

Depicting ordinary *and* nonstandard intimacies in public: Sex, romance and humour in women's porn comics

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In 1976 in the US, Trina Robbins worked with a group of fellow women artists to produce a 34-page, single-issue comic dealing with the topic of sex, entitled *Wet Satin: Women's Erotic Fantasies*.¹ This was not the first comic produced by a collective of women in the period known as the 'underground comix revolution', nor did it include the first comic authored by a woman depicting sex, or sexual content.² So how is it, despite being commissioned by an established underground comic publisher, that the comic was so nearly not printed and distributed? How is it that *Wet Satin* only lasted for two issues, with Robbins writing that 'putting out a comic about women's sexuality became too much of an uphill battle' (1999: 97)?

This paper draws on feminist theories of humour and romance to undertake a queer reading of three pornographic comics depicting sexually autonomous women. It explores the case of the *Wet Satin* comic anthology, in order to propose that discourses of heteronormativity negatively impact women's participation in public displays of sexual desires. Utilising theories of humour and common tropes from romance genres in relation to two women's sex comic stories, I then demonstrate how comic texts can depict ethical aspects of sexual desire that can be seen as both 'ordinary' and 'non standard', especially in relation to their main female characters. These case studies offer a space in which to think through a queer ethics of sexual desire that recognises aspects of multifarious pleasures and shame at work within 'porn(ographic) comics' and 'sex comics' (that is, commercially published comic books which include drawn depictions of explicit sexual activity).

What happens when *private* intimacies produced by women are made *public*? Robbins herself explains how *Wet Satin* was symptomatic of broader contested discourses regarding women, sex and public discussion in the 1970s:

[The] Midwestern printer took one look at the book, declared it pornographic, and flatly refused to touch it. This was interesting, considering that the same printer had printed an all-male sex book ... featuring such an obscene cover it had to be covered with plain white paper before it could even be distributed to the comic stores. The printer insisted that the male sex book, *Bizarre Sex*, was satire, while *Wet Satin* was serious and therefore objectionable (1999: 97).

Following the logic of the printer, material that deals with sex *seriously* is pornographic, whereas work that deals with it *humorously* is not. Particularly interesting is the printer's conclusion (through Robbins' retelling) that something publicly produced by ten women about sex is 'innately' serious, for looking at the comic content inside *Wet Satin* one can easily see it covers a range of comic styles and genres. There are eight comics included in the collection, with a range including sci-fi, hard-boiled detective satire, and contemporary work; all with a sexual focus. Further, the comic's use of humour was something noted by some reviewers at the time (Robbins 1999: 97). The later part of this paper will look at examples of humour in the comic in more detail, but in short, on this occasion the completed final artwork of *Wet Satin* was refused publication, and there was a last-minute dash to find alternative publishing options (Skinn 2004: 167-74).³

I will argue then that *Wet Satin* was a lightning rod, inciting reaction against several overlapping feminist imperatives at this time. This includes women's attempt to produce their own comics in the male-dominated underground comix industry (and the larger comic field itself) (e.g. Bechdel 1998, Hollander in Dooley and Heller 2005, Lopes 2009, McCloud 2000, Merino n.d., Pilcher

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2008, Robbins 1999, Skinn 2004, West and Spencer 2004);⁴ women's attempt to depict and represent their own sexual realities and fantasies as part of the 'women's liberation' movement (Buszek 2006, Juffer 1998, McKee et al 2008, Robbins 1999 and 2001, Segal 1993 and 1994); women's attempt to have their own storytelling style – including, and especially, their use of humour – taken as valid in 'mainstream' popular culture (e.g. Barreca 1988 and 1994, Gilbert 2004, Merrill 1988, Reed 2009); and their ongoing attempt to publicly participate in the political economy: through the production, distribution and consumption of texts dealing with all these issues to an equitable degree to their male counterparts (e.g. Juffer 1998, Lopes 2009).

Therefore, rather than just being an obscure story about a relatively unknown comic publication, this scenario is a complex example of the interrelation between what is deemed appropriately public and private when it comes to issues of sex and gender. This *Wet Satin* anecdote is an example of women trying to produce a comic text that exclusively represents women's erotic fantasies and as a result, facing a direct challenge to their work. In other words, it becomes an informative example of a marginalised gendered group making public their own private sexual desires, including a 'mainstream' response to such an effort.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's work on public and private discourses (especially where they work in social *and* political publics) is instructive in examining the dynamics between the public productions of texts by a 'marginal' group and 'mainstream' challenges to such efforts (Berlant and Warner 1998, Warner 2000 and 2002). This scholarship is especially pertinent when the work made public is that which is more often aligned to the private spheres of life, especially the nebulous category of 'sex'. For example, it is particularly the intent of the following comment by Berlant and Warner that I have in mind when I think through Robbins' retelling of the *Wet Satin* printing story:

A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatised sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a *tacit sense of rightness and normalcy*. This sense of rightness – *embedded in things and not just in sex* – is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life (1998: 554 my emphasis).

Berlant and Warner argue that heteronormativity not only obscures the social and intimate practices which border the private, heterosexual, reproductive realms, it also ensures for the most part adherence to an overall hierarchy in which some acts are coded 'natural' (almost 'innate' and therefore unquestioned) and other practices are deemed abhorrent or objectionable simply because their representation is not *ordinary* (see also Warner 2000). 'Ordinary' therefore becomes an evasive term in which certain actions and behaviours are normalised through historically relatively recent Christian-Judeo religious, legislative and medical discourses, while other actions and behaviours are deemed abnormal because of bodily taboos turned into social norms (Foucault 1998, Warner 2000). In 1970s USA, young women creating collectives to produce their own 'underground' opinions and work on issues relevant to them – including counter-responses to a mainstream approach to issues of abortion, lesbianism, menstruation and domestic violence – was not ordinary (Lopes 2009, Mitchell 1981a and 1981b, Robbins 1999). And even though *Wet Satin* did not deal with homosexuality or lesbianism per se, the diffuse governing powers of heteronormativity were at work when publication was refused on the grounds of it not being 'normal' – in this case because, one infers, it was produced by women. And, according to the norms of the day, women should not publicly display their sexual fantasies, let alone try and sell them.

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Berlant and Warner also argue that ‘being disgusted’ is an act which plays a key role in heteronormative culture (1998: 555), creating a metaphorical moral roadblock in which certain acts (not always sexual) that depict (apparently) non-heterosexually-normative aspects of life made public are judged as ‘immoral, criminal, or pathological’ (Warner 2000: 5). Once a link between an act and an identity can be claimed (however tenuous), certain ‘identities’ are no longer ‘shielded by the zone of privacy’ (Berlant and Warner 1998: 555). For example, some people could suddenly claim publicly that ‘all feminists are lesbians’ or ‘all women’s libbers hate men’, with a net result being that these ‘identities’ scramble to defend themselves – often through scapegoating the ‘identity’ they are (mis)aligned with – instead of collectively questioning the absurd, reductionist claim in the first place (Warner 2000). Indeed, the printer was disgusted with *Wet Satin* and claimed it objectionable. This was possible because ‘being disgusted’ was a valid discourse available to the printer as a North American Midwestern male professional; the result was that the female contributors found themselves having to explain whether the comic was objectionable, pornographic or serious, in a manner their male comics counterparts were not so required to do.⁵ Given the actual arrest of storeowners selling other women-produced comic books at the time, it could be argued that the printer might have had reason to believe the printing of *Wet Satin* could have been regarded as ‘criminal’, though this it seems was not his claim (Lopes 2009, Pilcher 2008, Robbins 1999).⁶

I am interested in how the production of texts by a marginal group – in this case, comics by women – were so easily attached to a judgment of being objectionable. What had changed in the conditions of publication, where a printer could have no issue publishing and distributing the *Bizarre Sex* magazine, which showed ‘giant vaginas landing on skyscrapers’ (Pilcher 2008: 162), but then refuse *Wet Satin* by utilising an argument based on women’s lack of humour? Warner writes:

Some kinds of sexual relations seem as though they ought to be universal. They seem innocently moral, consistent with nature and health. But what if they are not universal in fact, or *if other people demonstrate a different understanding* of nature and health? It would take an extraordinary effort to consider the views of these sexual dissidents with anything like openness, because the first instinct will be to think of them immoral, criminal, or pathological. And of course they might be. *But anytime it seems necessary to explain away other people's sex in these ways, the premises of one's morality could just be flawed.* What looks like crime might be harmless difference. What looks like immorality might be rival morality. What looks like pathology might be a rival form of health (2000: 5 my emphasis).

My contention is that the assessment used by the printer – that the *Wet Satin* comic was pornographic because it was 'serious' and not 'satire' – is an example of an effort to 'explain away' other people's sex. It relies on what is apparently a natural set of assumptions which include the following: it is natural for men to be interested in sex, but not women; men have a more natural affinity with humour than women – especially bawdy humour; and men are by nature visually stimulated (therefore drawn to magazines or comics), whereas women prefer text-based products (Albury 2002, Shamoon 2004). Theorists interested in feminism, gender and sex have shown these assumptions belie complex, socially constructed heteronormative discourses rather than any stable 'natural truth' (e.g. Gill 2007, Jagose 1996, Lehman 1993, Segal 1994).

What is particularly interesting is the way in which women's comics on sex (and comics per se) have *consistently* been 'explained away' as pornographic and as unfunny. And certainly these judgements are not just made by comic book printers. The 'explaining away' list proves lengthy: there has been legal action against women (and men) comic artists; many talented women artists have been excluded from the comic canon; comic readers interested in a

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more female perspective on sex (and many other topics) have struggled against the injunction that ‘women don’t read comics’ (e.g. Carvan 2001, Lopes 2009, Robbins 1999). In this manner, comic work by and for women may have even been explained away *before* being made public (e.g. women leaving the comic field to work in other areas in which they might find better opportunities, or books not being published because it is assumed there is no market for them).⁷ Female comic book readers themselves have also claimed that sex comics by women are inauthentic, unfunny and anti-feminist (e.g. sallycreswell 2007). And although more recently there has been a changing recognition of women’s participation in the comic field over its relatively short history, there is also a realisation that women’s *ongoing* participation is vital. In short, women’s interest in comics has been explained away for a good number of decades, making the statement ‘the comics field is a boys’ club’ a particularly pernicious and enduring truism (e.g. Carvan 2001, Robbins 1999, West and Spencer 2004).

When it comes to women and sex comics, I believe there are a number of interrelated discourses that circulate between the borders of public and private and ‘what women do’ which ensure such enduring assessments. These include: heteronormative discourses which define ‘natural’ sexual behaviour of females *as opposite to* males – including the tendency to assert that men behave in active ways, and women in passive ways – thereby ruling anything outside this realm ‘unnatural’, *especially when made actively public* by women (Albury 2003, Buszek 2006, Segal 1994); the difficulty in working through feminist thought regarding women, romance and sex, where even some feminists have had a tendency towards simplistic judgements regarding appropriate desires and reading/viewing practices of women (e.g. see the critiques of feminism and romance in Jackson 1995, Juffer 1998, Pearce and Stacey 1995); a relative dearth of *detailed* scholarship on women and their uses of humour (Barreca 1988 and 1994, Gilbert 2004, Merrill, 1988),⁸ and a heteronormative impulse to statically fix people’s sexual desires in order to

‘rationally’ judge how appropriate they might be, and especially a wish to fix (and ‘see’) women’s desires (e.g. Paasonen 2007, Rubin 1984, Williams 1989 and 1993). This includes the assumption that depictions of sexual activity will be read in the same manner by all readers (Jagose 2007).

The story behind publishing *Wet Satin* is one example of explaining away women’s comic work on sex. Drawing on this argument, I work with two other comics to examine how women have replicated, resisted and wrestled with these interrelated discourses to produce a public story of female subjects and their private ‘ordinary’ and ‘nonstandard’ sexual desires.

‘Turning a ‘curse’ into a blessing’: Recognising bawdy women⁹

Constance Penley, in her article ‘Crackers and whackers: The white trashing of porn’, sets out to ensure that the particularities of humour used in pornography are acknowledged, especially in a genre whose mainstream connotations so often lean towards essentialised assessments of ‘degradation’ and ‘violence’ (Penley 2004). Penley argues that certain genres of pornography (such as the early nineteenth-century stag films and, more recently, ‘white trash’ porn) have consistently used bawdy humour, arguing that the outcome of this lewd style often includes an ‘emphasis on female agency’ (2004: 316) and men becoming the butt of the jokes. Her insights into gender and humour are interesting more generally, because her assertion works against a norm established in humour studies by which women (and other marginal people) are often the butt of the joke, and are also expected to laugh at themselves – finding a (reconfirmed) marginal position ‘inherently’ funny. When it comes to women, often the jokes circulate around sexual and gender jibes (Gilbert 2004, Merrill 1988, Reed 2009).¹⁰ With an interest in feminism, porn theory and representations of explicit female pleasure in comics, I find the combined theories of Williams and Penley useful in reading

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how pleased female subjectivity is constructed in certain ‘funny’ sex comics. For example, as Peter Lehman explains, one of Williams’ key arguments in *Hard Core* (1989) is the opportunity afforded by the assertion that:

Certain hard-core films [are] unique in the way that ... they do not sadistically punish women for being sexual or the manner in which they posit female sexual desire and fulfilment as a legitimate need (1993: 171).

Working with the premise of this argument, I would also like to examine Penley’s statement that:

Only animated [pornography] films can play with the kind of hyperbolically exaggerated body parts and wildly impossible sexual positions that are a staple of the bawdy song. It would be more accurate to say both popular forms are fundamentally based in a kind of humour that features attacks on religion [and] middle-class ideas about sexuality, trickster women, and foolish men with their penises all in a twist, when those penises work at all (2004: 318).

Like Warner, Penley recognises a humorous ‘attack on middle-class sexuality’ is also a (momentary) attack on heteronormativity (see also Kipnis 1992). Therefore, what does it look like when a porn *comic* deliberately combines the dynamics of bawdy humour with those of the autonomous, sexually desiring woman?¹¹

Joyce Farmer’s comic ‘A Mature Relationship’, featured in *Wet Satin* (1976), is an exemplary case in point when looking at lewd humour. Remembering that the printer claimed *Wet Satin* to be a wholly serious anthology, one wonders exactly *how* he read this comic. ‘A Mature Relationship’ is the four-page story of a man and woman, Dennis and Maxine, aged in their sixties, with a penchant for having sex when Maxine is menstruating:



Fig. 1: The sexual activity of Maxine and Dennis in Joyce Farmer's comic (Farmer in Robbins 1976)

These sexually desiring characters are not limited to eroticising Maxine's period in just 'the sex act', they delight in the many prurient aspects of what is euphemistically known as *feminine hygiene*:



Fig. 2: The tampon sex play of Maxine and Dennis (Farmer in Robbins 1976)

Talk about ‘unpredicted pleasures’ (Berlant and Warner 1998)! Here is a comic about sexually desiring, active, aged, bleeding, fetishised bodies made public from the private imagination of a woman. And the bawdy humour has not quite finished, because the comic ends with the reader sharing the final joke: aged over sixty, Maxine has indeed ceased ‘naturally’ menstruating, but she solves this ‘problem’ by charting her monthly cycle and, when her period is due, going to the butcher and buying ‘half a pound of chicken livers’. She then uses these chicken livers to mimic her own menstrual flow. Maxine is fooling Dennis, so that she and he can keep having a good sexual time!

I wish to return for a moment to the printer who claimed that satire was evident in *Bizarre Sex* but not in *Wet Satin*. *Wet Satin* was objectionable – distasteful – because it was thought to be *serious*. If satire is where human folly is held up for ridicule, my question is: how could anyone think this comic is not using the satirical mode to poke fun at the squeamish reader? Clearly the story is deliberately ridiculing mainstream human taboos against blood (not to mention aged sex and dead animal parts) in order to *laugh at those people* who will respond with disgust towards menstruation and sex. It’s very clear Maxine and Dennis are having a whale of a time; they seem wholly preoccupied by their private intimacies. Therefore they seem relatively free from outside ridicule that might be directed at them. They both articulate how ‘lucky’ they are to have found each other, making the emotions of the characters (as I read them) overwhelmingly fun and joyful. Surely this comic is also an example of the silliness of sex exposed (making public all the ‘strange’ sexual things humans do) – ‘exposure’ being another outcome of satire. But perhaps here we get to the kernel of why some readers might not find this comic quite so funny. If Maxine and Dennis are not the butt of the joke, who is? Laughing at a joke often means siding with the joke-teller to poke fun at the expense of those who become the ‘butt’ (Gilbert 2004, Neve 1988).

Therefore some readers might actually be siding with Joyce Farmer and laughing at those who would be squeamish about *even the idea* (representation) of bloody, and aged, fetish sex. And who is most likely to buy and read an all-female comic book about sex in the 1970s? A counter-cultural hippie, or women's libber spring to mind (Buszek 2006, Segal 1994) – and if not exactly them, then people who might be judged non-heteronormative, or nonstandard in some way (Lopes 2009). Penley offers a salient point when she explores why sexual humour like this might prove so incomprehensible (let alone totally immoral) to some people:

It is particularly unseemly when [certain people] appear to flaunt shamelessly their [sexual] trashiness, which, after all, is nothing but an aggressively in-your-face reminder of stark class [as well as gender and sexual] differences, a fierce fuck-you to anyone trying to maintain a belief in [a heteronormative] America whose only class demarcations run along the seemingly obvious ones of race [or whose only sexual differences are seemingly what 'men' do and 'women' do] (2004: 310)

Although Penley is discussing issues of class and sex here, I would suggest that this argument applies to heteronormativity too.

Farmer 'shamelessly' produced a public four-page comic about so many issues which a mainstream heteronormative America would *expect* people – especially women – to feel shameful about: menstruation, eroticising tampons and sanitary pads, desiring 'weird' sex, lying to have sex, knowing how to put anything other than a penis into a vagina, and sexualising the ageing body, to name a few (Buszek 2006, Segal 1994). And neither author (Farmer) nor character (Maxine) seem ashamed; they are actually making fun of it all – flaunting it. One could even argue they are having 'one up on the man', for it seems Dennis is none the wiser about Maxine's deceit. Then again, 'ignorance is bliss' might never have held such sexual potential for the elderly menstrual-blood fetishist! Therefore, for those people (including the

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Midwestern printer) trying to maintain a belief that what Maxine and Dennis are doing could *never* be erotically funny, and that younger women in America could *never* imagine and publicly produce these kinds of desiring sex acts, especially under the rubric of women's sexual fantasies, the comic may indeed seem like a 'fierce fuck-you'.

This aggression-masquerading-as-humour may especially be felt as 'not funny' if the spectre of shame overwhelms a person. Some degree of feeling shame may be fairly common in this example, because taboos against sexualised bleeding and the aged body are well established in Anglo-Western discourses (Albury 2002). However, to feel *any* shame means a person is immediately defensive, and this will block them from recognising that aspects of shame and taboo are exactly the feelings being courted in this comic. One of the things the comic is doing is 'playing' with questions of sexual prohibitions through a romance discourse. But shame might blind a person from seeing these romantic aspects, or the humour. And what does Warner argue those who feel sexual shame do? 'The usual response is: pin it on someone else' (2000: 3). A person might say the comic is not funny, or call it 'pornographic'. In short, they might do anything necessary (using well-established heteronormative shaming edicts) to ensure the representation is as far from being seen as 'ordinary' as possible. Do feelings of shame make many of the 'ordinary' aspects of this work (too quickly) obscured?

As a story, 'A Mature Relationship' uses a number of standard romantic conventions (which will be discussed in more detail shortly). It is, in part, a love story about keeping stability and desire alive in a long-term heterosexual relationship. Romance and love may seem pretty ordinary. But the comic *also* works deliberately against heteronormative perceptions about the sex a man and woman will have. Berlant and Warner write:

To be against heteronormativity is not to be against norms. To be against the processes of normalisation is not to be afraid of ordinariness (1998: 557).

So can one create representations of 'ordinary' *and* 'nonstandard' sexual desires? To explore this notion, I will now turn to another comic, and to what might be thought of as woman's 'ordinary' affinity with a certain kind of humour: the romantic comedy (rom-com). What can this genre tell us about representations of women's desires?

Rom-com pornographies: A queer girl's dream?

Just as aspects of feminist thought have had a complex relation to pornography, so too has feminism been critical of romance discourses (Downing 2013, Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006, Hardy 2001, Jackson 1995, Negra 2008, Pearce and Stacey 1995, Snitow 1979, Sonnet 1999). By critical, I refer to work especially from the 1980s onwards which sought to provide a nuanced reading of romance texts. Such scholarship avoided retreating to the polar positions of judging the romance genre on one hand as 'women's complicity in patriarchal relations' or on the other hand as 'denying the pleasures of romance' which included some feminists discrediting specific romantic modes of female subjectivity (Jackson 1995: 50). Romance as a representational genre is clearly complex to define, although its gendered nature as a women's genre is without doubt (Snitow 1979). As Ken Gelder highlights, 'although romance generally does work to a formulae, it is a highly varied genre with a range of subgeneric identities' (Gelder 2004: 45). This acknowledges that texts within the broad romance genre do adhere to certain 'logics and practices' (Gelder 2004), and it is these which I wish to unpack in more detail. I find feminist scholarship on romance particularly useful as it seeks to examine how desire is constituted, and how it relates to notions of love and sex. As Stevi Jackson argues:

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Emotions are not simply ‘felt’ as internal states provoked by the unconscious sense of lost infantile satisfactions – they are actively structured and understood through culturally specific discourses ...

Fantasies do not emerge fully formed into our consciousness. They are actively constructed by us, in narrative form, drawing on the cultural resources to hand (1995: 57 my emphasis).

As my own research seeks to examine how women producers and female characters might actively construct desire in sex comics, romance theory assists in thinking through the role of subject formation and ‘narrativisation’ (Pearce and Stacey 1995). The porn comics which are the focus of my work all have a ‘story’, no matter how tenuous the narrative may at first seem. As this section seeks to show, certain porn comics are actually constructed on fairly ‘conventional’ romantic storylines. They include a clear (even if brief) beginning, middle and end (Roland Barthes cited in Pearce and Stacey 1995: 26). By utilising the word ‘narrative’ I am drawing on the idea that narrative structure not only explains *how* a text unfolds, but also *how* a text tries to answer questions within its genre style. Narrative is therefore an issue of *process*, more than merely the type of story being told (Gelder 2004, Williams 1989). For example, as briefly noted above in ‘A Mature Relationship’, although the *content* of the story may be nonstandard, the conventions are very much centred on a monogamous, heterosexual couple in love. Although it is a longer-term relationship (and therefore not a representation of the initiating romance story, which is so popular in this genre), conservative gender-based romantic conventions and concerns are still discernable: Dennis buys Maxine flowers and calls her ‘Fair Lady’, and above their bed is a ‘Home Sweet Home’ sign. In this way, the romantic aspects of the story may be read as rather ‘ordinary’. But again, the purpose of this work is to demonstrate the ways in which some comic porn texts – those that I would argue are particularly interested in desiring female subjectivities – might borrow aspects of romantic conventions *as much as* they borrow from nonstandard sex discourses.¹² For example, they may use aspects of bawdy humour as much as they replicate more formal romance storylines. In the act

of utilising *and* combining these discourses, then, how are female subjects formed and represented?

Needless to say, scholars have noted similarities between the genres of romance and pornography (Albury 2002, Downing 2013, Hardy 2001, Juffer 1998, Snitow 1979, Sonnet 1999, Williams 1989). Some of this work also highlights the links between humour/comedy, sex *and* romance (Barreca 1994, Paasonen 2007), but few scholarly works studied here provide *detailed* examples of this dynamic as it plays out in narratives (Gilbert 2004 also makes this point). What might be learnt from a text that displays aspects of humour, romance and explicit sex? Some research indicates a difficulty in depicting these dynamics at the same time, let alone exploring how subjectivity may function in such an example. For instance, in her discussion of humour and pornography Nina K. Martin notes, 'No more jokes or wisecracks are present as the actors perform the sexual number with serious intensity; the comedy is distinct from the sex' (2006: 193). Penley also offers an interesting insight into the 'dilemma' of combining sex with humour:

What I have observed is that as porn films 'progressed' as film, technically and narratively, and began to focus on the woman and her subjectivity, they became more socially conservative as they lost the bawdy populist humour whose subject matter was so often the follies and foibles of masculinity (2004: 320).

Does bawdy humour in pornography have to rely on masculine 'follies and foibles'? Can a text interested in female subjects have socially conservative aspects as well as including 'bawdy populist humour'? In rom-com comic porn, can the sex start and the laughing not stop? It is to some of the formulae and conventions within particularly the romantic comedy genre that I now turn.

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In many ways *The Adventures of a Lesbian College School Girl: Volume 1 – Petra's Diary* (referred to from here on as '*Lesbian College School Girl*') (Waldron and Finch 1997) is a romantic comedy as well as comic pornography. It is the story of a young woman, Petra, who is seeking to find a suitable love-object so that together they can act out their desires. We know this because we have access to Petra's diary, a staple item for the romantic heroine. Having just turned 18, Petra has only had her own fantasies and longings to keep her company; and in the tradition of romantic comedies she is completely distracted by her desires and thus faces many obstacles in the pursuit of finding a match. None of the barriers (time, the opportunity to meet someone, etc) seem insurmountable, and the reader therefore follows standard romance 'narrative questions', such as will she or won't she, or rather, *how* will she find romance (Pearce and Stacey 1995: 16)? And indeed Petra does find a suitable suitor. What follows in the comic are many of the conventions scholars have traced in romantic texts, some particularly from the more recent 'chick lit' romance genre (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006, Negra 2008). These conventions include, small obstacles and insecurities to fuel the love 'compulsion' (Jackson 1995, Pearce and Stacey 1995); the 'excitement lies in the chase' (Jackson 1995: 53), more than need for closure (Snitow 1979); the suitor 'knowing more' than the heroine, especially about 'what women want and who they are' (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006: 498); and the 're-virginisation' of the heroine, so that in the first sex act with her suitor she returns to an 'emotionally virginal state, which wipes away previous 'sully' experiences by making them enjoy sex fully for the very first time' (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006: 494).

The narrative ends, as romance genres so often do, in offering 'its subjects the possibility of a new 'becoming': through the encounter/fusion of self and other, a new self might be imagined' (Pearce and Stacey 1995: 18). Looking at Petra's closing diary entry (the last page of the comic), we see that Petra – now 'free' – has a new (modified, changing?) access to her sense of self:

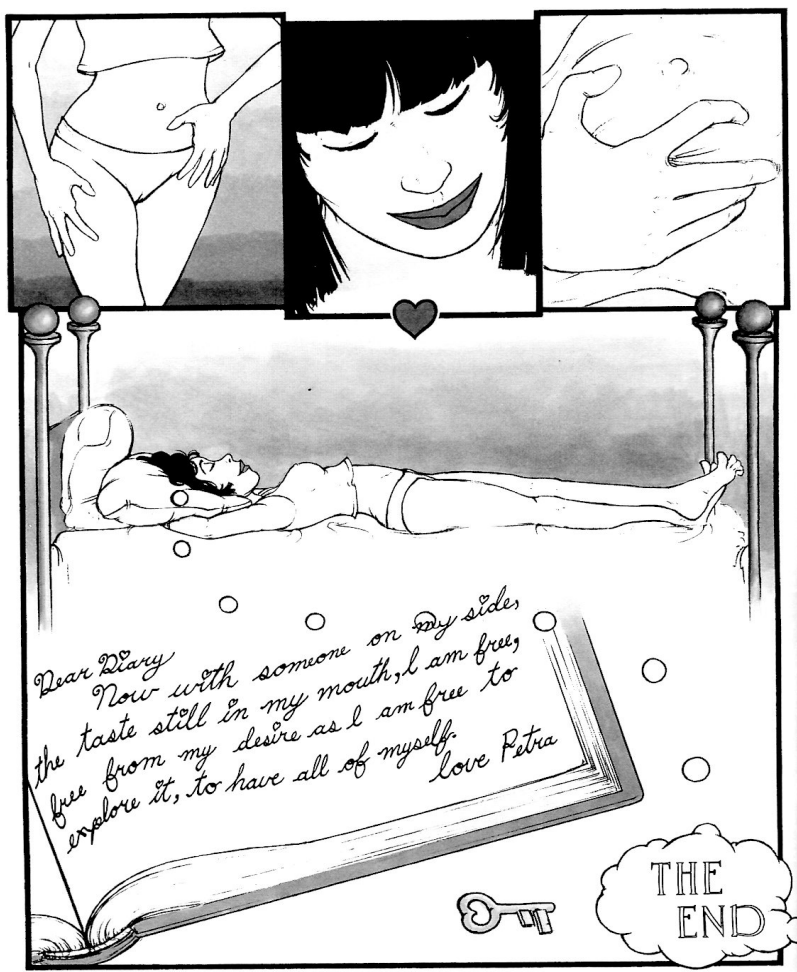


Fig. 3: Petra's last diary entry (Waldron and Finch 1997)

It is clear that the desire Petra writes about here is *personal* desire – a desire to better know her own fantasies, including the chance to explore them better (with ‘someone on my side’). Returning to Penley and pornography, if ‘social conservatism’ is about maintaining established and moderate traditions, one can see how aspects of *Lesbian College School Girl* follow some of the most basic customs of the romance and rom-com genres, which are often seen as socially conservative.

But Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey also remind us to be aware that romance is a ‘fractured discourse’ (1995: 24), and that in ‘love’ things might not always be what they seem. Through their deliberations on desire they point to the nonstandard opportunities offered by certain romance discourses:

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'[T]he desire(s) liberated through the process of falling in love are nearly *always in excess* of the love-object. Or as Lucy Goodison put it, 'Really being in love means *wanting to live in a different world*' (1995: 34 my emphasis).

Humour is a popular and malleable genre for playing with the notions of excess and 'difference'. For humour relies on pushing boundaries – creating a shock but within the 'safety' of recognising it as a joke. In my own research I have discussed the development of a participatory, consensual interaction between the female comic producer and her readers (Ruddock 2010). This relationship created a form of 'contained, flexible safety'. Humour has the potential to do something similar: to push people to the boundaries of what may or may not be deemed 'acceptable' and feel momentarily what it is like. It may begin with laughing at another person, or yourself, but with laughter also comes recognition that there are alternatives available. As humour scholar Norman Holland writes:

You laugh when something affirms and denies the same proposition simultaneously. You laugh when something creates disorder and then quickly and happily resolves that disorder ... You laugh at incongruity between an intellectual contradiction and an emotional reaction to it. You laugh if something presents the limitations of our real world as a way to affirm the logical order of some other, ideal plane (Holland 1982: 22).

What happens if we combine the insights of Pearce and Stacey and Penley's interest in bawdy humour to *Lesbian College School Girl*? The text is full of ribald tropes too. There is Penley's 'trickster women' (2004: 318) in Jennifer who 'pretends' she doesn't know what's going on, then suddenly has a 'surprise' package (in this case a dildo which is 'ready to go'):



Fig. 4: Jennifer surprises Petra (Waldron and Finch 1997)

There are also examples of Penley's 'wayward ... giant organs' (2004: 317):



Fig. 5: Petra fantasises (Waldron and Finch 1997)

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There is even the 'anticlericalism' Penley notices (2004: 315) in the form of a nun who 'gets off' on spanking her female students, only to find herself the focus of their sexual attention:



Fig. 6: The randy nun punishes Petra (Waldron and Finch 1997)

In many ways I think this comic is laughing at itself and the conventions of sex, and pornography, as much as the girls are being *comic* in the comic. And this ability to actively play with follies and foibles is key to Warner's 'ethics of a queer life' (Warner 2000: 33-40). Therefore some comics – texts which are acutely aware of their tenuous social position (because they are regarded as juvenile, puerile, disrespected) (Hajdu 2008, Wolk 2007) – might be yet another locale for thinking through sex in the queerly ethical way Warner had in mind:

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be above the indignity of sex ... The rule is: Get over yourself [because] if sex is a kind of indignity, then we're all in this together. And the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human (2000: 35-36).

Both the comics studied here do not avoid the indignity of sex. They represent it (albeit in different ways) right up front, and court with the reader to see and feel what happens when they follow the story. At what might be the most romantic moment of *Lesbian College School Girl* – when Petra has finally had sex with another ‘lezzie’ (her love-object) and then wakes up next to Jennifer, realising that it is not a dream and that she can in fact share more intimacy (‘snuggles’) – Jennifer reminds her:



Fig. 7: Jennifer foils Petra's romantic and sexual ideas (Waldron and Finch 1997)

In other words, by saying, ‘Let’s go’ Jennifer is implying ‘Get over yourself, Petra, you’re a ‘lezzie’ and now you’ve had some good sex. Well done, but what next?’ It could be ‘Let’s go and live in a different world’. Perhaps a world that is not (so) heteronormative? A queerly ethical world? This certainly seems the case when Petra and Jennifer go off after their initial romantic sexual encounter and get to have more pleasurable sex with the school nun. One sex act is not the ‘be all and end all’. It is how a person lives – one’s *ethics* – that counts.

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The sex comics discussed here do not replicate all aspects of romance genres of course. One notable difference is that these works do not replicate a heteronormative position of gender-based difference, in which women's needs and desires are often subjugated, or left obscured by a primary focus on the (usually-male) object of love (Downing 2013). In these comics, the pleasures of the main female characters do not need to be bounded at the close of the work by matrimony. Indeed, in 'A Mature Relationship' the couple are already married, and their 'kinky' sex is part of what keeps their romance alive and relationship working. In this manner, these comics avoid scapegoating the 'non standard' aspects of desire. And unlike a common romantic trope, the works do not seek to ultimately 'tame' the sexual proclivities of anyone involved (Downing 2013: 93).

Warner, particularly working with the theoretical work of Gayle Rubin (1984), makes note of the stultifying nature of heteronormativity. As a social construct, heteronormative discourses can often look like they are 'natural facts' when they are actually predicated on created (and changing) complex, social and cultural conditions (Warner 2000: 25-7). For example, the fact that some people engage in 'missionary position' penis-in-vagina penetrative sex in the privacy of their own bedroom becomes embellished as *the* 'fact' of sex – that is, the *right* way to have sex, what *the* sex act really is, and the *only* way to have sex. But because these ultimate 'truths' are anything but the case, at any point a person can slip from this site of false certainty and find themselves on the 'shameful' side of sex (2000). In the public *fiction* that is *Lesbian College School Girl* – now that Petra is truly part of the 'lezzie' world as she imagines it to be, and therefore definitely on the shameful side of the heterosexual ('normal')/homosexual ('pathological') dichotomy (Rubin 1984) - for Petra a freeing aspect of this realisation may be the knowledge that 'We can fuck later'. In other words, because one has acknowledged that sex and desire *includes recognising* and not avoiding aspects of indignity (as well as many other feelings), this realisation may lessen the chance of immediately

censoring or not engaging with new non-normative sex acts or desires as they arise over time. In line with Warner's argument that 'queer culture tends to expand the possibilities', this little queer rom-com porn comic 'will never be everyone's taste, but it might be anyone's' (2000: 38).

Anyone. Not *everyone*, but anybody at all. For those people who are looking for a fun, funny little story about sexually desirous queer girls having a good sexual time, the public availability of this comic might just be an example of ethical, female-focused pleasurable sex. And because the comic ends with Petra, the heroine, by herself and feeling free, some readers might appreciate finding an example of a romantic young woman not sexually punished for wanting to have lots of sex. They will have also found an example of a humorous story in which they may laugh at the bawdy aspects of sex (including its indignities) from the 'safe' distance of representation. Humour theorist Holland notes: 'Whenever we shock ourselves without getting hurt, we laugh with triumph and relief' (1982: 85).

Those who look closely might also register the way the comic utilises aspects of 'ordinary' and 'nonstandard' depictions of sex and romance to tell the story of a desiring young woman. Some readers will have found a porn comic that for them depicts ethical, pleasurable sex acts from the position of an empowered female subject – acts they might already do, or acts they might now feel less shameful about desiring (McKee et al 2008: 105-6). Not everyone is going to read the comic like this, but *anyone* might. It may also just be a comic for a person to read and reflect on sex itself.

The term Warner uses for these *anyone*'s is 'counterpublics'. For Warner, counterpublics are a 'public' of people who have 'an awareness of [their] subordinate status' and whose 'participation in such a public is one of the

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ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed' (2002: 56-7). Berlant and Warner call 'border intimacies' (1998: 560) the initiatives by people within counterpublics who make public nonstandard desires as they function in daily life. Joyce Farmer, who created 'A Mature Relationship', says of her comic work: 'We are the characters and they are us, and I, at least, feel too close to them to judge their image' (Farmer in Mitchell 1981a: 76).

Therefore the women characters in these comics – with their ordinary and nonstandard desires – are in part visual representations of the producer's own desires. The theory of counterpublics would also argue that such empowered characters in these comic works might just represent (through formation and transformation) the desires of some readers (McKee et al 2008). In the end a porn comic is a representation of explicit sex where the characters are drawn and therefore fictional. For those people who have an interest in representations of ethical depictions of female subjects enjoying the sexual acts they desire, and can recognise the ways heteronormativity has functioned to subordinate their desires (using shame and disgust to varying degrees), these comics are public sites which make real what Warner (2000: 7) calls 'the struggle with the unthinkability of [one's] own desire'.

This paper has examined aspects of queer sexual ethics in the field of comics, in relation to feminist theories of pornography, romance and humour. It bears repetition that comics are only constrained by that which can be drawn. For those interested in examining the way this form can be used to display, and think through, a queer ethical approach to female sexual subjectivity, there are endless possibilities. This is particularly the case for work that is interested in not necessarily splitting concepts like desire, pleasure or shame into heteronormative categories based on gender difference. As such, although this work focuses on certain pornographic comics as part of cultural practices, many of the arguments within this work could also be usefully applied to feminist and queer work with other emerging porn fields, such as feminist/alt pornography. Of particular interest is the ways in which these often marginal

genres seek to show, and grapple with, the multiplicity and diversity of ways in which women may conceive of their own desires and sexual actions. Such work may prove productive for those people interested in studying how women interact with pornography, especially seeking to account for the complex ways in which multiple pleasures, and tensions, may be located simultaneously within sexually explicit texts.

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1

The ten contributing women to *Wet Satin* were Cathy Millet, Margery Peters, Lee Marrs, Joey Epstein, Terry Richards, Shelby Sampson, Joyce Farmer, Melinda Gebbie, Becky Wilson and Trina Robbins.

2

According to Robbins and Skinn, women began contributing in the 'comix underground movement' as early as 1965. The first US all-women comic anthology was *It Ain't Me Babe* in 1970.

3

Robbins notes the same dynamic happened when the collective tried to produce the second *Wet Satin* issue as well.

4

In relation to the mainstream comics industry, Paul Lopes reports that in 1974 'only two women worked in the industry' in the US (2009: 138).

5

This is *not* suggesting male comic contributors did not face calls that their work was objectionable and/or pornographic. The underground comix movement is littered with social and legal claims of producing 'objectionable' work. My argument is rather that *Wet Satin* – produced only by women, and oddly claimed as 'serious' – was *a priori* deemed objectionable because it was firstly, produced by women (e.g. see Barreca 1994: 28), and secondly, publicly dealt with 'private' taboo subjects. The argument I am developing here is also not suggesting 'men' did not support women comic artists, or *Wet Satin* itself. There is evidence, obviously, for the ways in which men and women collaborated at this time. Instead what I am arguing is how certain discourses – in this case, what 'private' material is deemed appropriate to be made 'public' – often impacts women differently than it does men (Segal 1994: 22). Further, although not the primary focus of this paper, it is important to note that other socially constructed categories – such as race, sexuality, class, disability, etc – as they come into contact with 'gender' will also impact how certain people can make public their private work.

6

This point refers to the comic publication of *Tits & Clits* edited by Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely. This comic was immediately embroiled in legal action on its publication, as it was deemed 'pornographic' for again depicting women's sexual stories. On the impact of the law on these artists, Tim Pilcher writes, 'The duo hid the remaining 40,000 copies of the first issue with friends and lived for two years under threat of imprisonment, fines of up to \$400,000, and the loss of their homes and children, until the District Attorney decided not to take further action' (2008: 167). Again Warner's point that these examples have 'less to do with legal technicalities than with the taboos of law' is pertinent (2000: 26).

7

For example, see the scholarship of Robbins on the issue of women not staying in the comic field (1999, 2001).

8

Research by humour scholars Barreca, Merrill and Gilbert highlight the ways in which the conventions of humour used by women is often marginalised. Therefore this point and particularly the work of Gilbert, argues cogently that women's use of humour is not 'radically' different from 'men', but it has certainly faced judgment and the

generalisation that 'women just aren't funny' (see Gilbert 2004).

9

The line 'turning a 'curse' into a blessing' is a direct quote from 'A Mature Relationship' (Farmer in Robbins 1976: 26).

10

Otherwise women and other marginal people face the other normalising humour tactic which is summed up best as the statement, 'What? Can't you take a joke?' (e.g. see Barreca 1994: 14, 18; Gilbert 2004.) Or, that because of the 'feminist-humour-police', a joke is no longer funny (Barreca 1994: 13).

11

In this paper I am utilising the terms humour, jokes and comedy interchangeably. For more detailed scholarship on how theorists have distinguished these terms, see for example Gilbert 2004, Holland 1982, Neve 1988.

12

Additionally, I am not arguing along the simplistic lines that 'romance = ordinary' and 'sexually explicit = nonstandard.' Instead, I am working to demonstrate the ways in which aspects of romance may work to represent both 'ordinary' and 'nonstandard' desires just as much as sex discourses will depict 'ordinary' and 'nonstandard' acts.