

**“The Moment When a Feeling Enters the Body:” On the  
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Articles

# **“The Moment When a Feeling Enters the Body:” On the Politics of Drawing, Writing, and Roof Walking**

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*Abstract: This article reads parts of Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir Are You My Mother? (2012) together with a poem by Adrienne Rich, “The Roofwalker” ([1963] 1984). The two works speak of the act of writing as a practice that places the writer in a precarious situation, both politically and personally. Drawing on philosopher Jacques Rancière’s argument that the political power of art lies in creating dissensus, a radical break between sense and our way of making sense of it, the reading explores the medium-specific ways in which the two works engage in politics by bringing about a profound change in dominant conceptualizations of experience.*

*Keywords: graphic memoir, autobiography, poetry, politics of art.*

If a work of art is considered political when it reflects and draws attention to sociopolitical issues and engages in critique, then there are good reasons to consider Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* (2012) to be just that – political. It critiques compulsory heterosexuality,<sup>1</sup> gender inequality, and the institution of marriage from a personal perspective, through their effects on

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<sup>1</sup> “Compulsory heterosexuality” is a term coined by Adrienne Rich (1981) to describe a system of thought that organizes women’s lives around men’s lives. It does so by presenting heterosexuality as normal, romanticizing a system that exploits women (assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access to women). It moreover hides or underrepresents the existence of lesbians in history, presenting homosexuality as a deprivation. Following Rich, in this article the term “compulsory heterosexuality” refers to a hegemonic ideology, and thus is distinct from heterosexuality as a sexual preference.

Bechdel's relationship with her mother. Bechdel's work is an example of autobiographical writing that shows how experiences that feel uniquely personal are in fact often widely spread and common, exposing structural oppressions that hide behind what is seen as a matter of personal responsibility or adequacy (Swindels 207).

In her memoir, Bechdel defends the political value of her work against the critical voice of her mother, who argues that because of its personal focus her art is irrelevant and a form of narcissistic indulgence (2, 5, 11). Struggling against her mother's urges to stop making cartoons about herself, Bechdel refers to the American poet Adrienne Rich, who is famously outspoken about the political importance of autobiographical writing, in order to argue that her work is legitimate. A few pages after drawing a conversation with her mother, in which the latter expresses her disapproval of the lesbian theme of Bechdel's work, Bechdel draws a lecture by Rich, which she attended in the early phase of her career (Bechdel 186). In the lecture, the poet explains how adopting a personal voice informed by sexual politics means to evolve as a poet. She also warns her audience of the harsh criticism they may encounter if they venture to do the same. Bechdel uses Rich to pre-empt her mother's and her own internalized critical voice: "the self has no place in good writing" (Bechdel 200). The stylistics of the page are telling: a wide shot of the enormous lecture hall full of people with Rich on a podium is juxtaposed with a close up of Bechdel's hand and pen making notes during the lecture, a small panel depicting Bechdel fully engrossed in her note-taking, and a tiny panel that depicts Bechdel at a later age going through a volume of Rich's essays, looking for a line from the lecture she cannot find anymore: "The moment when a feeling enters the body is political" (Bechdel 186). Rich is a revered authority, and Bechdel a desperate stakeholder who finds in the lecture something of life-saving importance. The reason Bechdel cannot find the quote in the collection of essays is because it originates elsewhere: in a series of poems titled "The Blue Ghazals" (Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe* 120-123). This quote, and the way it has been taken up by Bechdel, testifies to the fact that Rich's poetry, more so than her essays, sheds light on the political quality of feelings. It is this political quality of feelings as invoked in the work of these two writers that this article engages with.

Following philosopher Jacques Rancière's argument that the political power of art and writing lies in creating a radical break between sense and our way of making sense of it, this article reads a passage from Bechdel's work in conversation with a poem by Rich, "The Roofwalker" ([1963] 1984), in order to show the particular way in which the two works engage in feminist politics by invoking feeling to create

such a radical break. Three pages from *Are You My Mother?* depict a dream Bechdel had, in which she is standing on the roof of her family home, which is transformed into a precipice of ice. In Rich's poem, the speaker identifies with builders standing on a roof. The two works take the familiar imagery of a family home and transform it into a threatening landscape in order to show that the act of writing puts the writer in a precarious situation. Invoking a feeling of fear in front of what should have been safe, they both produce an aesthetic rupture that uncovers the dangers in the psychic and familial structures of ordinary lives.

### **Politics and aesthetics**

It is generally assumed, Rancière explains in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), that art can be politically effective in one of two ways: by either exposing the marks of power on the world and on people or by leaving the sphere strictly allotted to art in order for it to become a social practice (134-135). In the first case, the efficacy of art depends on an understanding of art's relation to life that follows the mimetic tradition.<sup>2</sup> In Rancière's words, "the logic of mimesis consists in conferring on the artwork the power of the effects that it is supposed to elicit on the behaviour of spectators" (136). Art is politically radical when it compels us to revolt by revealing the forces that keep us contained. Rancière calls this idea of art's political efficacy "representational mediation" (137) and sides with its critics, who find the mimetic approach problematic on the basis of there being no proof of a direct relation between the model of behaviour that an artwork provides and the behaviour of the spectators after coming into contact with the artwork. This idea of linear causality, moreover, entails the separation of doing and seeing/reading: unless an artwork succeeds in inducing the reader/viewer to act or think in a certain way, it is not politically efficient (137). In the second case, art is political because it creates a community via the bodies of its audience: the artwork brings the audience together, enacting a common, and the audience embodies the common by way of reading/viewing the artwork. Rancière argues that, although

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<sup>2</sup> *Mimesis* is the Greek word for imitation. A literary work according to the mimetic critical tradition in aesthetic and literary theory is understood to reflect an external reality (Baldick 157). The mimetic tradition began with Plato and Aristotle and continues until today, taking many, sometimes conflicting, approaches toward reality and how it is represented in literature. Rancière seems to have in mind two specific features of the mimetic tradition when he talks about it: the first is the idea that reflecting reality entails separation – an acknowledgment that the representation of the thing is not the real thing (Eagleton 18) – and the second is an instrumentalist approach toward the political power of realism to engender revolutionary impulses within the reader through a transformation of consciousness (Taylor 156).

the second approach to the political efficacy of art – which he calls “ethical immediacy” (137) – has been disguised as anti-representation, it also relies on the same assumption that art is political only if it is effective in “real life.” Instead, Rancière is interested in how art can be political by way of being art, regardless of its effect in a realm that is allocated outside it.

The political efficiency of art lies, for Rancière, in “a suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function” (138). He places the origins of this idea in the notion of aesthetic distance, which he interprets not as the mere enjoyment of beauty combined with indifference for art’s social underpinnings, but as a kind of radical dissociation between the sensory and the ways we make sense of it, which sets forth a process of reconfiguring the political. Politics, for Rancière, is what breaks with the “natural” order that assigns people, bodies, things, thoughts, and feelings to certain realms. Speaking specifically about literature, he writes:

The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the modes of representation of political events or the social structure and the social struggles in their books. [...] Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear. [...] The politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world. (152)

This kind of political efficacy of art and literature, he believes, lies in *dissensus*, that is, “a conflict between *sense* and *sense*” (139, emphasis in the original), between a sensory display and the act of making sense of it. Effects of dissensus, produced by art, invent “new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities” (139). Dissensus does not make the viewer/reader follow a path from seeing to understanding or from understanding to acting, but instead makes the viewer/reader move into a world different from the given, where the relationship between sense and meaning is differently defined and expressed, thereby enabling a world of different possibilities.

Feminist historian Joan W. Scott, discussing the value of oppressed people's histories and autobiographical narratives, makes a similar point about the power of literature to make sense of experience. She notes a connection between seeing and knowing: seeing is often taken to be synonymous with experience and experience is often taken to be the source of knowledge. The value that is assigned to stories that were not always deemed worthy of being included in conventional histories is in providing evidence of values and practices that challenge hegemonic constructions of social worlds. When this happens, however, Scott argues, "questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside" (777). The evidence of experience then reproduces hegemonic ideas about the ahistorical nature of identities, of institutions, of categories of representation and ways of making sense of experience (778-779). There is, however, for Scott, another approach to experience: to look at experience not as an unmediated witnessing of a fact, but as a relation between an event or sense and its interpretation, a relation which has historical origins and which is subject to change (781-782). Literature can relativize such relations between senses and their interpretations, thus exposing the processes through which categories of analysis, subjects, and their positions are constructed (791).

Bechdel's graphic memoir provides the reader with a personal perspective on history while at the same time questioning the naturalized relationship between experience and our understanding of it. With its focus on family dynamics and intra-psychic processes, *Are You My Mother?* takes into account the greater issues that have affected Bechdel's parents' lives, such as compulsory heterosexuality and gender inequality. Bechdel considers her memoir to be a kind of political history, where the more open, freer life that she has lived as a woman and a lesbian is contrasted with the lives of her thwarted mother and her closeted gay father (Bechdel and Thurman 17'45-18'45). We see, for example, how her mother's artistic frustration has influenced her daughter's relationship with creativity both positively and negatively. Artistic competition between her parents and the children, and the parents' unmetabolized fear and aggression made the family home an unsafe environment for a child to be creative in (Bechdel 71-72). At the same time, having creative and lonely parents showed her how creativity can help deal with loneliness (130). Bechdel explains that this did not happen in a vacuum:

The drama between my mother and me has partly to do with her bad luck coming of age in the nineteen-fifties. We were on opposite

sides of women's liberation, and I got to reap its benefits. With Dad and me, same story: opposite sides of Stonewall. If only my parents had been born later, they might have been happier, and I wouldn't exist. (Bechdel, quoted in Thurman 2012)

The entanglement of creativity with loneliness and antagonism in the family, as well as Helen Bechdel's difficulty to understand her daughter's artistic expression of her lesbianism, are results of the structural oppressions that hindered Bechdel's parents' self-expression. Helen, in particular, belonged to the generation of white middle-class American women who struggled with the difficulties of reconciling society's expectations of them as wives and mothers with their ambitions and goals outside family life. She was an intellectual, a poet, and an actor, whose ambitions were sacrificed for a life that adhered to the standards of feminine domesticity (Bechdel 172, 199).

The results of these oppressions concentrate around a certain fear, which permeates the memoir. The origin of this fear lies in the fact that writing about her lesbianism and exposing family secrets to the world is considered, by Bechdel, as an act of disobedience (Bechdel 65, 165) which Bechdel's mother does not appreciate as it is hurting her and the rest of the family (66-67, 181-182, 227-229, 283-284). The apprehensive Bechdel prepares to announce her project to her mother (6), awaits feedback from her (208), feels remorse for causing any pain to her (165), and even explains accidents that happened to her as punishment for her transgression (65). Bechdel, in an interview with Thurman, discusses how fear in *Are You My Mother?* functions as an organizing principle. What Thurman calls the "heroic emotional daring, the willingness to take big emotional risks" that is woven in the memoir, Bechdel calls an emotional high-wire act during which she tells herself she just has to "start walking out here and see what happens" (Bechdel and Thurman 25'25-27'17).

Besides Bechdel's reflection on the sociopolitical conditions of her parents lives and the fear of creativity it has instilled in her, there is another, at least equally important, way in which *Are You My Mother?* expresses politics. According to comics expert Hillary L. Chute, Bechdel belongs to a group of cartoonists for whom creating a graphic autobiography means to bring to the reader's attention the constructedness of their text by presenting their experience "while refusing to reify 'experience' as the foundational precept of feminist critique" (*Graphic Women* 6). The graphic medium is particularly well-suited for this kind of double move, thanks to its hybrid nature, which allows it to create a simultaneous feeling of distance and intimacy in the reader. In the passage that I here discuss, Bechdel makes such a

double move by combining realistic drawing that expresses her deep fear with graphic intensity, a rather detached voice-over, and the spatial organization of the panels, which creates a temporal interruption in the narrative. In the following section, I will perform a close reading of this passage in order to argue that it produces “a conflict between sense and sense” (Rancière 139, emphasis omitted) that gives it political power in Rancière’s sense of the word. This conflict may, in this case, be produced in a way that is particular to comics. I, however, will argue that it can be produced in poetry too, through the use of imagery. Adrienne Rich’s poetry is an example of literature that can reframe the ways we make sense of the world, practicing a politics that goes beyond the unquestioned acceptance of experience, and towards an examination of its foundations and an opening up of experiential possibilities. To demonstrate this, I will read Bechdel’s passage together with Rich’s poem “The Roofwalker,” which expresses a similar fear and uses similar imagery.

### **Roof walking**

Long before Rancière developed his theory of the political efficacy of literature, in a time of feminist awakening, Adrienne Rich wrote her critical essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1979). She discusses the connections between sexual lives and political institutions, which is collective and marks the beginning of a formation of a new consciousness. She argues that, from a feminist point of view, literature plays an important role as it shows us

how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh. (Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” 35)

In short, literature is both a clue to and a revision of what constitutes us as subjects and what constitutes the field in which we can act, “the assumptions in which we are drenched” (ibid.), which is the foundation of politics.

Rich’s text showcases a relationship between politics and literature that bares similarities to Rancière’s. Rancière’s politics is never outside literature because even in the “real world” the real is a matter of construction in the sense that it is a number of configurations of the sensory field and our positions in it. The configurations can change and do, in fact, change when certain fictions produce a dissensus that “undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and



images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given 'commonsense'" (Rancière 149). Art and literature can invent new connections between our perceptions and the field of the real, that is, the visible, the sayable, and the doable. Rich's idea of literature's political power is also more than descriptive: for her, writers are also capable of leading the way in processes that reconfigure the world. Rich describes writers as explorers in unknown territory:

For writers, and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us. (Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 35)

What Rancière calls dissensus, the "conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it" (139) that departs from the sensory self-evidence of an order perceived until this point as natural, Rich describes as sailing in uncharted waters, where what was can no longer be, but what is to come is not yet formed. The "natural" order, which assigns individuals and groups to certain places in a system of rule, of separation of public and private, of certain ways of being and doing, of certain understandings of time and space, exists no more, and this is because of an aesthetic suspension of the relationship between experience and feeling. But this means that the old tools we had for creating meaning and for making sense are of no use to us. Where Rancière celebrates an art whose political power lies in that it "questions its own limits and powers, [and it] refuses to anticipate its own effects" (149), Rich focuses on the person of the poet, who questions the world as she knows it without being able to predict the form of the world that her poetry invites into being.

She does this beautifully in her poem "The Roofwalker" ([1963] 1984). The poem describes the moment when night is falling over a group of builders standing on a roof, finishing their day's work. Rich uses naval imagery to present the roof as a "listing deck" on a ship and darkness as a wave about to fall on the builders. The speaker of the poem identifies with them, the speaker too is a man on the roof, "exposed, larger than life and about to break [his] neck." She wonders:

Was it worth while to lay—  
with infinite exertion—  
a roof I can't live under?

[...]  
A life I didn't choose  
chose me: even  
my tools are the wrong ones  
for what I have to do.  
I'm naked, ignorant,  
a naked man fleeing  
across the roofs  
(Rich, "The Roofwalker" 49)

"The Roofwalker" is *about* a certain part of the politics of writing: the part that concerns the poet, the obstacles they have to face, and the fears they have to overcome, in their move away from "universal" poetry and towards a personally and politically informed one. But the poem is also *doing* politics in Rancière's sense of the word. It lets the reader experience a moment of dissensus when the familiar image of builders on a roof is accompanied by a weird feeling of unfamiliarity.

The man on the roof is the poet herself. Rich expresses the fear of the disorienting but heroic moment when a poet balances between the known and the unknown and feels in awe for what is to come while at the same time feeling inadequate to the task at hand. Having spent time making poetry that receives enthusiastic reviews, working on poetic techniques, and cultivating an impersonal, dispassionate voice according to the ideal she was raised to look up to, Rich finds herself feeling that she has not chosen, but has been chosen by a certain poetic life: the language, style, techniques, voice, and subject matter available to her. She talks of a need to change her poetic tools, she can envision a new kind of poetry, but it does not exist yet, and thus she has no tools. She is naked and ignorant, exposed and in danger. The safety of traditional poetry's structures, techniques, and themes, shown as the familiar landscape of suburban America in the making, gives way to the image of a ship in the middle of an ocean with a wave of darkness about to fall on it. But there is a heroic element in the poem, too. The roofwalker is a giant, bigger than life – a hero, and Rich seems to prefer the roofwalker's fate over the fate of someone who sits comfortably in a room under one of those roofs, reading in the lamplight about other people taking risks.

The question of whether one ought to embrace change with the risks it entails or passively observe others who take risks from a position of safety is the keynote of the volume that the poem is part of (McDaniel 7). *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, originally published in 1963, is the third volume of poetry Rich published and the first one informed by conscious sexual politics (Rich, "Blood,

Bread, and Poetry" 180). The style and attitude are different from her previous volumes, as the poet's life as a wife and mother has persuaded her that she needs to write from a particular point of view, rather than from the "universal" one she had aspired until this moment. For this, she has received the negative criticism she talks about in the lecture Bechdel attends in her memoir: the volume is too bitter, too personal.

But the power of the poem lies elsewhere. As darkness descends upon the builders on the roof, having just finished their day's work, their muscles slack like the pulleys, resting but still standing, looking over the unfinished roofs, the darkness changes: a lack of meaning or a change of meaning is about to break. There is a feeling of anticipation, for what looked like the end of a day's work in the first three lines of the poem, now feels like the beginning of something, yet of what exactly remains unknown. The descending darkness carries a violent bundle of meaning ("a torn sail where figures pass magnified"), which is still senseless, because it is still purposeless. This is the moment of dissensus: the descending darkness transforms the bodies of the builders into different bodies that do not fulfil their proper function but set forth to fulfil another, emerging and non-yet-specified one. As the roofwalker's skilled, dexterous body participates in a choreography that leads it towards incompetence, so the roofs on which he flees undergo a similar transformation that deprives them of their telos. The very unrepresentability of the change that the roofwalker and roofs go through requires that the reader does the "footwork of imagination" that Rich had to do when she was confronted with the fragmentation of identity that came with being what she perceived in her time to be contradictory: a woman and a poet (Rich, "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" 175). What is at work here is a crack in the middle of the familiar that allows for the unpredictable to happen. The middle-class suburb and the structures of poetry, the capacities of the bodies of workers and poets are all overturned, not because of a critique that exposes their blind spots or the political, ideological, institutional structures that keep them in place for the reader to see and understand, but because their reality is qualified by a radical break between sense and meaning. This disassociation has political power because it requires that we stop and contemplate their previously unexplored possibilities.

In a move similar to that of Rich, Bechdel, at the opening of her chapter titled "Hate," creates a magnificent imagery that visualizes the dangers the author faces while pursuing her artistic expression (Bechdel 161-163). She narrates a dream in which she has to climb up a precipice of ice of immeasurable height, and she is fearful for her life. Later, however, when she has managed to reach the top safely, the ice thaws and the precipice is revealed to be her childhood home. She's

standing on the roof realizing that even if she had fallen, she would not have been hurt, because the roof is not high. By now, it is a beautiful spring morning, so when she attempts to “convey the extremity” (163) of the situation she was in not too long ago to her father and a neighbour, they stare in disbelief. The similarities with Rich’s poem, in terms of content and imagery, are quite striking. The three pages of the dream symbolize the artistic struggles Bechdel is facing while writing her memoir – prominent in which is that in order to achieve artistic freedom she has to be disloyal to her family – as well as the psychic dangers she faced as a child in her family home. The symbolism of the dream is quite straightforward. It is a good example of what Bechdel is good at: investigating childhood and the traumas of everyday life, and talking about the dilemmas of writing an autobiography. The message is clear: to be raised as a girl in a family strained by the burden that a predominantly patriarchal and heteronormative society imposes, is not safe. Neither is it safe to be an artist who wants to tell her story in spite of the social notions of propriety and family honour.<sup>3</sup> A titanic effort of will is required to save her from either situation.

Apart from the thematic and visual similarities these three pages have with Rich’s poem, I want to emphasize the similar way in which they change the landscape of the familiar, resulting in a moment of dissensus. Where Rich’s poem uses the imagery of a ship and waves, Bechdel’s dream affects the transformation of her family home into a life-threatening site through the expression of emotional intensity and a temporal interruption in the spatialisation of narrative. Graphic narratives register temporality spatially, since they move forward in time going from one side of the page to another (Chute, “Comics as Literature” 452). It requires only the minimum of graphic literacy to be able to follow panel after panel from top to bottom and from left to right. The three pages of the precipice dream follow this sequence, on a first reading, but the first page causes a disruption to the sequence, because it sets the frame for another reading to take place simultaneously. The second reading does not follow the panels’ linearity.

The first page of the dream is an introductory one-page frame showing Bechdel desperately clinging to the ice. It prepares the reader for reading the later pages (which have many panels) as if they were one-paneled also, in a way. In the full-page panel we see Bechdel from above. The “bleed,” when the panel expands to the edges of the page drawing the reader in, together with the close-up of the

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<sup>3</sup> Bechdel has said that the book would have been different if her mother had not been looking over her shoulder. She may not have abandoned the project altogether, but she still tried to accommodate her mother’s needs by editing things out (Bechdel and Thurman 13’15-13’50).

fearful look on Bechdel's face, places the reader in a position from where she might be able to offer help and give the event of reading the first page an intensity that is extraordinary for the opening of a graphic memoir's chapter.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, no words are uttered: the silence, as well as the solitude of the panel, has the effect of removing the panel from any particular span of time (McCloud 164). The stillness contrasts with the urgency and precariousness of the situation of Bechdel hanging from the precipice and her facial expression. There is a feeling that the event does not take place in a particular moment in time, but that it is there permanently. The intensity allows the effect of the first page to linger in the reading of the following two pages: stillness of time instead of linearity. It causes fear to keep lingering over the final panels of these pages, where the house looks familiar and all danger is gone, and where intensity gives way to clarity and distance.

In light of the first page, the structure of the following two pages invites the reader to not only follow the familiar rhythm of comics, which unfolds the dream from beginning to end, but also to pause and look at the two pages as a simultaneous juxtaposition of the icy precipice and the family home, as if they were an image cut in two, showing some sort of bilateral symmetry. On the left side, the reader sees Bechdel on the precipice of ice, fighting for her life. On the right side, Bechdel's family home has replaced the precipice. When the house and the precipice can be looked at simultaneously, what happens is something that occurs in dreams and with which everyone is familiar: an object can be one thing and at the same time something completely different. Something familiar can become something strange. Something safe can become something dangerous. The different times of the dream being transcribed into pages viewed simultaneously means a merging of the precipice and the house. The merging is not done in drawing: we do not have a drawing of a structure that combines elements found in houses and precipices. It is not done in the structure of the dream, which follows a temporal mode: first it is a precipice, then it is a house. It happens in the structure of the frames and the pages.

Like in Rich's poem, the middle-class house and the (emotional) work of the artist, their qualities, capacities, and purpose are changed because of a radical break between sense and meaning that happens the moment the reader's gaze takes in the two pages simultaneously, seeing the house and the precipice as the same thing, refusing to follow the rhythm and linearity that the rules of graphic

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<sup>4</sup> It is more usual in comics to find a fixed, quiet background to set the stage for something dramatic to happen later (McCloud 50). There is an establishing shot, usually a long-shot panel, which tells the reader where they are, before the story zooms in on the protagonists and the events in the story (McCloud 160).

literacy prescribe. Bechdel's dream produces effects of dissensus by turning the familiar image of a home into a dangerous place where the artist is a heroic figure that might meet her death. This move is different from her direct discussion of the political issues at work in her family life which one often finds in a memoir. In this passage, the reader is not led toward rational reflection, but to the experience of a conflict between a sensory display and its interpretation, which calls for the invention of new ways of making sense of senses, and therefore of framing a specific sphere of experience differently than before, which is the act of reconfiguring the political.

The two works read in this article practice a politics of aesthetics establishing a break in the way one can look at the familiar image of American suburban houses: they are transformed into dangerous territories, while the bodies that inhabit them detach them from their proper function by climbing on them. Bechdel's dream symbolizes the artistic struggles she has regarding writing about personal matters while Rich's poem discusses the terrifying moment when a poet sheds off the poetic tools at her disposal and needs to find new ones. The two works, following a long tradition of feminist writing of the self, revisit the relationship between the personal and the political not simply by presenting it to the reader, but by creating the possibility of an emergence of new meanings of the private and of what constitutes artistic work through the feelings that they create in their reader the moment the familiar images are separated from familiar meaning – a political moment.

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