“Non-compliance” in the system: *Bitch Planet’s* satirical representations of race and gender constructs

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ABSTRACT

“Non-compliance” in the system: *Bitch Planet’s* satirical representations of race and gender constructs

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This thesis examines how co-creators Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro’s 2014 graphic work, *Bitch Planet*, is in all conceivable ways a seminal and prescient example of — to use their term — “non-compliance” in the comics form and industry. From its inception as a feminist dystopia, written by a white woman and illustrated by a Black man, in an industry that is over-represented by white men, *Bitch Planet* is a prime example of activist comics that is situated perfectly within the “Blue Age” of comics, to use the term coined by comic scholar Adrienne Resha. This is evident in the main narrative of *Bitch Planet* in which, in an industry still over-represented by white characters, the main cast of characters are four Black women and one Japanese-American woman, each of whom we see come up against a theologically patriarchal white supremacist system that imprisons them for crimes that are gendered, racialized, classist and ableist. DeConnick and De Landro’s collaboration with other artists extends from Laurenn McCubbin’s satirical paratextual in-universe advertisements on the back page of each comic which complement *Bitch Planet*’s main narrative to an invitation to world-building to the greater comic community, allowing creators with marginalized identities to craft short comic stories that satirically and deeply explore the socio-political issues developed in the main narrative of *Bitch Planet*. The final act of “non-compliance” comes out of the expansion of authorship of *Bitch Planet* to the readership via the letters pages, and beyond: highlighting

readers' Twitter messages, connecting with them through Tumblr, and posting pictures of fan "non-compliant" tattoos within the pages of *Bitch Planet*.

KEYWORDS: *Bitch Planet*, comics, graphic narratives, feminism, intersectionality, critical race studies, gender studies, race, class, prison, dystopia, satire, paratext, lettercols, back matter, fat bodies, trans bodies, male gaze, white gaze, speculative fiction, science fiction, whiteness studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was introduced to comic books by my father and brother. Comic books are a traditionally male-dominated sphere and women trying to enter into this sphere experience misogyny, gate-keeping, bias and gendered microaggressions. My feminist education took place through my love of comics and as much as I love the medium, I have hated the experience. In 2012, I started a women's comic book club where we have a safe space to discuss feminism, comic books, race, gender and sexuality. At the end of 2014, *Bitch Planet*, co-created by writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and Canadian illustrator Valentine De Landro was released. It was a book I had been waiting for: an exploration of patriarchy, gender, capitalism, and western colonial culture. In this series, women and marginalized genders are sent to an off-world prison planet for any hint of "non-compliance" — being too fat, too Black, too queer, too political, too ambitious, too gender non-conforming, too feminist, or exhibiting any other attribute that indicates that a woman is not obeying the status quo. My research looks at how *Bitch Planet* portrays and critiques gender and assumptions of the same. There are aspects of my research, such as sexism and sexual assault, that I have direct, experiential knowledge of, and aspects of which I have no epistemic knowledge — being Black, trans, lesbian, Latinx, Asian, or non-binary. In dealing with these aspects of my investigation, I have endeavoured to ensure that those with epistemic knowledge are properly acknowledged and credited. Ultimately, this research emerges from the context of my life, from a coming together of my passions — for a textual medium and for social justice.

Decolonialism is the process of learning and unlearning colonialist practices that have been ingrained in our society for more than 400 years. Here, I should acknowledge that in

making this statement I am using the Decolonization Model advocated by Jill Carter, Karen Recollect and Dylan Robinson in "Interventions into the Maw of Old-World Hunger: Frog Monsters, Constellatory Maps, and Radical Relationalities in a Project of Reworlding." The process involves five steps:

1. Recovery/rediscovery of traditional epistemologies, languages and ceremonial life
2. Mourn[ing] for what is lost or broken
3. Dream[ing] a way forward — without denying or repressing the grief as a result of the mourning
4. Interrogat[ing] works that strengthen commitment to one another
5. Act[ing] upon that commitment (224)

In the roundtable in which this model was unfolded, Jill Carter discusses the reluctance of non-Indigenous people and researchers to share their personal journeys. Carter argues that this passivity is not humility but rather a "refusal to personally engage" (221). I am the second child, a daughter born in 1982 to white settler parents. Their parents were born in Canada, and so were their parents: on my maternal side, my background is Italian and English; on my father's side, French and Hungarian. My grandparents, except for my paternal grandfather, were all born in Windsor, Ontario — the land that is the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishnaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. I am a privileged cis white woman: that is, I recognize I was born into a world where my gender matches my biological sex; where my white skin allows me many privileges that my sisters of colour do not have: generational wealth, access to education, greater employment and housing opportunities. I am a bisexual woman who can pass as heterosexual because I am married to a man and have two children. This ability to "pass" means that I face less direct and indirect discrimination from others — and this includes my own family members — than I would if I were married to a woman and have two children.

As non-Indigenous Canadians, we — and by "we," I mean the collective of colonial settlers — have a tendency to forget our past: I have learned only bits and pieces of my history, and there are aspects of that history that have been lost. I live in Oshawa, Ontario, which is the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. I am here, learning at Trent University in Peterborough, which is the land of the Mississauga Anishinaabeg. It is important for me to recognize: that as a person who has participated in colonial settler assimilation for which there has been no consent by Indigenous persons, that I am living and learning on stolen land. As Leanne Simpson said in "Canada on the Global Stage," I am the product of "assimilative colonial education," and systemic ignorance is the result of my own participation in that education. As an educator, it is important for me to re-educate myself and work to decolonize my biases. That is in part why I am researching a topic that is highly feminist and comes from a culture where I have faced misogyny, gate-keeping and bias. I do not wish to perpetuate discriminatory practices on others. That is my responsibility.

Two aspects of the five stages of decolonization that I have not thoroughly examined are the obligation to "dream a way forward" and to "act" on my commitment to others. I am a parent and an educator, and in those roles, I have responsibilities. The five stages are not an end in themselves, but a circle; we must continually learn, teach, reflect, and recognize. My actions must come into my work, my life, and my research. As I write this thesis, a worldwide reckoning on the racist capitalist system is going on. It was born out of the sheer rage and pain following the murder of Black American George Floyd on May 25, 2020 when a white police officer knelt for eight minutes on the man's neck, but what political correspondent Van Jones has called "The Great Awakening" is a culmination of 500-plus years of oppression, anti-Blackness and global colonialist capitalism. While the names of some of the state-murdered Black men are well-

known, as Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw has pointed out, the names of Black women whose lives have been snuffed out by a white supremacist system have only recently been acknowledged, in the aftermath of Floyd's murder. On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician — an essential worker — was killed by police in the middle of a global pandemic during which she worked to save the lives of those affected by Covid-19. Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Taylor, Sandra Bland — these are the names of Black Canadian and American women recently victimized by police, and who have not yet had justice for their deaths. Meanwhile, in Canada, the deaths of Black Canadians at the hands of police all too often goes unacknowledged, and the movement to acknowledge the genocide of Indigenous people and their culture has only just begun. While this thesis does not delve into significant detail on these atrocities, I want to take the time to highlight them. In volume 6 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 96 calls to action are put forward. One action is for settler Canadians like myself to make reconciliation a way of life.

I want to thank my instructors throughout my journey at Trent University, especially my supervisor Dr. Beth Popham. She has been a guiding hand in this work and an invaluable educator. Drs. Joel Baetz and Emily Bruusgaard have been incredibly supportive of my work. The Canadian Comics Scholars Society (CSSC/SCEBD) and fellow comic scholars (Wendy Browne, Adrienne Resha and Kate Tanski) at *Women Write About Comics* have been immensely supportive and instructional in developing this work. Lastly, I want to thank my husband, children, family and friends for all their love and support. I want to end this non-traditional acknowledgment by pointing out that I have located myself in a rather non-compliant way, much like the creators of *Bitch Planet* do in their own work. This work is dedicated to my Nona, who taught me the importance of calling others in.

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INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming the genre

"You don't get called a bitch as a woman unless you're making a man realize he's a little bitch."

(Nikki Glaser, self-interview. "Bitch" *The History of Swear Words*, directed by Christopher D'Elia, *Netflix*, 2021)

The word "bitch" has been used for 600-years to denigrate and disempower women. It has had many paradoxical meanings, but its usual intention is to punish and silence women. It is not surprising that a Black woman blues artist, Lucille Bogan (1897-1948), was one of the first to reclaim the word in her music during the 1920s (*The History of Swear Words*). Bogan was "pre-feminist" (Moroziuk 17). She used vulgar language in her music, yes, but more importantly, she played with non-normative gender roles, sang positively about sex and sex work, explored class issues, and voiced her experiences as a Black woman (Moroziuk 24, 28). Lucille Bogan was an uncontrollable woman – a "bitch".

Those who have been the most disempowered by language are those who are most able to reclaim the insult. If a "bitch" is an uncontrollable woman, then examining the ways in which society attempts to control these bitches is the premise of *Bitch Planet*. Throughout this thesis, I will explore both how women are controlled in the world of *Bitch Planet*, and how the comic operates as a defiantly "non-compliant" text. The dystopian future of *Bitch Planet* satirizes contemporary societal standards of femininity, presenting us with "non-compliant" bodies that are rarely depicted in comic books: fat bodies, trans bodies, and Black, brown — really, any non-white bodies. It is set within the political regime of the "New Protectorate", on Earth sometime

in the future. In the New Protectorate, women and marginalized genders who fail to comply with social standards can be rocketed into space to a prison planet for "rehabilitation". Their infractions are tied to their gendered caste in this society — hysteria, obesity, "political incitement", "fetal murder", "nyphomania", "seduction", "ill-temper", "marital neglect", "gender treason", being "bad mothers", and "disrespect" — making literal the crimes for which patriarchy judges women in contemporary society.

The inherent biases of comics

Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro, the co-creators of *Bitch Planet*, are very aware that in the comic genre "bitch" is a gate-keeping term used to quell women's empowerment. Graphic works like *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller and Klaus Janson, *Watchmen* (1986) by Moore and Dave Gibbons, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (first chapter in *Raw* #2, 1980) are what scholars studying the comic medium consider pivotal or "canonical" works. Famously, before completing his script for *The Killing Joke* (published by DC Comics, 1988), Alan Moore asked his editor if he would be able to have the Joker shoot the popular female character Batgirl through the spine, thereby crippling her. "Yeah, OK, cripple the bitch," Moore recalled Len Wein telling him at the time (McMillan; Ringo). I point to this anecdote to demonstrate the hostility of the creative environment of the comic making industry towards women. For the vast majority of its history, making comic books has been the exclusive territory of white men who privileged heteronomativity — a fact reflected in the inherent biases of the comic book universe.

Not surprisingly, membership in superhero groups like the Justice League and Avengers depicted in the comics of the same names were heavily white and male. Comics became associated with masculinity and whiteness, and, as comics scholar Hillary Chute states in *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*, "even international comics hits outside the realm of the superhero, like *Tintin* or *Asterix*, both from the Franco-Belgian tradition, largely featured boys and men" (278). However, since the debuts of Little Lulu in *The Saturday Evening Post* (February 23, 1935) and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, in *Wags* #1 (1937), women protagonists have been used in comic strips, comic books and graphic novels to explore issues of gender, sex and power in society. From Wonder Woman (first appearance *All-Star Comics* #8 in October 1941; first feature in *Sensation Comics* #1, January 1942) and the various manifestations of Ms. Marvel (first appearance *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13, March 1968) to Tank Girl (*Tank Girl* #1, 1988) and the Kate Kane iteration of Batwoman (first appearance *52* #11, September 2006), iconic female heroes have paved the way for more nuanced depictions of female characters in the genre and — eventually — for creators who transgress the comic industry's gender and racial stereotypes, making way for the radical feminist comic series *Bitch Planet*. Ironically, all the aforementioned female characters, with the exception of Little Lulu (created by Majorie Henderson Buell, and written by male creators post-1947) and the Kamala Khan version of Ms. Marvel (G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat share co-creator credit with three male creators; first appearance *Captain Marvel* #14), were created by men. William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman. Roy Thomson and Gene Colan created the first iteration of Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers. Tank Girl was conceived by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin (first appearance *Tank Girl* #1, September 1988). Kate Kane — a lesbian Jewish Batwoman — was reimagined by Greg Rucka in *Detective Comics* #854 (August 2009).

Women writers and illustrators had incredible difficulty breaking into comics in the early eras of the industry. Jackie Ormes was one of the first women — and the first Black woman — to have a published comic strip with "Torchy Brown: From Dixie to Harlem" (published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1937-1938). Her work was nationally syndicated in Black newspapers only (never picked up by white media) throughout the 1950s (Nicholson 20; Whaley 32-33). With more freedom of movement and labour as a result of the women's liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women began publishing comics that dealt almost exclusively with women's issues. With titles like *Tits 'n' Clits* (first published 1973) and *Abortion Eve* (1973), these comics focused on women's sexuality, patriarchy, abuse, harassment, abortion and reproductive rights, and menstruation (Robbins 88). *Wimmen's Comix* (later changed to *Wimmin's Comix*) started in 1973 and helped to launch a number of creators like Trina Robbins and Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Wendy Pini (along with her husband, Richard) created the independent fantasy comic series *Elfquest* in 1978 after a deep involvement in comics fandom, including cosplaying as the character Red Sonja and writing letters to the editor, one of which appeared in the back of *Silver Surfer* #5 (as "Wendy Fletcher"). Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For,* was not the first comic produced by an openly lesbian woman, but her series was hugely important both for being a semi-autobiographical look into the lives of queer women, and for creating the feminist media analysis known as the Bechdel Test. This test, which is actually titled the Wallace-Bechdel Test, named after Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace, challenges portrayals of women in media. The test, first published in a 1985 strip of *Dykes to Watch Out For*, requires three key elements: female characters must be present in the script; they must speak to each other, and not about a man; and they must have influence and involvement in the story.

This is indicative of a long-standing strain of feminist activism in comics which ultimately leads to the creation of *Bitch Planet*.

Image Comics, the publisher of *Bitch Planet*, was co-founded in 1992 by seven *male* artists: Erik Larsen, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld, Todd McFarlane, Wilce Portacio, Marc Silvestri and Jim Valentino. They established Image Comics because they were seeking creative control over their work in an industry that operated largely by work-for-hire, and they ushered in an artistic style that was quickly popularized by many other male artists. Image Comics was not initially, as Hope Nicholson explains in *The Spectacular Sisterhood of Superwomen*, a "friendly" space for women:

> The content of the books was usually high action, with throbbing muscles, painted-on suits, and proportionally distorted women. Even if the company was presenting an exciting new model that let creators own their creations, Image wasn't exactly friendly to female creators or fans. Fortunately, that would change (see for example, *Bitch Planet*). (160)

Before I explore the change to Image Comics that would enable Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro — a white woman and a Black man — to work with the publishing house, I must establish the classic depiction of women in comics popularized by the founding artists of Image Comics. This is the sexualized style that both creators would state in multiple interviews they would have to unlearn in order to create *Bitch Planet* (Santori; Towers). The female form during this time was dictated by the white male gaze. Illustrator Michael Turner's art for the *Witchblade* series, published by Top Cow Productions (an imprint of Image Comics), set the tone for depictions of female bodies in comics: "big boobs, big butts, long, long slender legs, pouty lips, tiny noses, and catlike eyes with arched brows" (Nicholson 179), drawn with either skin-tight clothing or clothing barely concealing "the nipple and vulva" (161).

[Figure 1: *Witchblade* #1 (Feb. 9, 1996). Cover art by Michael Turner and Brian Haberlin]

I have focused on Witchblade (aka Sara Pezzini) because the character proved to be an extremely popular entity for Image Comics. The comic defined the "bad-girl style in the 1990s" which "successfully branched off into other mediums, including television, anime, and manga" (179). Witchblade was created by Marc Silvestri, one of Image's co-founders. While Nicholson notes that the character had some female fans, including comic writer Tini Howard, Witchblade's form and story were "marketed to male readers" (179):

> [Witchblade] is the epitome of the "strong female character" archetype. In other words, she's drop-dead gorgeous and imbued with magic-enhanced (because god forbid a woman have bulky muscles) whose sole defining quality is: she's tough. Though that's a definite improvement from a fainting damsel in distress, it's still not very nuanced. (179)

That it was required that female characters be "drop-dead gorgeous" is relevant to understanding how *Bitch Planet* upends the "male gaze". The phrase was first coined in 1982 by British film critic Laura Mulvey in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Using psychoanalytical theory developed by Sigmund Freud, Mulvey first defines the term "scopophilia" (16). Scopophilia is not just "pleasure in looking" (16), but pleasure derived from "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (16). While Mulvey's essay discusses the male gaze in film, the principle can be applied to comics as it is both a visual and narrative medium. The concept of the male gaze helps us to better understand the resistance to established practice of depicting female characters as employed in *Bitch Planet*.

The posture of the female character, Witchblade is open, directed to the reader. Her waist is absurdly small, her lips are red and pouty, and her eyes gaze back at the reader. The white skin of her breasts is barely concealed, the fabric of her clothing ripping apart trying to contain them. There were few lead female characters of colour at this time, so her whiteness is notable. This image is an example of what Mulvey would define as "fetishistic scopophilia" (21), evoking

desire, bondage, and punishment (8). The Witchblade character on the cover is "isolated, glamourous, on display, sexualized" (21), but that, according to Mulvey, is the point:

> Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies. The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires. (13)

This representation of female characters in comics distressed and continues to distress many female fans. One such fan was Gail Simone, who would go on to have a very successful comic writing career, including the longest writing term on the *Wonder Woman* series (2008-2010). In 1999, after having read *Green Lantern* #54 in which the girlfriend of the title character, Kyle Rayner, is murdered, and her dismembered body is discovered by Kyle when he opens the refrigerator, Simone posted a list online of 50 female superheroes who had been maimed, killed or dismembered ("Women in Refrigerators"). Simone's list gives a name to the trope, "women in refrigerators", in which a female character is killed, maimed, raped or disempowered as a throw-away element of a male character's overarching plot. In *The Killing Joke*, for example, when Batgirl is shot in the spine — "fridged", in effect — the story gives way to her father's and Batman's emotional reactions to her shooting. As Stephanie Orme observes in "Femininity and fandom: the dual-stigmatisation of female comic book fans", it is this "hypersexualization and stereotyping of female characters in comics that discourages women from wanting to read [comics]", and perpetuates the misogyny prevalent in the comic industry (405).

The shakeup to the comic industry that ushered in a more female-friendly era was what DeConnick called "the return of Image Comics" ("Planet B"). In March 2012, American comic

writer Brian K. Vaughan and Canadian comic artist Fiona Staples teamed up to create *Saga*, a still-ongoing romantic drama/science fiction comic series. Vaughan's writing history to that point had prominently featured complex female characters (Lauer). For example, *Y: the Last Man* (published under the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics; first issue published September 2002), which Vaughan created with Canadian artist Pia Guerra, is a post-apocalyptic work problematically centering on the experience of the last living white American cis male. The critical and publishing success of *Saga* (Melrose) helped to transform Image Comics into a publishing house that was supportive of creators who wanted to explore issues of gender, sexuality, and race.

Prior to developing *Bitch Planet* for Image Comics, Kelly Sue DeConnick's work has shepherded in what comics scholar Adrienne Resha has declared as the "Blue Age" of comics (67). The history of comics has usually been defined b33333y "ages" — gold, silver and bronze — all of which precede what has been called "the modern era". The Golden Age is the period from 1938 and the 1950s, beginning with Superman's creation and encompassing the many imitations that would follow. The dominant company was DC Comics. The 1950s to 1970s are called the Silver Age. This is when Marvel Comics began creating and churning out superheroes who "gained their abilities from radioactive exposure, technological enhancement, and genetic manipulation" (Fawaz 4). The Bronze Age spans the period from 1970 to the mid-1980s, and generally covers comics that began dealing with social justice issues ("The Bronze Age of Comics"). The modern era spans 1985 to the 2010s. It is defined by the deconstruction of the hero, as well as the creation of two impactful comic companies: Milestone, a publishing house that provided greater opportunities and stories for Black creators and characters, and Image Comics.

In "The Making of the Blue Age of Comics," Resha argues that the modern era closes in 2012 when *Captain Marvel* #1 (2012-2013), written by DeConnick, was published simultaneously online and in print. Resha coined the phrase "Blue Age" to evoke the "digitization of comic books and comic book culture" (67). Comic fans can now connect directly with comic book creators online through social media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr (where DeConnick has a blog), and Facebook (67). In this new age, comics activism has gained visibility as online Tumblr blogs like "The Hawkeye Initiative" (https://thehawkeyeinitiative.tumblr.com/) critique the premises of traditional comics — for example, lampooning the stereotypical female form outlined above.

Women's activism in the sphere of comics fandom had grown through the late 2000s and early 2010s and became evident online in alternative forums like Scans_Daily (in which I was heavily involved and moderated for two years). Scans_Daily was created in 2003 as a women, non-binary and LGTBQ+ inclusive environment because other online spaces to discuss comics were hostile to these groups ("Fanlore: Scans_Daily"). This sort of comics activism is central to *Bitch Planet*, and DeConnick and De Landro's continued collaborations with Image Comics. Unfortunately, this visibility has also resulted in a backlash in the form of a targeted online harassment campaign called #Comicsgate, whereby marginalized persons have faced racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia under the guise of a consumer protest.

Both digitally enabled activism and the conservative backlash situate *Bitch Planet* and its creators nicely in the context of the Blue Age of Comics. Up to *Bitch Planet*'s publication, in almost any comic book — most especially in the superhero genre — the feminine form is drawn with large breasts, exaggerated hips and a tiny waist. From the debut of Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, in *Wags* #1 (1937), all the way to the recreation of Captain Marvel in *Avenging Spider-*

man #9 (2012), women's bodies have been exploited, commodified, objectified, and violated. However, this portrayal of women is almost entirely upended in *Bitch Planet* in which artist Valentine De Landro gives breath and life to the range of feminine bodies we might see beyond the pages of a comic book, on the street or in the classroom. The reader sees many women of colour in the prison known colloquially as "Bitch Planet" — a fact that is in line with the over-representation of Black and American Indigenous women in the American and Canadian prison systems — as well as trans women and gender non-conforming characters. What is so non-compliant about *Bitch Planet* is that centres the stories of those who have routinely been excluded from both behind the scenes and on the page.

***Bitch Planet*'s construction**

Kelly Sue DeConnick, a white American woman, got her start in the comic industry by writing comic reviews and then by translating Japanese and Korean comics to English ("Meet Kelly Sue DeConnick, The Female Comic Book Writer Making Waves"). In 2012, she reinvisioned the Carol Danvers iteration of Ms. Marvel into Captain Marvel, providing the blueprint for the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) *Captain Marvel* 2019 film. While the digital publication of this issue introduced the Blue Age of comics, as a reviewer she had already committed to using technology to enhance comic activism. As elucidated above, comics historically have been "wrongly identified as an exclusively masculinist field" (Gibson 241) because the involvement of women (such as Jackie Ormes and Marjorie Buell) was restricted, limited or uncredited. DeConnick recognized what was happening in the industry and wanted to acknowledge and credit the flood of women and marginalized persons who had begun more

actively participating in comic book culture by buying, selling, reviewing, and creating comics. In March 2016, DeConnick started the hashtag #visiblewomen on Twitter to promote and increase the ranks of women working in comics. DeConnick also saw room for development of feminist ideas by publishing through Image Comics following the success of *Saga*.
Valentine de Landro, a Black Canadian man, began his career as an artist at Dark Horse Comics in 2000, through the Toronto-based Bright Anvil Studios. He then illustrated for a number of titles (*Age of Spider-man, Marvel Knights* and *X-Factor*) at Marvel Comics. In 2011, DeConnick met De Landro at the Toronto Fan Expo, the largest annual comic convention in Canada. Both were still early in their careers; DeConnick appreciated that De Landro treated her as a "colleague" and was "blown away" by his talent (Hennon). She sent him five ideas for comic narratives, commonly referred to in-industry as "pitches"; De Landro perceptively recognized the proposal for *Bitch Planet* as the one to develop. "Once you read the name, it has you hooked already," De Landro said (Santori).

While carefully referencing the traditional format of comic books, *Bitch Planet* is very much a "Blue Age" production. Traditionally comics are construed as products of a "singular author" (Ahmed 1) and not understood to be products of a collaboration between writer and illustrator, or further, the entire collaborative team of writer, penciller, inker, letterer, editor, … in a "potentially composite, fluid and fragmentary authorship" (1). The comics writer is given a "privileged position" (5) which is "reflected in the many heated battles over copyrights" (1-2). One example is the lengthy dispute between writer Bob Kane and illustrator Bill Finger in which Kane gained exclusive proprietary and monetary "creator" rights to Batman (N'Duka) – a situation which has only recently been addressed by DC (Marnell). This assumes that the artist is "simply the illustrator of the writer's words" (Ahmed 5), but De Landro and DeConnick are

dually credited on each issue of *Bitch Planet*, and further, the *Triple Feature!* supplementary series is explicitly presented by both DeConnick and De Landro. This step recognizes the role De Landro plays in the creation of *Bitch Planet*, making it strategically "non-compliant" and purposefully collaborative, actively inviting participation from the full range of members of its creative team, external experts on the issues with which its stories engage, even its readership.

Bitch Planet was first published by Image Comics in December 2014 in a serialized format in which the story continues from issue to issue. The first three issues were published monthly from December 2014 to February 2015, while issues four through 10 were sporadically released: the last (but not final!) issue was published April 26, 2017. In this format, each issue tends to end on a cliffhanger, enticing readers to continue the story by buying the next comic. At the end of each single issue is a column written by DeConnick directly addressing content within the issue, an academic essay by a feminist or critical thinker, a section devoted to reader photos, art, letters, and a short, written post on the online social media forum Twitter. Lastly, the final page — sometimes called "backmatter" (Harper) — of each issue of *Bitch Planet* has advertisements created by collaborator Laurenn McCubbin that are situated within the world of *Bitch Planet*. These elements — the writer's column, fan letters, and backmatter — are called the "paratext" (Genette), and I will explore the concept more in Chapters 3 and 4.

There are many creative actors involved in the comic making process. Unusually, for *Bitch Planet*, DeConnick (script) and De Landro (art) are acknowledged as "co-creators" and both sign the writer's column. (Artists are not usually accorded writer's credits.) As co-creators, DeConnick writes the scripts, and De Landro pencils the cover of each comic and the interiors for all issues except two, duties which are incredibly time consuming. Cris Peters coloured issues 1 to 5, covers and interiors, while Kelly Fitzpatrick took over colouring duties from issues 6 to

10. Colouring guest artists Robert Wilson IV (issue 3) and Taki Soma (issue 6) pencilled key character backstory issues to establish them as stand-alone, as well as flashback narratives within the linear story scripted by DeConnick. Clayton Cowles has the important, but often overlooked role of the letterer, whose task is the incorporation of words into the visual text, and the specific placement, size, font, type (O'Keefe), and the overall "visual presence of the letterforms" (Baetens 201) in the comic.

In 2017, DeConnick and De Landro opened the world of *Bitch Planet* up to a diverse array of creators — including creators who are Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, queer, and non-binary — for the *Triple Feature!*, a serialized collection of short comics that offer glimpses into the dystopian society of the world in which *Bitch Planet* is set. Each of the *Triple Feature!* single issues (a total of five, each containing three stories) also included paratextual elements similar to those in the main *Bitch Planet* issues. Also contained at the back of individual issues of the *Triple Feature!* comics are readers' letters, creator biographies, in-world advertisements, interviews, book recommendations and definitions of feminist terms. The final backmatter pages of each of the five issues contain reader-submitted photos featuring fans "cosplaying" (dressing up or playing in costume) as *Bitch Planet* prison inmates, in reddish orange jumpsuits, staring right back at the audience.

Following their serial publication, the main story of *Bitch Planet* — currently incomplete as DeConnick and De Landro "shook on 30 issues" (2: 23) — was collected in two anthology volumes (published October 7, 2014 and May 31, 2017) as Book One, subtitled "Extraordinary Machine", and Book Two subtitled "President Bitch", while the *Triple Feature!* series was collected into its own volume (published December 13, 2017). *Bitch Planet* Book One and Book Two do not contain DeConnick's column, the critical essays, letters or any other fan-generated

content. This is an unfortunate blow to the important comics activism incorporated within the initial serial publication. However, they do contain the backmatter created by McCubbin, as well as a "discussion guide" created by comics scholar Dr. Ben Saunders geared to fostering reader interaction at an academic level. Book Two also contains the transcript of a conversation between DeConnick and DeLandro ("*Bitch Planet* Sketchbook: Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine"), in which they discuss the relationship of *Bitch Planet* to the Black Lives Matter movement and calls for the abolition of police and the prison system, and how anti-Blackness operates both in the world of *Bitch Planet* and our own world. It also contains sketches and original designs by De Landro, and commentary on why and how the creators approached the introduction of trans characters in Issue 8.

Single issue comics are usually purchased at a specialized comic book store. They come in a standard size (6 5/8" wide x 10 3/16" high) so that comic collectors can protect the single comic with a "bag and board" (a plastic bag with cardboard backing). However, since the launch of the digital comic provider ComiXology in 2007, a digital facsimile of a comic can also be purchased to be read and viewed online only. This has made comics accessible to marginalized persons who might not feel comfortable entering a comic book store due to physical space or social stigma (Resha 73). *Bitch Planet* was published in the traditional paper format, but single issues, *Triple Feature*! single comics, and the collected trade publications were all also made available digitally.

The western or American comics, on which *Bitch Planet* is modelled, are designed to be read left to right, panel to panel, top to bottom and page to page. Scott McCloud defined "comics" in his seminal 1993 text *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey and/or produce an aesthetic

response in the viewer" (9). A panel displays a single image frozen in time, and the space between each panel is called the "gutter" (66). Panels are ordered in sequence by the illustrator: in *Bitch Planet*'s case, by De Landro – or in the case of issues 3 and 6 commissioned artists Robert Wilson IV and Taki Soma respectively. This deliberate order, or sequencing of panels, is how the static images become a narrative. The blank gutter space allows for the reader to imagine action occurring between the sequence of panels. That said, the reader has "agency" (Resha 73) and is able to navigate the page non-linearly. In the digital format, the reader can read page by page, emulating the experience of reading the print version, or choose to read using a "guided view" which "allows the creative, editorial, and production teams to push against the reading conventions of the form" (Resha 73). In the "guided view", the reader does not freely scan the page, but is taken to specific frames in a sequence determined by the creators.

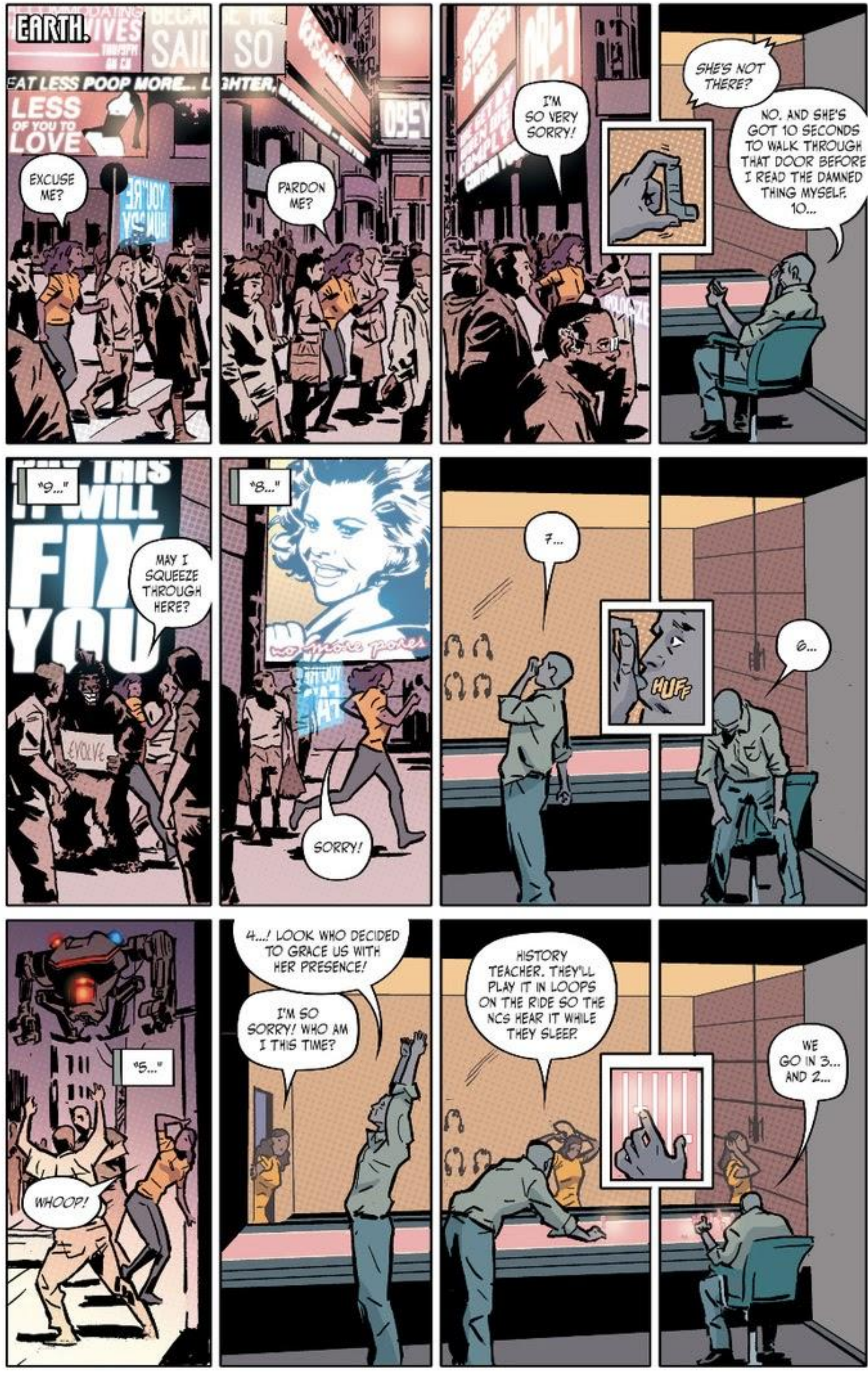
Despite being snubbed as "lowbrow" literature (Guynes 144 in "Keywords"), comics require a great deal of involvement on the part of the reader (McCloud 42). Comics combine both image and word to tell a narrative; they are the "medium" (6) for the content; the content is the message or the story the creator, or in the case of *Bitch Planet*, creators want to tell. The genres of comics can be wide-ranging — horror, romance, superhero, autobiography, fantasy, and erotica. DeConnick and De Landro exploit this generic flexibility in their depiction of an anti-feminist and racist dystopia clearly grounded in observation of contemporary society — and the process of reclaiming the insult embodied in the title *Bitch Planet* by resistance and active revolt. This story could be told in no other than the comics format; and comics as evidenced earlier, despite being presumed to be "strange bedfellows", have a rich history with feminism (Howard "Feminism" 101). As a genre, comics' "refusal of allegiance to words or images exclusively" (Howard 101) is exactly what is required to describe DeConnick and De Landro's

work because this format plays with the "dismantling of a patriarchal adherence to binaries upholding inequality" (101). As I will explore in detail in the following chapters, *Bitch Planet* subverts and reclaims traditional comic formats, while exemplifying and advancing feminism and activism in comics (Urcaregui 45; Brenna Clarke Gray 338).

CHAPTER ONE

Narrative, Intersectionality and Genre

The first page of the very first issue of the *Bitch Planet* series opens with a 12-panel action sequence of a woman of colour running through a crowded city street. In each panel in which she appears, she apologizes for the literal space she takes up as she races to work. She repeatedly asks permission to take up that space, calling out “sorry!” twice to passers-by. Giant televised ads are placed along her route, each an admonishment: “less of you to love,” “eat less poop more,” “you’re hungry, you’re fat” and “lighter, brighter — better!” (DeConnick and De Landro 1: 1).



[Figure 2: *Bitch Planet* # 1 (Dec. 2014): 1. Script by Kelly Sue DeConnick and interior art by Valentine De Landro]

What we view on this page is indicative of how women, and particularly women of colour, are pressured, and how little space they are allowed in this hyperpatriarchal, homocentric society. This woman is pushing past a crowd on a pedestrian walkway. She wears an orange shirt – this hue will come into play later with the prison uniforms of women sent to the "Bich planet" – and she is the only character in focus, while the other people are dressed in muted tones and sketchily drawn. Around her, billboards that continue from panel to panel excoriate her, the advertisements taking up more space than she does. The gutter — the white space between panels — down the right hand side of the page is broken by the addition of a series of smaller, interset panels in which a white man's hand holds up an inhaler. He takes a puff, and then begins a countdown for the woman to clock in to work. This scene establishes for us a visual hierarchy of who is in control and who must comply, who has unlimited space and who does not. The man has space within the panel to stretch, and freedom to relax while he waits. He is clearly the overseer in this situation, while this woman is beholden to him. She must arrive on time or risk ending up imprisoned like the rest of the "non-compliant". She is being forced to comply by eating less, blindly working, and apologizing for taking up that space. She is struggling against impossible demands: she must "eat less" and at the same time, "poop more" to expunge the little sustenance she is allowed. It's impossible. And, to top it all off, she is constantly under threat of violence: figuratively in the form of the billboards, and literally as a drone looms almost directly above her at the top of the bottom left panel and only narrowly misses her as she reports for her capitalist duty. On her arrival, the pressure to comply is reflected in the role she must play: she is assigned to narrate a speech by "the History Teacher" — the voice of judgment that "the NCs" — as yet unidentified — will hear "while they sleep" (1: 1).

On the next page, we see the recipients of this lesson for the first time. In the broadcast, our rushed, harried female narrator tells these women "Earth is the Father" who has "cast" them "out" and that they are on their way to a prison planet in space, "excised from the world" for their "trespasses" (1: 3-4). These "trespasses" are their failure to meet the hyper-patriarchal and white supremacist standards of their society, a society which very much mirrors our own colonialist western world. These women are deemed criminals — "beyond correction or castigation" — and have been labeled as "radical" (1: 2). Feminist scholars will recognize that the term is frequently used to delegitimize social movements: "radical" becomes synonymous with "extremist". These women do not conform. They are, in the world of *Bitch Planet*, criminal because they are "non-compliant" (1: 6).

While the voice declares "Father" Earth's judgment against them, the reader is presented with the naked bodies of six women. By the societal standards established in the opening pages of this text, they have been judged to be "non-compliant" and their bodies do not comply with

the standards established in the comic industry. These bodies upend the male gaze.

[Figure 3: *Bitch Planet* #1 (Dec. 2014): 3-4. Script by DeConnick and art by De Landro]

Unlike the title character Witchblade examined in the introduction, the bodies are not absurdly contorted in order to position both breasts and butts in the viewer's line of sight. Some are even positioned away from the reader. These bodies come in different sizes: there is a fat body, and bodies with breasts of proportions ranging from small to large. Most of these women — save for one — are not looking at the camera, the reader. They are asleep. While they are completely naked, their bodies show genitalia and pubic hair, thereby flipping the fetishistic gaze Mulvey says is typically employed when the female form is displayed. The one woman looking directly at the reader seems to gaze back at us, suggesting that she has relevance to the story.

The reader awakens as the prisoners do when they are rounded up to enter the "Auxiliary Compliance Outpost" (otherwise called ACO). This abrupt awakening makes the audience aware

of two key facts: first, that they are about to be introduced to the protagonists and antagonists of the story, and second, that the majority of the prisoners are Black and women of colour. Unlike the *Netflix* series "Orange is the New Black" (2013 - 2019) where the entry into the lives of women of colour in prison is told through the narrative point of view of a white character (Piper Chapman), *Bitch Planet* flips the switch on the "white gaze" (Yancy).

The "white gaze" assumes whiteness: that the audience is white and the majority of the characters are white. We can recognize such constructions when there are little to no racial markers about a character (no established hair type or defined skin colour) in a text — and yet this racial neutrality is often translated in a visual medium, like a comic book, television program or film, to whiteness. This white perspective can reproduce white privilege, as whiteness is presented as the norm or default, and this is something that DeConnick recognized and wanted to avoid. DeConnick raised her concerns with De Landro about whether having a majority cast of women of colour in a prison could be seen as furthering stereotypes of Black and Latina women, in particular, as they make up a significant portion of the American female prison population (Kajstura; Santori "Game Changers"). He responded that it would work to highlight the racist American prison industry, as well as ensuring that the lead — and the majority of the cast of characters — would not be white women (Santori "Game Changers"). As a result, when DeConnick set out to create *Bitch Planet,* she told De Landro to assume that all characters were not white unless she stated they were (Gilly), thereby flipping the script on the default assumptions of the white gaze.

These women are being punished for non-compliance, and when they arrive, they are brutally forced into a more visceral and violent compliance. This is emphasized when Penelope "Penny" Rolle (whose fat body is in slumber enroute to the ACO in Figure 3) fights back, having

been violently beaten for talking back to the guards during processing. In this scene, we also meet a white woman by the name of Marian Collins. Marian is the female prisoner who was gazing back at the reader in the opening view of the six prisoners in transit, and she demands to speak to “someone in charge.” Marian is the stereotype of an entitled white woman: a “Karen”, a term originating via Black Twitter and having historical roots in the Black community. Marian believes she’s been compliant all along; that she does not belong on *Bitch Planet*. And, it would seem (at least initially), that Marian’s husband, Mr. Collins, believes this, too because in side-by-side panels, both Marian and her husband protest to authority figures that his “wife” doesn’t belong on Bitch Planet.

There are two bait-and-switch scenarios operating here: the first occurs when we learn that Mr. Collins is really talking about his new, and much more compliant, younger wife, Dawn, with whom he had an affair behind Marian’s back. A bureaucratic error has landed Dawn in jail, awaiting transport to the ACO, and Mr. Collins is upset, not about his ex-wife Marian, but about Dawn. Mr. Collins’ happiness is restored when Dawn is returned to him and the “Fathers” offer to deal with their error by removing Marian from the picture entirely. By this point, the reader is assumed to be invested in the white woman’s story. However, on page 4 of issue 1, the reader has surreptitiously been introduced to the real lead of this story — Kamau “Kam” Kogo, a highly intelligent, tall, muscular Black woman and professional athlete who has actually volunteered to go to the ACO, for reasons not revealed in the first issue. We realize that Kam is the lead character only after she has stood up to the guards’ violence against Penny and Marian, and because a second bait-and-switch occurs on the very last panel of the comic when our in-comic narrators — the two guards supervising the processing of prisoners — tell us it is so.

[Figure 4: *Bitch Planet* #1 (Dec. 2014): 25. Script by DeConnick and art by De Landro]

The primacy of whiteness is overt, institutionalized and pervasive in the society that sends women to ACO. The holographic avatar that greets women upon their entrance to the

prison — "the Catholic" — is a scantily clad, pink-hued, mythologized image of beauty; and this voice of the patriarchy wears both a corset and a nun's habit. She is both a madonna and a whore — the two roles all too often assigned to women in movies, comics and books (Mirk).

The patriarchy that governs the New Protectorate — the future United States of America envisaged in *Bitch Planet* — is literalized in its leaders: "the Fathers", essentially the CEOs and principal shareholders of this colonial hetero-patriarchy, are mostly white men. And those in the ACO — in politically incorrect terms and in-text referred to as the "Bitch Planet" — those whose freedoms have been taken, are mostly women of colour. Whiteness allows a person to claim a position of absolute superiority and privilege, a "binary" meant to control and in opposition to the "Other", explains Dr. George Yancy, professor of philosophy at Emory University in *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (164). "In "Whiteness as Property", one of the key writings informing the Critical Race Theory movement, Cheryl I. Harris writes that "whiteness as a theoretical construct evolved for the very purpose of racial exclusion" (283). The goal of white supremacists is white superiority in all aspects of life. With this understanding, whiteness manifests as depictions of white women as being more beautiful, innocent, feminine, intelligent, nurturing and capable than Black, Brown and Indigenous women. Whiteness is positioned at the top of a hierarchy and all other races are relegated to a place outside of whiteness. As evidenced by *Bitch Planet's* cast, those who do not fit ideas of compliance are forcibly removed from the world, criminalized and "excised" from society (1 :3).

The idea that white people are racially neutral is born out of white supremacy and "inculcates white fragility" (DiAngelo 58). Whiteness becomes unracialized and whites are able to "view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience" (58). White people can be anyone they want, whereas Asian, Black and Indigenous peoples can only

represent their own racialized experiences (58). In fiction, the white gaze inundates us with racialized characters who are peripheral: the sidekick, the best friend. All of these are minor or tokenized characters who have little agency or relevance to the overall plot, and lack the complexity that the racially neutral character — the white main character — has to the story. Whiteness, and in particular hetero-patriarchal whiteness, is what the dystopic society DeConnick and De Landro created is founded upon. Much as in Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, people in the world of *Bitch Planet* are separated into a caste system based on service to the ruling political party. However, exceptionally unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, and a more recent feminist dystopia, *Man-Eaters* (first issue published Sept. 26, 2018 by Chelsea Cain and Kate Niemczyk), *Bitch Planet* focuses on how Black, Brown and Asian girls, women, trans and non-binary persons would be affected by a theocratic police state.

The narrative is about revolution and sisterhood, and resistance to oppressive laws. That narrative emerges as we learn of the Fathers' wish to use the women prisoners of Bitch Planet in the popular, masculinist, and brutal gladiator sporting event, called interchangeably "Duemila " or "Megaton". Duemila is an immensely popular pastime that is sponsored by the Fathers because it serves as a ritual reenactment of their racial and gender supremacy. In Issue 2, a speech by Father Josephson makes it clear that the "bloodthirsty rites" of the Duemila are essential to maintaining international peace and domestic order. However, "engagement" has lessened and Roberto Solanzo, the ambitious and corrupt overseer of the ACO — a Hispanic man eager for advancement despite his race — has proposed the ultimate competition, in which the champions of the league take on the "NC"s – the "noncompliant" women – of Bitch Planet.

In the writer's column in Issue 6, DeConnick interrogates how she and De Landro imagine sport functioning within the New Protectorate and without. Duemila is only played by

men in the New Protectorate, however, women are encouraged to watch, if only to please their husbands. Much like football, America's favourite pastime, which is organized by the capitalist National Football League (NFL), Duemila is a sport that upholds male supremacy. Officially, Duemila has been given a lengthy history. In the propaganda film *Duemila for Dummies*, viewers are instructed that it is a "descendent of Calcio Fiorentino, a 16th century Italian sport" (4: 14). Calcio Fiorentino is an ancient version of "football, rugby, and … wrestling" ("Calcio Storico Fiorentino — Florentine Historical Football"). Teams are made up of any number of players so long as their combined weight is no more than 2,000 pounds. The players must score points against their opponents to win; and points are scored by getting the ball over your opponent's side. In order to get past an opponent to score points, "all manner and degree of grappling is allowed, the only rule is that it must be one-on-one" (DeConnick & De Landro 4: 14-15). Deumila is violent and hypermasculine, yet it is also incredibly homoerotic: all the men wear short tight briefs that hit the tops of their thighs, with cropped body-hugging shirts that barely skim the top of their ribcages.

DeConnick also points out in her writer's column in Issue 6 that, in the New Protectorate, the sport is used as a way to reinforce racism. Duemila team names such as the "Florida Men", "Nevada Gamblers", and "Buffalo Juicers", trade on racism and stereotypes. The most shocking names of all — the "Arizona Wetbacks" — is a blatant racial slur on people of Mexican descent. The disparaging name is a reference to "Operation Wetback", a 1955 US government operation that deported 1.3 million people of Mexican descent (Blakemore). This type of racist naming is not unfamiliar in the sport; the Washington Redskins and Edmonton Eskimos, an NFL and a Canadian Football League (CFL) team respectively, only agreed to change their names, which

are racial slurs towards Indigenous and Inuit peoples, in July 2020 after years of protest (Sanchez).

When Roberto Solanzo proposes the match between the champions and the “NC”s of Bitch Planet, the potential for violence against these women is great, and this is what Josephson is clearly counting on to increase audience engagement — a “bloodthirsty” ritual to maintain social order (2: 2). Kam’s team of Duemila players, will be an ideal “them” to the patriarchy’s “us”. Josephson’s “us” and “them” speech uses racist dog-whistle tactics to other a team that will be comprised primarily of non-compliant women of colour, who have already been imprisoned for life. These women have been dehumanized through criminalization and imprisonment; they have little left to live for, and Josephson wants to exploit their desperation. Josephson claims that he wants “one civilized humanity” (2: 3). These women have been “excised”, placed outside of civilization, and are ripe for Josephson’s violent machinations.

However, as well as reinforcing the status quo, sport has frequently been a site for political protest. In a medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympics, African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos lowered their heads and raised black-gloved hands in a Black power salute during the American national anthem. In August 2016, San Francisco 49ers back-up quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the National Anthem and knelt to draw attention to anti-Black racism, oppression and ongoing police brutality. Before his election as American president, Donald Trump regularly traded in racist rhetoric on sport in his political speeches, Tweets and commentary, including saying Kaepernick should “find another country” (“Donald Trump on Kaepernick”) and calling him a “son of a bitch”, saying that true NFL fans should leave the stadium in revolt when Kaepernick protested for his rights (Graham).

The main event is to take place on a spaceship designed by Meiko Maki, another inmate in the ACO, and her father, Makoto Maki, who agrees to build a special stadium in space for the event in exchange for permission to see his daughter. Meanwhile, on ACO, Kam is coerced by Officer Whitney, a white female prison guard, to recruit and train a team of inmate women to compete against the male professional Duemila players. Kam initially refuses, but is intrigued when Meiko suggests the possibility of sabotaging the Protectorate ship with "half the Council of Fathers" on board, and agrees when the possibility of contacting her sister, Morowa "Mo" Kogo, is offered by Officer Whitney. Kam drafts a Duemila team with Penny Rolle and Meiko, among other inmates. However, in a practice session with the prison guards, Meiko is murdered while her father is enroute to the ACO. In a tragic and terribly bittersweet scene, he asks to see her and instead is presented with an unconvincing holograph of a stereotypically dutiful Japanese daughter. It is here that Makoto Maki realizes that Meiko is no longer alive, and commits himself to releasing the prisoners. When Makoto, who is able to operate the ACO technology, frees both the cis and trans prisoners in the auxiliary compliance outpost from their cells, they initially attack each other. However, Eleanor Doane, the former president and now political prisoner, inspires the women to fight together — symbolically calling out to feminists of all genders, races and classes — against the guards. Kam is reunited with her sister, Mo, in Issue 9, the penultimate issue produced to date. Meanwhile, back on Earth, in the climax of this story arc, Kylie Josephson, the daughter of the Father of Media who has orchestrated the tournament, and a secret follower of Eleanor Doane, assassinates the "High Father" of the New Protectorate.

From this synopsis several protagonists emerge: all are non-compliant, all are women of colour, all must be made invisible – locked away – so the New Protectorate can function, but are made visible through the pencil work of De Landro, Robert Wilson IV and Taki Soma. Kamau

Kogo, Mo Kogo, Penny Rolle, and Eleanor Doane are Black women. Meiko Maki is Japanese-American, and her father is an ally to the cause. Most of the antagonists are white men — Father Edward Daniel Josephson, Father John Johnson, Doug Braxton, and the young High Father, their titles all point to their patriarchal roles. The narrative does not simply hold white men to account, either: white women too are complicit in the New Protectorate's oppressive regime, including Mrs. Josephson and Officer Whitney, and they are represented in the AIs who enforce order on the ACO. This identification of power and whiteness is important in situating this text as a work of non-compliance.

Intersectionality and genre

DeConnick has often quoted Flavia Dzodan's statement "My feminism will be intersectional or it's bullshit" (Dzodan). Intersectional feminism rejects "white" feminism, citing its failure to acknowledge the additional forms of prejudice suffered by women who are *not* white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class. The term "intersectionality" was first coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a way to describe the unique form of oppression that Black women face:

> Because women of colour experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in the ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. (Crenshaw 360)

It has since been applied to people who experience more than one level of oppression. A disabled Mulsim queer woman, for example, could face societal, political or legal oppression in any one of the following areas: for having a disability, for her religion and/or public adherence to that

religion, for her sex and/or gender-presentation (be she feminine or masculine-presenting on the gender spectrum), and for her queerness or non-heteronormativity. Patricia Hill-Collins expanded on intersectionality as a "critical social theory" that "focus[es] on the inter-connectedness of the categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, age and ability" and how these "local social inequities articulate with global social phenomena" (Hill-Collins 22).

"Kyriarchy," a term defined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza — and referenced in Issue 7's "lip glossary" — can also help us to better understand how intersectionality frames *Bitch Planet*. Kyriarchy (derived from the Greek words of *kyrios* or lord/master [Schüssler Fiorenza 1992]) expands on the concept of patriarchy as it recognizes "that the different sets of relations of dominance shift historically and produce a different constellation of the domination in different times and cultures. Modern democracies are still structured as complex pyramidal political systems of superiority and inferiority, of dominance and subordination" (Note in Schüssler Fiorenza 1992). While patriarchy is the system of male domination, kyriarchy recognizes that there can be oppression on other levels, including race, class, gender expression. For example, despite the existence of male privilege, history has shown that white women could own, sell and oppress Black men during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (Jones-Rodgers 7).

In *Bitch Planet*, non-white characters — even those in positions of power or prestige in the regime, like Roberto Solanzo or engineer Makoto Maki — are subject to condescension and prejudice. In "Intersectional feminism in *Bitch Planet*: Moving Comics, Fandom and Activism Beyond the Page", Maite Urcaregui posits that *Bitch Planet* is a "progressive *intersectional* feminist comic that reveals and interrogates institutionalized systems of oppression (and encourages comics and their readers to move toward social change and activism)" (45).

However, while they have constructed a self-consciously “intersectional” comic, both DeConnick and De Landro recognize their positionality: De Landro has acknowledged a responsibility to reframe his male privilege (Santori), and DeConnick, as a white woman, has admitted her fear of approaching race clumsily (Towers). In the “Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff cautions against speaking “over” others, especially when one is in a position of privilege and power. Historically, white people have “othered” non-whites, leaving marginalized people silent or disenfranchised in discussions that affect them (173). At the same time, Alcoff cautions the anti-racist feminist against “retreating” into privileged space to avoid confronting racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and other societal oppressions (178). Both DeConnick and De Landro recognize the need to decenter one’s privilege, to invite others in, and together dismantle the normative status.

Intersectionality is demonstrated in numerous ways throughout *Bitch Planet*. If we return to the panel depicting six women prisoners enroute to the ACO, two Black men (later identified as Ayep and Schiti) nonchalantly comment on these women’s bodies with little regard for their humanity. Despite the preponderance of Black women in the ACO system, these Black men show no solidarity in the struggle of these women. This denial of sympathy — or “misogynoir” — is further evidenced when Ayep and Schiti set up Kam to take the fall for Marian Collins’ death. The term was coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy in 2008 and describes the “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (762):

> For me, naming misogynoir was about noting both an historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture. Misogynoir can come from Black men, white men and women, and even other Black women. [...] Black women and girls are being treated in a uniquely terrible way because of how societal ideas about race and gender intersect (762).

As many different types of intersectionalities can frame one's experience, each issue of *Bitch Planet* included an essay that defined feminist terms or explained concepts like "Black feminism" (in an essay by Tasha Fierce in Issue 2); the hypersexualization and criminalization of Black women (in an essay by Mikki Kendall in Issue 4); recognizing gender schemas (in an essay by Debbie Chachra, an engineering professor and woman of colour, in Issue 6); Japanese feminism and the hypersexualization of Asian women and girls (a feature on Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi, also in Issue 6); and trans representation and realities (in an essay by Mey Valdiva Rude, a Mexican-American trans woman who consulted on *Bitch Planet* Issue 8, in the same issue).

Intersectional feminism is a political act, and *Bitch Planet* leans heavily into contemporary politics, recognizing the oft-quoted feminist refrain, "the personal is political", as framed by Carol Hanisch. Published prior to the presidential election between the overqualified Hillary Clinton and failed TV personality Donald Trump in November 2016, Issue 9 is simply called VOTE. DeConnick, in her writer's column in that issue, discusses Trump, his casual misogyny and history of sexual assaults. In Issue 10, the backmatter included reader-submitted photos from the Women's March, a massive women-led protest on the day after Trump's inauguration in January 2017. In the main narrative of *Bitch Planet*, the personal lives of New Protectorate women are politicized. The Fathers have created, enforced, and policed laws that imprison women for "offenses" against male sensibilities. However, it is made clear that the New Protectorate was not always the New Protectorate. It was the United States of America and still uses the same state names: Georgia, Florida, Arizona. Reading issue to issue, the reader also learns, in fragmentary images of protest and resistance, that the New Protectorate overthrew the legitimate President Eleanor Doane — a Black woman — and sent her to the ACO.

Intersectionality is also evident in the creators' exploration of genre. *Bitch Planet* is most obviously located in the realm of science fiction, in which the fictive narrative revolves around realized — or not yet realized — science. Science fiction often involves time and space travel, advanced technology and futuristic worlds, including utopias and dystopias (Roberts 12). The ACO is a massive prison housed on a different planet, to which prisoners are transported via a massive rocket ship. However, the transport ship leaves an "Earth" that looks almost exactly like our own. Surveillance and media "feeds" are familiar to readers, but the use of media to control and monitor is expanded in the depiction of the AI that greets the prisoners. Throughout the *Triple Feature!* series, several short stories build on the advanced technology developed for the world of *Bitch Planet* to examine concepts of sex, gender, feminism, and race. In "Love, Honor & Obey", written by Kit Cox with art by Vanessa R. Del Rey, an artificial female robot used for sexual pleasure faces judgment for causing the death of her owner. In "Bodymods" by Sara Woolley, women use extreme body modification — redesigning their bodies into cats or mermaids, adding more than two breasts, wings or tiny feet — paid for and desired by their male partners. In "Basic Bitch", a multi-faceted short story by Bassey Nyambi, Eyang Nyambi, Nyambi Nyambi, and Chris Visions, white women use advanced technology to permanently pigment their skin in order to appear as dark-skinned Black women. Under the umbrella of science fiction, De Landro and DeConnick speculate about the implications of trends in contemporary society, and portray possible consequences in just a few panels just as "they might appear fractions of a second apart on video or separated by as little as a punctuation mark on a printed page" (carrington "Speculation" 197).

Underpinning the genre of science and speculative fictions in *Bitch Planet* is the incarceration narrative. The use of the prison setting allows DeConnick and De Landro to

explore the "prison-industrial-complex" (Davis, "Hell Factories in the Field"; Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*), otherwise known as the "PIC". Iconic Black American political activist Angela Davis — an obvious model for DeConnick and De Landro's depictions of Kamau Kogo and Eleanor Doane — maintains that the current PIC arose from the growth of the prison industry following the end of chattel slavery in the United States (abolished in 1865) and Canada (abolished in 1834). She maintains that there is a direct correlation between the criminalization of freed Black people post-slavery and the growth of the prison populations in North America (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 25). When the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States constitution abolished "involuntary servitude" except as punishment for a crime, laws, called the "Black Codes", were created to restrict the freedom of Black people post-slavery and created crimes for which only Black people could be "duly convicted" (Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 28). The crimes for which the prisoners in *Bitch Plant*'s ACO have been convicted are specific to women; however, the deliberate choice to have the majority of the prisoners be women of colour reflects the racist realities of the contemporary penal system in North America.

In addition to echoing arguments for the abolition of the PIC, DeConnick and De Landro are also exploring the Black Lives Matter movement and calls to "defund" the police. The Black Lives Matter movement began following the July 13, 2013 acquittal of white/Latino George Zimmerman, who fatally shot 14-year-old Trayvon Martin in an encounter with the unarmed Black teenager. Zimmerman claimed that he feared for his life, using a "Stand Your Ground" law in his defense. "Black Lives Matter" was an online hashtag started by three queer Black women — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi — who were "enraged" by the lack of

accountability in this case, and the frequency of state-sanctioned racism and violence against Black people (Spivey).

The 12-panel scene that opens Issue 7 of *Bitch Planet* demonstrates the confluence of colonial violence, racist capitalism, and white complicity highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. It stands alone, in between the story in Issue 6 of how Meiko ended up at the ACO and her father's arrival there in Issue 8 in hopes of seeing his daughter who has been killed while he is in transit. It is unconnected to the main narrative, but echoes the disregard shown for Meiko's life and her father's grief.

[Figure 5: *Bitch Planet* Issue 7 (Feb. 17, 2019): 2. Script by DeConnick and art by De Landro]

This 12-panel design was used in the opening of each issue of *Bitch Planet* ("*Bitch Planet* Sketchbook: Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine," *BP*: Book 2 pgs. 132-137). Here, the first panel opens on a young Black girl's face. She has pink barrettes in her hair and sports a backpack. She warns her companions — two young Black boys, one of whom sports a red hooded sweater like the one Trayvon Martin had been photographed in. Between panels two and three, the body of the other boy is cut in half as he climbs over a fence, the green sweater on his chest bisected by the gutter.

The use of the gutter here is important. Comics theorist McCloud describes the reader's imagination of what happens between the panels, in the gutter, as providing "closure" (64). The gutter cutting through this young boy's body foreshadows his murder. It emphasizes the dehumanization that is about to come as he, and the two other children with him, are caught trespassing and are systematically killed by an automated defense system. The children are described as "threats" to the property under the "Corporate Personhood Act" when a white security guard deems the children to be "sketchy" (7: 1). In *Bitch Planet's* world, a corporation can protect its property through the use of "arms" (7: 1) — echoing the language of the Second Amendment of the United States' Constitution. The unnamed corporation here is able to use the same defense that George Zimmerman did in killing Trayvon Martin, and does so with impunity. Horrifically, the three children are killed — their supposed threat "neutralized" (7: 1). The security guard's complete detachment and lack of empathy is further emphasized when he leaves the menial completion of the report to an artificial intelligence unit, and the violent act is trivialized in the space of a single gutter when he heads off for his scheduled lunch break.

A key goal of the police and prison abolition movements has been to identify them as systems which perpetuate violence against people of colour. In *The Modern Jim Crow: Mass*

Incarnation in the Age of Colorblindness, abolition advocate Michelle Alexander traces modern day policing back to slave patrols in which white people were enlisted by the state to return enslaved people to their masters (31). In this violent scene, DeConnick and De Landro make the reader a witness to racial injustice. The reader must consider why these children were killed for the harmless act of trespassing. The violence against these children exemplifies the violence faced by Black children, women, and men every day. De Landro and DeConnick reflect in "*Bitch Planet* Sketchbook: Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine" at the back of book two of the trade paperback on how closely this scene echoes racial oppression in contemporary North America. For De Landro, the "innocuousness" of the children cutting through the property to save time was reminiscent of his childhood as a Black boy growing up in Ontario. The creators also note the security guard's complicity in the white supremacist system. The guard does not even face the screen to look at the children; DeConnick notes that he is "walled off from [the children's] humanity" (132).

In the main narrative, the series indirectly endorses prison abolition and outright rejects reformation language through the absurd characters of "the History Teacher" whose voice accompanies the women on their flight to the ACO and "the Catholic" who encourages prisoners of *Bitch Planet* on their arrival to repent and learn to uphold heteropatriarchal standards. Ironically, the AI uses language eerily similar to that of early 19th century prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, who maintained that female criminals could only repent for their crimes if they were "tamed and domesticated" (Faith 190). Essays in the backmatter support this, including one by Black comics academic John Jennings who talks about stereotypes that can lead to criminalization of someone simply for an immutable difference in skin tone. Several stories in the *Triple Feature!* Anthology — specifically, "Basic Bitch", "Big Game", "To Be Free", and

"Those People" — also invite the reader to consider the impact of the fear-based tactics used by police to rationalize their brutality.

Bitch Planet also plays homage to film genres such as the female prison genre which is rife with problematic stereotypes of women. Many women-in-prison films featured a white woman whose crimes are minor and who is still redeemable in the eyes of the viewer (Faith 361). This woman often rehabilitates herself through a hetero-romantic subplot, and leaves prison "resolute to be a good person, and more importantly, a good mother" (214). Prison activist and researcher Karlene Faith observes that the genre has historically leaned heavily into grotesque lesbophobic portrayals, such as the predatory bull-dyke lesbian who rapes an "innocent" straight woman (366), and that the women-in-prison film genre has significantly focused on a narrative that is completely contrary to the reality of who is in prison and why they are imprisoned. Women are imprisoned for a number of reasons, but most often for gender-related crimes such as fraud, prostitution, and drug offences, and violent offenses are often are related to spousal abuse. In *Bitch Planet*, the crimes for which women are sent to the ACO are typically gendered, reflecting patriarchal societal mores : "seduction & disappointment", "terminal hysteria", "marital neglect" and "patrilineal dishonour."

These films also trade on racist, classist, and homophobic tropes: as Faith observes, the assumption is that "the darker a woman's skin, the more dangerous she is" (362). In *Bitch Planet*, the narrative focus centering four Black women and one Japanese-American woman echoes these tropes in order to dismantle them — although, as I will note in Chapter 2 in my discussion on the death of Meiko Maki, the intent to undermine racial stereotypes while advancing socio-political discussion has the potential to still recycle those same harmful tropes.

Bitch Planet also echoes the "Blaxploitation" films popular with both Black and white audiences between 1970 to 1975 (Novotny and Butters 745). These movies "challenged" Hollywood's long-standing racist practices and depicted African-Americans as protagonists, and whites as villains, in Black-themed storylines with soul music as the background (Lawrence 18-20 in Novotny & Butters 745). The term "Blaxploitation" is a combination of the terms "Black" and "exploitation", the genre from which Blaxplotation films drew inspiration (Schaefer 4). Exploitation films commonly involved forbidden topics like sex, drugs, and crime (4), and provided a model for DeConnick and De Landro's positioning of the audience as viewers of the ever-present prison surveillance system. While not outright pornography — that is, not made with the intent to sexually arouse — these films frequently used nudity (6), and characters in the world of *Bitch Planet* are frequently nude. However, comics academic and *Bitch Planet* contributor Rebecca Wanzo posits that, through De Landro's positioning and design of the female characters, the use of nudity is liberating and sexually empowering for the characters and the audience ("What is the Liberatory Potential?"). Kamau Kogo is pointedly reminiscent of prominent Blaxploitation actress Pam Grier in her role in *Coffy* (1973). In that role, Grier wore her hair in a big afro, much like Kam does. Afros became popular during the Black pride and Black power movements in the 1960s, particularly when Black Panther Party activist and revolutionary Angela Davis sported one during her widely publicized trial in 1972.

Finally, in numerous interviews and in their co-creator columns at the back of each issue of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* DeConnick and De Landro define *Bitch Planet* as a satirical dystopia. Dystopia is the imagineering of a hellish take on the world — in contrast to a utopian idealization of the perfect world. In reality, men make up around 90 to 95 percent of the prison population in the United States and Canada (Loesch and "World Prison Brief Data: Canada").

However, in the world of the New Protectorate, it is unclear if men are sent to the ACO at all; and only women are jailed in this most secure of prisons. This heightens the threat for the women who live on Earth under the rule of the New Protectorate.

One of satire's many forms is parody: the satire that parodies the legitimate article is exaggerated or made to seem preposterous; it is infused with "incongruous ideas" (Highet 18). According to Gilbert Highet in *Anatomy of Satire*, the first characteristic of a good satire is that it will describe a terrible person or horrible situation as "vividly" as possible (18-19).

> The satirical writer believes that most people are purblind, insensitive, perhaps anaesthetized by custom and dullness and resignation. He wishes to make them see truth — at least that part of the truth which they habitually ignore. (19)

The second test, Highet says, is to evoke a "blend of amusement and contempt":

> In some satirists, the amusement far outweighs the contempt. In others, it almost disappears: it changes into a sour sneer, or a grim smile, or a wry awareness that life cannot all be called reasonable or noble. (21)

In *Bitch Planet*, we recognize satire first through the advertisements in the 12-panel spread on page 1, Issue 1. The advertisements crowding the woman as she runs to work, all command her to: "obey", "comply", "buy this / it will fix you." The advertisements get right to the societal message that women are to conform to a Eurocentric beauty standard. The scene is laughable, and yet familiar. Who are we laughing at? The woman on the page or ourselves? The satire in *Bitch Planet* is also activated by elements in the narrative and the images such as the Catholic AI, the advertisements in the text and McCubbin's paratext, in the cover art in which De Landro pays homage to the film genres used to construct the narrative in *Bitch Planet* – Blaxploitation, prison, and science fiction – and in each of the stories in the *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* series. All of these elements flesh out the dystopian society of the New Protectorate and the intersectional critique of its assumptions. "This book does not offer answers," DeConnick states

in her writer's column at the end of *Bitch Planet* Issue 6. Yet, through satire we are led to inquire.

CHAPTER 2

Key Players

The key players in *Bitch Planet* — Kamau (“Kam”) Kogo, Muenda (“Morowa” / “Mo”) Kogo, Penelope (“Penny”) Rolle, Meiko Maki, and Eleanor Doane, each with her own story arc — provide a spectrum of problematic femininity. Kam is the selfless protagonist, who voluntarily enters the ACO to rescue her sister: hers is a hero’s journey emblematic of female empowerment, sex positivity, and specifically, Black femininity. Her sister, Mo, has been condemned to the ACO for transgression of the gender binary. Penny Rolle is criminalized for her fatness, and for being the product of the consensual union of white and Black parents; Meiko Maki uses her intelligence to subvert the system; and Eleanor Doane is the former president, imprisoned for daring, as a Black woman, to take on a position of power. The portrayals of these characters both lean into racial and trans stereotypes and conventions, and subvert them – particularly in the ways in which they upend the voyeuristic and fetishistic male gaze. The deliberate choice to center the story on a Black woman – and the rescue of her Black trans sister – highlights the importance of including and valuing trans narratives.

Kamau “Kam” Kogo

Kamau Kogo is identified as the protagonist in Issue 1, when she arrives at the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost (ACO). On her arrival at the ACO, we discover that she is a “volunteer” on a mission to find her sister. As the guards observe, she is “crazy” to have volunteered for the ACO, but her devotion to her sister Muenda “‘Morowa’” or ‘“Mo’” Kogo, who has been sent to

the ACO for “gender falsification, deceit” because she is a trans woman, is a testament to Kam’s solidarity and allyship. Kam has a big afro and, before the institution of the New Protectorate, was a professional athlete. She looks like both civil rights activist Angela Davis and Blaxploitation star Pam Grier, particularly her roles in “Coffy” (1973) and “Foxy Brown” (1974) where the Black actress plays women seeking revenge for harm against her loved ones (Roach 14).

Sisterhood and solidarity between women — particularly cis and trans women — are key themes in Kam’s story arc. Kam is a heroic protagonist, a role model. In the first episode in which she appears, she defends both Penny Rolle and Mariann Collins from the guards, who instantly recognize here as “the star of the show” (Issue 1: 23). The power of the erotic is also explored in Kam’s story. As comics are a visual narrative, this “makes the medium a powerful vehicle for erotica” (Hall in *Keywords* 165). Kam frequently appears naked, and twice appears in “the obligatory shower scene[s]” (Issue 4: 5) which are staples of the women-in-prison film genre. In the first, she is propositioned by a lesbian couple. And in the second, Kam masturbates in front of a voyeuristic guard. As Maite Urcaregui observes in “Intersectional Feminism in *Bitch Planet*”, the depiction of Kam — a Black woman — in several nude scenes could certainly seem exploitative, and problematically “risks” a “gaze that takes a scopophilic pleasure in the bodies of women of colour” (Urcaregui 67). However, we could also consider the reclamation of power in erotica. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde defines the erotic in opposition to pornography, and argues that women can find power in embracing eroticism. Lorde specifically advocates that the erotic celebrates women who find their sexual agency outside of male domination.

In the two shower scenes in Issue 4, Kam uses her erotic power to achieve an end goal. In the first, ironically titled, “The Obligatory Shower Scene,” Kam meets lesbians Fanny and

Renelle, who pretend to make a pass at Kam. The scene plays into the villainous lesbian trope, a stereotype applied to lesbian characters, particularly in prison films, as predatory and "sex-crazed" (Faith 365). However, Fanny and Renelle's faux threesome proposal is a front. They reveal that the only reason they are able to be intimate here is because a voyeuristic male prison guard — a "Tommie Peeper" — enjoys watching them copulate. These two women are allowed a measure of freedom through forced exploitation of their private lives. Fanny and Renelle use their pass at Kam to reveal there is a plot against her life. Kam plays along to avoid suspicion, and the three women use their sexual appeal to distract the guard.

In the second shower scene, Kam employs her erotic power to confront and punish the voyeur. Kam, alone, at the back of the showers, begins touching herself. De Landro breaks up the full body image of Kam's naked body with several inset images of her pulling on her lip, biting her finger, water dripping down her breasts and butt, and her hands between her legs. De Landro's choice to "fragment" Kam's body is, as Rebecca Wanzo explains, "evocative not only of porn's objectification of women into parts but the idea of porn objectifying women into parts" ("What is the Liberatory Potential?"). This powerful erotic performance by Kam, which Wanzo argues is an example of pro or positive sex representation, is a "gotcha" moment: Kam is able to capture the masturbating male guard, and blackmail him into helping her find her sister. There's a celebration in the erotic in this scene, and specifically, the "Black Pussy Power" (Roach), which had similarly been embodied by Grier in her roles as Coffy and Foxy Brown.

Penelope "Penny" Rolle

Penelope "Penny" Rolle is quite literally a larger-than-life example of radical "non-compliance" in the world of *Bitch Planet.* Penny is a tall, fat Black woman who sports a tattoo on her arm that says, "born BIG" (DeConnick and De Landro 1: 7). The reader is introduced to her naked body before we truly meet her in the depiction of prisoners in suspended animation en route to the ACO in Issue 1. The illustration of Penny's body is liberating: she has a big belly and rolls on her thighs. Penny looks like a real person, and one who would be discriminated against for the way she looks. She has been sent to the ACO after numerous acts of "insubordination" and "assault", but more importantly after "repeated citations for aesthetic offenses" for her masculine partially shaven head and "wanton obesity" (3: 1).

She takes up a lot of space in a world where we see women forced to apologize for taking up any space at all. Her very existence is radical. The "Born Big" tattoo is evidence she has pride in and of her fat body. She knows what her size is and when, on her arrival at ACO, she is given an orange prison jumpsuit that is simply too small, she asks "Where'm I s'posed to put my tits?!" (1: 7-8). When she is instructed to "put [her] uniform on and proceed to the concourse" by the prison guard, she fights back and is struck in the head. The violence against her body is jarring and, as Kam Kogo points out, unjust.

The list of fat Black characters in comics is, unsurprisingly, very small. Maria Dillard, otherwise known by her villain name "Black Mariah" (first appearance *Luke Cage*, *Hero for Hire* Issue 5, January 1973), is a problematic precursor to Penny. Mariah is a character steeped in stereotypes, a "grotesque, unapologetic drug trafficker — a morphing of one of the earliest images of the welfare queen," writes Deborah Elizabeth Whaley in *Black Women in Sequence:*

Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime (21). Black Mariah was created by Black American Billy Graham, and white Americans George Tuska and Steve Englehart. Few fat Black female characters are in heroic roles. Amanda Waller (first appearance *Legends* #1, 1986), a fat Black character in the DC Universe, is morally ambivalent — alternately cast as a villain and anti-hero.

In *Bitch Planet* Issue 3, the reader is introduced to Penny's backstory and is made witness to the institutional and systemic racism, sexism, and fat-phobia she endures. At the state run boarding schools where she is sent at eight years old, "Mother" Siebertling complains that even her hair does not "behave" (3: 15). After her arrest for non-compliance at the age of 22, Penny is hooked up to a "cerebral action potential integration and exploitation matrix" to see an image of her ideal self. The Fathers want her to see herself as grotesque. They read to her the crimes for which she has been indicted: "repeated citations for aesthetic offenses, capillary disfigurement and wanton obesity". They claim that Penny insists on making her "own life difficult" by failing to "prioritize how others see [her]", when she was torn from her family and taken in by the state at the age of eight when her parents were are imprisoned for "miscegenation", an illegal interracial marriage. Penny's father was white and her mother was Black. The conception of a mixed race child is a crime in the New Protectorate. Penny, as the product of a loving and consensual relationship between a white father and Black mother, is criminalized from birth.

When forced to look upon her true self in the display, Penny sees perfection within and without. She is a proud, fat Black woman — her very essence liberating to those of us who embrace "non-compliance". The story concludes with Penny courageously laughing at the Fathers (3: 26). However, Issue 7 shows us an intimate scene of Penny crying naked in the shower, mourning the death of Meiko Maki, whom she has been unable to protect in the

Megaton practice bout with the ACO guards. In an essay at the end of the same issue, Angelica Jade Bastien examines the "strong Black female" archetype, which does not allow Black women to show vulnerability lest they be seen as incapable, weak, lazy or complaining about their pain. Bastien argues that, too often, these archetypes "poison" real Black women's lives, affecting them when they attempt to seek healthcare or mental health services, as well as inhibit career advancement. She calls for multi-faceted, complex portrayals of Black women, in which they are shown to be both strong fighters and vulnerable human beings. While Penny's role as a champion and protector of other women positions her as a heroic character, her visceral and emotional moments provide a deeper insight into the concept of strength.

Muenda "Morowa" Kogo — "Mo"

In the world of *Bitch Planet*, trans women are treated as disposable. They are routinely scrutinized and tested under the umbrella of science and pretense of monitoring their "health" (8: 7). Before we even meet Muenda "Morowa" Kogo, or "Mo" — the nickname her sister Kam uses — she is intentionally misgendered by prison guard Violet Whitney in order to anger Kam.: "…You have a brother, I believe?". Kam replies, "…No. No, I don't." (2: 16). The reader is meant to recognize that Kam had (or has) a sibling, but is not provided with more information until Issue 4 where Kam demands that the guard that she has caught peeping in the shower to help her find her "sister" (4: 25). We do not meet Mo until Issue 8, and it is only then that we understand that she has been misgendered, and that Whitney's interaction with Kam was no accidental pronoun slip. It was a purposeful act of violence against both Kam and her sister, meant to deny Mo's gender.

“Gender Falsification, Deceit” are Muenda “Morowa” Kogo’s crimes in the world of *Bitch Planet*. She is housed in the “Auxiliary Compliance Outpost Facility One” (8: 5), a facility separated from the cis women. When we first meet her, Morowa is undressing to undergo a physical examination. Her first words are presented to the reader in white on black text, interspersed between illustrations of Mo undressing amidst other women: “We were the first to be sent away. We were *always* the first” (8: 5). The reader recognizes that these prisoners are trans women because some of them have breasts, penises and scrotums, but also because their coveralls are blue rather than the red colour assigned to the cis women population. Blue, of course, is the colour given in hospitals to babies assigned as male at birth, so the uniform that Mo is forced to wear is an act of violence against her. The blue and red uniform detail was meant both to unify and to separate the inmates, as the creators state in “*Bitch Planet* Sketchbook: Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine”:

> This [colour-coding] gives us a simple shorthand for who is trans going forward so we don’t need to have any awkward exposition or a display of anatomy that doesn’t mean anything anyway; and once the facilities are mingled, seeing the various expressions of gender across the trans and cis women should drive home the fact that gender is a spectrum, as we’ll see folks of both colours presenting all over that spectrum. (133)

“Trans” is Latin for “across”, whereas cis means “on the same side”. Simply, a cis woman’s gender identity matches her biological make-up. A trans person’s gender presentation may or may not match their biological make-up at birth. The separation of the trans and cis women populations within the ACO prison facility is in line with the Fathers’ “trans misogyny,” which, as defined by Julia Serano, is discrimination against trans women for their “expressions of femaleness or femininity” (14-15). Trans misogyny can take the form of societal mocking, degradation, and debasement of trans women as men who are pretending to be women; it is

manifested in the diagnosis of trans women as having "psychological disorder transvestic fetishism", which allows them to be scientifically catagorized as "disordered"; and lastly, it can result in the exclusion of trans women from cis women spaces, often on the authority of cis women (15). This separation by cis women of trans women from supposed feminine spaces is called "trans exclusionary radical feminism" (TERF). Cis women like Germaine Greer and Cathy Brennan (Sergent-Shadbolt), who claim the term TERF is a "slur" and instead call themselves "gender critical" argue for biological essentialism: the idea that a woman is not a woman if she does not have a vagina or a uterus. Never mind the fact that women born with uteri may or may not menstruate on a regular basis, may choose to or not to have children, or undergo a hysterectomy to remove all or part of the uterus — a fact that does not make them any less women.

The separation of the cis and trans women populations in the ACO is not only perpetuated by the Fathers and the prison guards. When Meiko's father opens the cell doors and the two populations intermingle, the trans women face threat from both the guards and the cis women. "Looks like they sent in the fucking freak brigade" one cis ACO prisoner says as she sees the blue overalls of the trans women. Spouting the vile trans misogyny that one might read on a "gender critical" Reddit forum, the cis prisoner yells: "Sticks or lipsticks, they're still men trying to take from you!" (DeConnick & De Landro 9: 19).

The creators of *Bitch Planet* credit three trans women consultants on Issue 8: Emma Houxbois, Mey Valdiva Rude, and Aria Ehran. Houxbois defines herself as a "fiercely queer trans woman from the wilds of Canada" ("Emma Houxbois"). She has written extensively about comics and representation, including a short in the DC Comics and IDW Comics *Love is Love* stand alone anthology, released to support the victims of the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting

where 49 queer men and women were killed. Rude is a Los Angeles based Latina trans woman and consultant, who writes extensively on trans and queer representation in comics and cartooning ("Mey Rude"). Ehren, a Huffington Post contributor, defines herself as "non-compliant trans woman who is not interested in being one of the Good Ones" ("Aria Ehren"). De Landro and DeConnick's consultations with trans creators suggests a self-awareness about their positionality, and an openness to "interrogating" internal biases in order to craft nuanced, yet underrepresented and marginalized characters (Miller).

As Rude observes in "The Complete History of Transgender Characters in American Cimic Books", until recently, trans representation in mainstream comics has been almost non-existent. Changes in gender were only short-lived, in instances in which gender was switched because of a magical spell, body swapping, or alien technology. Shapeshifters like Marvel Comics characters Mystique (first full appearance *Ms. Marvel* #18, July 1978) or Loki (first appearance *Journey into Mystery* #85, October 1962) can change genders, but inevitably revert to the gender they prefer (Rude). These characters do not represent actual trans women or men. It wasn't until the 1990s that more realistic trans representations were finally included in comics, but according to Rude, these have been exceptionally rare, fraught with derogatory stereotypes and too often focused on biological essentialism. There were almost no true-to-life trans representations until Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series (first issue published January 1989, Vertigo Comics), in which the very first representation in comics of a trans woman has her lying dead, naked on the bed of her killer, her genitals "silhouetted" by a shadow (shemale). The woman, whose name we never learn, was murdered by a serial killer who killed "pre-operative" trans women because they made him feel "uncomfortable" (Gaiman and Dringenberg). In the same *Sandman* series, Gaiman introduces us to Wanda Mann (first appearance in Issue 32: "A Game

of You, Part 1: Slaughter on Fifth Avenue", Nov. 1991), a trans woman character who was the most significant comic representation for trans audiences at the time (Rude; Wolfe). Wanda's last name — given to her by Gaiman, who stated he wanted to include in *Sandman* issues his real trans friends were experiencing — is a not-so-subtle nod to the idea that trans women are secretly deceptive males (Romano; shemale). Throughout *Sandman*, Wanda must fight against biological essentialism. Later in the story, Wanda dies in a freak accident and is misgendered by her transphobic parents in death as her burial tombstone reads her "dead name": the name she was assigned at birth, along with the gender which no longer exists for her.

It took more than 20 years before significantly more trans characters were introduced in comics, and most of those representations occurred in Image Comics publications (Rude). Japanese journalist Cassandra Igarashi in *The Wicked + The Divine* (first appearance Issue 1, June 2014) is heralded as one of the most positive representations of trans women in comics (Rude). Likewise, in other Image Comics series, Alain, a trans woman, was introduced in *Shutter* (first appearance June 2014), Zhen in *Trees* (first appearance October 2014), and Braga in *Rat Queens* was given her own one-issue (*Rat Queens Special: Braga* #1, January 2015) in which the colourist, Tamra Bonvillain is also a trans woman (Rude). DC Comics added Alysia Yeoh in *Batgirl* (first appearance *Batgirl* #4, November 2011), and Marvel introduced what Rude calls the "closest thing comics had to a trans superhero" with Sera in *Angela: Asgard's Assassin* (first appearance Issue 3, February 2015). While there has been a growth of trans characters and trans creators, there is still a dearth of representation of comic characters that do not ascribe to binary gender roles.

There are far more trans women comic characters than male. As Rachel Stevens explains in "Trans Representations and Superhero Comics: A Conversation with Mey Rude, J. Skyler, and

Rachel Stevens," this is often because trans women are objectified and made to appear "exotic and strange" (1). The media has an obsession with trans women, singling them out for "attention and ridicule" because they transgress the gender binary, and eschew their masculinity for their femaleness and femininity in a world where the latter is socially constructed to be inferior (Serano 14). Any person who transgresses the gender binary of masculine and feminine and/or male and female is at higher risk for gender-based violence (Taylor, et al. 13-14), but trans women face discrimination and violence at a higher rate than trans men; and they face these in every aspect of their life: employment, housing, health care and education. For a trans woman, what seems like a simple act of applying for a passport, driver's license, health card, or a birth certificate, or even using the washroom can mean being subjected to discrimination and violence (Taylor, et al. 49).

Houxbois, in "Crown on the Ground / the View from Facility One" for *London Graphic Novel Network* website, explores why she consulted on *Bitch Planet,* stating that it was in part to counter the trans misogyny of cis comic creators who were attempting, albeit feebly, to include trans representation in comics. The first instance she cites is in *Batgirl* #37, where the titular character reacts in horror to the reveal of a trans woman. (Note: this dialogue was changed in the collected graphic novel after the cis creators spoke with members of the trans community [Rude].) And the second instance, which Houxbois noted as being exceptionally egregious, is in the Image Comics series *Airboy* by James Robinson where the title character is angry and disgusted that the woman with whom he was having sex has a penis. This is the "trans panic trap," labelled as such because cis men who have sex with trans women claim they were trapped or deceived, and that is the reason why they violently lash out. In 40 US states, the "trans panic"

is a legitimate legal defense strategy that allows people who have murdered or assaulted trans individuals to receive a more lenient sentence (“Gay/Trans Panic Defense Bans”).

Houxbois states she was ambivalent about acting as a consultant to cis writers: she questioned whether doing so would “undercut” the ability of trans women to get work actually creating comics. She argues that having a consultant on issues of which they have epistemic knowledge is not the same as employing trans creators, and that cis creators recognizing their privilege and working to ensure trans representation is accurate is not the same as creating out of lived experience. Houxbois wanted to help to change the landscape of representation for trans women in the hope that, once those on the male-to-female gender spectrum attain better and broader representation, trans women can more greatly participate in the comic industry:

> The vast majority of the cisgender creators and editors I’ve observed doing the work and holding themselves accountable for it are mostly outsiders who sit at the fringes of the industry. (“Crown on the Ground / the View from Facility One”)

In a world where femininity, femaleness and womanhood are grounds for a prison sentence, Houxbois knew that trans women would be the first to be sent to the ACO, as Mo confirms. Trans women have been at the forefront of a number of LGBTQ political movements: the Compton Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco in 1966 began because trans women and drag queens were tired of being harassed by police for crimes like “female impersonation” and “loitering” (Stryker and Silverman); and trans women Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera have been credited with being among the first to resist police during the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969 (Brockell).

All too often portrayals of trans women, in particular, focus on their genitals. So, careful consideration was given by DeConnick and De Landro to their portrayal, particularly when

showing trans women in different states of undress in their very first introduction. In their conversation at the end of Book Two, DeConnick and De Landro discuss how they planned to introduce Mo and other trans women characters. Both DeConnick and De Landro are cis gender; both have experienced discrimination, and yet both have cis privilege. It is certainly exploitative to introduce women, be they trans or cis, naked. And, yet, this is how we meet the women of both the cis and trans gender populations in *Bitch Planet*. DeConnick states they "never shied away from nudity," but neither did they want to "titillate or pass judgment." Her notes to De Landro were to "normalize our presentation." ("Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine" 132-133). DeConnick struggled with whether or not to present Mo as having had genital reassignment surgery or not; she also questioned the idea of a traditionally feminine appearing trans woman sending a negative message about the variance in trans women's bodies:

> I was concerned … that the unintentional message would be that her body was somehow more acceptable. If we simple (sic) refuse to decide anything about Morowa, we avoid sending that message and because of the variety of bodies and presentations we're still presenting, we're not putting a different standard on trans women than on cis women. We're simply not making a decision about Morowa's anatomy because it's irrelevant and not our business anyway. ("Conversations with Kelly Sue and Valentine" 132 -133)

Again, here DeConnick had to check her cis privilege when designing Mo's look: she assumed that a person transitioning from the male to female gender spectrum would want to appear more feminine to "pass" as cis in this hyper patriarchal world. Ehran, whose surname is bestowed upon a *Bitch Planet* character, "nudged" DeConnick away from her conjecturing: "'Queers gonna queer,' [Ehran] said sweetly" (134). Bodies in the top frame echo this variety in gender expression: hairstyles range from short to long, and bodies vary in age, size, and skin colour variations from light, medium and dark. The panel filled with women undressing is large enough for us to recognize that they are trans, but the blocking of the panels too is transgressive: if the reader did not understand from the top image that these are bodies of those who have

transgressed the gender binary, they would by the time they get to Mo's internal narrative, "we were the first to be sent away" (8: 4). It has often and especially been trans, queer, and Black folks who are first targeted with oppression (such as Marsha P. Johnson and Stormé DeLarverie). The blocking of the page stands out in contrast to De Landro's paneling style on other pages, forcing the reader to linger on a visual that, as noted above and by Ucaregui, could be read as exploitative (67). However, De Landro's panel design here stands out in contrast to the rest of the pages in this issue. This tableau functions as a new encounter, not unlike a "gender transition, in which form must be continually relinquished for the meaning of the event to happen" (Keegan 210 in "Trans-/+*").

[Figure 6 “We were the first to be sent away”: *Bitch Planet* Issue 8 (June 22, 2016): 4. Script by DeConnick and art by De Landro.]

It is also notable that Mo is a main character in the comic. She is the reason why Kam is in the ACO, and is the leader of the trans prisoners. Mo would not only be subject to violence due to her gender expression, but also due to her race. When she first appears in a series of

panels, Mo hides a treasured item in her locker; then we see — juxtaposed between this first image and another of Mo walking away from the audience — a mug shot of her face, a narration panel indicating her name and her weight, a second image of her dressed in athletic performance wear, and a second narration panel citing the crime for which she has been sentenced. This sequencing of panels ensures that the reader stops to see who Mo is. What would otherwise be a familiar sequence of panels is interrupted allowing us to linger on her supposed crimes of "gender falsification, deceit", as well as making us aware that — like her sister — she was an athlete. There is a direct conflation between sport, race and gender, particularly when it comes to the policing of Black women, be they cis or trans. In the 2021 Olympics, several cis Black women, including one South African and two Namibian track and field athletes, have been barred from competing because they produce slightly higher levels of testosterone (Villarreal). Mo's crime is her gender presentation, her transness.

Meiko Maki

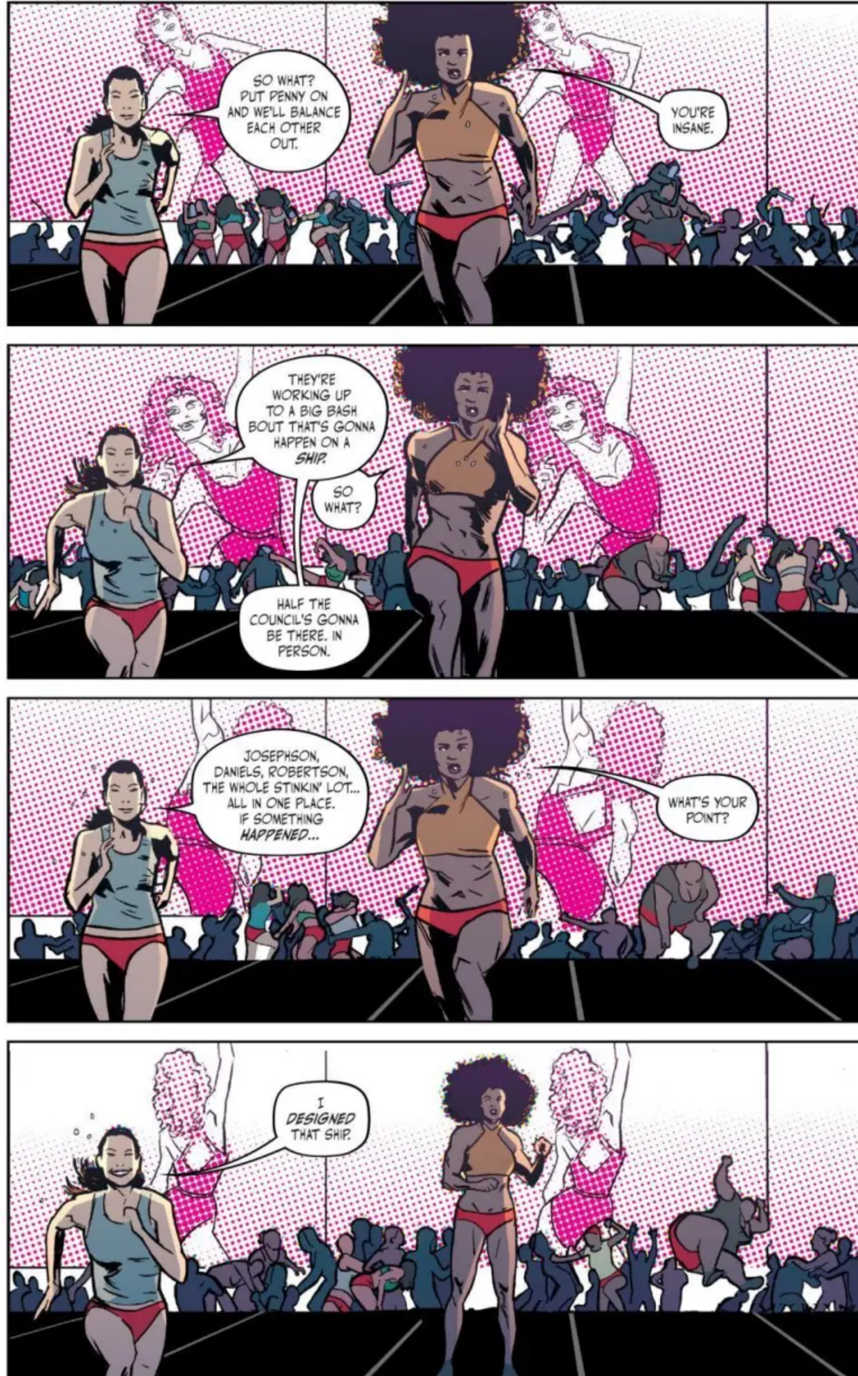
Meiko is a brilliant, young Japanese-American woman who wants to dismantle the system from within. As a child prodigy, secretly educated in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines by her parents with a number of other girls under the pretense of receiving violin lessons, Meiko worked with her father, Makoto, to design the technology used in the ACO and the spaceship "Polestar" that the New Protectorate will use as the site of the exhibition game between the ACO "Naughty N.C.s" and professional Duemila athletes. When Makoto tells her that he wants to make a "better world" for her, her "sister", the "girls in her class", and "maybe someday, for your daughters, too" (6: 8), Meiko questions how

he can "fight the Protectorate by building giant ships for them" (6: 8). However, on seeing the final plans for the ship, Meiko recognizes that a flaw in the design will cause the Polestar to explode. The flaw is also recognized by Doug Braxton, a blond, blue-eyed white man, who uses his knowledge to blackmail Makoto into allowing him to marry Meiko, *or* her younger sister, Marai. He tells Makoto that he has 48 hours to decide which of his daughters he will marry, or he will ruin their lives by reporting the sabotage. Meiko murders Braxton for attempting to destroy her family.

As a Japanese-American woman, Meiko's reality also exists at the intersection of race and gender. In an extreme example of "Orientalism" (a term coined by Edward Said in the same-titled 1978 text) — a romanticisation of the mysterious "East" coupled with a colonial sense of rights of possession — Doug Braxton is obsessed with Asian culture (Urcaregui 57). His home is filled with Japanese artifacts; he insists on addressing Makoto as "Sensei" ("master" or "teacher"); and he wears a short blue kimono to the Makoto home, claiming to dress the way he "feels on the inside". The young Makoto girls openly chide the white man for misunderstanding the significance of the garment (6: 13), but their parents are clearly alarmed by the implications of Braxton's behaviour. Braxton believes his rights as a white man extend to sexual access to Meiko or her sister, both just young girls. Meiko recognizes the threat he poses to her family, and goes to his home, alone, under the guise of playing her violin for him — an act of submission. Instead she strangles him with a violin string. Her plot is successful because it feeds into Braxton's belief that she, as a young Japanese girl, will comply with his misogynistic and racist sexual demands.

Meiko is sent to the ACO for Braxton's murder and a subsequent attack on a jailor who attempts to rape her in detention. Here, she meets Kam and Penny, and, when Kam is asked to

form a Duemila team, she sees the match as an opportunity to use her knowledge to incite a revolution against the New Protectorate:



[Figure 7: "Meiko's proposal", *Issue* 2 (Jan. 28, 2015): 20. Script by DeConnick and art by De Landro]

The dialogue between Kam and Meiko suggests there are some ways in which Meiko's portrayal eschews the white-constructed "model minority" stereotype, which pits Asian people against other people of colour in a white supremacist regime (Chou 18). The model minority stereotype of Asian people as docile and law-abiding has enabled her family to operate covertly against the regime, secretly educating their daughters and advancing in the corporate environment. However, having been victimized by the system, Meiko plots to overthrow the government, by destroying the ship on which the majority of the New Protectorate leaders will attend the game. This is a reversal of the stereotype of a submissive Asian female. However, Meiko is murdered at the end of Issue 5, only halfway into the *Bitch Planet* series, replicating the Hollywood trope of killing off Asian characters early and violently, thereby perpetuating racism both on and off-screen (Fang).

Meiko is murdered by a prison guard during a practice match between Kam's group of "Naughty N.C.s" and the ACO prison "Grappling Guards" (DeConnick & De Landro 5: 10-11). Meiko scores a goal against a guard, and turns around, sticks out her middle finger at the guard, and in a final rebellious gesture, laughs as she says: "Ha Ha Ha Muthafucker!" (5: 21). The moment that Meiko has surpassed the male guard, not only competitively one-upping him but then mocking him, he grabs her by the neck and slams her to the ground. This scene is a painful reminder both of violence against Asian women, and that all women must fear violence from men. As Margaret Atwood famously said, "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them."

Meiko's death is pivotal to the remainder of the story arc. Her father frees the prisoners and shuts down the ACO when he realizes Meiko is dead. DeConnick discusses Meiko's death in her writer's column in Issue 5: "I wanted to save her [Meiko], but the story doesn't work if she

lives. And we needed to have the understanding that no one is safe. The stakes are high and life is not fucking fair" (24). Meiko strikes the revolutionary match, first with her words, later with her actions, and then with her death. Meiko's personal arc is unveiled after her death, in Issue 6, which is the only issue to begin with a trigger warning — a notice that exists so that a person with traumatic experience of a sexual assault, for example, can determine whether they wish to continue reading the story (Gray and Wright 268):

> The following is a flashback issue, covering the events that led to Meiko Maki's incarceration. It contains plot elements and images relating to sexual assault. We encourage you to evaluate your comfort level before deciding to continue. *Bitch Planet*'s main narrative resumes with Issue 7 and does not recount the sexual assault. (6: 1)

The trigger warning cites a 2008 U.S. Department of Justice survey in which 1 in 16 female prisoners reported being sexually assaulted while incarcerated. However, in "Decentering the sexual aggressor: sexual violence, trigger warnings and *Bitch Planet*", Brenna Clarke Gray and David N. Wright argue that in spite of the trigger warning, while well-intentioned and progressive, Meiko's sexual assault and death could be re-exploitative in an industry that has a long history of exploitation of representations of marginalized women's bodies. Here, that's very much a pressing concern as the first scene following the warning shows Meiko being sexually assaulted by a jailor. In their close reading of this scene, Gray and Wright note that Taki Soma, an Asian-American woman artist solicited specifically for this issue, has depicted Meiko as a violin, an object, and that the use of small inset panels to convey the attempted rape disassociate her from her body. In the first inset panel, the guard removes her overall; in the nest, he licks Meiko's neck, while she seems not to react; in the third, he fondles her breast. This scene, on the first page after the trigger warning, is the only opening page in the issues comprising the main narrative not to use the 12-panel format, "universalizes" Meiko's experience, and the final page of issue 6 uses the exact same format (Gray and Wright 271). Gray and Wright suggest the

depiction of Meiko's sexual assault empowers victims by centering their experiences. Soma mimics De Landro's deconstruction of the left-to-right, top-to-bottom panel to panel format in comics, quite similarly to De Landro's illustration of Kam masturbating in the shower to catch the peeping security guard. This alternate style of presentation indicates to the reader that Meiko has disassociated herself from the sexual molestation by imagining herself as a violin, lost amongst lyrical notes on a page. "Meiko's dissociative state indicates her experience of a past trauma as well, suggesting a connection between the reader who is served by the trigger warning and the protagonist of the flashback" (Gray and Wright 271).

North American comics from their early inception have reproduced racist images of Asian people, initially in the form of the villainous yellow-skinned character, the "Fu Manchu" (Gray "Race" in *Keywords for Comics Studies*), a literalized caricature of the "Yellow Peril", reflecting a xenophobic white fear of people of Asian descent. In contrast, Meiko is a heroic protagonist, who has actively rebelled against the white-constructed system. Initial reactions to Meiko's death come from Kam and Penny, two Black women at their own intersections of oppression. Penny is unable to contain her tears and rage after Meiko's death, and in a pivotal scene for Penny's story arc, she sits in the shower — fat, Black and naked, as water pours down upon her — overcome with grief, and blaming herself for Meiko's death. Kam reminds Penny that "the motherfucker who broke her [Meiko's] neck is still walking on two legs" (DeConnick and De Landro 7: 18); that the system they are fighting still remains unaccountable for its violence. It is a call to action.

The same issue as Meiko's death includes backpage advertisements of "Sushi Models", with a picture of an Asian woman posed on a table, sushi on her naked body. This image not-so-subtly underscores the orientalism and hypersexualization Meiko faces in this issue, and that

Asian women face in western society. Braxton's cultural appropriation is not a one-off, it is a recurring and repetitive issue both in contemporary North America and in the New Protectorate. This type of cultural appropriation takes place again when the surveillance AI of the ACO assumes a guise meant to reassure Meiko's father that his daughter is well. When Makoto arrives on the ACO to see Meiko, it adopts an interface that appears to be an Asian woman, infantilized through girlish pigtails, but still sexualized enough to titillate with a cleavage-baring, high-midriff dress and high heels. This Asian interface lies to Makoto when it claims that Meiko is still alive, but that he is unable to see her "in person" (8: 12), despite having travelled such a far distance. Instead, he is presented with a hologram — an image of Meiko in a kimono, spouting propaganda, and playing the violin with much more skill than she ever achieved in life. This confirms to Makoto that Meiko is no longer alive, and he resolves to immediately free the ACO prisoners. Asian cultural appropriation is further touched upon in the *Triple Feature!* Story "Mirror, Mirror" by Jon Tseui and Saskia Gutekunst, in which an Asian actor who has martial arts experience and credentials is passed over for a white actor in a for a role in a Hollywood movie where the producers suggest they may need to computer-generate an Asian look for the white actor.

The question of whether or not Meiko's death constitutes a "fridging" is complex. Her death is violent. The panels not only illustrate the physical breaking of her neck, but several portray her lifeless, distorted body lying on the floor, while the other women on the ACO Naughty N.C.s team tend to her. Meiko's death provides an emotional breakthrough for her father, although he was already complicit in the movement against the New Protectorate. Her death speeds up Makoto's timeline, and refocuses his actions to freeing the women rather than looking for other opportunities to destroy the New Protectorate. Because her backstory in Issue 6

immediately follows her death in Issue 5, the narrative arc forces the reader to linger on Meiko's death. "M", who identifies as "Eurasian, multiethnic", voiced the feelings of many fans in a letter published in Issue 7 of *Bitch Planet*, expressing "mega disappointment" with the decision to kill Meiko, even while respecting authorial creative intent. "M" notes that Asian representation is lacking in comics, and that Asian people exist as "invisible minorities" in a "weird space in society between black and white" (7: 37). DeConnick, in a reply immediately following "M"'s letter, admits to "second-guessing" her decision to kill Meiko, but holds firm on her decision, which she expressed in her author column in Issue 5. DeConnick argues that, in spite of the scopophilic, consumptive and predatory effects of viewing images of violence against women, and particularly women of colour, that in some instances we must force ourselves to watch to "evoke a level of outrage I damn well ought to have anyway (5: 25).

Eleanor Doane

Eleanor Doane's storyline emerges very slowly and covertly as the narrative of *Bitch Planet* progresses. A name is crossed out on the list of inmates that Kam is given in order to choose players for her Duemila team in Issue 4. In Issue 5, a protestor bares herself before a camera with "Eleanor lives" scrawled across her naked chest (5: 1), and a commentator mentions "Eleanorians", a protest group that Feed 237AM, the New Protectorate right-wing news corporation, reminiscent of Fox or Rebel News, calls "terrorists" (5: 2). In the paratext in the back of Issue 5, a political poster declaring "Eleanor for America" is slashed to remove the candidate's face and graffitted with "President Bitch" (McCubbin 5). Doane, a Black political leader, was the former president, and, as we learn in Issue 10, the former "leader of the free

world" (10: 13). With the establishment of the New Protectorate, Doane has been imprisoned in the ACO. Apparently, the backlash following her election is not unlike the socio-political backlash following the election of Barack Obama, the first Black president in US history. Americans next elected Donald Trump, who began his bid for office by denying Obama's US citizenship (Coates). Doane is a symbol of political resistance and Black feminist liberation. She evokes Black revolutionary leaders Angela Davis, who ran for US vice-president under the Communist Party Ticket in 1980 and 1984, and Assata Shakur. Both women were imprisoned on trumped-up murder charges not long after becoming involved in the Black Panther Party, while Shakur was also involved with the Black Liberation Army. Davis was acquitted by an all-white jury in 1972, and went on to become an active member of the Communist Party and a proponent for prison reform, while Shakur was convicted in 1977 by an all-white jury. ("An Open Letter From Assata"; Shakur). Shakur's escape from prison in 1979 was abetted by Marilyn Buck, a well-educated, middle class white woman, who was working with the politically violent anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist group the "May 19th Communist Organization" (Rosenau 8). Their name is derived from a celebration of the birthdays of civil rights leader Malcolm X and Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh (8). The May 19 Communist Organization was an all-white, queer and female-led group that, between 1981 to 1983, robbed $3 million from several US banks to support Black liberation, and was involved in several bombings, including one at the US capitol (Rosenau). Buck drove the get-away car, and hid Shakur until Shakur could seek political asylum in Cuba in 1984, where she still resides (80-81). Shakur was the first woman to be included on the FBI's Terrorism List in 2013 with a $2 million reward attached to her name. ("Former Black Panther"). Revolutionaries in the US have created liberation groups in Assata's name. "Assata's Daughters", an abolitionist organization, was formed in 2015 and is led

by Black women in the vein of the “radical liberatory activism of Assata Shakur” (“Our Herstory”).

> Assata represents the strength and spirit of Black people’s struggle for liberation in this country. When that spirit, when that representation of that spirit is freed, then there’s hope for Black people, for all people who love liberation and who love freedom” (Marilyn Buck at 6:42).

Like Assata, Eleanor Doane represents demands for freedom and liberation. Outside of prison in the New Protectorate, she is supported by the “Children of Eleanor Doane”, a multiracial, politically violent women-led anti-fascist group. Like “Assata’s Daughters” and the “May 19 Communist Organization”, these revolutionaries commit their acts of protests in their leader’s name. The Children of Eleanor Doane are in hiding, organizing a literal “underground” to which we are introduced at the start of Issue 8. The Children of Eleanor Doane are a revolutionary group, and their story is quietly interwoven into *Bitch Planet*’s main narrative. Protestors can be spotted flashing a camera during a newscast in the background of a panel in Issue 5; and other protest elements are included in the paratext. For example, at the back of Issue 6, a pastel retro-chic “welcome to womanhood” brochure instructs women on best practices for compliance once they begin menstruating. Graffitted over this archaically sexist resource in all-caps is “ELEANOR LIVES!”, a reference to Eleanor Doane. The story itself hides the counter-revolution, much as the state has done to its revolutionary, Eleanor Doane, by locking her away forever. There is an obvious allusion here to Donald Trump’s repetitive refrain “lock her up” in reference to Hillary Clinton, of course, as well as the locking up of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, both in prison, and of Shakur being in asylum in Cuba, with a bounty still on her head.

The Children of Eleanor Doane, much like the May 19 Communist Organization, believe in political violence as the only effective response to an already violent, oppressive system. Kylie Josephson, the daughter of Father Josephson, is white and well-educated, much like Marilyn

Buck, and, like her, works against the system. On the last page of Issue 10 — the last issue released since April 2017 — Kylie uses her access as the daughter of a member of the Council of Fathers to assassinate High Father John Johnson, shooting him in the head. It is shocking, and yet we have seen other deaths in the series already: the deaths of Mariann Collins and Meiko Makoto, both murdered by representatives of the state, whereas Father Josephson was assassinated as a political act. The scene asks us to question the need for violence as a response to oppression.

In an essay appended to the end of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature* #1, which was published June 2017, and released after the publication of Issue 10, activist and non-binary femme Tasha Fierce asks us to consider "violence as a method of non-compliance." Fierce questions whether leftist violence can be equated with fascist violence, as anti-fascist violence is often a form of self-defense — a direct response to the hateful, genocidal aims of fascist movements (Bray). Fascist governments, like those of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, unite the masses under one ruling party, and excise from their ranks those whom the fascist state considers weak — often, those who don't meet standards of racial purity — through violent, genocidal means (Kallis). The New Protectorate is undeniably a fascist government. Sending mostly Black, brown and women of colour to a prison planet for the rest of their lives for their lack of compliance to a white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal state is certainly a fascist move. Patriarchy is "material" to fascism (Stanley); and, as thoroughly evidenced, the New Protectorate upholds male supremacy.

Violent leftist resistance in the face of far right white supremacist violence has always existed in North America: Marie-Joseph Angelique's burning of Montreal to escape slavery in 1734 (Cooper); the rebellion of the enslaved, led by Nat Turner in 1831 ("Nat Turner"); John

Brown's resistance to slavery, which culminated in the raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 ("John Brown"). Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" statements; the Black Panther Party's and the Black Liberation Army's violence in defense of the rights and self-determination of Black people in the 1960s and 1970s; and the activities of the modern-day multiracial, multi-gender antifa movement in the 2010s, led by groups founded in Portland, Oregon (Bray), where *Bitch Planet* writer DeConnick lives. Eleanor Doane has been subject to physical violence as a deposed leader and a political prisoner, but her freedom allows for an imagining of a new world, a "world to reclaim" as Doane declares at the end of Issue 9 when, simply by appearing before them, she unites the warring cis and trans prisoners against their oppressors (9: 25).

Eleanor Doane's storyline allows to imagine a better world. The mirror to a dystopia is a utopia, and we can believe that Doane's new world would be much more egalitarian and feminist, one led by oppressed peoples for the betterment of all people. It could also be one that abolishes the *Bitch Planet*. We have yet to find out as the series remains incomplete. What we have before us, however, are portrayals of a spectrum of women that allow the reader to better understand racialized and trans femininities and sexualities. Kam is recognizably an homage to Black activist Angela Davis, and Blaxploitation heroine Pam Grier. Kam's body is portrayed in a highly eroticized fashion, but the unconventional design of the page shows how she takes control of the male gaze of an abusive man. Penny is the fat Black woman, all too often villainized and criminalized; but she exhibits empathy and vulnerability with the other women, refusing the societal stigmas around fatness, Blackness, and gender non-comformity and acting as their protector. Much like Kam's, Mo's body could be fetishized; but her portrayal has been given dimention through the input of trans consultants on the series. Despite leaning into what could be construed as the "model minority" stereotype of an intellectual Asian woman, Meiko forms a

bond with other racialized women fighting against the white supremacist system of the New Proectorate. They are fighting for Eleanor Doane's new world.

CHAPTER 3

Paratext: bridging beyond the narrative

A text does not appear "naked". Rather, according to literary theorist Gérard Genette, who defined the term "paratext", the reading of the text is controlled by a "fringe" that accompanies the author's words (Genette 261). The fringe of a book typically consists of the front cover; the text on the inside jacket; the preface, introduction or foreword; and the back material. In the comic industry, comics are first published as floppy single issues, usually monthly. At the front of each comic, a reader can find the publisher's information, and occasionally at the back, advertisements, letters from the readers, or a column by the writer or editor. These paratextual elements empower the audience to more deeply engage with the comic, and, in the case of *Bitch Planet*, allow for an additional measure of authorial control over the reception of the text. It is common for a comic publisher to use the back pages to introduce a reader to an upcoming series, or advertise goods like toys, action figures, decor, party supplies, video games, books, comic conventions, other upcoming comic series or events, and superhero themed clothing, movies, and television shows (McAllister and MacAuley 97). All of these advertisements promote the reproduction of capitalism and/or comic book culture. They neither advance the story of a comic nor tie in to the overall message of the writer, penciller, or the collaborative team involved in the production of the comic.

Laurenn McCubbin is the creator of the paratext at the back of each issue of *Bitch Planet* — a major portion of the "fringe" which mediates between the comic and its audience. McCubbin, an assistant professor of Comics and Narrative Practice at Columbia College of Art & Design, acknowledges in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, that the satirical

aspect of the back material was a "challenge" as one cannot be too on the nose with satire (Owen). To meet the test of a good satire, and to illustrate authorial control, McCubbin's work must connect the paratext to De Connick and DeLandro's text, and it successfully disrupts the usual comic cultural practice of advertising by taking over that space and calling out oppressive practices. On the back page of every one of the 10 issues of the 2014 Image Comic series *Bitch Planet,* there are advertisements, but McCubbin's designs are not selling actual products, goods or services. These ads are parodies, highlighting cultural absurdity both within the fictional, sci-fi world of *Bitch Planet* and without. Some satirize ads found at the back of Golden Age comics, and others target contemporary beauty and diet ads; but all critique mainstream beauty culture, consumerism, capitalism, heteronormativity, misogyny, and white supremacy. These satirical advertisements — included both in the original serial publications and the two anthology volumes of *Bitch Planet* — are not typical of the combined advertising and comic medium. They act as what Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* defines as "culture jamming": artistic subterfuge designed to "hijack" corporate messaging (Klein 280).

Creators of corporate messages do not live in a cultural vacuum: they operate in our western, capitalist hetero-patriarchal society, and their ads uphold an ideal — what Raymond Williams in "Advertising: The Magic System" calls a "consumption ideal" (188). The controlling minority have a significant portion of society's wealth and are powerful influencers, making money from selling products to the masses. Thus, our choices are dictated to us, rather than being autonomous decisions from their inception to completion. We are inundated with advertisements without our consent, and therefore, when artists use "culture jamming", they are fighting back against the theft of our public spaces and reclaiming that space (Klein 281). The replacement of what would otherwise be prime corporate advertising space in *Bitch Planet* with

ads that are anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchy, anti-heteronormativity and anti-beauty culture is what Klein would describe as "subvertising": "us[ing] Madison Avenue's aesthetics against itself" (guerilla artist Rodrigues de Gerada, qtd in Klein 286). Queer theorist Michael Warner argues in his essay "Publics and Counterpublics" that a public reading of a text is most widely disseminated to the dominant culture. In a western, colonialist hetero-patriarchal society, that dominant culture is white, cis gender, heterosexual, and middle-class, and those not within that particularly narrow demographic are "assumed to not matter" (49). The same is true in *Bitch Planet's* dystopia.

As outlined in my introduction, *Bitch Planet* was originally published in a serial format: a monthly publication for the first three issues, while issues four through 10 were published sporadically: the last (but not final) issue was published April 26, 2017. As the issues advance in numbering, the back page advertisement styles change. *Bitch Planet* issues 1 through 3 all use the cyan, magenta and yellow colour palette of early comics (McCloud 187). This heavy use of primary colours helped early Golden Era comics stand out from the dull grey of newsprint (McCloud 187). In *Bitch Planet,* the colours aid in coding these satirical ads for the audience as both an homage and a parody of early comic ads. The colour palette provides us with a sense of time as the narrative of the main story progresses. Issues 1 through 3 are where we are first introduced to the world of *Bitch Planet,* the story and its main characters. So in these early comics, each of these satirical advertisements announces itself in a header: "HEY KIDS, PATRIARCHY!", a nod to the cultural estimation that comics were simply low-brow, cheap entertainment for children (Stein 161).

The ads echo *Bitch Planet*'s main narrative elements and rhetoric. As stated previously, in issue 3, the reader is introduced to Penny's backstory and is witness to the systemic racism

and fatphobia she endures. The men tormenting her are shocked when Penny is forced to produce an image of her ideal self, but what she sees is herself exactly as she is: a proud, fat Black woman — her very essence liberating to those who would embrace “non-compliance”. In the back material there are constant reminders to comply: for example, Issue 3 includes a quarter page diet ad telling women to “stop being so fat and gross you big fatty!” (McCubbin 3: 32). Hints of revolution are on the horizon, however: a smaller advertisement for middle finger “spirit fingers” for fans of the “N.C.” teams in the megaton games is a nod to Penny’s resolve not to be broken by a system intent on breaking her.

Returning to the first issue of *Bitch Planet*, the back page advertisements, under the heading “Hey Kids, Patriarchy!”, are heavy on text and light on images. On first glance, the page could simply be a colourful classified. The images are retro and the colour palette is almost completely washed in yellow, with sparse use of other primary colours, or even black. One advertisement is selling “X-Ray Specs: The Perfect Way to See Through His Intentions” (McCubbin 1: 27). These are $1 — a hefty price in 1945 (the Golden era year this comic evokes) and a relatively inexpensive amount in 2014, the year when this issue was released. As Paul Gallager observes in “Vintage comic book ads that were too good to be true”, “X-Ray Specs” were a typical Golden Age era comic advertisement.

[Figure 8: "X-Ray Specs" (Gallager)]

The most common versions of this ad featured a young boy or man wearing the "X-Ray Specs" and either looking at his hand or looking at a woman, who was placed in the background. "X-Ray Specs" offered the consumer the titillating prospect of voyeurism — a glimpse of a naked woman. Ironically (or not, considering the gay panic during the McCarthy era), the wording of the original advertisements for "X-Ray Specs" uses the masculine pronoun to suggest an innocent male friendship despite the illustration depicting a woman: "Look at your friend. Is that really his body you 'see' under his clothes?" (Gallagher).

[Figure 9: “X-Ray Specs”, *Bitch Planet*, Issue 1: backmatter. Script and art by Laurenn McCubbin]

In *Bitch Planet’s* parody “X-Ray Specs” advertisement, a young woman is now the wearer of the “X-Ray Specs”, reversing the genders. A lone white male figure is featured in the middle of the advertisement frame, suggesting the centring of white men in a colonial patriarchy — the controlling minority. There is, however, capitalized wording on the man’s shirt: “FUTURE OF TORMENT AND PAIN” (McCubbin 1: 27). The colonial patriarchy has been a source of torment, pain and violence for women, especially women of colour, racialized men and non-binary folks, LGBTQ persons, the disabled, and other marginalized people. To top off McCubbin’s ironic use of “truth in advertising”, she announces in the fine print of her version of the “X-Ray Specs” ad, “Surprise insight! Scientific obfuscation really works” (1: 27). The “X-Ray Specs” are an example of a junk science: they are simply plastic frames with cardboard lenses:

> The lens is made up of two pieces of thin cardboard, more like cardstock, with a hole in the center, and in between those cardboard pieces is an actual feather. (Gallagher)

These so-called “X-Ray Specs” do not allow a viewer to see through flesh or clothes. They do not work, but the “scientific obfuscation” that is highlighted in the *Bitch Planet* fake advertisement, as advertised, really does work. Scientific obfuscation is the practice by which women are excluded from the expert arena of the scientific profession and then declared by male scientists to have smaller brains, to be naturally better at childrearing and domesticity, to be hard to please in the bedroom, and to be inherently chaste (Saini). In her 2017 study *Inferior, How Science Got Women Wrong-and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story*, Angela Saini examines the use of academic and peer-reviewed science to construct social stereotypes about women which aided in the quashing of their right to equal pay, diminished their ability to attain leadership roles, and created a moral standard that repressed their sexual agency (151).

The next bit of wording in the “X-Ray Specs” satirical advertisement reads:

> That guy in the black Taurus who followed you home? Is that really insecurity you “see” beneath his clothes? Or is it a gun? Is he probably going to murder you?
>
> LOADS OF LAUGHS AND FUN AT PARTIES. (McCubbin 1: 27)

There is an obvious allusion here to the Twitter hashtag #YesAllWomen, which began in May 2014 following the murder of six women in Isla Vista, California by self-proclaimed misogynist George Chen (Weiss “The Power of #YesAllWomen”). The online Twitter movement was an opportunity for women to declare publicly their lived experiences of unwanted male attention, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape — and strategize how to protect themselves. It was also, partly, a response to #notallmen, the Twitter hashtag that was posted as a reminder that not all men commit violence against women, while deflecting the fact that many men do (and that too many men simply stand by and let that violence occur). *Bitch Planet* #1 was published seven months after #YesAllWomen.

The man depicted in *Bitch Planet*'s "X-Ray Specs" ad could be any man, but he is very clearly a white man. The social construct of race that occurred during the era of colonization propelled white men to the very top of the power structure grid. White men are rich because they are white, Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The colonist obfuscates, Fanon explains. He creates an alternate narrative in which the colonizer is portrayed as "the wretched of the earth", when that role really belongs to the colonized:

> As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil. (73)

The bait-and-switch tactic used by De Connick and DeLandro in the narrative of Issue 1 is also used in the "X-Ray Specs" ad with the apparent reversal of gender roles. McCubbin's revision uses "culture jamming" to disrupt the structure of the original advertisement. While the woman is objectified in the original advertisement, the opposite is not true here: the man is not objectified by the female gaze. By putting on the glasses, her sight is heightened and she is made aware of the threat he presents. In McCubbin's revision of the original ad, a white woman is wearing the glasses — standing-in for all women. Many white women fall victim to domestic and gender-based violence, sexual assault, fatphobia, homophobia, transphobia, but they do not face racism! In 2020, white women earned 0.81 cents for every $1 white men make; Black, Hispanic, Aboriginal U.S. women made 0.75 cents for every $1 white men make ("Gender Pay Gap Statistics for 2020").

Any examination of an intersectional text would be lacking if it did not recognize that white women have played a significant role in both upholding and downplaying white supremacy (Kelly, "Gather Your People: White Women Must Hold Each Other Accountable For

Racism”). Presenting a white woman as a stand-in for all women in the satirical paratext of *Bitch Planet* suggests to the reader, either that McCubbin is systematically ignorant in her design, or that she is perpetuating the dominant narrative in order to encourage commentary about it. *Bitch Planet* is focused on the effects of a hetero-patriarchal colonist society on women of colour. White men have enacted violence against women of colour, and in particular Black women with little to no consequences**.** More than 150 years after the end of slavery, Black women can be assaulted, raped or killed by men — mostly white — with impunity (Jacobs). White women’s complicity in maintaining whiteness is critiqued in the main narrative, particularly through characters like Mother Siebertling, the white school headmistress who attempts to force assimilation into whiteness of Penny Rolle through her teachings and the straightening of Penny’s hair; and Officer Violet Whitney, the white woman from Georgia who, as a prison guard, actively tortures and abuses the women imprisoned in the ACO women, and in spite of her collusion with the regime, ends up as Kam’s cellmate. Historically, white men have used science and the media to shift the blame of sexual assault back on to Black women by framing them both as liars and promiscuous. Often Black women are silenced by what Fanon calls the “spokesperson for the colonizer”: the police (71) who uphold white supremacy through their continued violence against Black women and men. According to a 2014 examination of race and police by the *New York Times*, “The Race Gap in America’s Police Departments”, police forces, particularly in the USA, are significantly more white than the population they enforce (Ashkenas and Park). However, the *Bitch Planet*’s X-Ray Specs advertisement depicts a white man as “Shrodinger’s Rapist”: embodying the concept that a woman must approach men with heightened suspicion, based on overwhelming statistics of violence by men against women. This man is wearing some type of uniform: black pants, black shirt, and white collar, in a style not

unlike that of a priest. Fanon echoes the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass in accusing the Church and, in particular, American Christianity of upholding oppression, colonialism and white supremacy:

> The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. (Fanon 74)

The man's arm is outstretched; his mouth is slightly open and he seems to be speaking to someone. He is holding something in one of his hands: it could be a weapon, or simply a wallet. He could be asking a woman out on a date, a priest advocating against reproductive rights, a CEO hoarding money, power and generational wealth through tax havens, or a police officer who believes racial profiling makes his city safer. He should ultimately be recognized as a double threat to the women of colour so heavily represented in the ACO.

It is interesting that the satirical advertisement sells the "X-Ray Specs" for just $1. It was, of course, common for junk items like this to sell for this amount (Gallagher). However, the $1 in the parody version in *Bitch Planet* may also refer indirectly to the gender pay gap, as in this case, the target audience for this satirical ad is female. If only a woman could buy these, she would not have to constantly fear men! Potentially she could stop violence against her if she only had the tools — the "X-Ray Specs."

Violence against women is normalized in so many ways in contemporary society: rape jokes, the exploitation of women in advertising and mass media, and gender narratives that reinforce the idea that heterosexual women require male support. Women in heterosexual relationships are at the most risk for violence (Wood 242) and yet will commonly "dissociate" the violence from their male partner (252). This results in a normalization of intimate partner

violence (253), and, as the *Bitch Planet* advertisement acknowledges, that a heterosexual woman's male partner can be "loads of laughs and fun at parties" and still is "probably going to murder you" (McCubbin 1: 27). The line "loads of laughs and fun at parties" is taken directly from the original advertisements this paratext satirizes. The dark undercurrent of the original advertisements is the awareness that men engage in sexual assault and non-consensual behaviour as though it is permissible and "fun."

The back page advertisements in *Bitch Planet* Issue 4 use an entirely different colour palette, this time softer, pastel colours: pink, purple, lavender, and mint green. These colours are coded as feminine and the headline "Advice For Ladies" solidifies this codification (McCubbin 4: 29).

[Figure #10: "Advice for Ladies", *Bitch Planet* Issue 4, backmatter script and art by Laurenn McCubbin.]

Every ad on this page — for recipes, douches, medication and lubricants — is meant to be read by a heterosexual woman because each tells the women readers that their goal in life is to please their husbands. Women will be so much more agreeable to their husbands' wants if they simply take "Agreenex" (McCubbin 4: 29). A recipe from Penny's grandmother, Bertha, for muffins implores women to cook for their families, emphasizing the cultural expectation that all women will want to experience motherhood. As these ads trace the narrative of the story, the reader has already witnessed Bertha, Penny's grandmother, being arrested in Issue 3, during Penny's backstory. The muffin company uses Bertha's recipe and likeness while Bertha (and later her granddaughter, Penny, who would have also benefited from the profits of the sales of the muffins) is imprisoned. There is a long history of white companies profiting off of Black faces to sell goods: for example, Quaker Oats (Pearl Milling Company) used Aunt Jemima, a racist stereotype of a content and loyal Black enslaved woman (the "mammy"), as the name and image of a ready-made pancake mix company from 1889 until February 2021 (Holzwarth; Alcorn).

Lesbian women do not need to rely on men in the same ways as heterosexual women, but their sexuality and bodies are still exploited for male pleasure. In the main narrative of *Bitch Planet* Issue 4 – the same issue in which the advertisements so pointedly offer "Advice for Ladies" on how to remain attractive to a man – we meet lesbians Fanny and Renelle. Fanny is a cis white woman with curly red locks, and one pink highlight above her bangs. However, her hair is not the most noticeable aspect of her appearance: that would be the futuristic eye patch emblazoned with the letters "NC": for "Non-Compliant." Ironically, with her curly red locks, Fanny evokes the plucky Little Orphan Annie (created by Harold Gray; first published August 5, 1924 in the New York *Daily News*), a popular comic strip character whose highly politicized storylines revolved around her life in the home of her adoptive, capitalist father "Daddy

Warbucks", while comically foiling leftwing criminals, bullies, and similar antagonists. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans men and women are pointedly ignored in the satirical *Bitch Planet* advertisements. Several ads assume that the readers are heterosexual white women, and that the woman's role is to nurture her culturally expected family. One ad is for a douche product not-so-subtly named "Flavour Patch Snatch" and another, for "Niagra" (McCubbin 4: 29), a female genital lubricant, both assuming that all women have vaginas. But not all women have vaginas. These advertisements are not written for queer folks, and as Michael Warner observes, when queer people are excluded from the public, they must create a "counter public" (Warner 87-88).

> Within the gay/queer counterpublic, no one is in the closet. The presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended. (86-87)

As Warner argues, the type of discourse constructed to address a counterpublic — a queer audience — is "certain to meet intense resistance" (87). In the world of *Bitch Planet*, an advertisement directed to a queer audience would be a grounds for an immediate sentence to the ACO, and in contemporary society, result in censorship. In December 2019, a lesbian wedding ad appeared on The Hallmark Channel, and the public uproar from the conservative audience caused the company to remove the ad — although the TV station later reversed its decision (Duffy and Judge "Hallmark Channel Apologizes"). The fictional advertisements in *Bitch Planet* straddle this divide as they address both the in-world audience of the comic and the external readership. A counterpublic examination of *Bitch Planet's* satirical paratext imagines these ads were read by Fanny and Renelle, and inhabitants of the Protectorate of the Patriarchy. It may also see them embracing their pink locks of hair and reclaiming the branding of "non-compliance." The pink streak in Renelle and Fanny's hair is powerful here. Pink is both a feminine-coded hue,

and has a historical connection with the oppression and liberation of gay and lesbian people. The downward-turned pink triangle was used in Nazi Germany (1933-1945) to identify a homosexual person to be eradicated, and an upward-facing pink triangle was used to break the silence over the deaths of gay men, in particular, during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s ("Keeping the Pink Triangle in Context"). The pink hue then suggests their defiance of the system; this is further evidenced by Fanny's "N.C." eye covering, a nod to the theological Christian underpinnings of the New Protectorate, which would have seen Fanny's eye removed under a literal interpretation of the Matthew 5:29 biblical verse "if thine right eye offends thee, pluck it out." Each element of the advertisements in *Bitch Planet* serves a purpose. On a naive first glance, they seem incongruent with the rest of the narrative. Most would seem, if one were to simply view them as legitimate articles and not parodies, to uphold a hetero-patriarchal colonist state. Upon further examination, however, they pull a naive public out of its complacency by critiquing and deconstructing the hetero-patriarchal narrative the reader is fed. They link together with the narrative to inform the reader of time and space in which the text takes place.

The essays at the back of each issue more directly address the same racial and feminist topics raised in the text and contextualize them for the audience. The essayists were solicited by the creators for their epistemic, lived, and theoretical knowledge to educate the reader on the socio-political issues metaphorically raised in the visual narrative, and satirically explored in the paratext. In Issue 8, when Muenda "Mo" Kogo is introduced, Mey Valdiva Rude, a trans woman, editor and comic consultant, writes about trans representation in comics, and real world violence against trans women. Issue 6, the stand-alone backstory of Meiko Maki, contains an interview about feminist movements in Japan with Megumi Igarashi, a Japanese artist dedicated to

demystifying female sexuality, and who has been censored for publishing data that could be used to create three-dimensional models of her vagina. Issue 10, in which the prisoners and Eleanor Doane are freed, was published April 2017, three months after the inauguration of Donald Trump. In the back material of that comic, American political correspondent Jamelle Bouie offers suggestions for direct action that readers can take to safeguard civil, immigrant, and reproductive rights — such as donating to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), the National Immigration Law Centre, and Planned Parenthood. The essays provide an intersectional feminist perspective (Urcaregui 53) and contextualization, while DeConnick in her writer's column reveals the process of *Bitch Planet*'s narrative creation and expounds on its commentary on current socio-political events.

CHAPTER 4

Expanding "Authorship": Franchise and Fandom

The concept of authorship is fluid in comics. In *The Invisible Art of Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud suggests that audience involvement is required to move action in static images from panel to panel in order to form a sequential narrative (42). However, *Bitch Planet* expands authorship of the series through McCubbin's paratext (as explored in Chapter 3), the publication of scholarly socio-political commentary and essays, and DeConnick's writer's column. Then, in 2016, one year before the first issue of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* was published, DeConnick and De Landro further broadened the scope of authorship by soliciting creators to craft short stories set in the world of *Bitch Planet*. DeConnick spoke to Alex Abad-Santos of *Vox* about how she and De Landro were developing *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature* to "pay forward some of the support we've had":

> Each issue will feature three eight-page, in-world *Bitch Planet* stories by creators that Valentine and I approached, with an emphasis on new creators, women, and people of colour. (Abad-Santos)

There are 33 creators of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* including Andrew Aydin (writer of "Without and Within" with artist Joanna Estep), who co-created the three-part graphic biography *March* with and about the late civil rights icon John Lewis; Cheryl Lynn Eaton (writer of "Windows" with artist Maria Fröhlich), who founded The Ormes Society in 2007, to promote and encourage Black women in comics; Danielle Henderson (writer of "This is Good for You" with artists Ho Stein and Ted Brandt), writer of *Feminist Ryan Gosling*, a text that includes

feminist theory in bite size pieces accompanied by pictures of the conventionally attractive actor Ryan Gosling, and who wrote the essay at the back of *Bitch Planet* #1; Mindy Lee ("Life of a Sportsman" with Marc Deschamps), a game concept designer; Vita Ayala ("To Be Free" with Rossi Gifford), a non-binary queer Afro-Latinx who has written comics for DC; and Alissa Sallah, (writer of "Those People" with artist Alec Valerius), who has also illustrated the Image Comics series, *Sleepless* (first issue published December 2017). Some of the 33 creators identify their positionalities as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Cuban, queer, and/or any other intersection of marginalized representation in their biographies listed at the end of the collected trade of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature*, Book 1. In an intersectional feminist reading of *Bitch Planet*, Maite Urcaregui suggests that expanding the comic to include those same oppressed peoples whose experiences are being explored moves the comic beyond "simply pointing out oppression" (65) to activism. Simultaneously, publishing and promoting the work of lesser-known and marginalized creators amplifies and empowers their voices, allowing for increased equity in a medium where the creatives have historically been white and male. As Resha notes "marginalized peoples are exploited within this system because comics and their derivative media will often feature people of marginalized identities, but not as writers, artists, or editors" (78). Racialized persons, women, LGBTQ, and disabled persons (and those with identities that intersect within these categories) all have lived experiences that can lend to more authentic and, potentially, portrayals of diverse groups devoid of stereotypes.

The creators of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* emulate the satirical and dystopic approach employed by DeConnick and De Landro, extending the critical lens on white, male, and heterosexual privilege, and illustrating the harm these societal actors inflict upon oppressed peoples. For example, while unacknowledged white privilege is a recurring feature of *Bitch*

Planet's narrative, several stories in the *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!* series explicitly address whiteness through the lenses of satire and dystopia, that often intersect and overlap as the underlying message is revealed. While DeConnick and De Landro's *Bitch Planet* operates in a "linear form of seriality" (Kelleter and Stein 2012, transl and qtd in Stein 172) that would ordinarily be closed to "creative appropriation", the franchising of *Bitch Planet* expands the core narrative. While offering additional epistemic authenticity by diverse creators, "parallel and overlapping" stories within that same universe develop a "form of multilinear seriality" (Stein 172). These stories, produced by professional creators in the same serial comic format, introduce readers to different characters, times, places, spaces as a way to round out their understanding of the world of *Bitch Planet*.

The *Triple Feature!* anthology features stories that illustrate the many ways in which patriarchy and white supremacy cause harm and violence. Issue 1 is subtitled "Where Bitches Come From," and includes three tales of women denied agency and moved to resistance. In Issue 2, subtitled "Tales of Non Compliance", the short comic "What's Love Got to Do With It?" by Jordan Clark and Naomi Franquiz highlights unearned entitlements given to those born with white or light skin, and denied to women with darker skin. In Issue 3, "Those People" by Alissa Saleh and Alec Valerius examines police brutality against queer people, and in particular, queer people of colour; and "Big Game" by Dylan Meconis presents readers with the way in which white supremacy and the police state dehumanize and criminalize non-white mothers, as well as the separation of non-white families. Issue 4 offers a study of the macho world of professional Duemila, the national pastime game of the New Protectorate, in "A Life of a Sportsman", and the destructive addiction to plastic surgery in "Body Mods". In Issue 5, "Everyone's Grandma is a Little Bit Feminist", Matt Fraction (DeConnick's husband) and Elsa Charretier connect white

supremacy to anti-Semitism, and imagine the need to banish radical old women to a new facility in the ACO.

Also in Issue 5, "Mirror, Mirror", written by Jon Tesui with art by Saskia Gutekunst, investigates racist Hollywood practices of "Yellowface", (wherein white actors will portray caricatures of Asian people, while systematically denying Asian people equitable roles in films), and cultural appropriation. In this short story, two candidates with nearly identical resumes on paper compete for a leading role in a major martial arts film, a genre rich in Asian history and culture. Asian actor Jackson Wong is even told by the film casting directors that his martial arts reel is the "best of the bunch," whereas white actor Van Norris — an obvious nod to American action star Chuck Norris — is deemed to be someone that the audience "can "really connect with" and "relate to." The story ends with the white male actor handily securing the lead role, while the Asian male actor is relegated to the off-camera role of stunt coordinator. This is what whitewashing is: framing whiteness as a "universal" trait, and the only race capable of being relatable to every demographic. The reality is that Asian actors are still rarely hired as lead actors in action movies (Fang "Hollywood Continues to Perpetuate Harmful Asian Stereotypes"), and the Hollywood industry has continued whitewashing (Fang "Hollywood"), even when those movies are steeped in Asian culture (Pulliam-Moore).

The final short comic in the series is "Basic Bitch" by Alobi, Bassey Nyambi, and Nyambi Nyambi, and Chris Visions, all Black creators. It is a rich and layered story that draws attention to multiple cultural practices and attitudes which make white people — and white women in particular — complicit in maintaining white supremacy. Blackface and colourism, cultural appropriation in fashion, food and language, intolerance, police brutality, and anti-

Blackness in the media are all touched upon in “Basic Bitch.” The comic also tackles intersectionality and misogynoir.

As explored in Chapter 1, intersectionality and misogynoir are important critical race theory terms when contextualizing the way *Bitch Planet* utilizes satirical exaggeration and parody. “Basic Bitch” provides readers with a mirror of contemporary culture — but it is a fun house mirror, distorting reality while still being recognizable. As in many of the other comics in the *Triple Feature!* anthology, Alobi, the Nyambi family and Chris Visions heighten reality to distort it, including futuristic technology that can change the level of melanin in a person’s skin. This concept has been used haphazardly before in comics, most notably by white creators Robert Kanigher, Werner Roth and Vince Colletta, who scripted, pencilled and inked (respectively) the “I’m Curious (Black)” issue of *Superman’s Girlfriend, Lois Lane* #106 (published DC Comics November 1970). In this issue, Lois Lane uses Kryptonian technology to change from her white skin to Black because she believes there is no way a Black person will talk to her, a white reporter. She wants to infiltrate Metropolis’ Black community, “Little Africa”, in order to win accolades, rather than out of a genuine concern for the Black people who live there, and who tell her that they experience white-forced segregation, slum landlords, poor schooling, and violence from white and Black criminals. As Lois walks around in Metropolis as a Black woman, she experiences the discrimination faced by Black people on a daily basis; but, by the end of the story, she is white again, and her experience is never addressed by again.

In “Basic Bitch”, the creators play with the concept of the curious white woman who wants to emulate Black culture, but is not prepared for what it actually means to be Black. In the first panels, we encounter three white women at a bar. The scene illustrates how white women, in particular, have appropriated Black culture. As Denise Cuthbert observes in “Beg, borrow or

steal: The politics of Cultural Appropriation", this "theft and expropriation" of the culture of the colonized has been ongoing since colonization (Cuthbert 257).

[Figure 11: "Basic Bitch", *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!*, Issue 5: 17. Script by Alobi, Bassey Nyambi, and Nyambi Nyambi and art by Chris Visions.]

There's a lot happening in this tableau. The bar where these women meet is called "Paula Beans Soul Food" — a reference to Paula Deen, a notorious TV celebrity chef who was initially ostracized for her racism in 2013 and later made a comeback (Koman). "Paula Beans Soul Food" is patronized exclusively by white people, although the bartender and waiter are Black. This indicates who in the racial hierarchy gets to experience pleasure from profit, and whose labour is being exploited for that pleasure. Outside the bar are billboards advertising "BLK is the NW BLK" with an image of a white woman who has her hair done in Bantu knots, an African hairstyle that white singer Adele wore her hair in summer 2020 ("Adele wears Bantu knots"), causing a major outcry in the media. There is an incredibly complex cultural history in Black women's hair. For example, Bantu knots are a protective style, which means that the hairstyle protects the naturally curly type of hair of many Black women. As Judith Carney explains in *Black Rice*, complex patterns of braiding evolved when enslaved women wove seeds into their hair as a means of survival when forced into slavery as well as during and while escaping enslavement (Carney). Furthermore, Black hair has been continually policed in colonial societies (Mar). It has been viewed as unprofessional in the workplace, and Black men and women have been denied employment and advancement in the workplace simply for wearing their hair in styles that are best for their hair types. Only five of the 50 states in the US have passed the *CROWN Act* introduced in 2019*,* which would prohibit race-based hair discrimination, into law ("Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair"). And yet, as happens too often in contemporary society, white women who wear imitation dreadlocks, locs, braids, twists, corn-rows or Bantu knots are seen as trendy and cool.

"You look Black, for real," the white women say to one another. These white women have appropriated physical manifestations of Black women — their lips, butts and hair —

exoticizing and sexualizing them as a fashion identity; thereby reducing Black women, as Yancy explains in his essay "Looking at Whiteness: Whiting Up and Blacking Out in *White Chicks*", to their anatomy. Yancy calls this the "best of two worlds: the social, aesthetic, and economic power that comes with whiteness and the sexually primitive steatopygic attribute of the black female body" (121). "Steatopygic" can be defined, essentially, as having a fat ass; colonizers sexualized this specifically in Black women's bodies**.** For example, in 19th century, South African Saartjie Baartman — known as "the Hottentot Venus" — was enslaved and displayed as a sideshow exhibit throughout Europe simply for having these physical attributes (Howard). Lastly, on this page, these women are appropriating African American English or Black American English (AAVE/AAE/BAE), a recognized dialect of English, historically criticized as being inferior compared to Standard American English (SAE) (Baugh) . "Finally, this hoe is calling. Y'all know she ***stays*** trying to make an entrance," says one of the women.

The woman they are referring to is their friend, Paige Anderson, our "Basic Bitch." The term "basic bitch" is Hip-Hop slang, connoting a white woman, usually middle to upper-class, between the ages of 15 to 25 who appropriates cultural trends. She is a follower, not an originator (Malone). The comic introduces Paige by showing her in a beauty salon leafing through a beauty magazine. Paige wants to make her friends envious, and the beautician suggests a skin darkening treatment so that Paige can look like celebrity and rapper Say-Say. Paige hesitates because Say-Say is "***Black*** Black." This aversion to dark (***Black*** black) skin or preference for lighter skin is known as Colorism. Aisha Phoenix writes in "Colorism and the Politics of Beauty" that colonial beauty myths constructed through the lens of white supremacy deem those of darker skin to be ugly, unkempt, and untrustworthy (97). Paige does not want to relinquish her unearned white privilege by being in the body of a "Black" Black woman.

The beautician reassures Paige that she will look just like Say-Say, who is a "superstar" and that Paige, a white woman, can "pull off ***anything.***" This statement reveals how Paige, as a white woman, has the privilege of being able to "wear" skin color the same way she is able to wear Black hairstyles. Reassured of her privilege, Paige agrees to add melanin to her skin. But when she re-enters the beauty salon waiting room with dark skin, the white patrons are shown wearing expressions of shock, concern and disgust.

[Figure 12: "Basic Bitch", *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!*, Issue 5: 21. Script by Alobi, Bassey Nyambi, and Nyambi Nyambi and art by Chris Visions.

This chemical darkening of Paige's skin is a form of Blackface, a type of costume makeup that dates to the 1830s which Eric Lott describes in "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy" as a "collective masturbation fantasy" (26). Minstrelsy, in which white actors would put Black on their face and act out their contrived ideas of Black people for "ridicule" (Yancy 111), is the most well-known type of Blackface, but the definition encompasses any instance where white people put on skin darkening make-up and act "Black" for profit and entertainment — a practice which continues to this day. For example, Judy

Garland acted in Blackface in *Everybody Sing* in 1938; comedian Sarah Silverman leaned into Blackface for a comedy sketch in 2007; and white feminist Tina Fey's show *30 Rock* featured Blackface three separate times, the latest as recent as 2010 (Abramovitch). In the age of photoshop, and digital facial modifications Deja and Wanna Thompson identified a type of digital Blackface they term "Blackfishing" (Rasool; Thompson) in which non-Black (but especially white women) darken their skin and "embody an exoticized aesthetic" to look like a racially ambiguous or mixed Black woman in an attempt to increase their "marketability" (Sobande 141).

When non-Black people don Blackface, they do so in contexts where they do not actually experience Blackness. However, the comic takes Paige to the real world, where she finds herself in a situation familiar to Black people — interacting with the police. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought attention to the differences in how white people and Black people are treated by the police, and the comic presents the disparity of that experience by contrasting the experience of Paige's friends and that of Paige herself. Paige and her friends leave separately to go to the Say-Say concert where Paige intends to surprise them with her "spicy A.F." (Alobi, Nyambi, et. al. 5: 19) look. Meanwhile, on their way, Paige's three white friends are pulled over by police.

> White woman driver: Perfect.
>
> Police: Do you know why I pulled you over?
>
> Driver: Because you like me?
>
> Police: Tints. Couldn't see you.
>
> White woman passenger: And now that you do, are you going to ask us out or arrest us?
>
> Police: *Ha*. Where are you ladies headed?

Passenger: Downtown for some music and then a coffee. Care to join?

Police: Drive safely. And enjoy the concert. Maybe I'll see you there.

(5: 20)

Once their tinted car window rolls down to reveal that these women are white, the officer acts casually with them. While it is not stated outright, it is understood between the police and these white women that their whiteness allows them to break the law for speeding and drive away unscathed. The women flirt, and the police officer flirts back, even laughing at their attempts. He uses "I" with them, not "we" — an indication of a personal connection. It is a short interaction, more of a "meet-cute". In fact, the officer even suggests he will see these women later at the Say-Say concert.

Then Paige is pulled over by the same policeman for speeding. The interaction begins almost exactly as when her three friends were stopped:

Paige: Perfect.

Police: Do you know why we pulled you over?

Paige: Because you like me?

Police: Tints. Couldn't see you.

Paige: I'm… in a convertible. With the windows rolled down.

Police: Have you been drinking?

(5: 22)

Paige now looks like a Black woman, and so does not receive the same kind of treatment as her white friends. The officer assumes she is inebriated (she's not) and then insults her as he approaches, claiming that he could not see her dark skinned body at night. Just as her friends did,

Paige attempts to flirt with the officer, but unlike her friends, she is rebuffed. When the officer demands her “identification” (5: and it identifies her as white, the situation escalates. This reflects the societal double standard in which white people are allowed to appropriate the culture of the Other, and yet when a person of colour attempts to gain some of the privileges of white people, they face violence. He yells at Paige, demanding that she “get out of the fucking car, Black bitch!” (5: 23)

[Figure 13: “Basic Bitch”, *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature!*, Issue 5: 23. Script by Alobi, Bassey Nyambi, and Nyambi Nyambi and art by Chris Visions.]

While the reader has seen Paige’s journey and knows that she has donned Blackface as a fashion statement, the officer sees her as Black, and is treating her as he would, presumably, treat any Black person. Paige protests, “I’m not Black!”, but the police officers treat her, a white woman, as though she is who she appears to be — a Black woman.

The final panels of “Basic Bitch” show a newscast where Paige is reduced to being just another Black victim of police brutality. The language of the newscasters to describe Paige’s death evokes the passive “bloodless” language described by John Leary in “Officer Involved Obfuscation” that “obscures agency and avoids the question of culpability.” There is deflection and indifference in the passive voice. Furthermore, blame is laid at the victim’s feet with the use of the phrase “altercation with authorities” (5: 24). The murderous police officers are extolled as upstanding family men who were “uninjured” in the incident (5: 24).

Contrasting photos of the victim and murderers are featured within the comic panels: the photo of Paige — the victim — shows her looking angry, while the photo of one of the officers who killed her is a wedding photo. This is an all too common sleight-of-hand to criminalize the Black victim and elevate the white perpetrator's goodness in the eyes of the public. The newscast then moves on to a fashion/entertainment reel on the "newest fashion craze" — dashikis. "We don't know where they came from, but we're sure glad they're here," (5: 24) the text reads, juxtaposed to an image of a blonde, white model with her hair in a braided top knot, wearing brass neck coils, hoop earrings, and gold bangles.

The reader's laughter at a white woman appropriating Black fashion is unsettled as we witness another Black body killed by police brutality. It is this discomfort that the reader should hold onto as Bassey Nyambi, Alobi, Nyambi Nyambi, and Chris Visions use "reverse discourse" (Weaver 31), employing what would usually be viewed as a racist stereotype (Blackface) and turning it into a mockery of white people wanting to appropriate Black culture without acknowledgement, reparation or correction of the ongoing harm white society does to Black people. Satire here is doing what it does best: punching up by mocking the dominant group to unpack culturally racist actions.

"Basic Bitch" is the final entry in the *Triple Feature!* series, and it is unclear to-date if there will be more entries in this series, as De Landro and DeConnick state in their shared column at the end of *Bitch Planet: Triple Feature* #5 that their goal was to "help folks get their next comics gig" (5: 25). The stories in *Triple Feature!* amplify the socio-political messaging already established in *Bitch Planet*, widening the authorial range even further with the letter columns and photos of fans dressed in costume that allow fans to be transformed into authors

themselves (Stein 168) as the creative team of *Bitch Planet* promotes, reads, publishes and replies to fan content.

In both the main series and *Triple Feature*, the letter columns of *Bitch Planet* act as confessionals, allowing fans a public forum to question and discuss societal double standards of gender, sexist bosses, being female in fields overrepresented by men, being male feminists, and some, like "Claire T", whose letter was published in Issue 4, wish they were "more non-compliant". Readers are allowed a "say" (Stein 168) in the content. For example, in Issue 5 of *Bitch Planet*, Mey Rude and Aria Ehren — both of whom would go on to consult for Issue 8 of the series — each pen letters discussing trans representation in comics and identifying trans women as women. Their letters were responded to by different members of the *Bitch Planet* creative team, turning the editors into readers of fan-generated content (168); and Danielle Henderson points out misinformation and assumptions of feminism by one reader in Issue 6. While letter columns have existed in comics, and particularly in superhero comics, since at least the 1950s (167), additional elements deployed in *Bitch Planet* widen the "back-and-forth flow of communication between the comic book producers and their readers" (167) reproduced in the use of letter columns. Letter columns are often just that — for letters. However, *Bitch Planet* opened up new opportunities for fans to engage with the comic through self-submission of work beyond just letters. This is what Brenna Clarke Gray in "Public Facing Feminisms: Subverting the lettercol in *Bitch Planet*" highlights as real "community building" within the letter columns that "subverts" their original intention as fan discourse to call the creators and readers in to educate one another in feminist discourse, and hold one another accountable (338). The fans also submitted pictures of De Landro's "NC" design tattooed on their bodies, a public proclamation of their non-compliance (Urcaregui 63; Goodyear); some even put their own spin on De

Landro's design by adding new elements, like the transgender flag, a clenched Black Lives Matter fist, as well as visual iconography of superheroines like Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, and the late, gender-bending singer David Bowie. Additionally, fans generated and submitted art of Kam, Meiko, and Penny, among others, as well as photos of themselves cosplaying (dressing up) in the orange prison jumpsuits the protagonists of *Bitch Planet* are forced to wear. Through the *Bitch Planet* letter columns, fans have been able to develop a community based on shared progressive political views, and resistance to regressive and discriminatory societal practices, within the pages of *Bitch Planet* and in their own lives, in turn becoming published authors themselves. By expanding the franchise through collaborations with up-and-coming creators, particularly those from marginalized communities, and broadening communal solidarity through the letter columns and shared online interest, *Bitch Planet* has been able to advance critical race, feminist, gender and queer theoretical frameworks. It has become a forum for collective authorship, for celebration of resistance and activism — for "non compliance".

CONCLUSION

Bitch Planet was consciously created as an acknowledgement of the paradigm of oppression. DeConnick and De Landro's series builds on what for more than 80 years was a heavily white, cis gender, and masculine genre and uses it to advance critical race, feminist, gender, and queer theoretical frameworks. It plays with tropes from film genres like science fiction, Blaxploitation and women-in-prison, exploring them both in the narrative and the visual presentation. Satire is used in many different elements of the series to question the assumptions underlying the fascist regime of the New Protectorate — assumptions that are held in our own white supremacist, heteronormative, cis-centric, and patriarchal society. There is a radical departure in this comic from the medium's history of misogynist stereotypes and poor, if any, female representation in the depiction of the main characters — Penny Rolle, Kamau ("Kam") Kogo, Meiko Maki, Eleanor Doone, and Muenda ("Mo") Kogo. Like many other comics, *Bitch Planet* exploits women's bodies, but this exploitative voyeurism is used to shock its audience and to encourage them to question the violence against those bodies they see happening when Penny is struck by prison guards for protesting obvious injustices, or when Meiko is casually killed for laughing at an opponent in a practice Duemila match.

DeConnick and De Landro work as a collaborative team, and advance equity in the comic industry by inviting the participation of comic creators with marginalized identities to share stories that deeply connect awith the socio-political issues developed in the main narrative of *Bitch Planet*. These acts of equity and representation broaden what comics can achieve. *Bitch Planet* is one of the seminal graphic texts emanating out of the Blue Age of comics because of its use of both print and digital media to call its creative team and readership to advocacy and

authorship: growing the comic form through its use of paratext to satirize socio-political issues and incorporate intersectional feminist thinking, and through calling on its readership into creatorship.

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