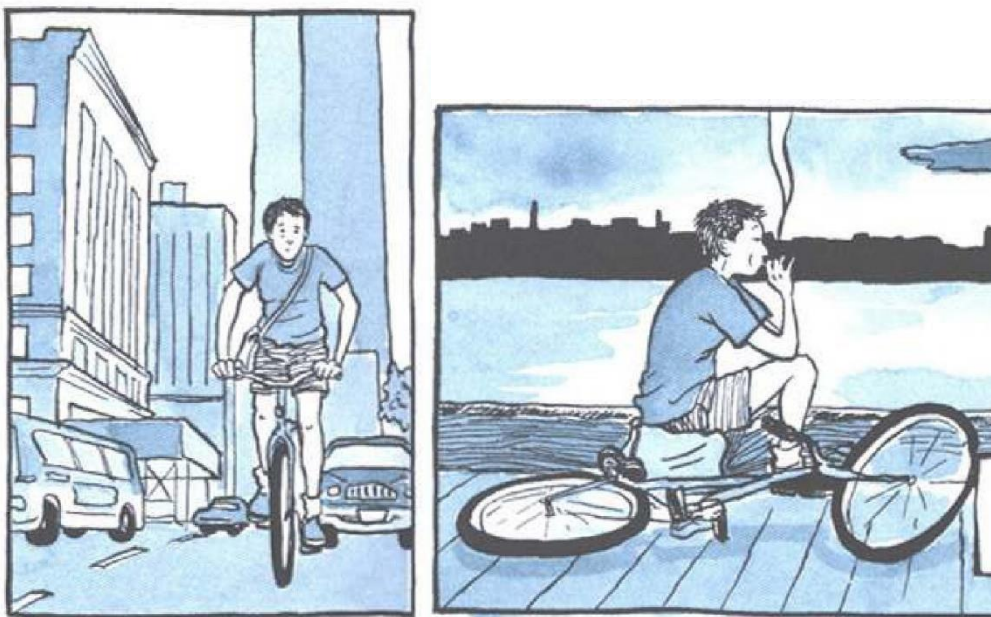


Fig. #3 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 196.



In the luncheonette (Fig. #1 and #2), Alison wears clothes her father approves, including a hair clip she dislikes. She embodies, in this moment, an attempt of imitation of what her father considers a woman to be like. In her adulthood, however, Alison is depicted wearing more masculine clothes, and with a haircut typically worn by men (see Fig. #3), which could be an imitation of the gender expression from the “truck-driving bulldyke” she recognized in her childhood. If adult Alison, as a woman, imitates the gender expression of a woman that has significantly different traits from the women Alison’s father takes as models of femininity, what is the original woman to be imitated, the prototype to be copied? Butler ponders:

If [all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation], it seems, there is no original or primary gender [to be imitated], but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. (“Imitation” 313)

Gender, then, in this regard, could be thought of as a cycle of simulations with no beginning to which be traced and no ending to where it is directed. In other words, there is no original: “all along the original was derived” (*Gender Trouble* 189). Hence, to be a woman is to nonstop simulate being one, performing femininity as well as imitation allows. Femininity, nevertheless, is a set of behaviors that the heterosexual matrix regards as the one appropriated for women, so what is “feminine” and what is “masculine” is not inherent to the body, but rather learned, like gender itself. To disrupt this heterosexual matrix is a dangerous activity. Butler states that, “as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences [...] indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”

(“Performative Acts” 522). The philosopher offers a more detailed insight on performance and punishment:

The “being” of the subject is no more self-identical than the “being” of any gender; in fact, coherent gender, achieved through an apparent repetition of the same, produces as its effect the illusion of a prior and volitional subject. In this sense, gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (“Imitation” 314)

The coercive characteristic of gender, in other words, is distinguishable in the resulting consequences of disrupting gender norms that can hinder one’s ability to live peacefully in society. If gender is compulsory and its imposition comes from the heterosexual matrix, then heterosexuality is also compulsory in the sense that disrupting it also has punitive consequences. One, therefore, must have/be one gender only, and must desire only the opposite gender.

Both Esperanza and Alison struggle with the compulsory characteristic of gender, an aspect of their lives, as I argue in this work, that is primarily responsible for their sense of non-belonging. Their refusal to perform gender as they should is, ultimately, a challenge to the heterosexual matrix. In *Fun Home*, since Alison is a lesbian, it might be obvious that she defies heterosexual norms; in *The House on Mango Street*, on the other hand, Esperanza does not express romantic or sexual affection toward other girls. Nevertheless, heteronormativity is challenged in *Mango Street* simply because gender itself presupposes the heterosexual roles of

man and woman, and husband and wife, which Esperanza questions throughout the novel.

Butler argues that:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (*Gender Trouble* 192)

Thus, when Esperanza questions her destiny as a woman, she is questioning the very idea of playing a heteronormative role, which becomes clear when she talks about her great-grandmother, who had to abandon her "wildness" to fit in the role of a wife, as previously discussed in this chapter. Fearing ending up regretting the possibilities of a life she could have, like what happened to her great-grandmother and to many other women in Mango Street, Esperanza decides to defy the heteronormative womanhood in any way she can, even in small actions that, ultimately, only matter to her:

My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain.

[...]

I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (Cisneros 88-89)

The concept of performance, then, applies to this analysis because Esperanza and Alison are coerced by their surroundings to imitate women who are accepted as such, so they can also be recognized as women. This research assumes that these two characters are women because of the compulsory performance aforementioned and that is how both of them identify themselves in their narratives. Based on the considerations regarding gender that are drawn in this chapter, I refer to “femininity” and “masculinity” as the sets of behaviors that are, respectively, considered fit for women and for men based on the coercive binary heterosexual matrix. More specifically, the “femininity” which Esperanza and Alison are supposed to imitate to which I refer during this research is that that their communities establish: Alison, for instance, is expected to act in accordance with her father’s notions of what is feminine, while Esperanza sees herself surrounded by women who act similarly and share the same fate, which she fears being her own.

As I discuss in this chapter, the concept of gender performativity applies to my analysis because Esperanza and Alison both refuse to reiterate the implicit conventions of gender. Because they diverge from these norms, they feel a lack of belonging to the groups of which they are expected to be part; and simultaneously — and, perhaps, paradoxically —, their divergent performances of gender are a result and a reflection of their sense of non-belonging. Furthermore, the way in which they both decide to defy gender expectations is to put on a performance that is divergent, but that is also an imitation of another performance. Esperanza, for instance, sometimes imitates behaviors of men to question gender inequality and of adult women to experiment what womanhood feels like, while Alison imitates performances of butch women because that set of behaviors resonates with her more than the feminine standards her father forced on her. Therefore, in viewing their gender as a performance, I can analyze their actions, exterior expressions, and interior thoughts not in a deterministic fashion, but in a

reading that considers their personality and appearance to understand how they act in/as their gender and why they perform the way they do, even if they are not themselves aware of that.

This chapter is focused on the theoretical ideas on which my analysis is based. With this, I define the concepts of non-belonging, subjectivity and gender performativity that are adopted in this research. In Chapter 2, I use these concepts to make an analysis of *The House on Mango Street*'s Esperanza as a subject who feels out of place in her community and refuses to play the roles she is expected to adopt because of her gender.

Chapter 2: A Place Outside the Window

“A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. . . those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’”

(Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*)

In Chapter 1 of this research, I put together a literature review on the themes of non-belonging, subjectivity, and gender performance. With that, I define in what sense these topics are used throughout this study. Considering the conclusions previously reached, in this second chapter I use the concepts of non-belonging and gender performance to analyze the construction of *Mango Street*'s Esperanza' subjectivity.

In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, as suggested by the title, Esperanza's house is the protagonist's central concern. The house she dislikes, of course, is not just a building, it is a result of class disparity and of the marginalization of Hispanic Latin-Americans in the United States. In the year Esperanza spends in Mango Street and tells her story, she leaves behind her childhood and innocence, and gets a better grasp of what it means to be Mexican-American and to be a woman. Space, then, plays a major role in the narrative and in Esperanza's life, not only the physical space, i. e., the house, the Hispanic neighborhood, and the country itself, but also the symbolic space: as a Chicana, Esperanza is always in a borderland, not being fully Mexican nor fully American. In her understanding of life so far, she does not belong anywhere, and she certainly does not belong in her house.

According to Stella Bolaki, “*The House on Mango Street* dramatises the idea of border struggle in a . . . subtle way; through its basic structural principle, that is, the *vignette*” (5). What the author means is that the vignettes take the usual place of chapters in a novel. While

chapters give linearity to the narrative, Cisneros's vignettes can be read individually and out of order, if the reader so desires, but they can also be read as disposed in the book to form a bigger cohesive story. As put by Christina Rose Dubb, "Cisneros's, and therefore Esperanza's, use of vignettes rather than linear narrative further highlights the idea of living in [borderlands] because she is placed in an in-between space even in form" (223). In this sense, Cisneros is a writer that defies the border of genres, especially when considering that the vignettes are what she calls "lazy poems": "each of the stories could've developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering in that grey area between two genres" (qtd. in Olivares 234).

Because Esperanza lives in a borderland, Lidiane Santos defines her as a developing culturally hybrid subject, and the author sees this hybridism as a paramount element in the delineation of the character's identity. Considering the protagonist's ethnicity, Santos offers a glimpse into the complicated relations between Mexico and the United States:

Because she is part of the Chicana community, the protagonist is inserted in an environment where she has to deal with the delicate relation between the American and Mexican cultures that is resulting from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo from 1848. The treaty gave part of the Mexican territory to the United States and, although there was a promise of making the residents of these areas American citizens with full rights, the agreement was not fulfilled. To these individuals, it was due the condition of a colonized people or of marginalized subjects confined to the *barrios*, which established an invisible and painful border between both groups. They were also forced to abandon their native language and to give up their political and economic independence. Part of

the Chicanos' cultural identity was robbed by the dominant culture, and an ethnic and cultural barrier was raised (5, translation my own¹²).

Esperanza's community's marginalized status, then, is at least partially derived from the treaty that took place more than a century before the publication of *The House on Mango Street*. The protagonist's perception of her family's condition and of the space they occupy is highlighted from the very first vignette, in which Esperanza explains that, despite being very young, she had to move a lot, showing her family's lack of financial stability. The house on Mango Street is different from the other places she lived in because it is her family's, they do not have to pay rent anymore, so they cannot be suddenly evicted again. Esperanza holds on to the promise of getting a house like the ones portrayed in the media:

They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And inside it would have real stairs, not hallway stairs, but stairs inside like the houses on TV. And we'd have a basement and at least three washrooms so when we took a bath we wouldn't have to tell everybody. Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed. (Cisneros 4)

¹² In the original: "Por fazer parte da comunidade chicana, a protagonista está inserida em um ambiente no qual tem de lidar com a delicada relação entre as culturas estadunidense e mexicana resultante do Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo em 1848. O tratado cedia parte do território mexicano aos Estados Unidos e, embora houvesse uma promessa de tornar os residentes dessas áreas cidadãos norte-americanos com plenos direitos, o acordo não foi cumprido. A esses indivíduos coube a condição de povo colonizado e de sujeitos marginalizados confinados aos *barrios*, estabelecendo uma fronteira invisível e dolorosa entre ambos. Foram também forçados a abandonar sua língua materna e abrir mão de sua independência política e econômica. Parte da identidade cultural dos chicanos foi tomada pela cultura dominante, e uma barreira étnica e cultural foi levantada." (Santos 5)

Her dream house, then, is not only her own, but also her parents'. The house they end up getting, though, is not at all like the one she was promised, which frustrates her as a child, who, unlike the adults, is still learning how dreams and reality often do not coincide. Instead of what she expects, Esperanza describes the house as

small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in. There is no front yard, only four little elms the city planted by the curb. Out back is a small garage for the car we don't own yet and a small yard that looks smaller between the two buildings on either side. There are stairs in our house, but they're ordinary hallway stairs, and the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom — Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny. (Cisneros 4)

To think from where this desire for a big house comes is to understand that the media reinforce value judgements that appraise the rich as something better than the poor, disregarding that class disparity is an inevitable consequence of capitalism, and that living in poverty is not a choice. When Esperanza sees only fancy houses on the TV, the assumption she makes is that this is what one must strive for. What is advertised is good, and what she has is bad. The idea of her house being inferior to what a person should have impacts her the most when people tell her directly that they do not approve of where she lives. Esperanza, before coming to Mango Street, had a nun from her school judge her former house: “You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing” (5). This is when she knew she had to have a house: “A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go” (5).

According to Christina Rose Dubb, referring to Esperanza's dialogue with the nun, "It is the disapproving eyes of authority that force Esperanza to reevaluate her situation and learn to be ashamed of her home. This is her turning point to . . . begin working toward finding her own authority" (225). In other words, the displeased nun imbues Esperanza with embarrassment, and the girl starts associating the house to her feeling of humiliation. From then, Esperanza seeks a better place. The house on Mango Street and Mango Street itself is not what she wants, so she feels like she does not belong, and, most importantly, she does not want to belong in a place that brings her shame. Her ultimate goal is to escape, and the narrative depicts the start of her journey to find ways to do so. The following passage, which occurs toward the end of the narrative, shows that Esperanza's wish is still the same — to have a big, fancy house —, but she repels her family's starry-eyed approach to their shared dream:

I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works. We go on Sundays, Papa's day off. I used to go. I don't anymore. You don't like to go out with us, Papa says. Getting too old? Getting too stuck-up, says Nenny. I don't tell them I am ashamed—all of us staring out the window like the hungry. I am tired of looking at what we can't have. When we win the lottery . . . Mama begins, and then I stop listening. (Cisneros 86)

Despite the desire to escape her situation, it is not Esperanza's wish to become someone else, nor to pretend her upbringing was different when she finally achieves her goal. She, instead, wants to welcome and resonate with people who are in a similar position as she once was: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house" (87). Esperanza claims that, like the bums in her fantasy, she

does not have a house. This comparison, of course, is not literal: she is not homeless, she lives in a real house. Nonetheless, she does not belong to that place, so she does not recognize that house as her own. What she feels lacks her is a home.

Esperanza's goal of escaping transcends Mango Street: she wants to escape what seems to be her fate. In the vignette "My Name" (10-11), the protagonist explains that her name is inherited: "It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse — which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female — but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong." Esperanza finds similarities with her great-grandmother that go beyond their name. When she calls them horse women, she means more than just their birth on the Chinese year of the horse, she means that the two of them are wild ("My great-grandmother [...] a wild horse of a woman"), they refuse to be tamed, i. e., to follow what their community expects from them in regard to their gender. Esperanza knows her community likes its women weak, and she suspects the Chinese do too, since they consider horse women bad luck. This implies that Esperanza recognizes that a woman's bad luck is not related to cosmical events, but to the place and the society where she is born.

Esperanza's great-grandmother, despite being wild, was eventually tamed by being forced into marriage. Because of their similarities, the protagonist fears sharing the same destiny as her relative. She "[has] inherited her name, but [she doesn't] want to inherit her place by the window" (11), the place of regret. Julian Olivares states that "Here we have not the space of contentment but of sadness... The woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice" (236). The place Esperanza is supposed to occupy is not the one she wants, and she associates the sorrow of her fate to her inherited name, that, despite meaning "hope," has only bad connotations for Esperanza in the context of her community: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting.

It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing” (10). For that reason, Esperanza does not accept her name as her own: “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (11).

To Olivares, “Esperanza prefers a name not culturally embedded in a dominating, male-centered ideology” (236). She, however, considers “Maritza” as an alternative for her name, even though it is also a common name in Hispanic countries. Her resistance to accept the name “Esperanza,” thus, could be strictly related to how her great-grandmother’s life turned out. Because they are similar in their wildness and share the same name, Esperanza fears being tamed like her. “Esperanza” does not represent the real her because she refuses to accept her namesake’s fate.

Regina Betz, coming from a similar point of view as Olivares’s and taking into account the negative connotations Esperanza gives her name in Spanish (“it means too many letters”) as opposed to the positive connotations in English (“[it] means hope”), argues that “Her name is important because it represents tradition; ancestral connections provide the foundation to a person’s identity, but the protagonist attempts to reject these connections through her disapproval of the Spanish meaning to her name” (19). Betz goes further and affirms that the Spanish language is rejected by Esperanza throughout the story as a way for her to reject her ethnicity. She believes, for instance, that Esperanza’s father speaks in Spanish for the narrative to convey that he is weak and pitiful for not being able to give financial stability to his family and for breaking down in front of Esperanza when his father dies (Betz 25). The author also affirms that “the narrator feels as if she does not belong on Mango Street, and this is signified by the author’s use of English to express belonging” (29). In summary, what Betz means is that Esperanza negates one of her languages, Spanish, to negate her ancestral culture.

It is my argument, on the other hand, that Esperanza does not plan to negate her ethnicity. She, instead, wants to be free specifically from the misogynistic traits of her culture, and, because she is powerless to change an entire community, the path she can pursue for now is to escape from Mango Street. Even though Esperanza does not narrate her story in Spanish, this is not evidence of her rejecting the language, since she listens to her family and some neighbors speak to her in Spanish and probably talks to them the same way. As a hybrid subject — like Du Bois, as mentioned in the previous chapter, with identities that simultaneously collide and merge —, Esperanza is more comfortable speaking and writing in English because that is the language with which she is in contact most often, considering that she attends an American school and has friends that speak to her in English. Spanish, then, is something that she might reserve for family, and instead of taking that as a sign of rejection of her culture, I believe that is just another cultural division she has to manage. It is also my view that, unlike what Betz claims, Esperanza's father is not objectively portrayed as weak. All he does is behave like a human being who has feelings and who struggles in a capitalist country that oppresses people like him. The language he chooses to speak, Spanish, does not indicate that the narrative and, consequently, Esperanza portray him as weak because his struggles are a result of circumstances beyond his control.

According to Jacqueline Doyle, “women of color in the United States have all too often felt themselves compelled to choose between ethnicity and womanhood” (6). Similarly, Bolaki affirms that

any attempt by women of colour to interrogate the patriarchal structures of their local communities becomes equated with betrayal as it is considered synonymous either with an assimilationist antiethnic stance or with a fashionable white feminism. For ethnic women writers then, the opposition between individualism and community, or between

privacy and affiliation, frequently implies another border struggle, namely between gender and ethnicity. (2-3)

Considering Doyle's and Bolaki's claims, I argue, also, that the belief that Esperanza negates, and, in some sense, betrays her language and her culture is related to how Chicanas are portrayed by the media and expected by their culture to act accordingly to either one of two archetypes — namely, la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe. These archetypes are more detailed ahead, but, either way, they both result in subjugation to men. Esperanza's journey to reconcile her heritage to her refusal to be tamed, therefore, might be mistaken with a journey to leave her people behind, which, as she herself learns, she can never do.

Furthermore, even longing to escape Mango Street, Esperanza, despite her sense of non-belonging, recognizes herself as part of a marginalized group. In this sense, people from this community, i. e., immigrants and their descendants, feel as default a lack of belonging for being away from home or for not completely fitting in neither culture. Esperanza's sense of non-belonging, thus, is at least partially shared by her community. She, of course, questions tradition and refuses to accept the role she is supposed to play, but, nevertheless, she recognizes herself as a Chicana and shares the struggles of her community. This recognition of her ethnicity can be noticed, for instance, in Esperanza's use of "we" and "us" to talk about not only her family, but also her neighbors with a similar ethnic background.

Soon after moving to Mango Street, Esperanza realizes that her people are not welcome by those who are not like them. She mentions, for instance, a friend that she had for a brief period, Cathy, whose family was moving out because "the neighborhood is getting bad," a statement Cathy makes "as if she forgot [Esperanza] just moved in" (13). Even though Esperanza is still a child, she understands that Cathy's family is leaving because of their

prejudice against Latinos: “they’ll just have to move a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in” (13).

Cathy and her family are not the only ones that look down on the new residents of Mango Street. In fact, Esperanza dedicates the vignette “Those Who Don’t” (28) to share her perception about how outsiders fear groups with whom they are not familiar. She calls this sort of people “those who don’t know any better.” According to her, because they do not know her community, they usually only end up in the neighborhood by mistake and fear they will get attacked. Despite being judged as dangerous, Esperanza states: “we aren’t afraid.” She and the community know the names of the people who live on Mango Street, their families, their occupations, their lives, so there is no reason to fear. On the other hand, she recognizes that her own community is biased against other communities (“All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes”), which strengthens Esperanza’s argument that people fear what they do not know. In this sense, because Esperanza knows and understands the people around her, she understands that she belongs. Once again, it is noticeable the way she uses “we” to describe her people, showing that she accepts and embraces that they belong to the same category. The most interesting aspect of this realization is a strong internal conflict in Esperanza: while she belongs with her community, because of who she is and of the experiences they share as a group, she, simultaneously, does not belong and does not want to belong with them because of what they expect from her as a woman.

Another evidence of Esperanza’s connection with her ethnicity is the feelings she can share with her sister Nenny, but not with non-Mexicans, as shown in the vignette “Laughter” (17-18). Esperanza is with two friends, Rachel and Lucy, with whom the protagonist shares both childish adventures and experiences of growing up as they transition from girls to women.

Even though they have this friendship bond, because Rachel and Lucy are not Mexican, there are some feelings Esperanza cannot convey to them, but which Nenny comprehends:

One day we were passing a house that looked, in my mind, like the houses I had seen in Mexico. I don't know why. There was nothing about the house that looked exactly like the houses I remembered. I'm not even sure why I thought it, but it seemed to feel right.

Look at that house, I said, it looks like Mexico.

Rachel and Lucy look at me like I'm crazy, but before they can let out a laugh, Nenny says: Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly. (Cisneros 17-18)

In this sense, Nenny, as Esperanza's family, transmits to her a sense of belonging, since the two of them have lived experiences similar enough for them both to feel the same way about something as trivial as a stranger's house, but that is embedded in memories. Nevertheless, Nenny also triggers Esperanza's sense of otherness, especially when the protagonist is confronted with her undesired role as a woman and an older sister.

Esperanza's relationship with Nenny is especially explored in the vignette "Boys & Girls" (8-9), which is placed at the beginning of *The House on Mango Street*. Since this research considers the book as a bigger narrative composed of the vignettes, which are individual narratives themselves, chapter placement is relevant for this analysis. "Boys & Girls" is the third chapter of the book, and the reason for this early placing is the theme of gender that is in focus and that is present throughout the whole story. As the title suggests, the vignette focuses on Esperanza's perception of the differences between boys and girls, and she

notices this especially because she has two brothers and one sister, and the relationships among them are different according to their gender:

The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls. Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friend . . . not ours. (Cisneros 8)

In the passage above, Esperanza makes a simple commentary about the differences between the girls and the boys in her household, but, still, it calls attention to the performative aspect of gender — as proposed by Judith Butler and discussed in the previous chapter —: the boys behave a certain way home, because no one other than family is looking, but they adapt their performance when outside, “they can't be seen talking to girls”, because that is not proper behavior for boys their age. The protagonist observes that her brothers “are each other's best friend,” which is probably due to the amount of time they spend together and interact with each other. If they are always close, it makes sense that they are best friends, but that does not happen with their sisters because they can only talk within a certain limit, which is the house.

The boys' relationship is not replicated among the two sisters: “Nenny is too young to be my friend. She's just my sister and that was not my fault. You don't pick your sisters, you just get them and sometimes they come like Nenny” (8). Esperanza compares her relationship with her sister to the one shared by her brothers as a way to contrast behaviors of boys and girls. She blames the age difference between her and Nenny for the lack of friendship between them. At a first glance, the age difference seems to be a problem because they might enjoy different things and have different ideas on how to have fun. As it becomes clear, that is not the only reason. According to Esperanza, because she is older, she must take care of her sister,

to not let her play with problematic kids, for instance, otherwise Nenny might start behaving like them: “since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility” (8).

Having to worry about her younger sister means assuming a maternal role from a very young age, a part she does not want to play. As Esperanza says, she did not ask to have a sister, she just has her, and now she must be responsible for her instead of being her friend like Carlos is friends with Kiki. Of course, although the reader does not know how old Carlos and Kiki are, it is implied that their age difference is not as discrepant as Esperanza and Nenny’s, but, still, Carlos does not have to worry about the younger Kiki like Esperanza has to worry about Nenny. In other words, it is not expected from the oldest boy to assume a guiding/paternal role like it is expected from the oldest girl to assume a guiding/maternal role.

It is also interesting to notice that Esperanza, as the oldest child, must act as a substitute for her parents — when her grandfather dies, for instance, she is the one responsible for delivering and explaining the news to her brothers and sister (56-57) —, which shows that she is sort of responsible for all her siblings. However, she only has to worry directly about her sister, not her brothers. She is not responsible for with whom Carlos and Kiki are friends, but she must know with whom Nenny is not allowed to play. It is possible to speculate that this is due to the difference in how parents create boys and girls: Nenny must behave like a girl, that is, she must have manners and be polite and clean, which is why she cannot be friends with girls who do not act accordingly, otherwise she might end up like them. Carlos and Kiki, on the other hand, are boys, and it is expected from boys to act like children do: they do not need to worry as much about having manners and not getting dirty, i. e., they do not need to act like grown-ups in their childhood, while Esperanza and Nenny have to behave like women instead of girls in specific scenarios.

The responsibility with which Esperanza is charged is like weight on her shoulders: “Someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will

understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (9). Along with a “real house” (5), Esperanza, thus, dreams of a best friend to have in the future, someone that contrasts with what Nenny is. She compares her sister to an anchor: because of the responsibility she has toward Nenny, she is incapable of floating like a balloon, i. e., she is not allowed freedom to live life the way she wants, she cannot float away from her responsibility. It takes a lot less than an anchor to stop a balloon from floating. If Nenny is an anchor, then Esperanza’s maternal responsibility is much more weight than what should be attached to her, as merely a young girl/balloon.

The maternal role Esperanza must play is a reminder of the fate from which she attempts to escape. Despite rejecting this destiny, Esperanza learns from the women around her that girls often inherit their mother’s position, regardless of their will. In “Alicia Who Sees Mice” (31-32), the reader learns that Alicia, Esperanza’s neighbor and friend, inherits her mother’s responsibilities after her death, despite also studying at a university far from home (she has to catch “two trains and a bus”). She has to assume her mother’s duties because her father believes “a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star.” In other words, because Alicia is the older woman in the house, she is the one who must wake up as early as the morning star rises to prepare food for her family, and she “is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas.”

Esperanza claims that Alicia “inherited her mama's rolling pin and sleepiness.” What she means is that she inherited her mother’s domestic position, which she conciliates with her studying “because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin.” She, thus, also inherits her mother’s sleepiness, since she does not have enough time to sleep properly with all the responsibilities to which she has to attend, having to “stud[y] all night.” Esperanza also states that Alicia is “afraid of nothing except [mice and] fathers” (31-32). If

Alicia fears her father, it is implied that he is violent with her, a characteristic that is common to several men on Mango Street, as Esperanza tells throughout the vignettes.

Despite the episodes of violence against women Esperanza witnesses, she retells these events as just an observer instead of someone who tries to help, certainly because she is powerless to do so. As is further discussed, there is an event in which she attempts to help a friend who she thinks is being harassed, but, in the end, Esperanza misunderstands what is happening. Regarding Esperanza's observations, Fiona Hartley-Kroeger comments:

As a spectator who judges rather than acts, Esperanza does not intervene in the lives of others. And as Esperanza's powers of spectatorship grow, the text makes implicit judgments about the women around her: which ones does she want to be like? Which ones are good role models, and which ones does Esperanza emphatically not want to be like? Using the distance afforded her by the spectator stance, Esperanza is able to judge and evaluate the kinds of life available to her. (282)

When Esperanza observes the women around her, she is, thus, projecting her own life in the future. Although Hartley-Kroeger claims Esperanza looks for role models among these women, she finds none. Even the women with whom Esperanza can identify in parts, like her great-grandmother, her namesake who was "a wild horse of a woman" (11), ended up trapped in a misogynistic environment with little or no hope of escaping. What Esperanza finds, then, are women who — like her — have enormous potential of doing things they deem great and relevant, but — like she fears — who end up "[looking] out the window" and "[sitting] their sadness on an elbow" (11) because they could not become what they wanted.

Even Esperanza's mother shows some regret about the life she ended up getting. There is no suggestion in the text that the mother suffers any kind of violence from the husband. She,

however, is still displeased with her life because of the structural violence women suffer under patriarchy:

I could've been somebody, you know? my mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a TV. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive.

She used to draw when she had time. Now she draws with a needle and thread, little knotted rosebuds, tulips made of silk thread. (Cisneros 90)

Like many women on Mango Street, Esperanza's mother looks back on her life and wonders how things could be different. Despite all her knowledge and talent, she did not pursue a career in the things she is passionate about, dedicating herself mostly to domestic life instead. Esperanza enumerates what her mother can do, but highlights the fact that she is not too familiar with the subway, which implies that, to a certain level, she depends on others to get around the city. What else does she depend on others to do? Since it is not mentioned she has another job outside the home, and considering she does not use the subway frequently, Esperanza's mother perhaps dedicates herself solely to the household, which means that she would also be dependent financially.

Because the mother tells Esperanza she "could've been somebody," she thinks she is nobody now, or at least no one relevant, which implies a certain level of regret. Even though she wishes she had a different life, she is unable to change things now, and often she only desires things, but does not pursue what she wants: "Someday she would like to go to the ballet. Someday she would like to see a play. She borrows opera records from the public library and sings with velvety lungs powerful as morning glories" (90). She would like to do a lot of things,

but she does not do them because she is too caught up in the life and the routine she has now. Instead, she dreams about a life she could have had but cannot anymore: “Today while cooking oatmeal she is Madame Butterfly until she sighs and points the wooden spoon at me. I could've been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. That Madame Butterfly was a fool” (91). While pretending to be Madame Butterfly, from the homonymous opera, she realizes that the character is a fool: she is happy to wed at an early age, and, even after being abandoned, believes her husband will come back. When he returns, married to another woman, he finds out Madame Butterfly gave birth to his son. She agrees to give her child for them to raise and commits suicide.

Upon realizing how naïve Madame Butterfly is and reflecting about her own life, Esperanza's mother advises her daughter to study so she can be somebody, the same way Alicia is studying to have a better life. The mother tells Esperanza to “look at [her] *comadres*. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head” (91). Analyzing her friends' lives and her own, the mother understands that a woman cannot depend on her husband, but must be able to take care of herself, and that is what she wishes for Esperanza, not to repeat her mistakes.

The mother continues: “Shame is a bad thing, you know? It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. Yup, she says disgusted, stirring again. I was a smart cookie then” (91). Considering the way she says she quit school (“disgusted”) and how she tells Esperanza to “study hard,” the mother believes studying is a way for her daughter to get a better life than her. She quit school out of shame for her clothes, which is an example of how harmful expectations that are imposed on others can be. First, there is the issue of class: Esperanza's mother could not afford nice clothes, and, considering she was embarrassed, her classmates probably had better financial conditions. Like Esperanza, who is tired of seeing nice houses she cannot get, she might have become tired

of looking at people with better clothes. The reader can also wonder if she was bullied because of how she dressed.

Second, there is the matter of gender. Having nice clothes is usually something that is expected from girls, not only because of the class status, but also because it shows femininity. Girls are taught to worry about their appearance, they must be pretty before anything else. Gender roles, then, might also have played a part in the mother's shame that made her quit school. She knows now education is more important, but the ostracism one falls into when the gender roles are not thoroughly followed might have been too hard for her, as a young girl, to handle.

Based on the way Esperanza's mother speaks about her life, which is mostly with regret, the reader can assume she wants her daughter to see her as an example not to be followed. Still, even though the mother's story shows the harms of compulsory femininity and gender roles, taking into account the compulsory aspect of gender discussed in the first chapter of this research, Esperanza sees her femininity as a model. Even though she does not want to live her mother's life, Esperanza wishes to be as feminine as her mother is. As a "wild horse" of a girl, however, it is hard for Esperanza to meet the standard of femininity.

In the vignette "Hairs" (6-7), Esperanza speaks affectionately about her mother's hair: "my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day." The mother takes time to make her hair look perfectly feminine, with the meticulous curls. Esperanza's hair, on the other hand, is wild: "And me, my hair is lazy. It never obeys barrettes or bands." To have this knowledge, Esperanza probably tried on different hairstyles, either because she wanted to do so or because her mother tried to make her hair. The hair, however, like Esperanza, is disobedient: it refuses to be tamed. Esperanza's hair, therefore, is an extension of the character's non-conformity to gender roles, and, at the same time, it mirrors her will to rebel.

The way Esperanza describes her mother's hair shows not only an admiration for its beauty, but also the affect she feels for her family. Her mother's hair is

sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread.
(Cisneros 6-7)

In moments like this, Esperanza appreciates that she has a loving family. Despite her urge to escape Mango Street and pursue a life of her own, when she thinks about her family, she belongs there with them. The passage above, from the early pages of *The House on Mango Street*, hints from the very beginning the realization Esperanza later makes, after her coming of age journey: she cannot leave forever because she must come back for her loved ones.

Esperanza's mother is not the only person in her family who she thinks is pretty and with whom she compares herself. In the vignette "Beautiful & Cruel" (88-89), Esperanza lets the reader know that Nenny, like herself, does not want the life women on Mango Street have. Instead of waiting for a husband or getting pregnant to escape her family's house, Nenny "wants things all her own, to pick and choose." According to Esperanza, "Nenny has pretty eyes and it's easy to talk that way if you are pretty," which means that she thinks beauty is something that can make life easier for women, something that will not happen to her: "I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for."

The value of beauty to Esperanza reflects the patriarchal world with which she is familiar. All around her, for instance, what she witnesses are women whose lives are, one way or another, bound to men, and beauty is what attracts men, therefore "nobody comes for [her]."

She, however, does not want to become a woman that fits the stereotype of beauty and femininity to be carried off by a man like her great-grandmother (11), since that would result in a life similar to being incarcerated: “My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (88).

There is, nonetheless, one way to use beauty that Esperanza apparently admires: “In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (89). To her, the *femme fatale* from the films knows the potential of her beauty, and instead of surrendering this power to men, she empowers herself.

Esperanza disapproves of the way that beauty can dictate a woman’s life. In fact, she disapproves of the whole part a woman is supposed to play, in her community, as someone dedicated to finding a husband and taking care of the family and the household, with no freedom to do whatever she would like. As someone who is still powerless, Esperanza can only protest in ways that seem small, but that, in the end, make a difference in the stance she adopts against a life she does not want to lead: “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89).

Even though Esperanza can be critical of the importance of beauty standards in a woman’s life, she is still a girl conditioned to aspire to be pretty, and the text suggests that being an “ugly daughter” bothers her. She does not want to be tamed, but she would like to be pretty enough to get attention from boys. In the vignette “Chanclas” (46-48), for instance, Esperanza is upset because her mother got her new clothes to go to her little cousin’s baptism party but forgot to buy her new shoes, so she has to wear the ugly old shoes that hurt her feet. When a boy that is apparently a distant cousin — she is not sure of the exact term to describe

their kinship, and mistakenly calls him a “cousin by first communion” —, invites her to dance, she declines. At a first glance, it appears that she refuses to dance because her feet hurt, but it becomes clear that, beyond the pain, she is embarrassed because of her ugly shoes. It is not until her uncle makes her believe she looks pretty that she tries to ignore the pain to have some fun:

Then Uncle Nacho is pulling and pulling my arm and it doesn't matter how new the dress Mama bought is because my feet are ugly until my uncle who is a liar says, You are the prettiest girl here, will you dance, but I believe him, and yes, we are dancing, my Uncle Nacho and me, only I don't want to at first. My feet swell big and heavy like plungers, but I drag them across the linoleum floor straight center where Uncle wants to show off the new dance we learned. And Uncle spins me, and my skinny arms bend the way he taught me, and my mother watches, and my little cousins watch, and the boy who is my cousin by first communion watches, and everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown and white, the kind my mother buys each year for school. (Cisneros 47)

The belief that she looks pretty and the attention she gets from dancing make Esperanza feel good and abandon the shame she felt for wearing ugly shoes that stopped her from having fun like the others: “Everybody laughing except me, because I'm wearing ... the old saddle shoes I wear to school, brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long and they do ... the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress” (47). After the dance, people clap for them, she finally feels confident, and the pain in her feet is no longer a big problem.

Esperanza, despite not wanting to belong to Mango Street, gets happy when she is accepted and admired by others, and she gladly walks back “to [her] mother who is proud to be [her] mother” (48). The approval that her mother gives her contrasts with the hostility she gets in the vignette “Born Bad” (58-61), in which Esperanza claims: “Most likely I will go to hell and most likely I deserve to be there. My mother says I was born on an evil day and prays for me.” The reprimand from the mother, motivated by how Esperanza made fun of a sick Aunt Lupe with her friends, is not exclusive to this event — as previously discussed, she makes comments about Esperanza’s hair and dirty clothes —, which suggests her validation at the party has a deeper meaning to the protagonist.

Besides the mother, Esperanza is especially glad the distant cousin paid attention to her: “All night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance” (48). The interest in boys Esperanza reveals in the text is part of her coming-of-age journey, one of the many signs that she is leaving childhood behind. In “Sire” (72-73), Esperanza writes about the attraction she feels toward a boy from her neighborhood, who always observes her: “I don't remember when I first noticed him looking at me—Sire. But I knew he was looking. Every time. All the time I walked past his house.” Because Sire and his friends drink beer, they are probably older than Esperanza, and she admits that they scare her, although she tries to convey that they do not. Despite being scared, she is also curious about Sire: “It made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that.” Esperanza’s blood freezes not just out of fear — what is it that scares her, anyway? That he is a punk, according to her father, which is why her mother forbids Esperanza to talk to him, or the attraction she feels? —, but also because of the attention he gives her: “Somebody looked at me. Somebody looked. But his kind, his ways.” Sire has a girlfriend, Lois, with whom Esperanza compares herself:

She is tiny and pretty and smells like baby's skin. I see her sometimes running to the store for him. And once when she was standing next to me at Mr. Benny's grocery she was barefoot, and I saw her barefoot baby toenails all painted pale pale pink, like little pink seashells, and she smells pink like babies do. She's got big girl hands, and her bones are long like ladies' bones, and she wears makeup too. But she doesn't know how to tie her shoes. I do. (Cisneros 73)

What Esperanza highlights in the passage above is how feminine Lois looks in contrast with herself. While Lois is pretty and delicate, Esperanza feels she is the opposite, a wild girl. She, however, has the brains that Lois lacks: she can tie her shoes by herself, while Lois depends on Sire to do so, an observation that reveals how much Esperanza values independence. Although she feels what could be admiration or envy for Lois' femininity, she knows the girl is not the type her mother approves of: "But Mama says those kinds of girls, those girls are the ones that go into alleys. Lois who can't tie her shoes. Where does he take her?" (73). Despite Esperanza being warned against both Sire and Lois, she shows interest in them, she wants to know what they do together and to have similar experiences:

Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all new and shiny. I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see.

A boy held me once so hard, I swear, I felt the grip and weight of his arms, but it was a dream.

Sire. How did you hold her? Was it? Like this? And when you kissed her? Like this? (Cisneros 73)

That Esperanza fantasizes about Sire and imagines herself in Lois's place is another sign of her transition from childhood into teenage life, and she does not yet know how to process these new feelings, hence the fear, the frozen blood, and the curiosity. She, furthermore, analyzes Lois's appearance and behavior to compare herself with a prototypical girl. Despite trying to convince herself that she can do things that Lois cannot — tying her own shoes —, the way Esperanza notices the other girl and wishes to experience the things she does might reveal an interest in knowing what it would be like to be like her, i. e., to perform the standard of femininity. Nonetheless, while she wants to look more feminine, which she expresses mostly through the clothes she likes to wear, she refuses to behave like the women she is supposed to imitate, so she will always deliver a somewhat deviant performance from the one her community expects from her.

The signs that indicate that Esperanza is leaving childhood are not manifested only in her new feelings, new perception of the world and development of maturity, but also in changes in her body, which affect how men perceive her — there is Sire, who looks at her with desire, but there are as well other men who harass her. In “Hips” (49-52), a vignette that is focused on Esperanza's acknowledgment of her growing up, she discusses with Lucy, Rachel and Nenny the reasons why women's hips get wider someday. She claims that: “One day you wake up and they are there. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where?”, which displays how changes in the body are usually only noticed when they are done instead of while they are happening and introduces the girls' curiosity over the function of hips that motivates their speculations in the chapter.

While the older girls share their observations and knowledge about hips, Nenny's comments are nonsensical, so she is seen as childish: “If you don't get them you may turn into a man. Nenny says this and she believes it. She is this way because of her age” (49-50).

Although Esperanza knows Nenny is wrong, she plays her role as a responsible older sister and does not allow her friends to mock the younger one: “That's right, I add before Lucy or Rachel can make fun of her. She is stupid alright, but she is my sister” (50). What Esperanza concludes about hips is that they are not ready to get them, which symbolizes how they are not yet ready to step into adulthood and that she thinks one could practice growing up like they practice walking as if they had wider hips: “What I'm saying is who here is ready? You gotta be able to know what to do with hips when you get them, I say making it up as I go. You gotta know how to walk with hips, practice you know—like if half of you wanted to go one way and the other half the other.” (50)

Even if they are not ready to fully abandon childhood, they cannot slow down their aging. Esperanza understands this as she realizes she, Rachel and Lucy are in a different place from Nenny, who sticks to old songs when jumping rope while the other girls want to make up their own songs about hips:

Not that old song, I say. You gotta use your own song. Make it up, you know? But she doesn't get it or won't. It's hard to say which. The rope turning, turning, turning.

[...] I can tell Lucy and Rachel are disgusted, but they don't say anything because she's *my* sister.

[...] Nenny, I say, but she doesn't hear me. She is too many light-years away. She is in a world we don't belong to anymore. Nenny. Going. Going. (Cisneros 52)

The place where Esperanza stands in relation to her age is yet another borderland: she is not as childish as Nenny, but she still jumps rope and plays with her friends; similarly, she is not as grown up as Lois, but she desires to experience the same things she does with Sire. Esperanza, Lucy and Rachel, on this journey to womanhood, attempt to practice being grown-

ups. To walk like they have wide hips is amusing and funny to them, because they are only among friends, but when they try on high heels for the first time and look older, they get harassed by unknown men, which takes the fun away from their experiment. This episode is depicted in “The Family of Little Feet” (39-42), in which the three girls are gifted with second-hand high-heeled shoes. At first, they are excited to try something new, but also uneasy about how their legs look in high heels, so different that they seem to belong to somebody else (“Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly, and we laugh at Rachel's one foot with a girl's gray sock and a lady's high heel. Do you like these shoes? But the truth is it is scary to look down at your foot that is no longer yours and see attached a long long leg.”), until they acknowledge their own bodies: “Then Lucy screams to take our socks off and yes, it's true. We have legs. Skinny and spotted with satin scars where scabs were picked, but legs, all our own, good to look at, and long.”

To the girls, trying on high heels is something fun, they try on womanhood as one of the games they play. When they wear the heels outside, however, they learn the reality of womanhood that ceases from being imaginary the moment the girls are perceived as women by men. Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy soon realize that their experiment calls attention to themselves: “Down to the corner where the men can't take their eyes off us. We must be Christmas” (40). Comparing the girls to Christmas can convey the idea that women are objectified by men: like Christmas gifts, women are something men want to have, and they want women to be handed to them like presents picked out for them.

The girls are warned by someone called Mr. Benny of the dangers of wearing high heels: “They are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run”. The girls soon find out the reason why Mr. Benny thinks the shoes are dangerous, which is the attention they grab from men: “On the avenue a boy on a homemade bicycle calls out: Ladies, lead me to heaven.” Esperanza thinks

the boy might be talking to somebody else, “But there is nobody around but [them].” Initially, the girls seem to be glad about the attention they are receiving, and they praise the high-heeled shoes: “Do you like these shoes? Rachel says yes, and Lucy says yes, and yes I say, these are the best shoes. We will never go back to wearing the other kind again” (41). It is not until they encounter a bum on the street that they realize the insecurity that surrounds their performance of womanhood. Upon seeing the girls wearing high heels and being asked if he liked the shoes, the man tries to buy a kiss from Rachel, taking advantage of her innocence and of her newly discovered feeling of being admired:

You are a pretty girl, bum man continues. What's your name, pretty girl?

[. . .] She is young and dizzy to hear so many sweet things in one day, even if it is a bum man's whiskey words saying them.

Rachel, you are prettier than a yellow taxicab. You know that?

But we don't like it. We got to go, Lucy says.

If I give you a dollar will you kiss me? How about a dollar. I give you a dollar, and he looks in his pocket for wrinkled money.

We have to go right now, Lucy says taking Rachel's hand because she looks like she's thinking about that dollar. (41-42)

Their dream of womanhood, suddenly, becomes a nightmare because they are now frightened of what men expect from them. The high heels that originally made them feel good about themselves and have fun turn into a pivot of a cautionary tale of their own, and the girls decide to abandon the shoes: “We are tired of being beautiful. Lucy hides the [shoes] under a powerful bushel basket on the back porch, until one Tuesday her mother, who is very clean, throws them away. But no one complains” (42). According to Hartley-Kroeger, Esperanza

“tries on a potential female role that she and her friends then discard when they tire of it” (281). That Esperanza and her friends can wear and strip out of a sort of skin of beauty, and that they also can try on the role of womanhood to which they may stick when they are adults, are evidence of the performative aspect of gender discussed in Chapter 1. The girls put on a performance of womanhood that is convincing enough — for them to feel more confident in their own bodies — and, simultaneously, too convincing — for them to be frightened by the consequences that performing femininity may cause. While they are still at the borderland of childhood, they can easily put that performance aside, a task that will become more difficult when they are older because the compulsory aspect of gender performance will increase, and, as argued by Judith Butler (“Imitation” 314), refusing to deliver a convincing performance might lead them to social ostracism.

Another big step out of childhood Esperanza gives is getting her first job to help her parents pay for her Catholic school. Because she is one year younger than she is supposed to be to work at the place Aunt Lala found, she has to lie about her age to get the job. When she starts working, she finds herself to be uncomfortable surrounded by adults and she does not know how to act, which she attempts to remediate by imitating the women around her — “... I didn't know if I could sit down or not, and then I started sitting down only when the two ladies next to me did” (54) —, but they laugh at her, making her feel embarrassed. The job, thus, becomes yet another place in which she does not belong. Esperanza starts to feel better when a male co-worker finds her and starts a conversation, until he takes advantage of her naïveté and forces a kiss on her mouth:

... an older Oriental man said hello and we talked for a while about my just starting, and he said we could be friends and next time to go in the lunchroom and sit with him, and I felt better. He had nice eyes and I didn't feel so nervous anymore. Then he asked

if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn't, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go. (Cisneros 54-55)

There is no other mention of Esperanza's job in *The House on Mango Street*, which could mean that she left it after this episode. On the other hand, it could also mean that she continued to work there, and whether she got harassed again she did not find relevant to mention, since it is now no longer a surprise what men might expect and try to take from her. Regardless of the reason why she never writes about the job again, it is clear that her first day concretizes her fear of men objectifying her like a "fancy chandelier" (11), as what happened to her great-grandmother. It is also noteworthy that both times when there is an effort to appear more adult — trying on high heels and getting a job —, Esperanza faces sexual harassment. Although there is no evidence, either in the text or in the world, to suggest that all women go through episodes of violence with men, in Esperanza's world that seems to be the norm, and that urges her to escape from it to somewhere she is not a victim.

These two episodes that portray men forcefully attempting to kiss girls make Esperanza more attentive to the interactions she and her friends have with men. The vignette "The Monkey Garden" (94-98), for instance, depicts a traumatized Esperanza trying to save her friend Sally, whom she thinks is being harassed. "The Monkey Garden" also gives special attention to the in-between place where Esperanza stands. People tell her she "was getting too old to play the games," but she wants to run as fast as the boys are doing, while Sally prefers to stay behind to talk with the (probably) older boys. Esperanza compares herself with Sally the same way she does with Lois: they both are more feminine than her and less childish. She is "not like Sally who screamed if she got her stockings muddy," she wants to "play with the kids", in

Sally's words, even if that means getting her clothes dirty. When Esperanza gets back to Sally, she encounters her friend "pretending to be mad" because the boys stole her keys. Esperanza takes her seriously, but "They were laughing. [Sally] was too. It was a joke [Esperanza] didn't get." While she wanted to resume her playing with the other kids, "Sally had her own game":

One of the boys invented the rules. One of Tito's friends said you can't get the keys back unless you kiss us and Sally pretended to be mad at first but she said yes. It was that simple.

I don't know why, but something inside me wanted to throw a stick. Something wanted to say no when I watched Sally going into the garden with Tito's buddies all grinning. It was just a kiss, that's all. A kiss for each one. So what, she said.

Only how come I felt angry inside. Like something wasn't right. (Cisneros 96-97)

Because of what happened to Lucy when she wore high heels and with herself at the job, combined with her lack of experience in flirting, Esperanza interprets Sally's game with the boys as her friend being forced to kiss them, which revolts her. She then goes to Tito's mother to ask for help, but she dismisses Esperanza, treating the situation as a normal thing for kids to do. Speechless, the girl decides to be Sally's savior, but something goes wrong:

I looked at [Tito's mother] a long time, but couldn't think of anything to say, and ran back down the three flights to the garden where Sally needed to be saved. I took three big sticks and a brick and figured this was enough.

But when I got there Sally said go home. Those boys said leave us alone. I felt stupid with my brick. They all looked at me as if I was the one that was crazy and made me feel ashamed.

The moment Esperanza realizes she misunderstood the situation, she gets embarrassed and runs away. “The Monkey Garden,” thus, shows another key episode in the protagonist’s coming of age journey in which her shame makes her understand there is no way for her to stare at what is beyond her childhood and keep refusing to grow up. Because of her age, people judge her for liking to play with the other kids and expect that she acts more like a teenager, so she feels pressured to enter the world Sally lives in. By being seen as crazy and childish by Sally, Tito and his friends, Esperanza is ashamed for not understanding what they are doing, and that shame is so heavy that she wishes to die in that moment and ends up never coming back to the garden where all of that happened:

This is where I wanted to die and where I tried one day but not even the monkey garden would have me. It was the last day I would go there.

[...]

And then I don't know why but I had to run away. I had to hide myself at the other end of the garden, in the jungle part, under a tree that wouldn't mind if I lay down and cried a long time. I closed my eyes like tight stars so that I wouldn't, but I did. My face felt hot. Everything inside hiccupped.

I read somewhere in India there are priests who can will their heart to stop beating. I wanted to will my blood to stop, my heart to quit its pumping. I wanted to be dead, to turn into the rain, my eyes melt into the ground like two black snails. I wished and wished. I closed my eyes and willed it, but when I got up my dress was green and I had a headache. (Cisneros 96-98)

The importance of this episode in Esperanza's story lies in the shift that it causes in the inner self because of a combination of the number of feelings with which she is overwhelmed in that day and of the acknowledgment of her naïveté. There is pressure for her to grow up, but, standing at the border of childhood, she does not belong either before the line nor beyond it, similar to her position in between cultures. To Esperanza, thus, it seems like there is no place that fully embraces her. "The Monkey Garden" closes with Esperanza understanding that she has become someone else, or best, another version of herself, someone who does not belong at the garden she used to like anymore: "I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either" (98).

Esperanza's resolution to save Sally contrasts with her stance as an observer when other women in Mango Street suffer different kinds of violence. She is usually powerless to do anything, since she is still a child, but, with Sally, she sees an opportunity to be her savior. This will to help her friend is not exclusive from this chapter. Ever since Sally is introduced, Esperanza writes about her with preoccupation. Because Sally's father is too strict and religious, the girl is forbidden to go out and is reprimanded for what she does without his permission. She tries to hide from most people that her father beats her, although nobody believes her because of the bruises, but Esperanza knows the truth and feels sorry for her friend. Saving Sally in the monkey garden is one of the few things Esperanza can do for her, since there is no way to overpower Sally's father with sticks and a brick.

Even though Esperanza shares with Sally the will to escape Mango Street, the opposition between them is enough to make them foils. Unlike Sally, Esperanza does not have an abusive father, and, because she does not have to do things hidden from her parents, she was not forced to grow up too fast, struggling, instead, with the borderland between being a child and a teenager. In other words, Esperanza is allowed to grow up at her own pace. Sally, on the

other hand, lacking the caring family Esperanza has and being raised very strictly, explores her sexuality earlier than her friend, arguably because she might feel in control of her freedom doing so, and because that is how she might escape the life has: “Sally got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same. She met a marshmallow salesman at a school bazaar, and she married him in another state where it's legal to get married before eighth grade ... She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape” (101). Desperate to get out of her father's house, Sally is forced to grow up too fast, getting married before she is ready, and, despite claiming to be happy with the marriage, Esperanza discloses that her husband is also abusive. What happens to Sally, then, is the illusion of success in escaping her prison, since she ends up in a similar situation to the previous one. “She is afraid to go outside without [her husband's] permission” (102), so she is still trapped inside a house.

Since Sally steps too early into adulthood, she presents herself like a grown woman, and Esperanza is admired by her femininity, which she lacks: “Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke. The boys at school think she's beautiful because her hair is shiny black like raven feathers and when she laughs, she flicks her hair back like a satin shawl over her shoulders and laughs” (81). Esperanza wants Sally to teach her how to “paint [her] eyes like Cleopatra” (81) and to wear the same clothes as her, having her as some kind of role-model. At the same time, Esperanza pities her friend for the life she has and wonders how things could be different if she managed to escape:

Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you. And if you opened the little window latch and gave it a shove, the windows would swing

open, all the sky would come in. There'd be no nosy neighbors watching, no motorcycles and cars, no sheets and towels and laundry. Only trees and more trees and plenty of blue sky. And you could laugh, Sally. You could go to sleep and wake up and never have to think who likes and doesn't like you. You could close your eyes and you wouldn't have to worry what people said because you never belonged here anyway and nobody could make you sad and nobody would think you're strange because you like to dream and dream. And no one could yell at you if they saw you out in the dark leaning against a car, leaning against somebody without someone thinking you are bad, without somebody saying it is wrong, without the whole world waiting for you to make a mistake when all you wanted, all you wanted, Sally, was to love and to love and to love and to love, and no one could call that crazy. (Cisneros 82-83)

When Esperanza envisions Sally's life outside Mango Street, she includes her own dreams of escaping: a house of her own, a sense of belonging and nobody to think she is strange. In this regard, it is possible to assume that Esperanza has some identification toward Sally: they both want to escape Mango Street, and Esperanza puts part of herself in her portrayal of Sally's dream life. The ways they choose to escape are, however, opposites. Sally has a sense of urgency and marries a man to leave her father as soon as possible. Esperanza, on the other hand, decides to take the long path, since the oppression she wishes to escape from is one she imagines for a future in Mango Street, in contrast with Sally, who already has a cruel man to torment her. In a way, Sally lives Esperanza's nightmare.

Because of how Esperanza cares about Sally and admires her, she feels disappointed and betrayed when Sally never comes to save her when she gets raped at a carnival. She also feels that Sally and the media lied to her about what it is like to have sex with a boy, because she experiences violence instead of love: "Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What

he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (99). Esperanza feels abandoned by Sally: she only comes to the carnival because she enjoys her friend's company, but Sally leaves with a boy and makes Esperanza wait for her by the red clown, just to never show up: "Why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life" (100).

Alone, Esperanza is defenseless against her abuser, who tells her "I love you, Spanish girl, I love you" (100), an indication that he knows she is Latina, but does not care about which nationality. According to María Herrera-Sobek, "Chicana writers . . . have utilized the rape-as-metaphor construct to critique the patriarchal system that oppresses them" (245). She also "[believes] economic, social, and political circumstances are . . . instrumental in influencing Chicanas to utilize sexual assault as a recurring metaphor in their works" (254). Based on that, the abuser calling Esperanza "Spanish girl" mirrors the power relations between the racist patriarchal system and the Chicana: he abuses Esperanza to state that he has more power than her and to let her know it has to do with her ethnicity. Esperanza can eventually escape Mango Street, but it is impossible to escape from her identity. She is a woman, she is a Chicana, and, regardless of her will, she cannot be separated from that.

In agreement with Herrera-Sobek, Dianne Klein, who discusses *The House on Mango Street* as a coming-of-age novel, states that "Esperanza's rites of passage speak . . . through the political realities of Mango Street . . . Her major loss of innocence has to do with gender and with being sexually appropriated by men." She continues: "Perhaps Esperanza's 'descent into darkness' occurs in the story 'Red Clowns.' Unlike the traditional bildungsroman, the knowledge with which she emerges is not that of regeneration, but of painful knowledge, the knowledge of betrayal and physical violation" (25). Esperanza's process of leaving innocence behind, thus, is abruptly and brutally interrupted, with her having, instead, her innocence robbed of her.

Esperanza's story of violation fits one of the two archetypes that permeate the Mexican culture. According to Leslie Petty, "[t]hese archetypes, embodied in the stories of la Malinche, the violated woman, and la Virgen de Guadalupe, the holy Mother, sharply define female roles in Mexican culture based on physical sexuality." Moreover, Petty states that "as historical and mythical figures, these two archetypes take on both political and social significance that also influence perceptions of femininity in the Latin American world." Gloria Anzaldúa, in her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, takes these figures as two of the three mothers of Chicanas: "All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada* (*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two" (30). That the stories of these women are used to teach Chicanas the accepted behavior for a girl shows that the maternal role is one of great importance in their culture since the three of them are mothers, both the good and the bad models. Anzaldúa claims that "In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted — *Guadalupe* to make [Chicanas] docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy" (31). Esperanza's narrative, as detailed ahead, both presents and subverts this dichotomy.

Although the legacy of "long-suffering people" could be investigated in *The House on Mango Street*, because la Llorona combines the archetypes of Guadalupe and la Malinche, I consider only the latter two in this analysis in view of my focus. In Petty's article, she argues that both archetypes are used in *Mango Street* as a way to subvert the idea that Mexican women can only be one of two things. The author gives more context about these archetypes. "As the Mexican manifestation of the Virgin Mary, la Virgen de Guadalupe is the religious icon around which Mexican Catholicism centers" (120). In addition,

The shrine of La Virgen de Guadalupe is a haven for the indigenous population of Mexico. As the incarnation of the Virgin Mary, Guadalupe represents the passive, pure female force ... she represents the holy, chaste woman, the embodiment of feminine purity as well as the virtues of nurturing and self-sacrifice. Thus, she is venerated in Mexican culture as the proper symbol for womanhood. (Petty 121)

While la Virgen de Guadalupe is the univocal role-model for the Mexican culture, that values a womanhood that is pure as opposite of sexual, self-abnegating instead of strong-willed, Marina "la Malinche," who was "Cortés's interpreter and mistress during the conquest of Mexico" (Petty 121), is an ambivalent character. Because of her history, that is often a mix of facts and legend, she can be seen as either a victim or a traitor. Petty presents a summary of her story:

As a young woman, she was given to Cortés, along with nineteen other Indian slave women, as gifts from local Indian leaders. When Montezuma's envoys came to Tabasco to find out information about Cortés, they spoke only Nahuatl while Cortés's Spanish translator spoke only Mayan. Marina was used to provide the missing link by translating the Nahuatl into Mayan. Marina soon learned Spanish and became Cortés's primary translator. Contemporary paintings and accounts show that Marina was near Cortés at all times and that her skill as a translator helped him defeat Montezuma, furthering the cause of the Spanish conquest in Mexico. In addition to her role as translator, historical writings confirm that Cortés and Marina had a sexual relationship; she gave birth to his son, Martín. The last bit of information available about Marina is that some time after this birth, on an expedition to Honduras, Cortés gave her to one of his captains, Juan Jaramillo, to marry. (121-122)

Despite how la Malinche is regarded, Petty affirms that “[b]oth Malinche’s betrayal and her violation threaten the Mexican concept of the Male; she either openly challenges his authority or is not saved by his protection. This dual threat makes her the symbol of the female sexuality that is both denigrated and controlled in Mexican society” (122). La Malinche, then, functions in Mexican culture as some sort of antitheses of la Virgen de Guadalupe. These two archetypes of the Mexican woman are challenged in *Mango Street*, where Cisneros writes characters that do embody either one of the mythical women or both in different moments, but in a manner that conveys the complexities of life and subverts the expectations for each of the two kinds of women. In other words, characters that are more aligned with la Virgen de Guadalupe, such as Esperanza’s mother and her aunt Lupe (that shares the name with la Virgen), have their own burdens and regrets, and their place is not one of being worshipped. Furthermore, characters like Marin, who is more aligned with Marina “la Malinche,” as her name suggests, show that the passive dependence on men disguised as sexual freedom result in the same life full of regrets as the lives of las Virgens de Guadalupe. Esperanza refuses to be reduced to archetypes, and Petty affirms that her attitude creates a new type of role-model for Mexican women:

[Cisneros] "revises" the significance of the Chicana archetypes of la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe through her characterization of females in the book. By recasting these mythical stories from the female perspective, Cisneros shows how artificial and confining these cultural stereotypes are, and through her creation of Esperanza, imagines a protagonist who can embody both the violation associated with la Malinche and the nurturing associated with la Virgen de Guadalupe, all the while rejecting the feminine passivity that is promoted by both role models. Therefore, Esperanza

transcends the good/bad dichotomy associated with these archetypes and becomes a new model for Chicana womanhood: an independent, autonomous artist whose house is of the heart, not of the worshiper, nor of the conqueror. (123)

As Esperanza's foil, while the protagonist rejects these archetypes, Sally associates herself with them both. She is introduced as a Malinche girl who uses her sexuality to pursue a better future away from her father. Because of that, there are several rumors about her that are supposed to stain her reputation. Her getting married is an attempt to abandon the previous archetype to embrace a new one, that of la Virgen, in order to purify her image. Either way, in both lives she is trapped and controlled by a man. In conclusion, as Petty puts it: "whether a woman follows the example of the Virgin, or of la Malinche, being reduced to either side of the good/bad dichotomy entails confinement, sacrifice, and violation" (130).

Another connection that can be traced between Sally and la Malinche is their status as traitors, but Sally's treason is not to her community, for whom she betrays is her friend. Esperanza calls Sally a liar for painting her an image of sex that is opposite of the violation she suffers, and a traitor for not coming to her rescue. According to Herrera-Sobek,

The diatribe is directed not only at Sally the silent interlocutor but at the community of women who keep the truth from the younger generation of women in a conspiracy of silence. The protagonist discovers a conspiracy of two forms of silence: silence in not *denouncing* the "real" facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and *complicity* in embroidering a fairy-tale-like mist around sex, and romanticizing and idealizing unrealistic sexual relations. (252)

The discovery to which Herrera-Sobek refers, materialized in the protagonist's rape, is what sharply ends Esperanza's slow and natural process of abandoning innocence and initiating, as a teenager, a journey into adult life. Esperanza is robbed of her gradual progress and thrown into a forced state of maturity by means of a traumatic event that pushes on her the reality of being a woman. Despite her efforts not to become a Mango Street woman, she becomes a victim like her neighbors, but she will not settle for that. Escaping this apparent fate is still her goal, and while she cannot leave Mango Street, she finds in literature her way to be free.

The reader learns for the first time that Esperanza likes to read and to write in the vignette "Born Bad" (58-61), dedicated to Aunt Lupe, who dies after being sick for a long time. Esperanza speaks fondly of her aunt, especially because she could read her stories and poems from the library books, and she regrets imitating Aunt Lupe in her sickness with Lucy and Rachel, mostly because the aunt dies later that day. Esperanza recalls reading Aunt Lupe a poem of her own:

I want to be
like the waves on the sea,
like the clouds in the wind, but I'm me.
One day I'll jump
out of my skin.
I'll shake the sky
like a hundred violins. (Cisneros 60-61)

Esperanza's poem reveals her dissatisfaction with her life. She wishes to be fluid and free like waves and clouds that cannot be controlled. Although "jump out of my skin" is an

expression that often conveys that the speaker is surprised or frightened by something, Esperanza means it literally: she wants to leave her skin behind to become someone or something else that is free without the restrictions of her body. Aunt Lupe listens to these lines and approves of them, advising Esperanza that her writing is her way out: “That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant” (61). The girl takes the advice, but she will only come to understand it by the end of the story, after the loss of her innocence and after reflecting deeper about her writing. Until then, she continues to struggle with her feelings. Esperanza identifies herself with four skinny trees that are not supposed to be on the street — they do not belong there — but that grew anyway. She admires their strength to survive despite all the obstacles, and she tries to get inspiration from them:

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (Cisneros 74-75)

Like the trees, Esperanza is a tiny element surrounded by many obstacles and she must grow despite them. She must keep reaching like the trees' roots do in order to survive in her reality. Her melancholy and identification with the trees are related to her insistent feeling of non-belonging and belief that she has no home. When she complains about her situation to Alicia, however, claiming she does not have a house, her friend explains that she is wrong: “You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of” (106). Esperanza's shame of the house prevents her from perceiving the reality: “No, this isn't my

house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here. [...] I never had a house, not even a photograph ... only one I dream of" (106-107). Even though Esperanza insists in her homelessness, a belief that refers to the comparison she makes between the lives of bums and of hers (87), Alicia tries to make her understand that she cannot change her upbringing: "Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too." Esperanza, however, still denies this possibility: "Not me. Not until somebody makes it better" (107).

Alicia's prediction of Esperanza coming back to Mango Street corroborates the advice she receives in the vignette "The Three Sisters" (103-105). In Lucy and Rachel's baby sister's funeral, Esperanza encounters three mysterious women who are a reinterpretation of the ancient Greek figures of the Moirai, also known as the Fates, three goddesses who personify destiny and ensure that it is fulfilled. Like the Moirai, the three sisters seem to know about fate. They tell Esperanza, for instance, that "Tomorrow it will rain", and, after checking her hands, they say that "She's special" and that "she'll go very far." The sisters ask Esperanza to make a wish, which they affirm will come true, even without Esperanza telling them what she wished for. One of them calls Esperanza aside and advises her to come back to Mango Street, like Alicia later tells her she will do:

She held my face with her blue-veined hands and looked and looked at me. A long silence. When you leave you must remember always to come back, she said.

What?

When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are.

Then I didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish.

You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused. (Cisneros 105)

Like Alicia, the mysterious woman tries to make Esperanza understand that she cannot dismiss Mango Street from her identity. Her house, the people she met and the things she learned while living there made her who she is, and that cannot be changed. Accepting this truth is how Esperanza will be able to reconcile her past and present to the future she pursues, and when she is finally free, she will have the power that she now lacks to help other women in Mango Street. The three sisters know Esperanza will achieve her goal of escaping, and what motivates her to do so is the desire to have “a house of [her] own”, with “[her] books and [her] stories”, “a house quiet as snow, a space for [herself] to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108). While that house does not exist, Esperanza’s home is the paper. Her writing, according to Leslie Petty, can also be a bridge between the worlds of la Malinche and of la Virgen de Guadalupe: as la Malinche, Esperanza “goes off into the world of the ‘conqueror’”, out of Mango Street, and she might be perceived as a traitor, but “like the Virgin, Esperanza will return to support, protect, and aid those that need her within the barrio” (130-131).

In the closing vignette, “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes” (109-110), the reader finds an Esperanza that has grown up in the year she has spent in Mango Street and that has now a better understanding of who she is and who she wants to become. After she affirms “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong,” Esperanza starts her story with the same words that open *The House on Mango Street*: “We didn't always live on Mango Street.” While in the first vignette she says that what she “[remembers] most

was moving a lot” (3), though, what she now “[remembers] most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house [she] belongs but [does] not belong to.” Esperanza, thus, accepts that her house and the street are places where she belongs, because they are what she knows and they made her what she is, but where she does not want to belong, since that would mean surrendering her wildness to the fate of a Mango Street woman.

After completing her journey of growing out of childhood and innocence, Esperanza understands the meaning of Aunt Lupe’s advice to write to keep her free: “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (110). Esperanza finishes her story with an envision of her future:

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away.

Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (Cisneros 110)

Esperanza’s closing words reveal that, despite being reluctant at first at the idea of coming back to Mango Street, she embraces the duty she has to her community. She will leave to learn to live a life that suits her, and she will come back to rescue those who need her knowledge. She will help dismantle the idea that only two lives, either that related to la Malinche’s or to la Virgen’s, that both end up in subjection to men, are possible for the women of Mango Street.

This chapter demonstrates the main pieces of evidence in *The House on Mango Street* that support my argument, especially based on Butler's ideas, that Esperanza has a sense of non-belonging that is attached to her refusal of performing gender like she is expected to do. In her coming-of-age story, Esperanza develops a better apprehension of her subjectivity, which helps her navigate her feeling of non-belonging. The same themes of belonging and gender performance will be analyzed in the following chapter, whose focus is on *Fun Home's* protagonist Alison.

Chapter 3: Odyssey to the Self

“Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, inhuman, non-human.” (Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*).

In the previous chapter that focused on Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, I explored the themes of non-belonging and gender performance that surround Esperanza’s life and associated them to the construction of her subjectivity. A similar analysis is conducted in this chapter, which is centered on Alison, the protagonist of Alison Bechdel’s memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Like Esperanza, Alison’s subjectivity is heavily influenced by the way she performs gender and by her conflicted feelings of belonging. Her sexuality and relationship with family are also relevant topics to understand Alison as a subject.

In *Fun Home*, the author Alison Bechdel creates a fictional character Alison, by means of an autobiographical narrative, as she depicts her own relationship with her father, Bruce Bechdel, which leads her to dwell on formative events from her childhood and teenage years. Because it is a graphic novel, also known as a comic book, *Fun Home* has particular characteristics that differentiate it from a novel, especially the presence and importance of the drawn pictures to the narrative. In other words, the text in this book is not enough to tell the complete story, having the reader to rely as well on the images to get the full picture the narrative paints.

Regarding “the formal qualities of comics — the interplay between verbal and visual representation and the unique spatial qualities of graphic narratives —,” Heike Bauer affirms

that they “allow for a representation of the gaps, confusions, and multidimensional meanings that occur when events and experiences are felt, remembered, and represented” (221). Since *Fun Home* is an autobiography written in the form of a comic book, a model that is frequently referred to as an autographic, the visual elements of the narrative, along with the textual elements, emphasize that the reader is looking at a story the way the narrator/protagonist sees it, lacking, therefore, objectivity. In this sense, one of the reasons why autographics differ from “the literary genre of autobiography,” according to Bauer, is that “graphic memoirs are defined by how they tell a story as much as by what is represented” (221). Considering this, many of the *Fun Home* quotes I will include in this chapter will be either followed by or substituted for a reproduction of the comic book page where it is taken from, if the image contributes to a deeper interpretation of the analyzed passage.

Image and text come together in *Fun Home* to portray Alison’s struggle to understand her father and what he means to her. Although Bruce is emotionally distant from his children, Alison finds common interests between them that help them connect with each other, such as literature, which is addressed in more detail further in this chapter. Despite her need to be noticed and approved by her father, Alison develops quite different tastes from Bruce, perhaps to contradict his authoritative manner. For instance, one of Bruce’s greatest passions is historic restoration, which involves the home decór of their house that he restored, and “[Alison and her brothers] couldn’t compete with the astral lamps and girandoles and hepplewhite suite chairs. They were perfect.” Alison states: “I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture.” To counter Bruce’s taste for the aesthetic, Alison develops a “preference for the unadorned and purely functional” (14):

Fig. #4 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 14.

WE EACH RESISTED IN OUR OWN WAYS, BUT IN THE END WE WERE EQUALLY POWERLESS BEFORE MY FATHER'S CURATORIAL ONSLAUGHT.



MY BROTHERS AND I COULDN'T COMPETE WITH THE ASTRAL LAMPS AND GIRANDOLES AND HEPPLEWHITE SUITE CHAIRS. THEY WERE PERFECT.



I GREW TO RESENT THE WAY MY FATHER TREATED HIS FURNITURE LIKE CHILDREN, AND HIS CHILDREN LIKE FURNITURE.

MY OWN DECIDED PREFERENCE FOR THE UNADORNED AND PURELY FUNCTIONAL EMERGED EARLY.

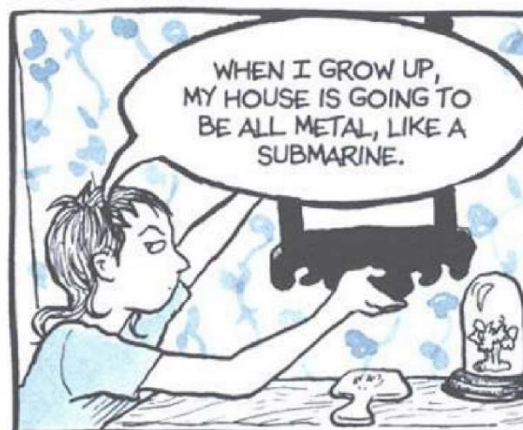


Fig. #5 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 15.

I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN.



MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.



UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.

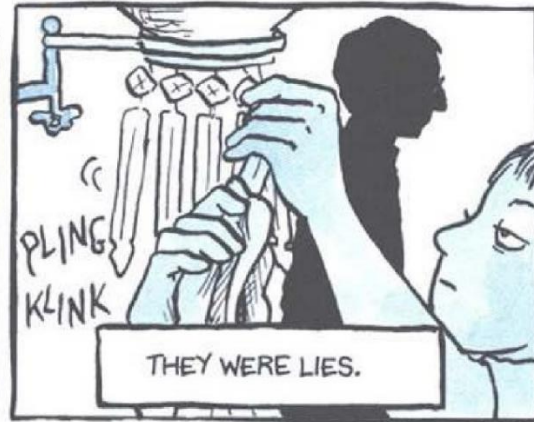


Fig. #6 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 16.

I DEVELOPED A CONTEMPT FOR USE-
LESS ORNAMENT. WHAT FUNCTION WAS
SERVED BY THE SCROLLS, TASSELS, AND
BRIC-A-BRAC THAT INFESTED OUR HOUSE?



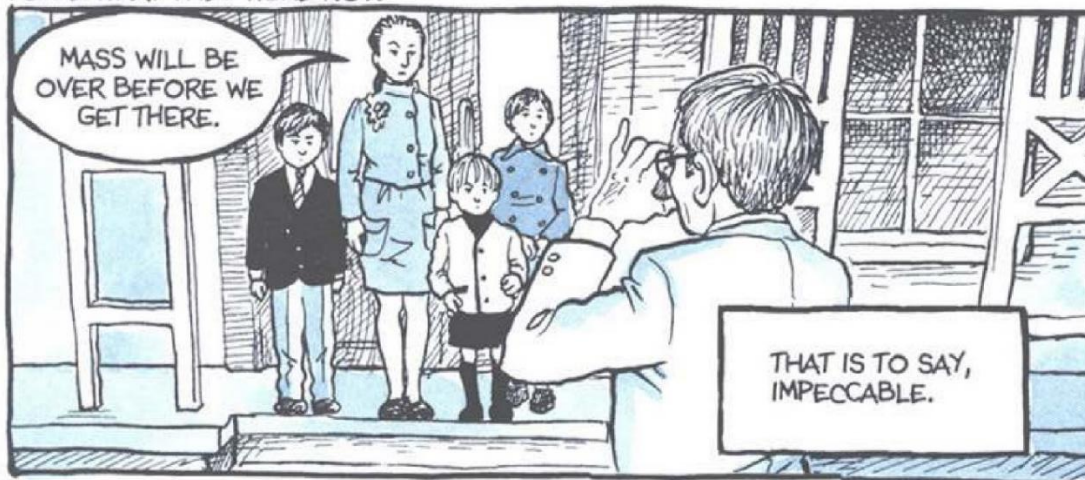
IF ANYTHING, THEY OBSCURED FUNCTION.
THEY WERE EMBELLISHMENTS IN THE
WORST SENSE.



MY FATHER BEGAN TO SEEM MORALLY
SUSPECT TO ME LONG BEFORE I KNEW
THAT HE ACTUALLY HAD A DARK SECRET.



HE USED HIS SKILLFUL ARTIFICE NOT TO MAKE THINGS, BUT TO MAKE THINGS APPEAR
TO BE WHAT THEY WERE NOT.



As illustrated in Fig. #5, Alison's preferences are contrary to those of her father. One of the differences portrayed is particularly important for this analysis: the way each of them wants Alison to look like. Bruce acts toward his daughter as if she is some sort of doll that he can decorate as part of the house he renovates. In his vision, Alison's aesthetic should be as close as possible to what is prototypically feminine, while she tends to deviate from that notion. She is the "butch to his nelly" (15), an affirmation that foreshadows two important topics of the memoir: first, the choice of the words "butch" and "nelly", which can refer, respectively, to a masculine looking lesbian and an effeminate gay man, hints to the sexuality of the characters; second, this precedes Alison's realization that she and her father are opposites, especially in what concerns their gender performance.

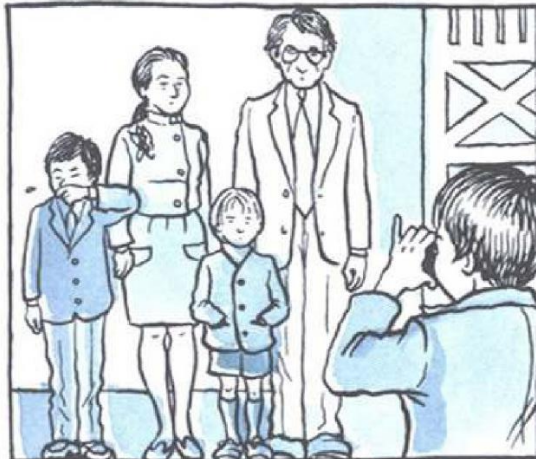
Bruce's need to make Alison look like a perfect girl reflects the importance he gives to appearances, to make his life appear impeccable (see Fig. #6). She may not be a perfect girl, but as long as she appears to be so, Bruce is satisfied. According to Aimee E. Vincent, "Alison's appearance becomes one of the tools Bruce uses to construct a perfect reality. Her gender performance is as carefully crafted by him as the 'perfect' home they live in, much like Bruce's identity as 'an ideal husband and father' is crafted (Bechdel 14, 17)" (77). The passage to which Vincent refers, about Bruce's status as a husband and father, is reproduced below:

Fig. #7 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 17.

HE APPEARED TO BE AN IDEAL HUSBAND AND FATHER, FOR EXAMPLE.



IT'S TEMPTING TO SUGGEST, IN RETRO-SPECT, THAT OUR FAMILY WAS A SHAM.



THAT OUR HOUSE WAS NOT A REAL HOME AT ALL BUT THE SIMULACRUM OF ONE, A MUSEUM.



YET WE REALLY WERE A FAMILY, AND WE REALLY DID LIVE IN THOSE PERIOD ROOMS.



In Fig. #7, Alison reveals the dark secret from her father mentioned in Fig. #6, calling him out on his hypocrisy: “would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (17). The same way Bruce is not the ideal man, his family is not perfect like he wishes. In fact, despite knowing they constitute a real family, Alison feels like they are “a sham,” since their situation differs from the impeccable image Bruce attempts to show. Even though the family exists, Alison claims that “something vital [is] missing” to it, which is “an elasticity, a margin for error” (18), meaning that imperfection bothers Bruce. Because of that, he punishes his children when something seems out of place, even when they are not at fault.

In the initial pages of *Fun Home*, Alison compares her father to Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and “plummet[ed] from the sky” (4), but soon she expands that comparison and associates her father to Daedalus: “For if my father was Icarus, he was also Daedalus — that skillful artificer, that mad scientist who built the wings for his son and designed the famous labyrinth ... and who answered not to the laws of society, but to those of his craft” (7). This analogy accompanies Alison’s narration until the end of the story, reminding the reader of Bruce’s complex personality, that ranges from the rebellious Icarus to the wise Daedalus. Bruce’s tantrums and the way he punishes his children, however, put him also in the fearful figure of the Minotaur, another crucial character in the myth of the labyrinth:

Fig. #8 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 12.

INDEED, THE RESULT OF THAT SCHEME--A HALF-BULL, HALF-MAN MONSTER--INSPIRED DAEDALUS'S GREATEST CREATION YET.



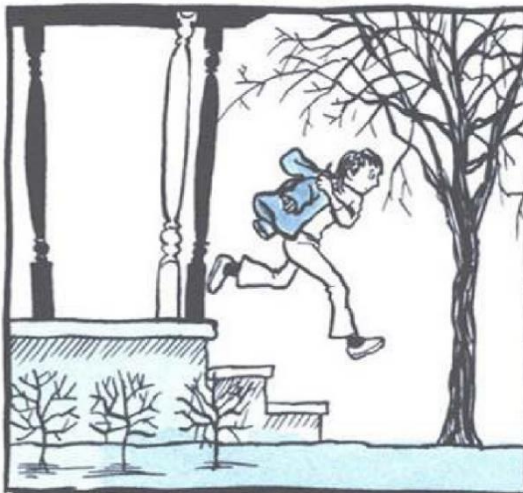
HE HID THE MINOTAUR IN THE LABYRINTH--A MAZE OF PASSAGES AND ROOMS OPENING ENDLESSLY INTO ONE ANOTHER...



...AND FROM WHICH, AS STRAY YOUTHS AND MAIDENS DISCOVERED TO THEIR PERIL...



...ESCAPE WAS IMPOSSIBLE.



THEN THERE ARE THOSE FAMOUS WINGS. WAS DAEDALUS REALLY STRICKEN WITH GRIEF WHEN ICARUS FELL INTO THE SEA?



OR JUST DISAPPOINTED BY THE DESIGN FAILURE?



In the first panel of Fig. #8, Alison seems to be afraid of her father: her eyes are wide open as she is caught breaking something of his; Bruce is represented in shadow, like something to be feared; the panel caption that composes the scene describes the mythical monster. In this moment, Bruce is the Minotaur, and the house is the labyrinth. As Alison recognizes, escaping from the labyrinth is impossible, and the drawings reiterate this idea by depicting her finding herself back at the house just after leaving it. The father's fits of temper, the simulacrum of a home, the sham of a family and the thoughts of escaping indicate that Alison is part of an environment to which she does not fully pertain. She is an element of this family and of this house, but the false appearance of what they are bothers her, because that is a life that does not belong to her, as much as she does not belong in it. Alison declares that, even as a child, she disliked the idea of her family being atypical: "When other children called our house a mansion, I would demur. I resented the implication that my family was rich, or unusual in any way . . . In fact, we *were* unusual, though I wouldn't appreciate exactly how unusual until much later. But we were not rich" (5). Her apprehension about being uncommon is, as I argue, a result of her anxiety to belong. Belonging is a feeling she has not yet experienced, nor in her home, where she is trapped in a labyrinth trying to escape her father's crafting of her, nor outside, where she is seen as different by those whose family is usual.

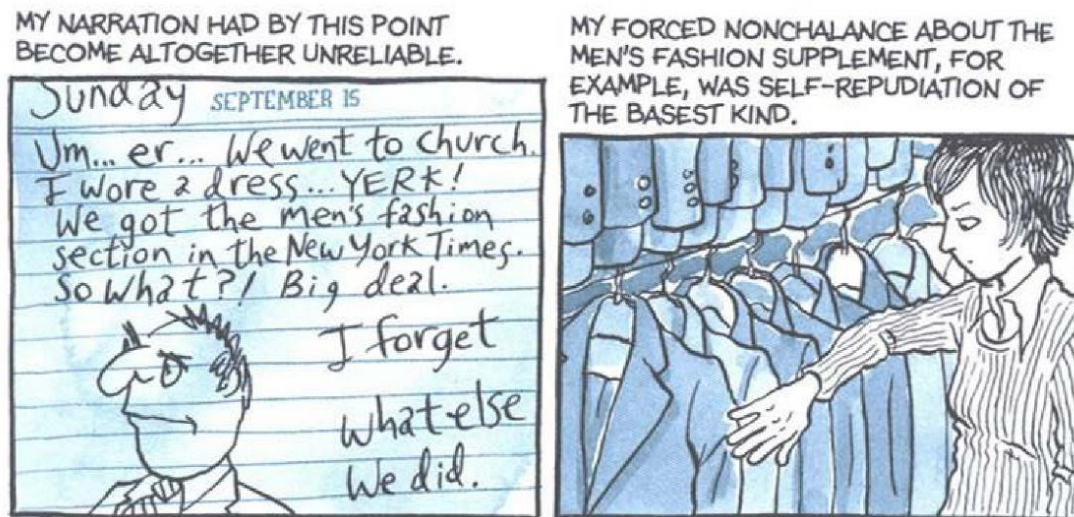
Another key aspect of Alison's troubled status of belonging is her lack of femininity, which permeates the whole memoir, not being limited to the moments she contradicts her father, although they are frequent. Alison is shown disapproving of Bruce's attempts to make her more feminine from the beginning, when she is still a young girl and firmly argues against the wallpaper Bruce chose for her — "But I **hate** pink! I **hate** flowers!" —, to which he responds with "tough titty" (7), in a clear dismissal of her feelings and will. Her interest in masculinity is not abandoned in her teenage years. At 14, she and her friend Beth, after missing the school game and dance, try on men's clothes:

Fig. #9 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 182.

In Fig. #9, her claim of “finding [herself] fluent in a language [she’d] never been taught” (182) indicates that wearing men’s clothes is how she can express herself in a way that is more truthful to her tastes and subjectivity. She describes this feeling as some sort of “mystical pleasure,” and that is a refreshing sensation for Alison, who tries to blend in with the other girls. The reason she was going to the school event, for instance, is that Beth “was trying to improve [her] social skills” (181), but Alison is relieved when they miss their ride and have to stay home. When she retells the day in her journal, however, Alison uses “an utter falsehood” (183) to describe her disappointment for missing the game and dance, as if she is trying to

convince her diary that she is someone else, maybe as a way to convince herself of that. She claims, in fact, that her journal is, at this point, “altogether unreliable” because of how much she edits the events and thoughts that took place during the day:

Fig. #10 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 184.



The expression “YERK!” (Fig. #10) used by Alison in her journal has unclear meaning and it is possible to grasp either a good or a bad connotation from it. If interpreted as an expression of disgust, I argue that her followed falsehood of being nonchalant about men’s fashion, in which she is actually very interested, as a form of “self-repudiation” is an attempt to correct something that appears to be at fault: she disapproves of her forced femininity, realizes that, and tries to remediate it by forcing a disapproval of masculinity. If, on the other hand, “yerk” is used to show excitement for wearing a dress, that emphasizes the unreliability of her journal narration: Alison chooses an uncommon, unfamiliar expression to imitate an excitement she perceives in other girls, but the feeling is false. Either way, what is clear in this event is Alison’s effort to appear as something she is not — much like her father does —, an effort that is also to belong. Her falsehood, however, is apparent. The hesitant onomatopoeias

("um", "er") and the frequent use of ellipses in the start of her entry indicate the uncertainty of what she says. The forced emphasis when dismissing the men's fashion supplement ("So WHAT?! Big deal.") suggests that the feeling expressed is also forced. As suggested by the identifiable falsehood of her diary, her attempts to blend in are ineffective. She still sticks out, no matter how much she resents being perceived as unusual.

Alison's unusualness in relation to her performance as a girl is also particularly noticeable during the camping trip she takes when she is 10 years old. Just before they leave to camp, Alison opens a nude calendar given to her father, despite being told not to do it, without knowing of its content:

Fig. #11 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 112.

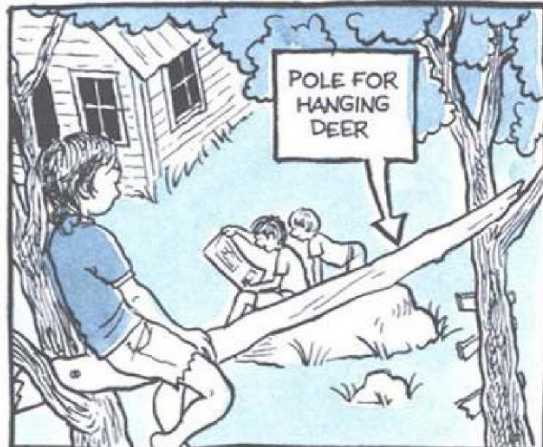


I FELT AS IF I'D BEEN STRIPPED NAKED MYSELF, INEXPLICABLY ASHAMED, LIKE ADAM AND EVE.



ONCE WE WERE AT THE BULLPEN, MY BROTHERS DISCOVERED THE CALENDAR.

THE SHOVEL WASN'T RUNNING, BUT THE OPERATOR LET US INTO THE CAB.



THAT AFTERNOON, WE DROVE OUT TO THE STRIP MINE.

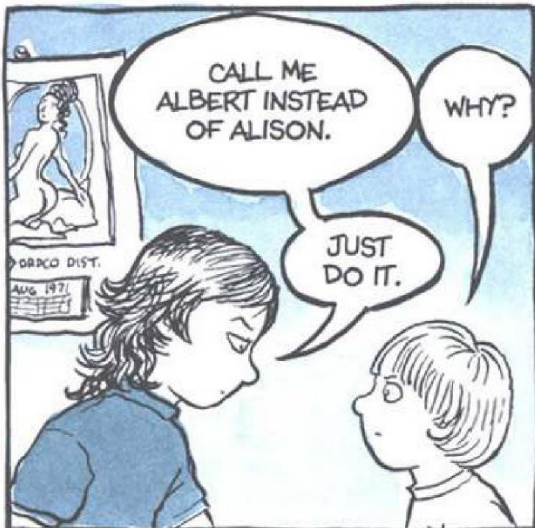
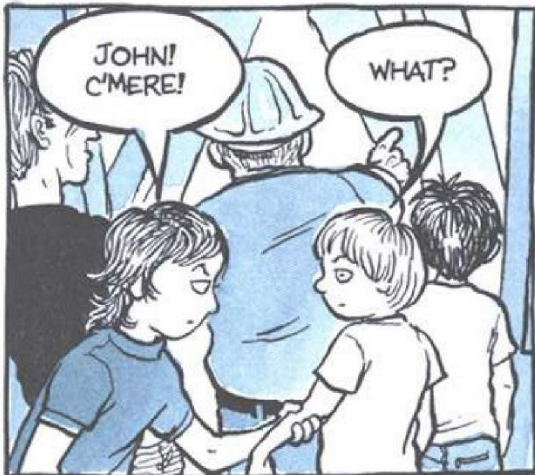


Fig. #12 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 113.

INSIDE I WAS ASTONISHED BY WHAT STRUCK ME AS A BIZARRE COINCIDENCE.



AS THE MAN SHOWED US AROUND, IT SEEMED IMPERATIVE THAT HE NOT KNOW I WAS A GIRL.



While Alison feels ashamed for looking at the calendar and puts on an apathetic expression to disguise her embarrassment and not let her father know she disobeyed him, her brothers, when they discover the same calendar, are represented smiling (Fig. #11). Unlike Alison, the boys do not seem to feel any shame for looking at an image of a naked woman because it is expected from boys to do and enjoy such things. Alison's shame, however, is so strong she compares it to Adam and Eve's. She cannot explain, at that moment, why she feels this embarrassed, but considering the later realization of her lesbianism, perhaps she experienced some sort of attraction to the woman and subconsciously reprimanded herself for feeling different from what is usual for a girl.

Later, when she goes into the operator's cab, she sees another nude calendar (Fig. #12). As the only girl there, it is possible that Alison feels like she should not be with them, in the presence of that image, and the solution she finds to belong there is to become a boy. She does not actually change genders, but the minute she pretends to be a boy, she is one, at least in her head. As a boy, she is allowed to act like one, and she probably feels a bit freer that way.

In that same trip, however, Alison is reminded she is not one of the boys when she fails to pull the trigger of a gun and Bill, her father's helper that tries to teach her and her brothers how to shoot, points out: "That's weird. I could do it fine when I was your age" (114). Although none of her brothers succeed at the same task, Alison is the oldest. If Bill, at her age, was able to shoot a gun, Alison feels she should be as well. Confronted with the reality of her being, as opposed to who she attempted to be during the trip, Alison ponders: "On the drive home, a postlapsarian melancholy crept over me. I had failed some unspoken initiation rite, and life's possibilities were no longer infinite" (115). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Alison's experimentation of boyhood showed her multiple possibilities of life that seem to be non-existent for a girl, and the melancholy she feels is due to this realization. That does not

necessarily mean she wants to be a boy. In fact, I argue that what she wants is to have, as a girl, the same freedom a boy does.

Alison considers her pretending to be a boy a “precocious feat of Proustian transposition” (113, see Fig. #12). References to Marcel Proust are frequent in *Fun Home*, especially because *Remembrance of Things Past* was read by Bruce the year before his death, and Alison associates it to his possible suicide. Bruce is Daedalus, Icarus, and the Minotaur, and he is also Proust in Alison’s eyes. The following is a transcription of the captions in *Fun Home*, disregarding the balloons and images, that detail that comparison and explain the “Proustian transposition”:

Of all his domestic inclinations, my father’s decided bent for gardening was the most redolent to me of that other, more deeply disturbing bent. What kind of man but a sissy could possibly love flowers this ardently? . . . If my father had a favorite flower, it was the lilac. A tragic botanical specimen, invariably beginning to fade even before reaching its peak. That’s how Proust describes the lilacs bordering Swann’s Way in *Remembrance of Things Past*. My father, as I say, had begun reading this the year before he died. Proust would have intense, emotional friendships with fashionable women. . . . But it was young, often straight, men with whom he fell in love. He would also fictionalize real people in his life by transposing their gender — The narrator’s lover Albertine, for example, is often read as a portrait of Proust’s beloved chauffeur/secretary, Alfred. My father could not afford a chauffeur/secretary. But he did spring for the occasional yardwork assistant/babysitter. He would cultivate these young men like orchids. (Bechdel 90-95)

It is noteworthy that, in the passage above, Alison calls her father a “sissy,” which has the same connotation as “nelly” (15), an effeminate man. She plays with stereotypes of homosexuals to accuse her father of being both the same as her (queer) and her direct opposite: she is the “butch to his nelly” (15), and he is the “sissy” to her “bulldyke” (119). When describing her father’s probable favorite flower, Alison, in fact, describes him, who “fade[s] even before reaching its peak,” in reference to his premature death. Most importantly, Bruce’s most noticeable similarity with Proust, according to Alison, is their relationship with young men. Not only does he hire young men to help him with some chores, such as Bill who taught the children how to shoot a gun, but also he, as a teacher, develops closer relationships with “his more promising high school students” (61), that Alison believes to be sexual in some cases. In fact, Bruce eventually gets himself into legal trouble after offering alcohol to an underage boy and driving him somewhere without his parents’ knowledge. He almost loses his job because of that, which tells Alison that the real accusation is more severe than giving beer to a minor. Bruce’s cheating on his wife, especially with underage boys, is important to this analysis because Alison both judges and empathizes with her father based on his behavior and on the comparison between his closeted life and her openly queer living, as becomes clear further in this chapter.

Some of the young men Bruce cultivates know his children, since they act as babysitters. Remembering events from her childhood, Alison admits: “I admired their masculine charms myself . . . Indeed, I had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age” (95). Her admiration for their masculinity, however, comes from a different place from her father’s:

Fig. #13 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 96.

I MEASURED MY FATHER AGAINST THE GRIMY DEER HUNTERS AT THE GAS STATION UPTOWN, WITH THEIR YELLOW WORKBOOTS AND SHORN-SHEEP HAIRCUTS.



AND WHERE HE FELL SHORT, I STEPPED IN.



I COUNTED AS AN INDICATION OF MY SUCCESS THE NICKNAME BESTOWED ON ME BY MY OLDER COUSINS.

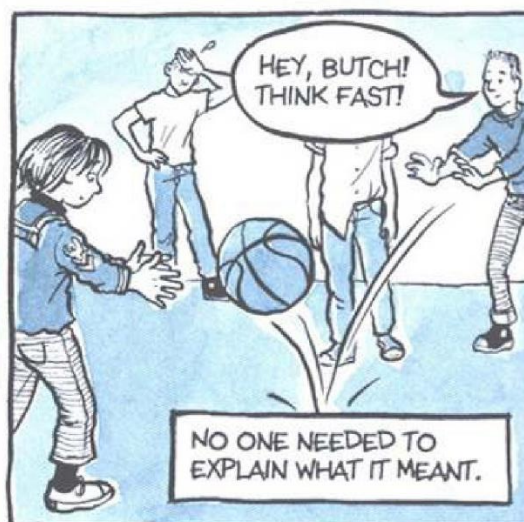
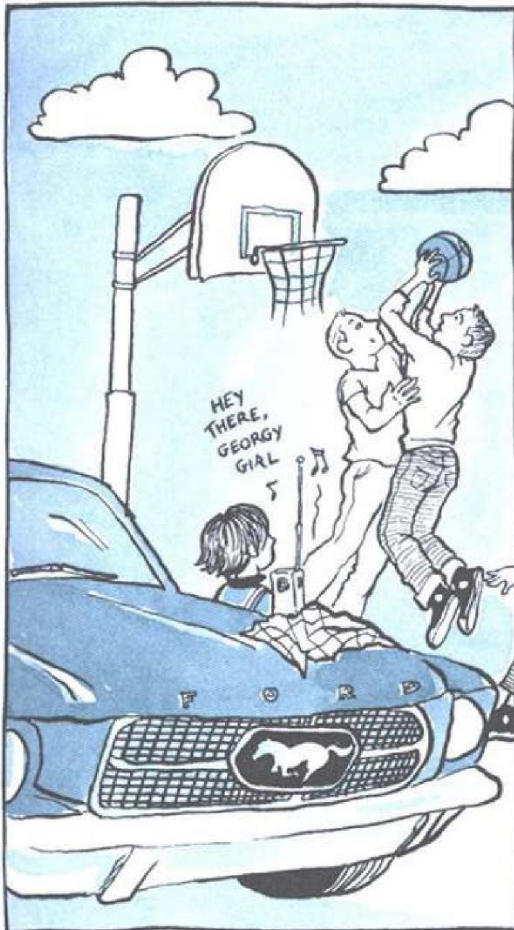


Fig. #14 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 97.

IT WAS SELF-DESCRIPTIVE. CROPPED, CURT, PERCUSSIVE. PRACTICALLY ONOMATOPOEIC. AT ANY RATE, THE OPPOSITE OF SISSY.

AND DESPITE THE TYRANNICAL POWER WITH WHICH HE HELD SWAY, IT WAS CLEAR TO ME THAT MY FATHER WAS A BIG SISSY.



PROUST REFERS TO HIS EXPLICITLY HOMOSEXUAL CHARACTERS AS "INVERTS." I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FOND OF THIS ANTI-QUATED CLINICAL TERM.



IT'S IMPRECISE AND INSUFFICIENT, DEFINING THE HOMOSEXUAL AS A PERSON WHOSE GENDER EXPRESSION IS AT ODDS WITH HIS OR HER SEX.

BUT IN THE ADMITTEDLY LIMITED SAMPLE COMPRISING MY FATHER AND ME, PERHAPS IT IS SUFFICIENT.



Fig. #15 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 98.

NOT ONLY WERE WE INVERTS. WE WERE INVERSIONS OF ONE ANOTHER.



IT WAS A WAR OF CROSS-PURPOSES, AND SO DOOMED TO PERPETUAL ESCALATION.



Fig. #16 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 99.



YOU NEED SOME PEARLS.

NO WAY!



WHAT'RE YOU AFRAID OF? BEING BEAUTIFUL? PUT IT ON, GODDAMN IT!

LEAVE ME ALONE!

BETWEEN US LAY A SLENDER DEMILITARIZED ZONE--OUR SHARED REVERENCE FOR MASCULINE BEAUTY.

BUT I WANTED THE MUSCLES AND TWEED LIKE MY FATHER WANTED THE VELVET AND PEARLS--SUBJECTIVELY, FOR MYSELF.



YOU SHOULD GET A SUIT WITH A VEST.



THE OBJECTS OF OUR DESIRE WERE QUITE DIFFERENT.



NICE. I SHOULD.

Even before Alison's claim of Bruce and herself being "inversions of one another," in Fig. #15, it is noticeable that they often oppose each other, especially when it comes to their gender performance. Instead of the usual father-daughter gender differences, though, the roles are reversed. Fig. #13 depicts Alison in her younger years. By closely observing her father and contrasting him to the other men around, she ascertains that he lacks manly characteristics, which she gladly supplies. Her masculine traits do not go unnoticeable, as she is called a "butch" by her cousins, which not only does not bother her but indicates her success in making up for what lacks in her father (Fig. #13 and #15). It is possible to contrast this younger Alison who owns up to her unusual gender performance and the teenage girl who lies to her journal to seem more common (see Fig. #10). What matters to the child Alison is becoming the opposite of a sissy, and to achieve such status she defies the Minotaur, the controlling father who wants to dictate that her appearance must be more feminine and threatens her if she does not comply.

This "war of cross-purposes" continues even in her late teenage years. Bruce cannot stand being unable to control Alison's appearance, which ruins the perfect image he would like to build of his family. She pleads with him to leave her alone (Fig. #16); he suggests that she can only be beautiful by following his standards of appearance. Alison recognizes that Proust's concept of the invert, that "[defines] the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex" (97, see Fig. #14), is flawed and inadequate. Still, it perfectly describes both Alison's and Bruce's situation. They each perform gender in an unexpected way, considering the norms of their society in that specific period of time. And it happens that their gender expressions are direct opposites, therefore leading Alison to conclude that, more than inverts, they are inversions of each other. Bruce uses his daughter to finally express the femininity he is denied of performing; Alison's masculine gender expression fills up the gap in her father's manliness. Their "shared reverence for masculine beauty" (99) is a neutral ground in their war, but their admiration have different reasons: masculine beauty is something

which Alison strives to achieve for herself, while Bruce feels attracted to its occurrence in other men (Fig. #16).

The inversion between them also refers to how they choose to live in their gender and with their sexuality. While Bruce's youth takes place in a more repressive society, Alison's young adult years are set after the Stonewall riots, so the memory of the rebellion is still fresh and inspiring, as suggested by her college girlfriend's "one-woman protest" (214). Therefore, the environment in which Alison lives, especially after she leaves her home in Beech Breek for college, grants her the opportunity to seek knowledge on herself, meet people like her and form a community, which encourages her to live truthfully, unlike her father, who decided to live a sham life because of the circumstances of his upbringing. In Judith Kegan Gardiner's words, referring to Bruce's life and to his death — that was preceded by the coming out of his daughter and by a divorce notice —, and also to Alison's journey, "In *Fun Home*, we never know what Bruce finally knows about himself, and we don't know if his knowledge precipitates his tragic death. Alison's recognition of her sexual identity, in contrast, leads to her liberation from stifling home and family" (206). Liberation, however, is not easy to achieve for those outside of the heterosexual matrix. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

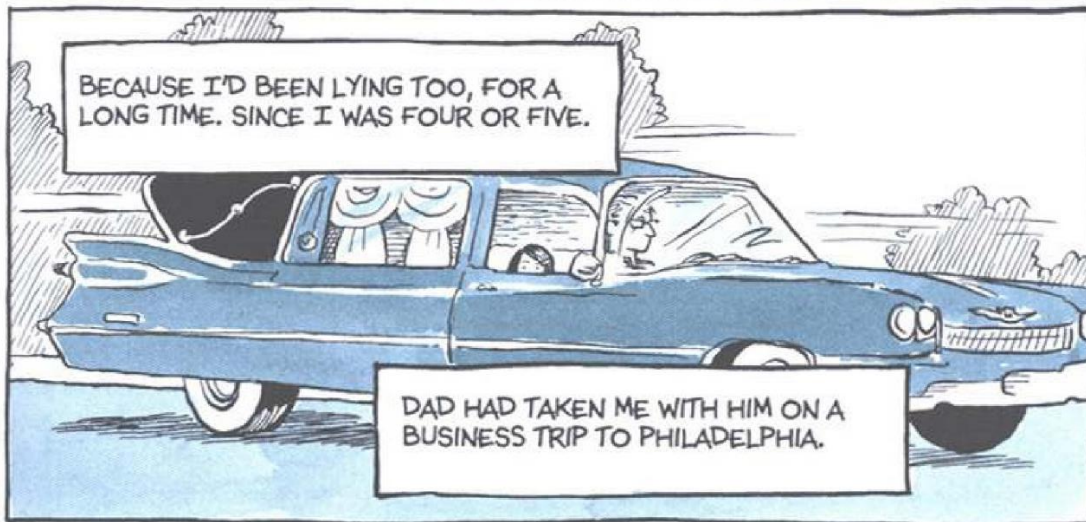
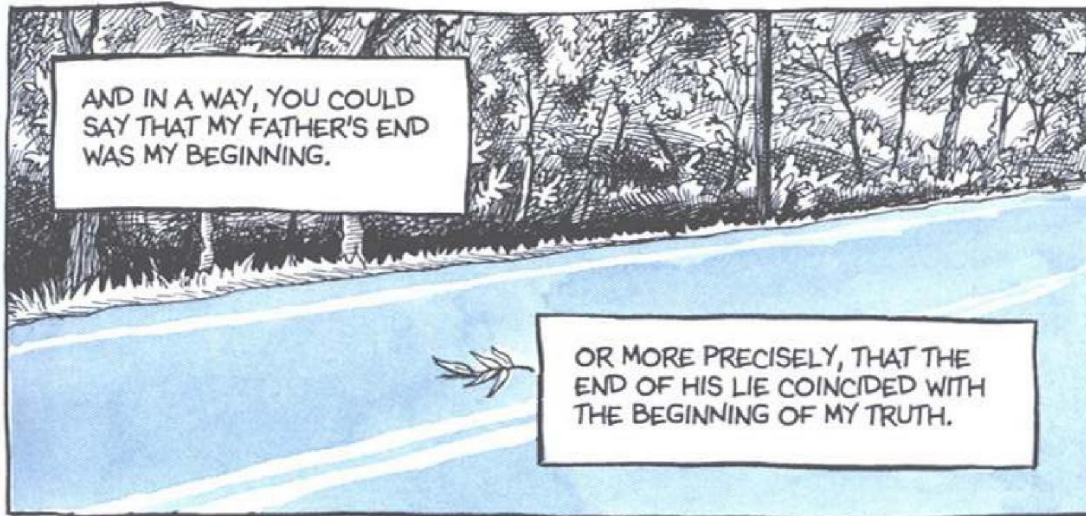
The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (68)

Sedgwick refers to two main points. Firstly, there are not many queer people, in comparison to the general queer population, who are privileged enough to allow themselves to be out of the closet without putting themselves at risk. Secondly, the author has in mind the

many times a gay person must come out. Instead of disclosing their sexuality once and becoming freed, one is constantly assumed to be heterosexual, especially by those who meet them for the first time. In this sense, the coming out of the closet happens many times in the lives of queer people, and every time they need to evaluate the situation and decide if it is safe to reveal themselves. Bruce's upbringing led him to opt not to be out of the closet for the most part of his life. Alison, on the other hand, encounters what she needs to be open about her sexuality.

The following reproduction of pp. 117-119 — that have already been referenced and partially reproduced in the first chapter of this research to exemplify the concept of gender imitation — shows Alison's ponderation on the liberty she finds to live truthfully:

Fig. #17 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 117.



IN THE CITY, IN A LUNCHEONETTE...

...WE SAW A MOST UNSETTLING SIGHT.



Fig. #18 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 118.



Fig. #19 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 119.

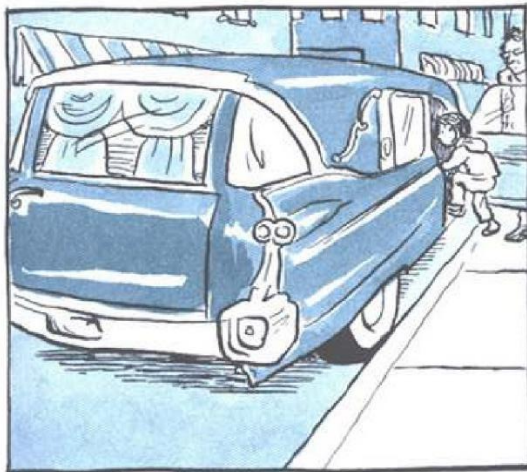
WHAT ELSE COULD I SAY?



BUT THE VISION OF THE TRUCK-DRIVING BULLDYKE SUSTAINED ME THROUGH THE YEARS...



...AS PERHAPS IT HAUNTED MY FATHER.



AFTER DAD DIED, AN UPDATED TRANSLATION OF PROUST CAME OUT. REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST WAS RE-TITLED IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME.



THE NEW TITLE IS A MORE LITERAL TRANSLATION OF À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU, BUT IT STILL DOESN'T QUITE CAPTURE THE FULL RESONANCE OF PERDU.



If Alison is no more than 5 years old in that luncheonette, it is safe to assume this event is one of her earliest memories. What is it, then, that makes it a core memory to her? Perhaps it is the newly found knowledge that her father cannot control everything. By seeing a woman that defies Bruce's ideal of femininity, Alison starts to see new possibilities for herself, and this is how her lie begins: she understands what she wants to be as soon as the bulldyke gets in her sight; she notices the father's reprobation. She hides her will to please him and she keeps the dyke in her memory to give her hope until she is ready to allow herself sincerity. Marjorie C. Allison makes the following consideration about the luncheonette scene and the differences between father and daughter:

While her father, having lived a closeted and stress-filled life, appears to desire a traditional daughter with feminine tastes, Bechdel embraces the potential of being outside of the cultural box. She already knows at age four that she is more like the butch woman than a traditionally feminine woman. She is not only fascinated by the difference she sees, she identifies with it. Bechdel asks readers to visualize her world and to see it as she does, as a place that incorporates ideas and images previously pushed to the margins of discussion and presentation. The images may present us with stereotypes, but perhaps that is Bechdel's point. She asks readers to grapple with both ignored images and the all-too-familiar stereotypes she faces daily. (92)

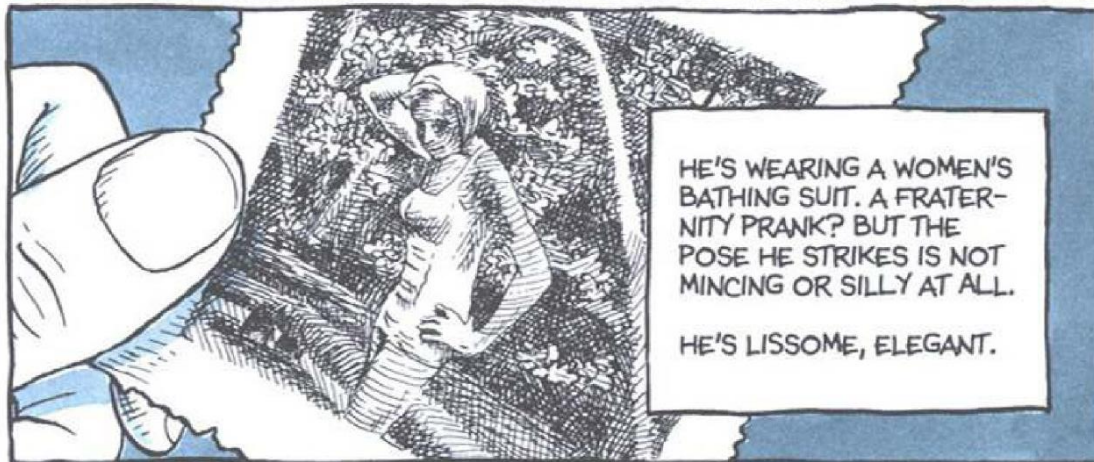
Despite “[embracing] the potential of being outside of the cultural box” (Allison 92), Alison grows up with her father's expectations of her femininity, having, therefore, to reconcile her will to his wishes. Her gender performance, then, until the beginning of her adult years, is a blend of imitations of both the luncheonette bulldyke and the women whose femininity Bruce admires. It is only after she leaves the maze and the Minotaur that she is able to take flight.

Once again, Alison refers to Proust's novel that is read by Bruce before his death (Fig. #19). The adjectives she uses to get close to the meaning of the French word *perdu*, that compose the original title of his book, are, besides "lost", "ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled" (119), which might relate to how Bruce feels in the year that precedes his death/possible suicide. Bruce's life was spent in the shadows, hidden in false appearances, and seeing Alison following a path of liberty that was not allowed to him could have made an impact on the way he evaluates his life. What would have become of Bruce had his life not ended when it did? This is a question that haunts Alison, who ponders, for instance, if he would not have died shortly after that from the AIDS epidemic (195).

Alison's thoughts about what gets lost in translation continue:

Fig. #20 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 120.

WHAT'S LOST IN TRANSLATION IS THE COMPLEXITY OF LOSS ITSELF. IN THE SAME BOX WHERE I FOUND THE PHOTO OF ROY, THERE'S ONE OF DAD AT ABOUT THE SAME AGE.



HE'S WEARING A WOMEN'S BATHING SUIT. A FRATERNITY PRANK? BUT THE POSE HE STRIKES IS NOT MINCING OR SILLY AT ALL. HE'S LISSOME, ELEGANT.



IN ANOTHER PICTURE, HE'S SUN-BATHING ON THE TARPAPER ROOF OF HIS FRAT HOUSE JUST AFTER HE TURNED TWENTY-TWO. WAS THE BOY WHO TOOK IT HIS LOVER?

AS THE GIRL WHO TOOK THIS POLAROID OF ME ON A FIRE ESCAPE ON MY TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY WAS MINE?

THE EXTERIOR SETTING, THE PAINED GRIN, THE FLEXIBLE WRISTS, EVEN THE ANGLE OF SHADOW FALLING ACROSS OUR FACES--IT'S ABOUT AS CLOSE AS A TRANSLATION CAN GET.

In the box of pictures she finds, Alison sees her father in his youth. In one photo, he has what is considered a divergent expression of gender, and he looks comfortable in it. Even if it was a fraternity prank to make Bruce wear women's clothes, he does not seem humiliated. Instead, he looks graceful. In another photo, he looks relaxed, like he was having fun, and Alison wonders if he had a boyfriend with him. Among these pictures, Alison finds a photo of herself of a similar age as Bruce was in the photos. According to M. C. Allison,

Bechdel is here attempting to come to terms with her similarities to her father and his sexuality . . . The realistic images of Bechdel and her father are perhaps taken by their lovers and present the same camera angles and shading but are, of course, taken years apart . . . She is clearly asking readers to create meaning between the cells and within and around them . . . Bechdel, as an artist and a person, needs to understand her father and her relationship to him. She needs to understand the translation of his life and experiences as a gay man into her life and experiences as a lesbian. Perhaps even more fundamentally, she needs to understand the translation that occurs between parent and child, which traits and beliefs get translated into a new person and which ones do not.

(79)

With M. C. Allison's considerations in mind, I claim that Alison's journey is to become aware of which parts of her life mirror her father's and to be able to distinguish among these parts the ones from which she would like to diverge. The Bruce in the pictures is a different man from the one who fathers Alison. Perhaps the younger one was freer, but Alison's whole existence is bound to the latter. She must, therefore, learn to accept her father's journey and let go of the guilt of following a path he could not.

When Alison maintains that “[her] father’s end was [her] beginning,” that the “end of his life coincided with the beginning of [her] truth” (117, see Fig. #17), she refers to her coming out, that was shortly followed by Bruce’s death. Because Alison believes he committed suicide, she feels responsible for his death, as if her coming out triggered a chain of thoughts about his life that made him decide to abandon it. Or, perhaps, it is the opposite: she believes in the suicide theory because she feels guilty for telling the truth about herself.

Before coming out to her parents, Alison had to make herself the discovery of being a lesbian. Below is a compilation of the captions where Alison narrates her realization, which happened in college, not including the pictures and other textual occurrences that accompany them:

My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind. I’d been having qualms since I was thirteen... When I first learned the word due to its alarming prominence in my dictionary. But now another book — a book about people who had completely cast aside their own qualms — elaborated on that definition. That first volume led quickly to others. A few days later I screwed up my courage and bought one. This book referred to other books, which I sought out in the library. One day it occurred to me that I could actually look up *homosexuality* in the card catalog. I found a four-foot trove in the stacks which I quickly ravished. And soon I was trolling even the public library, heedless of the risks. My researches were stimulating but solitary. It became clear I was going to have to leave this academic plane and enter the human fray. (Bechdel 74-76)

As Alison goes on her odyssey of self-discovery, she gets excited about finding people that are like her, who have been through the same journey she is experiencing now. She has been negating the word *lesbian* ever since she discovered it at 13 the same way she has been lying ever since she met the luncheonette bullydyke at 5. After reading whatever she could and thinking the harder she could, Alison realizes that her being a lesbian must leave the theoretical realm. She starts searching, then, for places where she would meet other gay people, and she finds herself in a meeting of the “gay union.” Despite just “[observing the meeting] in petrified silence,” she feels that her “mere presence . . . [amounts] to a public declaration” and “[leaves] exhilarated” (76). The excitement she feels, like the joy of meeting that woman at the luncheonette, is due to her recognition of the people there. Finally, after years of feeling unusual, she finds a sense of belonging. It is in this state of exhilaration that she decides to come out to her parents (see Fig. #21).

Fig. #21 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 77.

I DID IT VIA LETTER--A REMOTE MEDIUM, BUT AS I HAVE EXPLAINED, WE WERE THAT SORT OF FAMILY.



MY FATHER CALLED AFTER RECEIVING IT. HE SEEMED STRANGELY PLEASED TO THINK I WAS HAVING SOME KIND OF ORGY.



MOM WOULDN'T COME TO THE PHONE.



BUT HER RETURN EPISTLE ARRIVED A WEEK AND A HALF LATER.

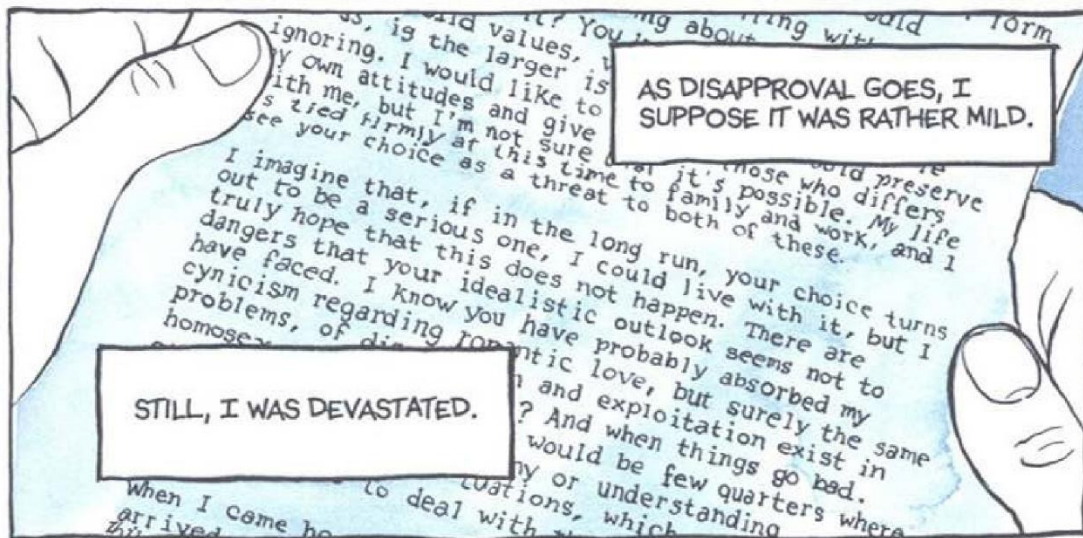


Fig. #22 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 79.

Hoping for a positive response from her parents, Alison gets instead a father that acts like she is just experimenting with sexuality and a mother that does not offer any comfort to her and states her disapproval. The affection that was lacking during Alison's childhood is once again denied by her family, and the love and acceptance she can find is with her first girlfriend (46, 80-81). Troubled by the letter sent by her mother, who told Alison to destroy it afterward, Alison writes her own response only to find out that her father, like herself, is a homosexual (see Fig. #22 and #23).

Fig. #23 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 58.

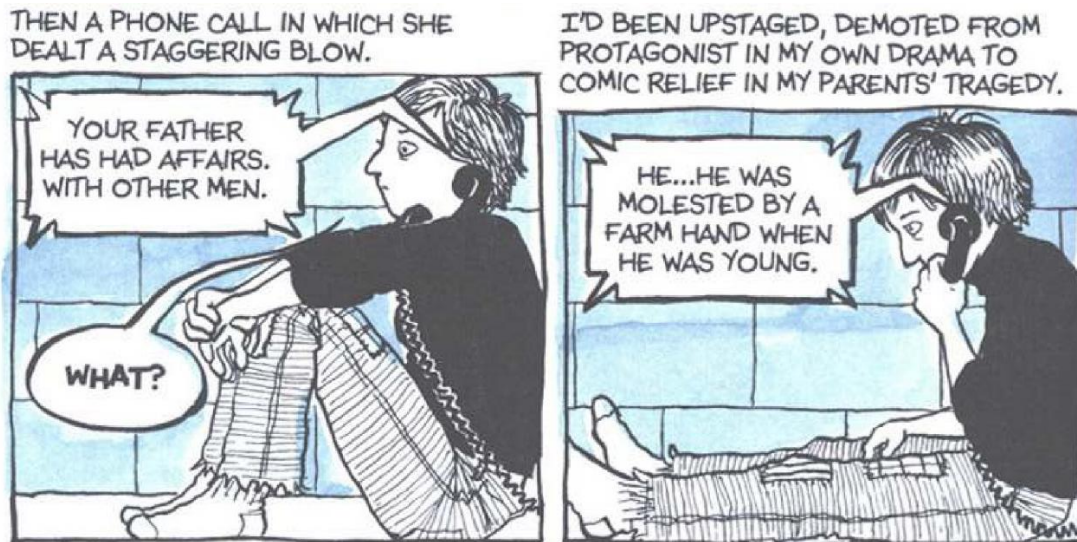
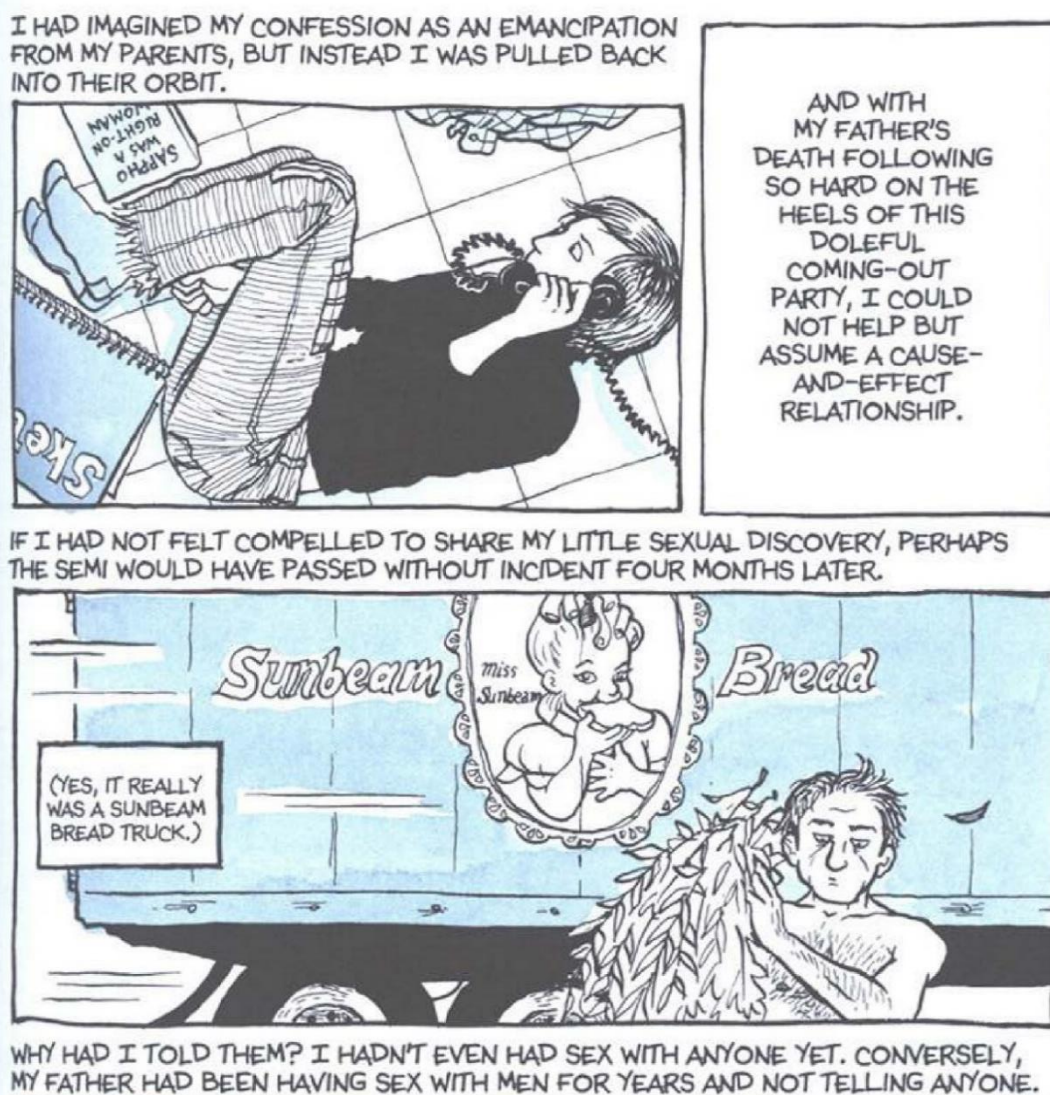


Fig. #24 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 59.



Alison's coming out goes along with her hoping for attention and emancipation. Instead, she gets neither. By discovering her father's secret life, Alison ceases to be in the place of protagonist and goes back to being a supporting character in her parents' story (Fig. #24). In a way, it is as if she discovered that the story she has been writing all along was not about herself, but about her father. But there is another feeling that fills her up shortly after that: guilt. Four months after coming out to her father, Bruce dies in a car accident, but Alison believes he puts himself in front of the truck on purpose. Two weeks before that, her mother, Helen, announces the divorce (81). Alison, therefore, wonders if she is responsible for the chain of events that leads to his suicide. According to her,

My father's death was a queer business — queer in every sense of that multi-valent word. It was strange, certainly, in its deviation from the normal course of things. It was suspicious. Perhaps even counterfeit. It put my family in a bad position, it thwarted and ruined each of us in particular ways. It left me feeling qualmish, faint, and, on occasion, drunk. But most compellingly at the time, his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster's. (Bechdel 57)

Bruce's death weighs on Alison for several reasons, besides, of course, grief. First, Bruce dies in an accident, and this is harder for her to accept than it probably would have been if the death was due to natural causes instead. She keeps wondering, for instance, if the outcome of him crossing the street that day would change had some variables be different. Second, she believes he committed suicide and blames herself for that, although she recognizes: "The idea that I caused his death by telling my parents I was a lesbian is perhaps illogical" (84). Last, considering the suicide hypothesis, Alison believes it has to do with his sexuality, as the missing definition of *queer* in her dictionary refers precisely to that. Ana Carolina Ferreira

Fernandes gives a brief overview of the term: “Previously a highly charged negative word used to insult homosexuals, the name has been appropriated and repurposed by the gay community to move away from derogatory meanings and signify an assertion and proud affirmation of non-normative sexual identities” (10). In that light, when Alison refers to her father as queer, she reclaims the word to proudly accept both her and her father’s sexualities. *Queer* is also present in this research, and I use it with one of the two connotations described by Judith Kegan Gardiner — who investigates the queer in Bechdel’s works —, “an umbrella term for the non-heteronormative, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people and behaviors” (189).

Alison’s queerness is paramount to her sense of belonging. It is in the history of queer people and in the friendship with other lesbians that she finds acceptance and understands who she is, also finding the liberty to put on a gender performance for which she has been reprimanded since childhood. In fact, looking back, Alison reflects if the feeling she had as a child when being in the place of the Stonewall riots weeks after they took place was not some sort of belonging, an unexplainable connection to the site:

I have a hallucinogenic memory of a throbbing welter of people in a large circle. It must have been Washington Square Park. Maybe I was experiencing a contact high from the LSD trips no doubt swirling around us. Or perhaps it was a contact high of a different sort. It had only been a few weeks since the Stonewall riots, I realize now. And while I acknowledge the absurdity of claiming a connection to that mythologized flashpoint... Might not a lingering vibration, a quantum particle of rebellion, still have hung in the humectant air? (Bechdel 104)

The connection Alison feels with New York City is not just because of the prominent gay scene, as it is also related to her parents' life. Both her father and mother are artists — among other abilities, Bruce is a writer and Helen is an actress. They settled down in Beech Creek, Bruce's hometown, but Helen lived her youth in New York. Alison feels like the big city was a better place for them, since their artistry do not fit in Beech Creek, and she ends up living in the city after college, looking for the kind of belonging one would find there:

Fig. #25 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 107.

THERE WERE MANY SUCH HUMILIATIONS IN STORE FOR ME AS A YOUNG LESBIAN.



I'D COME TO NEW YORK AFTER COLLEGE, EXPECTING A BOHEMIAN REFUGE...



...BUT THE VILLAGE IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES WAS A COLD, MERCENARY PLACE.



ONCE, MY MOTHER SHARED A GLIMPSE OF LIFE THERE IN THE OLD DAYS.



IF HER COMMENT WAS AN ATTEMPT TO SWAY ME FROM MY COURSE, IT FAILED UTTERLY. I BECAME FASCINATED WITH LESBIAN PULP FICTION FROM THE FIFTIES--THE BAR RAIDS AND THE ILLEGAL CROSS-DRESSING.

IF THE COPS SEARCHED ME, COULD I PASS THE THREE-ARTICLES-OF-WOMEN'S-CLOTHING RULE?



Fig. #26 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 108.

In New York, Alison experiences a bohemian life. As a lesbian, however, things are not so easy. One evening, for instance, she and her “gang of lesbian friends” (106) are subtly denied service in a bar they tried to go, the same her mother used to attend. Instead of a welcoming site, she encountered “a cold, mercenary place” (107, see Fig. #25). But despite her bad experiences and the disapproving messages from her mother, Alison is still interested in the queer culture of New York. Comparing her life in the 80’s to how queer people lived in the U.S.A. in the 50’s, she wonders if she would have been brave enough to live truthfully or if she would be like her father, marrying for the appearance of a so-called perfect life but hiding

an obscure secret. In the drawings Alison makes to illustrate this contemplation (Fig. #26), the Eisenhower-era butch is drawn like her (adult) self, while her father represents the man who goes home with his wife but looks at the butch as if with regret or envy.

Bruce's closeted life is one of Alison's major concerns. She sees the unhappiness of the marriage, the fights, the regret of her mother, and the problems of her father. Still, she is unable to blame him. In the same box she finds the picture of her father in women's clothes and her own picture that mirrors aspects of the former (Fig. #20), she finds a photo taken by Bruce of a seminude Roy, her former babysitter with whom he had an affair. Alison ponders: "In fact, the picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged? Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe" (100-101). Because she identifies with his "illicit awe," Alison finds explanations for his behaviors and recognizes that she would probably feel differently had his affairs been of heterosexual nature. What complicates the situation to her is that Bruce was a gay man in an era where everything was much more difficult for queer people than what it still is for Alison. She, therefore, sympathizes with him.

The sympathy Alison feels for Bruce might be more than just because they share an illicit awe. He is, after all, her father, and since her childhood she has wanted to be closer to him. She claims: "Although I'm good at enumerating my father's flaws, it's hard for me to sustain much anger at him. I expect this is partly because he's dead, and partly because the bar is lower for fathers than for mothers" (22). Still, their sexualities that diverge from what is taken as the norm make Alison feel more connected to him, like they have a secret shared between father and daughter, but what really creates a relationship between them is literature:

Dad didn't have much use for small children, but as I got older, he began to sense my potential as an intellectual companion. Years of neglect had left me wary. But then I

ended up in his English class, a course called “Rites of Passage”, and I found that I liked the books dad wanted me to read. Sometimes it was as if dad and I were the only ones in the room. The sensation of intimacy was novel. I think we were both starved for attention. We grew even closer after I went away to college. Books — the ones assigned for my English class — continued to serve as our currency. (Bechdel 198-200)

After spending her childhood with an emotionally distant father, toward whom she did not know how to demonstrate affection (19), getting attention from him feels inebriating. Finally growing closer to him maybe deepens their father-daughter relationship, and the family that feels like a sham now seems to be what it is: a real one. Eventually, however, she feels suffocated by the amount of knowledge her dad wants to share about what she has been reading and she decides to spend a while without taking any literature courses in college. She ends up missing Bruce’s remarks, though, and, when she starts reading his favorite book, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and going on her own odyssey of self-discovery (203), they reapproximate. It is in their conversations about *Ulysses* and literature that Bruce tells his daughter to read Colette’s autobiography — which depicts the writer’s relationships with women —, still unaware of Alison’s sexuality, and she wonders if he chose the book on purpose. It is this very book that gives Alison the courage she needs to start the only sincere, yet brief, conversation between father and daughter:

Fig. #27 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 220.

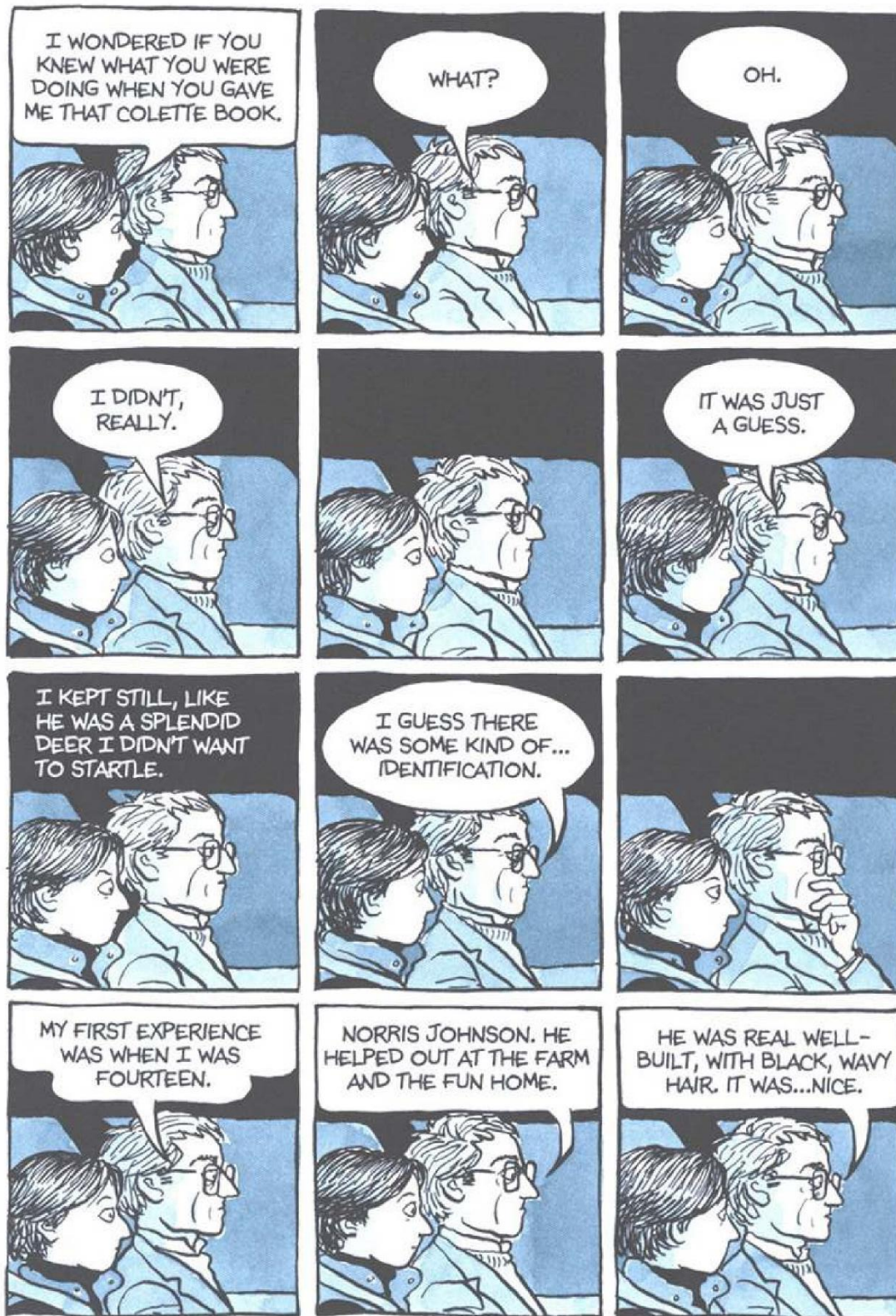


Fig. #28 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 221.



The hesitant conversation (Fig. #27 and #28), full of pauses from both sides, indicates the lack of intimacy between them. In this moment, however, they are being honest with each other, and Bruce uncharacteristically shares experiences of himself. There is identification between them, and they are no longer just inverts, for they are also the same. Bruce tells his daughter of how he wanted to be a girl as a child, and Alison seems excited about having that in common with him, as she wanted to be a boy.

It is interesting, at this point, to go back to the first chapter of this research, which discusses some of Butler's ideas in relation to gender. As it has been considered, performing gender is what establishes the reality of gender itself. Bruce's and Alison's genders are defined by their acts, their performances. While Bruce abandons his feminine performance to be accepted in the category of men, Alison is eventually able to act gender as she desires, while still identifying herself and being identified as a woman. Taking into account Butler's considerations in *Gender Trouble*, Aimee E. Vincent claims:

Bechdel explores sexuality as well as gender, and her refusal to adopt a normative gender identity links directly to her refusal to adopt normative heterosexuality. Butler suggests that "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" [185-186, my reference]. Bechdel certainly challenges this "obligatory frame" in the way that she embraces and validates queer sexuality in both her own life and her father's. (79)

Considering that compulsory gender derives from the heterosexual matrix, as discussed in Chapter 1, what Vincent defends, as do I, is that when Alison ruptures heteronormativity to

embrace her desires without the guilt of being atypical, she becomes able to disrupt the obligation of gender, performing at her will within the category of women. In fact, she is no longer bothered by the suggestion of her being unusual. In the last encounter with her dad, the appearance they convey is that of a close father and daughter. Their guest finds it unusual, and Alison admits it: they are uncommon, and they are close, but not sufficiently. There is still something missing in their relationship; perhaps it is time (see Fig. #29).

Fig. #29 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 225.

AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER JOAN CAME HOME WITH ME FOR A VISIT. I DID NOT INTRODUCE HER AS MY GIRLFRIEND.



THIS WAS THE LAST TIME I'D SEE DAD.



ON OUR FINAL EVENING, A FAMILY FRIEND REMARKED ADMIRINGLY TO JOAN ON THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MY FATHER AND ME.



IT WAS UNUSUAL, AND WE WERE CLOSE. BUT NOT CLOSE ENOUGH.



Despite this late connection with her father, growing up with her parents was not filled with fondness. Alison describes her parents as artists, and she follows in their steps. When younger, she attempts to write a poem, and Bruce finishes it for her. She never writes poetry again. Similarly, she experiments with color in her drawings, but abandons it when Bruce criticizes the way she paints a coloring book and takes over her work. What happens, then, is that Alison feels overshadowed by her parents. Not only does Bruce have more talent than her, but also Helen is intimidatingly good at her artistic hobbies, which include acting and playing the piano. Moreover, when they are absorbed by their tasks, they neglect Alison. She reflects: “It’s childish, perhaps, to grudge them the sustenance of their creative solitude” (133), but concludes:

Fig. #30 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 134.

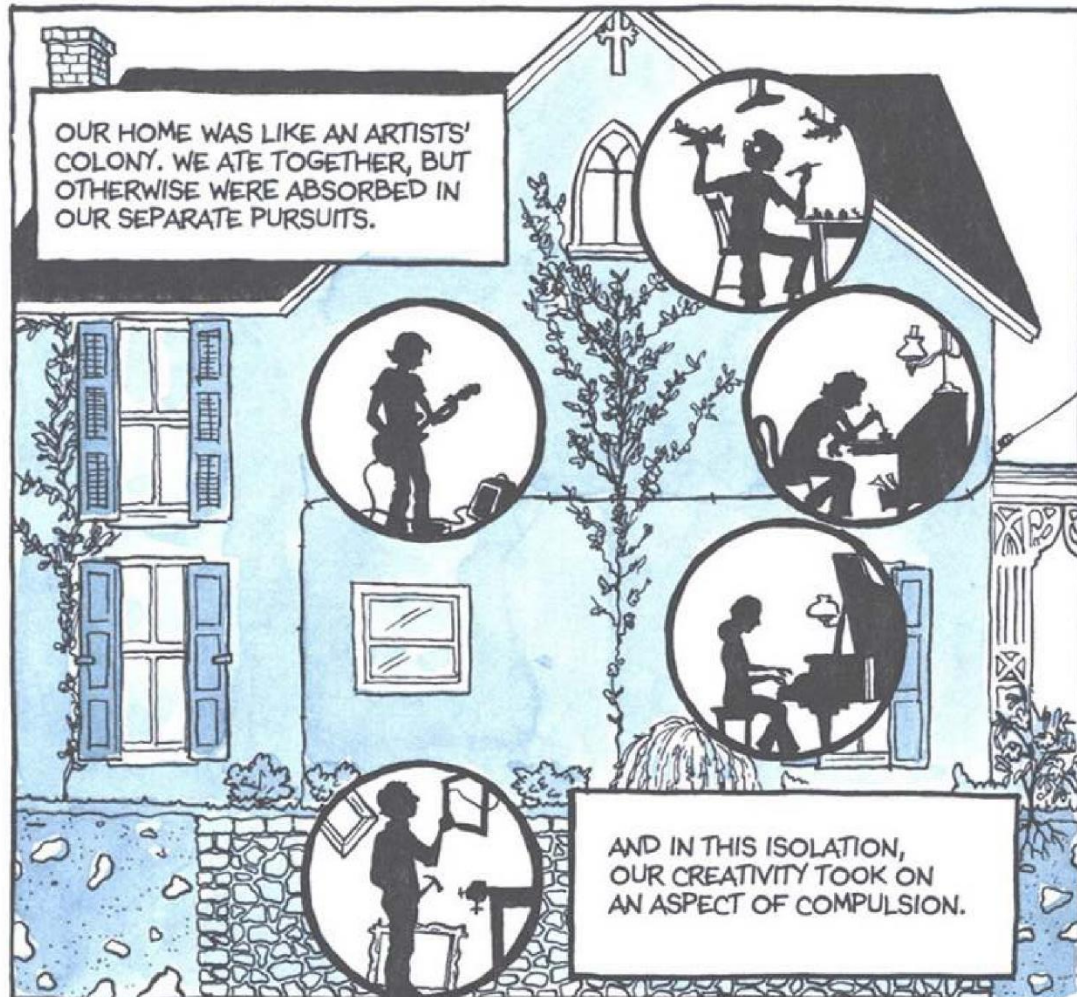
BUT IT WAS ALL THAT SUSTAINED THEM,
AND WAS THUS ALL-CONSUMING.



FROM THEIR EXAMPLE, I LEARNED
QUICKLY TO FEED MYSELF.



IT WAS A VICIOUS CIRCLE, THOUGH. THE MORE GRATIFICATION WE FOUND IN OUR OWN
GENIUSES, THE MORE ISOLATED WE GREW.



OUR HOME WAS LIKE AN ARTISTS'
COLONY. WE ATE TOGETHER, BUT
OTHERWISE WERE ABSORBED IN
OUR SEPARATE PURSUITS.

AND IN THIS ISOLATION,
OUR CREATIVITY TOOK ON
AN ASPECT OF COMPULSION.

Finding herself without options, Alison ends up like her parents, and so do her brothers: sustained by her compulsive solitude (Fig. #30). Having abandoned poetry and color, her artistry is focused on drawing and writing, especially on her journal, a habit induced by her father. With the emotional distance from her parents, she does not trust them to get comforted. When she first gets her period, for instance, she hides it from her mother for months until finally gathering enough courage to tell her. Her discoveries, thus, are all made on her own, through her solitary artistry. Such is the case with her sexuality. Not only does she discover her lesbianism by doing researches in libraries, but she also starts experimenting with masturbation because of the arousal she feels from some of her drawings. Alison comments — and illustrates it with her teenage self that is drawing a basketball player: “The new realization that I could illustrate my own fantasies filled me with an omnipotence that was in itself erotic. In the flat chests and slim hips of my surrogates, I found release from my own increasing burden of flesh” (170). The basketball player is an object of desire, but in the sense that he incorporates characteristics of gender that she would like to perform. Jennifer Lemberg comments Alison’s self-insert in the drawing:

Functioning as a “surrogate” that embodies aspects of her queer identity, the basketball player she draws signifies feelings she cannot put into words. These are related to desire, pleasure, and self-knowledge and have already been marked as illicit.

Until she finds the words that will eventually allow her to type, simply, “I am a lesbian,” in a letter she mails home from college, the drawing Alison creates serves as evidence of her ability to know herself, proof of an internal state that external appearances tend to obscure. (135)

The basketball player, thus, is another hint that Alison subconsciously knows more about herself than she lets show. In a way, these sorts of moments, like when she pretends to be a boy or dresses as one, let the truth slip from a lie she has been maintaining since the luncheonette. Even so, she does her best to keep it hidden.

Alison's compulsion is not solely of solitary artistry, as she develops OCD at 10. She lists her compulsions and explains how she feels without doing them, and her mother suggests: "maybe you feel guilty about something. Have you had bad thoughts about me or dad?" (138). Alison cannot answer her. Still, she tries to find out why she is like this, and the answer might be on the background of the illustrations:

Fig. #31 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 139.

THE EXPLANATION OF REPPRESSED HOSTILITY MADE NO SENSE TO ME. I CONTINUED READING, SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING MORE CONCRETE.



BUT THESE NERVOUS HABITS AND INVOLUNTARY TWITCHES WERE CHILD'S PLAY TO THE DARK FEAR OF ANNIHILATION THAT MOTIVATED MY OWN RITUALS.

STILL, I LIKED DR. SPOCK. READING HIM WAS A CURIOUS EXPERIENCE IN WHICH I WAS BOTH SUBJECT AND OBJECT, MY OWN PARENT AND MY OWN CHILD.



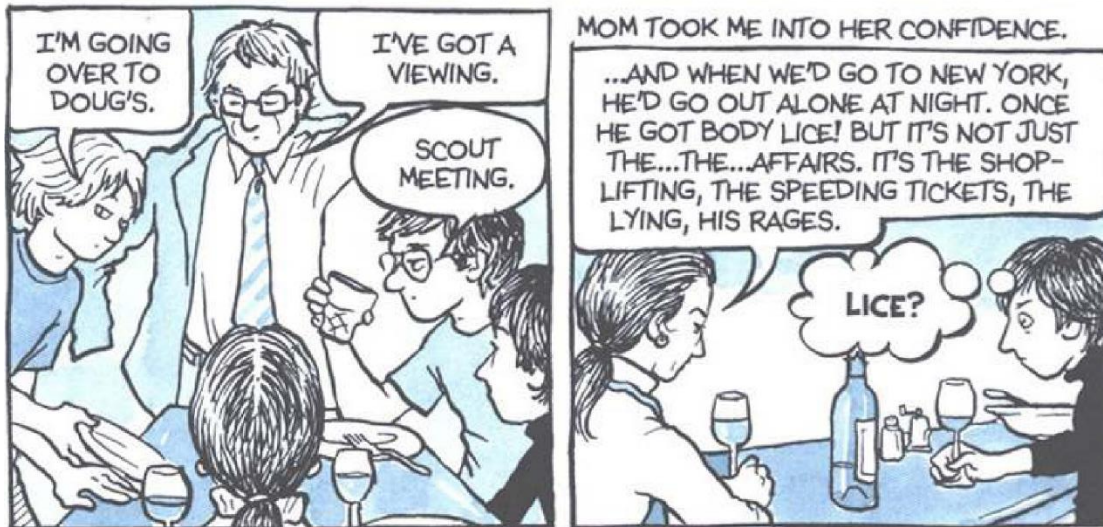
AND INDEED, IF OUR FAMILY WAS A SORT OF ARTISTS' COLONY, COULD IT NOT BE EVEN MORE ACCURATELY DESCRIBED AS A MILDLY AUTISTIC COLONY?



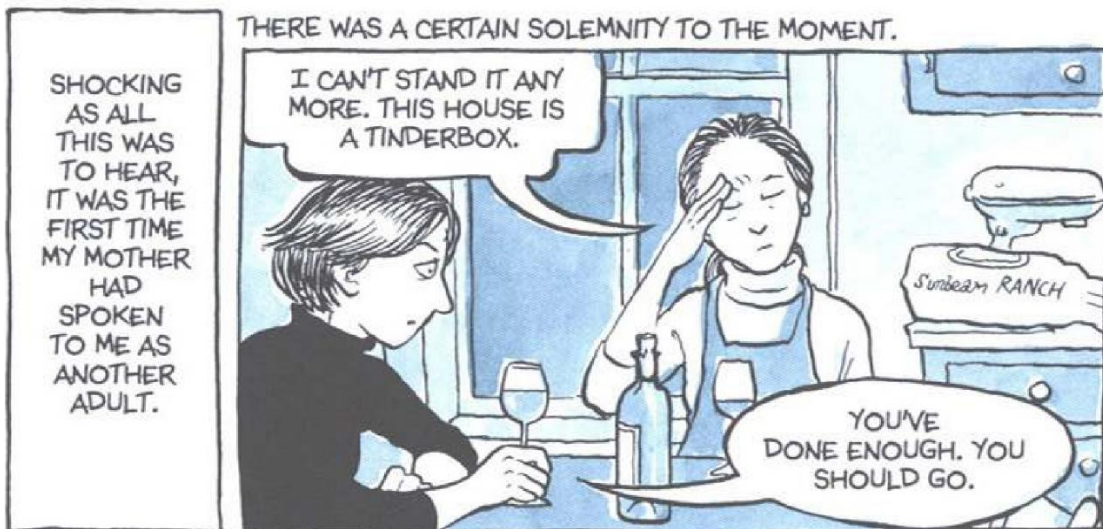
Her parents arguing on the background (Fig. #31) suggest that her compulsive traits originate from their troubled relationship and the lack of affection and attention they pay to their children. If she does feel guilty about something, she might somehow feel responsible for the terrible climate at the house. In the end, she does not feel comfortable there, and this might be the start of her will to go away.

The same way Alison has a moment of intimacy with her father (see Fig. #27 and #28), she has a conversation with Helen that makes her feel like she is, indeed, her daughter, as well as an adult. This happens when Alison comes home for the first time after she comes out. Things are awkward at her house, as usual, and everybody leaves the table after the meal, leaving her alone with Helen:

Fig. #32 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, pp. 216-217.



LIKE ODYSSEUS'S FAITHFUL PENELOPE, MY MOTHER HAD KEPT THE HOUSEHOLD GOING FOR TWENTY YEARS WITH A MORE OR LESS ABSENT HUSBAND.



Listening to her mom's complaints, in Fig. #32, Alison empathizes with her like she empathizes with her father, although there is no identification, since their livings are too different. What matters is that, as an adult, Alison can view her family through new lenses, as well as comprehend aspects that used to be beyond her reach. This does not mean that she suddenly feels like she belongs there with them, but it does give her enough understanding to discern what she wants her life to be like. The title of the book is, thus, both ironic and misleading. First, it is not fun to live in her house. Second, *Fun Home* does not refer to the house, but to the family business that is located in the back of her grandmother's house, an abbreviation for funeral home (36), yet another unusual trait related to the Bechdels.

Alison, in her childhood, as well as her brothers, frequently do chores at the fun home. When she is old enough, she is allowed to see the cadavers that are being prepared. Her proximity to death might suggest that she should know how to react to it, but reality shows that she is weirded out by it, just like her little brother, and acts awkward when talking about her father's passing. Alison seems apathetic when she receives the news. Later, she cries on her girlfriend's shoulders. When meeting her brother for the funeral, however (46), and telling others about Bruce's death, she grins and laughs uncontrollably, because "the idea that [her] vital, passionate father [is] decomposing in a grave [is] ridiculous" (227). Maybe it is harder for her to accept his death because he passed too soon before they could be close enough. The memoir would, thus, be her way to ruminate their relationship and draw conclusions about it.

Regarding the fun home word play, Fernandes states:

The allusion to "fun home" in the book's title indicates both the funeral home where the family business is conducted and an ironic reversal of the tense familial environment under which characters reside. By conflating these two meanings under the same heading, the novel seeks to combine places that carry distinct significances within the

narrative, fusing the actual home with the funeral home, thus generating a sense of estrangement. The narrative's ambiguous name serves this dual function that implies that home can be located elsewhere . . . (28-29)

If home can be somewhere else, that place, to Alison is not in Beech Creek. Since her childhood, she wonders why her parents decided to stay in that provincial place, where many of Bruce's relatives, just like himself, were born, raised, and settled down. With an illustration of a map, Alison shows how small is that world, with these same people. According to her, "it was made clear that [her brothers and she] would not repeat [their parents'] mistake," a declaration that is followed by Helen telling them: "After you graduate from high school, I don't want to see you again" (31). In Bruce's funeral, Alison makes clear that she hates her hometown:

Fig. #33 – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 2006, p. 125.

MY NUMBNESS, ALONG WITH ALL THE MEALY-MOUTHED MOURNING, WAS MAKING ME IRRITABLE. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE SPOKE THE TRUTH?



I DIDN'T FIND OUT.



WHEN I THINK ABOUT HOW MY FATHER'S STORY MIGHT HAVE TURNED OUT DIFFERENTLY, A GEOGRAPHICAL RELOCATION IS USUALLY INVOLVED.

<p>BEECH CREEK — Bruce Bechdel, 44, of Maple Avenue, Beech Creek, well-known funeral director and high school teacher, died of multiple injuries suffered when he was struck by a tractor-trailer along Route 150, about two miles north of Beech Creek at 11:10 a.m. Wednesday.</p> <p>He was pronounced dead on arrival at Lock Haven Hospital</p>	<p>while standing on the berm, police said.</p> <p>Bechdel was born in Beech Creek on April 8, 1936 and was the son of Dorothy Bechdel Bechdel, who survives and lives in Beech Creek, and the late Claude H. Bechdel.</p> <p>He operated the Bruce A. Bechdel Funeral Home in Beech Creek and was also an English teacher at Bald Eagle-Nittany</p>	<p>Institute of Mortuary Science. He served in the U. S. Army in Germany.</p> <p>Bechdel was president of the Clinton County Historical Society and was instrumental in the restoration of the Heisey Museum after the 1972 flood and in 1978 he and his wife, the former Helen Fontana, received the annual Clinton County Historical Society preservation</p>
<p>IF ONLY HE'D BEEN ABLE TO ESCAPE THE GRAVITATIONAL TUG OF BEECH CREEK, I TELL MYSELF, HIS PARTICULAR SUN MIGHT NOT HAVE SET IN SO PRECIPITATE A MANNER.</p>		
<p>gardening and stepped onto the roadway. He was struck by the right front portion of the truck</p>	<p>degree from The Pennsylvania State University. He was also a graduate of the Pittsburgh</p>	<p>as a member of the Society of America, and of directors of the Playhouse, National Council of Teachers of English, Phi Kappa Psi fraternity and was a deacon at the Blanchard</p>

Alison, at her father's funeral, is irritated by the conforming attitude around her (Fig. #33). She is enraged by her father's possible suicide, and she blames Beech Creek for it. Instead of letting her rage show, Alison plays the good catholic, acting in conformity with the community and realizing she, too, would rather die than live like this. According to Fernandes,

The narrator hints at an interconnection between her father's suicide and the spatial limits of his geographic location. What is implied in this change of scenery for which Alison yearns is the alienation and lack of agency faced by Bruce in his hometown and a potential for the negotiation of desires and the self in a different place. For Alison, the pursuit of displacement stems from the emancipatory impulse to belong to a safe space for queer subjects. (50)

In other words, her pursuit is to belong, a feeling that her father was unable to achieve. As an inversion of him, Alison attempts to break the cycle of his family, that of staying put without being brave to explore new grounds. Bruce did live in other places, but he eventually comes back to Beech Creek. Was he motivated by fear or something else? Whatever it was, Alison refuses to repeat it.

Alison's grief, in a certain light, has always been felt:

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

As puts Ann Cvetkovich, “Bechdel explores the story of her father's death out of a desire to understand her own history and the genesis of her gender and sexual identity, seeking to be the sympathetic witness who can make available the rich and contradictory story of his life” (113). In the end, Alison’s memoir is her way to reclaim her father, to put their stories side by side and understand the connection they share: “I shouldn’t pretend to know what my father’s [truth] was. Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay’, as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself — a sort of inverted Oedipal complex” (230). Closing the narrative, Alison concludes that, despite his flaws, Bruce was still her father, and he showed up when needed: “What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’d inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (231-232).

In this chapter, I investigate Alison’s sense of non-belonging in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The pieces of evidence show that her performance of gender that differs from the one expected of her, as well as her non-heteronormative sexuality, is responsible for her uneasiness in a place that compels her to act contrarily to her will, albeit her unusual family contributes to the uncommon status that bothers her. In the following chapter, that concludes this research, I draw a comparative analysis of the protagonists-narrators of *Fun Home* and *The House on Mango Street* as a way to understand how the two characters, who come from completely different backgrounds, can share a similar feeling in relation to belonging motivated by the different ways they perform gender.

Final Remarks

“And she looks again into the cards, palm, water, and says uh-huh. A home in the heart, I was right . . . A new house, a house made of heart.”

(Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*)

Chapters 2 and 3 of this research present, respectively, an analysis of Esperanza’s and Alison’s sense of non-belonging and gender performance, besides the relation between these two topics in each of their experiences, taking into consideration the theory described in Chapter 1. Moreover, the individual analyses of these characters show traces of their subjectivities, which are heavily influenced by their conflicted feelings of belonging. In this chapter, which concludes the proposed investigation, I draw a comparative analysis between the information already presented about the protagonists-narrators of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* so as to fulfill the aim of this research. Along with the main objective, I will also assess my thesis statement and the specific objectives nominated for this investigation.

As stated in the Introduction and taken as a premise in this research, Esperanza and Alison come from significantly different places. Esperanza, for instance, lives in a cultural borderland, being neither fully American nor fully Mexican, while Alison’s nationality and culture are never mentioned as a struggle. The Bechdel family lives in a house that is seen by other children as a mansion, and the family, therefore, is perceived by them as being rich, although Alison claims that is not the case. Esperanza, on the other hand, dreams of a house of her own that is like the houses shown on TV — perhaps one like Alison’s —, since she lives in a poor house in a marginalized neighborhood. Despite that, both lack a consistent feeling of belonging, and the reasons for that include, in each case, their performances of womanhood that deviate from what their communities expect from them.

The inconsistency in the sense of belonging of both characters lies in their internal conflict. They are still figuring out who they are and who they want to become, as well as where and with whom they belong, which means that there are conflicted feelings within both. The narrators share a relevant reason for their conflict, which is their family. On the one hand, there is Esperanza, who is embarrassed about where her parents can afford to live. She sees her family and neighborhood that is mostly composed of Latinos, paying special attention to the type of life that seems to be destined to the women around her, and decides she does not want that place. She notices specific roles for Latinas that always involve submission to men, so she wishes to detach herself from that position. At the same time she denies that place, she identifies with her own people, both family and community, for they share similar livings and for all they have is each other. Her sense of belonging, therefore, is confused: she is part of an ethnical group, which cannot be changed — and she does not wish she could do so —, but she disapproves of the harmful expectations for women in her community and wishes to evade this reality.

On the other hand, there is Alison, whose embarrassment lies in the implication that she and her family are unusual. She despises the way Bruce, her father, forces her to dress for the sake of maintaining the false appearance of a perfect family. Alison resents the impossibility of living truthfully while under her father's roof, not having an affectionate family, being neglected when her parents focus too much time on their artistic hobbies instead of paying attention to her and being overshadowed by their talents. Despite that, she still seeks their attention and enjoys receiving their approval; moreover, she inherits their creative solitude, being herself immersed in a world of art and literature. Alison, therefore, simultaneously feels like she is not part of this simulacrum of a family but belongs to the reality of it, since she has no choice other than to do so, for this family is all that she knows. Alison and Esperanza both choose to defy the expectations their families lie on them. While Esperanza is more subtle,

deciding, for instance, to imitate her father's behavior at the table (not picking up the plate or putting back the chair) so as to show the gender inequality in her own house, Alison is more vocal, complaining and disobeying her father in moments when he tries to dress her as a model of femininity.

Another common trait in the characters' families is the regret expressed by their mothers. In *Fun Home*, Alison's mother, Helen, regrets leaving New York City, where she could have pursued a more successful career as an actress, to move to Bruce's hometown. She is unhappy, also, with her marriage, that is full of fights and cheating, until she decides to get a divorce shortly before Bruce's death. Esperanza's mother is also dissatisfied with her life, showing regret for abandoning her studies because she was embarrassed about not being able to afford to be beautiful like the other girls, who could buy nice clothes. With many talents, but without a career, she focuses on the household and wonders what it would be like to do the things she likes. Furthermore, she is dependent on others — to get around town, for instance —, as if her existence is bound only to the house and the family. The mothers do not want their girls to commit the same mistakes they did: Helen tells Alison to leave Beech Creek after high school; Esperanza is advised to focus on her studies. Following their mothers' paths is, therefore, undesirable for the girls, and they are discouraged from doing so.

Esperanza and Alison are, thus, skeptical about the necessity of following gender roles, considering the unhappiness expressed by their mothers. Also, in *Mango Street*, the stories of violence lived by Esperanza's female neighbors disturb her, motivating her to pursue a different life. Alison's motivation is not the fear of ending up like the women around her, but the attempt to find her own truth and live according to her will instead of her father's.

In refusing to act like what is expected from them as women, Alison and Esperanza make evident the performative aspect of gender by deciding to put on performances that are considered deviant. Alison feels uncomfortable with the femininity that is forced on her, and

she chooses on several occasions to express herself, especially as regards style and fashion, in terms of what is expected from a man. This is related to her individuality and personal taste, but it also connects to her sexuality: as a lesbian, she detaches herself further from the heterosexual matrix that dictates how each gender — assuming the binary aspect of it, as part of this matrix — should behave. Her gender expression is, therefore, related to her queerness. As for Esperanza, it is not queerness that guide her gender expression, but the frustration of inequality and fear of being forced into archetypes of women that do not contemplate her. When she tries on womanhood by trying on high heels for the first time, she initially feels empowered, until finding out she has become an object under the male gaze. It is the freedom from men's subjugation that Esperanza craves, especially after becoming a victim of sexual harassment and abuse. Either way, neither Alison nor Esperanza conforms to gender roles, and the two of them question compulsory femininity, refusing to perform as the prototypical woman of each of their communities.

The characters' journeys end at different points of their lives. The reader follows Esperanza in her transition from childhood to adolescence. Through this period, she learns a lot about herself and her people, enough to come to conclusions about the life she expects for herself. Instead of aiming at leaving Mango Street never to return, she is able to see the oppression of women that, unlike her, have no means to get out. Esperanza, thus, decides that her goal is to leave, but to come back for them and never forget who she is and where she comes from. The narrative is finished before the reader gets to see Esperanza escaping. She never gets to form a new community where she feels comfortable enough, and her conflicted feelings of belonging are not resolved. Alison's narrative, however, goes further into her adult life. The discoveries she makes in her young adult years lead Alison to find a way to live truthfully. She looks for people like her, and she finds belonging in living queerly, with a community that embraces her and with whom she identifies.

It is crucial to point out the importance of literature in Esperanza's and Alison's path of self-discovery. Both characters show an anxiety to belong, to find their place within the world, and they use literature to aid their journey. Esperanza is seen as different by those around her for enjoying books and paper, but it is through writing that she can express her feelings and opinions, and her poems help her connect with one of her neighbors, who is also a writer. She finds refuge in literature, and, as she is advised, writing is what will set her free. As the one who narrates *Mango Street*, perhaps writing about her personal experiences is what helps her control her own story.

Similarly, Alison's memoir helps her deal with her complicated emotions, especially guilt and grief. Writing about herself is a habit she cultivates since childhood by keeping a journal, and going back to her old entries to write the memoir clarifies the changes in her life. Narrating her relationship with Bruce is the way Alison finds to reconcile with his death, with his story, and with how she was raised. The memoir also acts as evidence of the parts of her life which constitute her belongingness.

These final remarks conclude the general objective of this investigation, which is to make a comparative analysis of Esperanza's and Alison's gender performance and sense of non-belonging in the novels *The House on Mango Street* and *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The comparative analysis shows evidence to support my initial hypothesis that, even coming from different backgrounds and challenging gender roles in their own unique ways, Esperanza and Alison experience the same feeling of non-belonging, which is heavily influenced by their gender performances that are considered deviant. The reason for this, as I argue, is that compulsory gender is harmful for the development of a sense of belonging of those who do not conform, despite their different motives to act differently from the heterosexual matrix. The individual analyses of these characters, along with the comparative analysis, exemplify in detail how Esperanza's and Alison's gender performances make them perceived as unusual, which

influences their sense of belonging. Also, it becomes clear that their gender expressions are paramount to the construction of their subjectivity. It is important to emphasize that the two characters begin their stories in the same place, at home, in which they experience their conflicted feelings on non-belonging, but only Alison is able to find a community where her belonging status is mutually recognized. The reason for that, as commented above, is that Esperanza's narrative ends at a much sooner point of her life than Alison's: the reader gets to see Alison as an adult, but not Esperanza, whose story is finished before she develops the means to escape Mango Street.

In this chapter, I also conclude the specific objectives delineated in the beginning of this research. Chapter 1 provides the most relevant theoretical notions for the main topics I investigated: non-belonging, subjectivity, and gender performance. In Chapters 2 and 3, I use close reading to analyze Esperanza's and Alison's relations to these topics and to fulfill three of the proposed objectives: to explore the protagonists-narrators' identities as individual subjects; to describe in which ways gender and womanhood are challenged in each novel; and to map textual evidence of Esperanza's and Alison's feeling of non-belonging. The final objective, which is to associate the characters' gender performativity in face of gender expectations to the characters' lack of belonging, is concluded in this chapter.

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