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**Dystopian Misogyny: Returning to 1970s Feminist Theory through
Kelly Sue DeConnick's *Bitch Planet***

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Abstract

Although the Civil Rights Movement led the way for African American equality during the 1960s, activist women struggled to find a permanent place in the movement since key leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael, were openly discriminating against them and marginalizing their concerns. Women of color, radical women, working class women, and lesbians were ignored, and looked to “women’s liberation,” a branch of feminism which focused on consciousness-raising and social action, for answers. Women’s liberationists were also committed to theory making, and expressed their radical social and political ideas through countless essays and manifestos, such as Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), Jo Freeman’s *BITCH Manifesto* (1968), the *Redstockings Manifesto* (1969), and the Radicalesbians’ *The Woman-Identified Woman* (1970).

Kelly Sue DeConnick’s American comic book series *Bitch Planet* (2014–present) is a modern adaptation of the issues expressed in these radical second wave feminist manifestos. *Bitch Planet* takes place in a dystopian future ruled by men where disobedient women—those who refuse to conform to traditional female gender roles, such as being subordinate, attractive (thin), and obedient “housewives”—are exiled to a different planet, Bitch Planet, as punishment. Although *Bitch Planet* takes place in a dystopian future, as this article will argue, it uses the theoretical framework of radical second wave feminists to explore the problems of contemporary American women.

Keywords

Comic books, Misogyny, Kelly Sue DeConnick, Dystopia

Distopik Cinsiyetçilik: Kelly Sue DeConnick'in *Bitch Planet* Eseri ile 1970'lerin Feminist Kuramına Geri Dönüş

Öz

Sivil Haklar Hareketi Afrikalı Amerikalıların eşitliği yolunda önemli bir rol üstlenmesine rağmen, birçok aktivist kadın kendilerine bu hareketin içinde bir yer edinmekte zorlandılar. Stokely Carmichael gibi liderler, kadınlara karşı cinsiyetçi bir ayrımcılık yaparak kadınların sorunlarına önem göstermedi. 1960ların ikinci yarısında, cinsiyetçilik ve kadınların bastırılmışlıklarına karşı yeni bir feminist akım ortaya çıktı. Aktivistler, Valeria Solanan'ın *SCUM Manifestosu* (1967), Jo Freeman'ın *BITCH Manifestosu* (1968), *Redstockings Manifestosu* (1969) ve Radikalezbiyenler'in *The Woman-Identified Woman* (1970) manifestosu gibi beyannameler ve makaleler üreterek radikal ve siyasi fikirlerini ifade ettiler ve yeni kuramlar ortaya koydular.

Kelly Sue DeConnick'in Amerikan çizgi roman serisi *Bitch Planet* (2014-günümüz) bu manifestolarda söz edilen sorunların günümüze olan uyarlamasıdır. *Bitch Planet* erkeklerin hüküm sürdüğü, geleneksel kadın rollerine (boyun eğen, çekici ve zayıf ev kadını) karşı çıkan kadınların *Bitch Planet* adındaki başka bir gezegene sürgün edildiği bir distopyayı anlatmaktadır. *Bitch Planet* gelecekte bir distopyada geçmesine rağmen, bu makalenin tartışacağı gibi, Amerikan kadınının günümüzde yaşadığı sorunları, 1960 ve 1970lerin kuramları çerçevesinde ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Çizgi roman, kadın nefreti, Distopya, Kelly Sue DeConnick, Cinsiyetçilik

Although the Civil Rights Movement led the way for African American equality during the 1960s, activist women struggled to find a permanent place in the movement since key leaders, such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, were openly discriminating against them

and marginalizing their concerns. Civil Rights leaders, and Black Nationalists in particular, “tended to cast women as mothers of a new peoplehood rather than as political actors themselves. Black men were to lead and defend their people; black women were to give birth to and nurture them” (DuBois 631). Dennis J. Urban states that “as the Civil Rights Movement progressed and SNCC’s conditions worsened, more women began to recognize and react to their own oppression within the organization, helping to spawn the modern feminist movement of the 1960s” (Dennis 185). Therefore, during the second half of the 1960s, a new wave of feminism emerged out of black and white women’s frustration with this sexism and misogyny, and their lack of power within the Civil Rights Movement. In order to voice their concerns in the political arena, American second wave feminists founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, under the leadership of Betty Friedan. However, NOW was too white, heterosexual, middle class, antiquated and out of touch according to many younger women. Moreover, women of color, radical women, working class women, and queer women were ignored, or sometimes outright rejected (Friedan’s statement on lesbians as the “lavender menace” immediately comes to mind). Marginalized by mainstream feminists, these individuals looked to “women’s liberation,” a more radical, but inclusive, branch of feminism which focused on consciousness-raising and social action, for answers. Black and white women’s liberationists were also committed to theory making, and expressed their revolutionary social and political ideas through countless essays and manifestos—such as Jo Freeman’s *BITCH Manifesto* (1968), the *Redstockings Manifesto* (1969), and the Radicalesbians’ *The Woman-Identified Woman* (1970)—crucial texts which set the stage for the feminist writing and activism that would come to define the 1970s.

Kelly Sue DeConnick’s and Valentine De Landro’s comic book series *Bitch Planet* (2014–present) is a modern adaptation of the issues expressed in such 1970s feminist theory. *Bitch Planet* takes place in a dystopian future ruled by men where disobedient women—those who refuse to conform to traditional female gender roles, such as being subordinate, attractive (thin), and obedient “housewives”—are exiled to a different planet, Bitch Planet, as punishment. In this dystopian future, men control society, and their leaders, referred to as the “Fathers,” reinforce the “father knows best” patriarchal ideology that women’s liberationists tried to (but could not completely) deconstruct. Women

living in this dystopia are subjected to harassment and exploitation, and if they try to oppose it—in other words, if they challenge the male utopia the “Fathers” are trying to construct—they are sent to Bitch Planet for their “crime.”

Although *Bitch Planet* takes place in a dystopian future, as this article will argue, it uses the theoretical framework of 1970s radical second wave feminism to explore the problems of contemporary American women. For example, the main characters, who are trying to escape Bitch Planet’s prison, share the same attributes mentioned in the *BITCH Manifesto*: they are “aggressive, strong-minded, competitive, big, tall and strong” women fighting to end injustice, inequality and misogyny. (S)exploitation, (hetero)sexism, pornography and the manipulation of (racialized) women’s bodies by the capitalist system—all important 1970s feminist issues—are also running themes in *Bitch Planet*. Moreover, the comic book series also suggests that while feminist activism has certainly improved women’s lives, in many ways they still suffer from the same oppressive institutions, and their rights are always in danger of being taken away by the “Fathers”—a theme with a great deal of contemporary relevance.

This article will also reach beyond the content of this specific comic book series to analyze broader, persistent feminist concerns, such as the continued under-representation of women in the comic book industry, and the failure of women to enter such professions and receive equal pay—issues that clearly serve as a bridge between twenty-first century feminists and those of the 1970s. The two largest comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, are responsible for more than sixty percent of sales worldwide. Yet, despite being the leading force in comic book industry, they are lagging when it comes to the representation of women, both as characters and creators. While women comprise fifty-one percent of the world’s population, roughly fifteen percent of comic book characters, illustrators and writers are female, which poses a significant problem on many levels, especially in terms of how women are gendered and sexualized in comic books. As DeConnick, who is an activist in this realm, has expressed in numerous interviews, this has led women who are being marginalized and exploited by the mainstream comic book industry to seek alternative venues (like Image Comics, which publishes *Bitch Planet*), much like the radical women’s liberationists of the 1970s.

1. Women and the Comic Book Industry

Before tracing the ways in which second wave feminist theory has informed *Bitch Planet*, it is necessary to understand how today's comic book industry operates and why, despite the gains of the 1960s and 70s, it is still in need of serious feminist intervention. According to February 2017's Unit Market Shares, Marvel Comics is leading the industry with a 33.6% market share, closely followed by DC Entertainment's 33.4%. Image Comics, the publisher of *Bitch Planet*, occupies third place with 18.1% (Diamond Comics). The common misconception concerning the comic book industry is that it is comprised of (mostly male) superhero comics. Although this is far from reality, it still does not change the fact that the superhero genre is the most dominant comic book genre in the United States. Women, either as writers, illustrators, or as superhero characters themselves, are underrepresented in comics, and "to say that comic book industry has a slight gender skew is like saying Superman is kind of strong" (Hickey). This under-representation stems from the male domination of the industry. Superhero comics are overwhelmingly written by men, to be read by other men. Since Marvel and DC together make up more than 60% of the industry, I will predicate my argument on those two companies: "In February 2017, DC put out 82 new comic books featuring 729 credited creators, 610 men and 79 women... Marvel released 91 comics from 811 creators, 672 men and 139 women" (Johnston).

A similar pattern can be observed when we look at the number of major characters that appears in each universe. "Of characters with gender data and 100 or more appearances (294 DC characters and 414 Marvel characters), only 29.0 percent of DC's are female, and a similar 31.1 percent of the Marvel crowd is [female]" (Hickey). When women make up fifty-one percent of world's population, thirty percent becomes a big problem of under-representation, especially given *how* they are represented in these comics. Male and female superheroes are depicted in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles, underscoring the fact that power, especially for women, only exists in the realm of fantasy. "Female characters are hyper-sexualised, while male characters embody male power fantasies; heterosexual romances are foregrounded; and protagonists are primarily themselves white men" (Gray and Wright 264). This problem seems to stem from the number of (mostly white) male writers. As previously states, 84% of the creators who work for

Marvel or DC are male. At this point, it stops being a problem of numbers, becoming, instead, a problem of how those numbers are distributed. Women are mostly writing female-centered comics, while men are writing everything. “At DC, 38 men are writing male-led books compared to 1 woman, while 12 men are writing female-led books compared to 11 women. At Marvel, 43 men are writing male-led books compared to 1 woman, while 16 men are writing female-led books compared to 8 women. At both publishers, there are more men writing women than women writing women, and writing women is about the only thing both publishers have women doing” (Johnston). The numbers are, not surprisingly, even more alarming when race is included as a factor.

The aforementioned data also underscores how limited women’s work is in this specific workplace. Since men have a large say in how characters should be created, female superheroes/characters emerge out of mostly white heterosexual male fantasies that are unfriendly at best, and misogynistic and racist at worst, towards women. Every female comic book superhero, and their movie/TV adaptations, are physically designed in a way that is appealing to heterosexual men, usually displaying as much skin as possible. The Black Widow is never seen without her dark red lipstick and revealing black leather top which feeds into the idea of fashion over function, and S&M fantasies, and not women’s empowerment. The portrayal of female superheroes as heterosexual male fantasy objects is an issue that is at the center of Kelly Sue DeConnick’s feminist agenda, and she blames it for the decline of the female comic book readership. As she has remarked in an interview, “The percentage of female readership went down in the country when superhero comics became...aggressively unfriendly to women” (Campbell 89).

Jon Hogan best summarizes why such blatant sexism and racism—in the workplace and in the comic books themselves—has become part of the contemporary feminist agenda: “Although many scholars ignore them, superhero comic books...give us the greatest insight into society. Analyzing the superhero is the perfect means of analyzing the culture. The superhero is such an asset in sociological research because the hero provides a record of the values prized by a society. Just like the works of Homer for the Greeks, superhero comic books are a social record of what our society sees as the most important aspirations one can hold”

(200). Since women in comic books are mostly in subordinate positions (unless they are leading characters, which is rare) and physically appealing to men, it implies that women in society should replicate such gendered expectations. Behind every successful male superhero there stands a beautiful woman. This is also true for the actors playing the characters in movie/TV adaptations. For Iron Man, there is Pepper Potts, for Spider-Man there is Mary Jane Watson, for the Flash, there is Iris West. Since these men are “superheroes” of the patriarchal world (Earth), their women must adhere to appropriate human gender roles, also designed by men. Thus men emerge as supreme beings on every level. Yet as DeConnick states, “There is nothing—and even if you break it down into the superhero genre, which is the dominant genre in this country—there’s nothing inherently masculine about that! It can be done in a way that is aggressively unfriendly to women. And has been done in a way that is aggressively unfriendly to women!” (Campbell 99). *Bitch Planet*, as DeConnick asserts, is a corrective to this situation.

2. *Bitch Planet*

There are no female superheroes in Kelly Sue DeConnick’s comic book series, *Bitch Planet*; only ordinary women trying to accomplish extraordinary things—like sexual, gender and racial equality. *Bitch Planet* takes place in a dystopian future where men control everything. As DeConnick describes, “In this world, if you are a woman who does not fit in the box assigned her—if you are too loud or too opinionated, or too quiet or too religious, too atheist, too black, too brown, too any of the things that they don’t want you to be—you are labeled noncompliant. And if you are deemed terminally noncompliant, you are shipped off-world to an Auxiliary Compliance Outpost that is colloquially referred to as ‘Bitch Planet’” (DeConnickNPR). The Auxiliary Compliance Outpost is modeled after the concept of the “Prison-Industrial Complex,” which builds on the idea that prisons are a solution to economic, social and political problems. As Eric Schlosser states, there are nearly two million Americans behind bars, and just like in *Bitch Planet* the majority of them are nonviolent offenders (Schlosser). On page 16 of the second issue of *Bitch Planet*, Specialist Operative Whitney explains the dynamics of the Prison- Industrial Complex to Kamou Kogo: “Prisons are expensive to run. And the women here... They need purpose. The director believes a dual solution could be found in duemila(a type of duel)” (DeConnick #2, 16). In short, the system wants women to fight

for the Fathers' entertainment while paying for the costs of the system that puts them behind bars.

Similar to today's prisons, most of the inmates in *Bitch Planet* are women of color—a reality that DeConnick incorporates into her aesthetics, which evoke the (s)exploitation and blacksploitation movies of 1960s and 70s and the feminist criticism that accompanied these genres. According to Brenna Clarke Gray and David N. Wright, “Women-in-prison films emerged first in the 1930s and 1940s as melodramatic B-movies, but by the 1960s and 1970s belonged squarely to exploitation cinema, as the combination of violence against female bodies, lesbianism, sadistic humiliation, and rebellion made them a prime ground for the titillating filmmaking of the era” (265). The cover of the first issue of *Bitch Planet* features a silhouette of a naked women, in chains, giving the finger to men, juxtaposed against a bright pink background, suggesting not only the banality of the sexual abuse of the female body, but also female oppression and rage. The physical and sexual abuse of the female body is a reoccurring motif throughout the series, and abuse takes many shapes and forms. In the first few pages of the first issue, Penny, a physically large black woman, confronts both racism and the one-size-fits-all body ideology by saying “Where’m I supposed to put my other tit?” (DeConnick #1, 7). In response, she is beaten by a nightstick, a phallic object representing male authority, wielded by a white male prison guard.

Although *Bitch Planet* takes place in a futuristic dystopia, it clearly deals with a range of contemporary issues, including sexual harassment in the workplace. On the first page of the second issue, a man, presumably one of the “Fathers,” physically accosts every waitress that passes by in a restaurant, and they cannot respond since they know they will lose their jobs, be deemed non-compliant, and sent to *Bitch Planet*. As the current “Me Too” movement illustrates, this is not an issue that disappeared with second wave feminism or with Anita Hill. It persists at every level of society, and many women have remained silent just to survive.

Voyeurism, or the practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others while nude or engaged in sexual activity, is another form of sexual abuse that pervades this dystopia. As radical feminist activist Andrea Dworkin first argued in the 1970s, and DeConnick aptly illustrates in *Bitch Planet*, such “innocuous” male fantasies, which have been normalized in sexploitation movies and pornography, almost

always lead to sexual abuse, violence, and even death, for women. In *Bitch Planet*, voyeurism comes in two different forms: simply peeping through a hole in the wall and through “big brother” electronic cameras. There are two ever-present guards in the prison, monitoring the women’s every move. Like in Michel Foucault’s formulation of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, they are visible, yet invisible, and it is the mere idea of their omnipotent eyes, always somehow present, that disciplines the women’s behavior. In fourth issue of *Bitch Planet*, one of the guards, Tommy Peepers, takes on the role of a voyeuristic Peeping Tom, striking a deal with the inmates: he agrees to overlook their gender-transgressing “misbehavior” (in this case homosexual activity) and in exchange, they allow him to watch them in the showers (DeConnick #4, 11). Valentine De Landro’s artistic style further improves and imposes the idea of being watched every second. Every page is filled with neon colors that create a cyberpunk theme that enhances the technological “watching behind the monitors” type of voyeurism. While clearly DeConnick’s “lesbian prison sex scenes,” with their grittiness and blatant use of nudity, are the reminiscent of the sexploitation films of the 1960s and 70s, in this case she turns the tables. On *Bitch Planet*, the “bitches,” or imprisoned transgressive women, wield just as much, if not more, power than the men who seek to discipline and punish them. They exploit male fantasy (in this case voyeurism) to advance their own agenda, which includes sexual freedom, and even controlling the system through traditionally male tools such as language, violence, and a menacing bodily presence.

3. *Bitch Planet* and Radical Second Wave Feminist Theory

Bitch Planet revolves around protagonists Kamau Kogo’s and Penny Rolle’s lives in prison and their attempt to escape. This escape has two different meanings: on its most literal level, they are trying to escape from an actual planet prison; in a more figurative sense, they are trying escape from a male dominated society. Comic books serve the same function in the real world—they are a means of escape from reality, and our reality is a world that is dominated by white heterosexual men.

The nonconformist women trying to escape *Bitch Planet*’s prison share the many of the same attributes of second wave radical feminists, whose texts basically serve as the intellectual framework of the comic book series. The most direct intertextual link between *Bitch Planet* and this genre of feminist theory is the *BITCH Manifesto*, which was written by political activist Jo Freeman in 1968. As Freeman argues, historically,

“bitch” has always had a negative connotation, and was a term used to degrade women who refused to play by the rules of men. As Freeman states, “‘bitch’ serves the social function of isolating and discrediting a class of people who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior” (214). This is essentially the core of *Bitch Planet*. In its most literal sense, women who do not “conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior,” also known as non-compliants, are sent to a different planet, Bitch Planet, where they are isolated from mainstream society. These women are particularly dangerous because they criticize and question social rules. Therefore, when taken seriously, “a Bitch is a threat to the social structures which enslave women and the social values which justify keeping them in their place” (Freeman 215). Since they are regarded as “marginal beings in society,” bitches have to be contained in somewhere outside of society, in this case, Bitch Planet. However, their status as dangerous liminal figures simultaneously renders these women as powerful threats to male hegemony and social order. Like Freeman, they come to embrace the power that comes with being a bitch, claiming the term for themselves (in much the same way that queer has been claimed by the LGBTQIA+ community) and using it to negotiate status for themselves within the albeit narrow confines of their world.

As Karrin Vasby Anderson conveys, “‘Bitch’ not only is a defining archetype of female identity, but also functions as a contemporary rhetoric of containment disciplining women with power... Using the term ‘bitch’ in casual conversation, political punditry, and public debate is the most recent incarnation of sexual containment in American political culture. Its use is widespread and the potential consequences for women are significant. ‘Bitch’ is more than an epithet—it is a rhetorical frame, a metaphor that shapes political narratives and governs popular understanding of women leaders” (600–601). In *Bitch Planet*, this containment of women leaders is exercised through Eleanor Doane, a “nasty woman” (politically reminiscent of Hillary Clinton) who was the leader of the free world (presumably president of the United States) before she was sent to Bitch Planet as a prisoner. Not much else is revealed about this character, perhaps intentionally, as her main function is to serve as an iconoclastic leader of women’s liberation in the comic book series. In fact, she is so inspirational that the women who oppose the government call themselves the “Children of Eleanor Doane.” Upon closer examination, however, Eleanor is a far

more complicated feminist hero—an “everywoman” for every woman. An African American who is on a mission to free her fellow women, she also begs comparison to abolitionist and former slave Harriet Tubman, who helped countless bonds people to escape to the North through the Underground Railroad. Moreover, the “Children of Eleanor Doane” all wear red lipstick, which becomes an empowering way to mark themselves as a group. Specifically, they apply it in the style of Native American war paint, reinforcing the idea that they are feminist warriors, fighting for sexual, gender, and racial justice against a common enemy: the white male heterosexual patriarchal power structure.

Red is a prominent motif in *Bitch Planet*—for example, all the prisoners wear red jumpsuits, which is meant to symbolize their aggressive behavior. However, red is also significant because traditionally, it has been associated with Marxist thought and proletariat revolution, and the women of *Bitch Planet* certainly represent the proletariat within the context of the comic book series, preparing to revolt and exact revenge against the patriarchal capitalist structure which oppresses and imprisons them. The color serves as another link to radical second wave feminist theory in that it immediately brings to mind the Redstockings, a short-lived women’s liberation organization whose “name combined ‘bluestockings,’ a pejorative word used in the eighteenth and nineteenth century for educated women, with ‘red’ for the group’s radical and socialist roots” (Redstockings 220). The Redstockings rose to prominence in the late 1960s through their eponymous 1969 manifesto and their goal to unite all women against male oppression in order to fight for liberation. The Redstockings Manifesto opens with this powerful proclamation: “After centuries of individual and preliminary political struggle, women are uniting to achieve their final liberation from male supremacy. Redstockings is dedicated to building this unity and winning our freedom” (Redstockings 220). This call to action to unify against male authority becomes a running theme in *Bitch Planet*, especially in the ninth and tenth issues. During the riot against the male prison guards, Kamau tells Penny that her sister might be her blood, but that they are all her sisters. Another uniting figure is President Eleanor Doane, who emerges as the leader of this sisterhood. As she remarks at the beginning of the revolution, “So much time lost. Well... I have **risen**. We don’t have time to let our fear divide us, my children. We have a **world** to reclaim!” (DeConnick #9, 24).

As the Redstockings Manifesto conveys, “We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest” (Redstockings 221). This statement basically describes the power structure of *Bitch Planet*. Men oppress and sexually exploit women as they see fit, and a “few men” called the “Fathers” dominate society, including men without power. When Bert wants to tell Makoto that his daughter Meiko was murdered in prison, Father Edward Josephson (who is the Media Father) forbids him to do so (DeConnick #7, 4). The Fathers are constantly competing for power and are outright hostile towards one another, such as when Father John Johnson (the High Father) steals Edward Josephson’s speech for the opening ceremony (DeConnick #10, 3).

According to the *BITCH Manifesto*, all bitches share most of the following list of characteristics: “*Personality*. Bitches are aggressive, assertive, domineering, overbearing, strong-minded, spiteful, hostile, direct, blunt, candid, obnoxious, thick-skinned, hard-headed, vicious, dogmatic, competent, competitive, pushy, loud-mouthed, independent, stubborn, demanding, manipulative, egoistic, driven, achieving, overwhelming, threatening, scary, ambitious, tough, brassy, masculine, boisterous, and turbulent” (Freeman 214). This list of characteristics summarizes the protagonists of the series, Kamau Kogo and Penny Rolle. When they try to pin the murder of Marian Collins on Kamau through psychological torture, her thick-skin and stubbornness allows her to survive the torture tactics. She is also strong-minded, achieving, direct, and loud-mouthed, always fighting against injustice. Moreover, she is tough, and ambitious, which allows her to become the leader of the women’s rights (or in this case bitch’s rights) movement in prison, and a leading force of the rebellion.

Physically speaking, bitches are “big, tall, strong, large, loud, brash, harsh, awkward, clumsy, sprawling, strident, ugly. Bitches move their bodies freely rather than restrain, refine and confine their motions in their proper feminine manner... Bitches are not pretty” (Freeman 214). In third issue of *Bitch Planet*, Penny—the archetypal bitch—is presented to the Fathers for evaluation. According to their report, Penny is guilty of a long list of crimes: “Habitual offender, insubordination, assault, assault, assault, repeated citations for aesthetic

offenses, capillary disfigurement and wanton obesity” (DeConnick #3, 4). The Fathers claim that they are only there to help Penny, and that it “pains” them to see her like this. A strong, tall, large and “ugly” woman of color, she defies all the physical attributes and gender roles expected from women. Instead of being compliant, she is insubordinate, instead of being thin and invisible, she is large and takes up space, instead of being white, she is black, instead of acting feminine, she is aggressive, masculine and unafraid to use physical force when needed. The Fathers want to use Penny as an experiment for the “Cerebral Action–Potential Integration and Extrapolation Matrix” which would allow them to see what Penny thinks of herself in her mind. The main reason behind this experiment is to see how Penny perceives her “ideal self” and to compare it to her actual self. Of course, her “ideal self” should match the image the Fathers have created for women in society. When the Fathers reflect the image of her ideal self in a mirror, they see Penny’s current image, smiling and muttering “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it...I ain’t broke...And you bastards ain’t **never** gonna break me” (DeConnick #3, 26). Clearly through Penny, DeConnick not only subverts restrictive, often white male, definitions of womanhood, beauty, and gender, but also critiques the destructive power these institutions have on contemporary women’s lives.

Another second wave feminist group, the Radicalesbians, also address the issue of living by male-defined female gender roles and sexual rules in their 1970 manifesto, *The Woman–Identified Woman*. As they state, “By virtue of having been brought up in a male society, we have internalized the male culture’s definition of ourselves. That definition consigns us to sexual and family functions, and excludes us from defining and shaping the terms of our lives” (Radicalesbians 241). Before they marry, women are regarded as their fathers’ daughters, and after they marry (presumably men), they become their husbands’ wives. In other words, ownership passes from one patriarchal figure to another, which is further reinforced by the designators “Miss” and “Mrs.” Lesbianism breaks this pattern of belonging to a man, and proclaims to the world that women do not need men to function—in fact, they can even thrive without them. In a prison full of women, lesbianism becomes a gynocentric personal and political choice that allows the characters to bond and create a world of survival and sisterhood, without men. Although Kamau herself is not sexually a lesbian, her sister Muenda “Morowa” Kogo is, but both choose to live

woman-centered lives. In their world, men are dispensable, and like Tommy Peepers, can be manipulated and exploited through their own sexual fantasies. Thus in the context of the comic book, lesbianism is not an alternative to men. Quite the contrary; it is a conscious choice, even in the presence of men, that empowers women. These homosocial (and sometimes homoerotic/homosexual) relationships are not sites of male pleasure. Rather, they serve as the foundation of the matriarchy of *Bitch Planet*, the only power structure that can fight the patriarchy.

By using lesbian scenes as a form of rebellion instead of a source for pleasure, DeConnick breaks away from male expectations, or as Gray and White state, “*Bitch Planet* toys with the expectations the reader brings to the genre and centers authentic female relationships over superficial titillation. The bodies and their interactions act together as disruptions to the expected, which is all the more powerful when we consider the market, even in 2016, that mainstream monthly comics are sold within” (266). Even the title of the section, “The Obligatory Shower Scene”(DeConnick #4, 7), subverts male expectations of prison narratives. Contemporary television shows like *Orange is the New Black* reinforce established women-in-prison narratives, most of which appeal to heterosexual male fantasies. They expect inmates to be attractive women like Piper Chapman (portrayed by Taylor Schilling) or Alex Vause (portrayed by Laura Prepon). Moreover, the fantasy also includes male prison guards who control female prisoners through sexual domination: if women do not obey, they will get the “stick” like Penny does, either physically (a nightstick) and/or sexually (rape). Historically, unruly inferiors have always been disciplined with a stick of some sort, as Mary Crow Dog’s essay “Civilize them with a Stick” and President Theodore Roosevelt’s “speak softly, and carry a big stick” foreign policy bring to mind. The women of *Bitch Planet* defy “the stick” in all of its reincarnations.

Valentine De Landro’s aesthetic style further reinforces the subversive feminist messages of *Bitch Planet*. She uses light and shadows to give the impression of “deformed,” dirty bodies, therefore resisting heteronormative depictions of womanhood. Since the women of *Bitch Planet* are not ashamed of their bodies, there are no attempts to hide their physical features. In fact, they are celebrated: each cover depicts a different act of feminist rebellion. While the cover of the first issue features a silhouette of a naked, chained, oppressed woman giving the

finger to the Fathers, the cover of the third issue is an “angry” drawing of Penny with her “born big” tattoo, and the cover of the fourth issue features the women protesting together.

Likewise, the “superheroes” of *Bitch Planet* are not depicted in the white, (hetero)sexual style of mainstream comic books. Penny is a big, “ugly,” black, aggressive lesbian figure with burnt hair, a typical bitch from the *Bitch Manifesto*. Moreover, their physical and emotional scars are always present. De Landro illustrates how badly the women are hurt during and aftermath of the rebellion through extensive usage of blood, and like the mythic Amazon women, they are proud of their battle scars. Moreover, physically and politically, Kamau Kogo is drawn to resemble Angela Davis, suggesting that while in reality women struggled to find a permanent place in the Black Power Movement due to the sexist discrimination of key leaders, on *Bitch Planet*, there is room, and power, for all types of rebellious women. In this context, Angela Davis takes on the role of supreme bitch, a leader among leaders. In the comic book as in real life, “The face of Angela Davis, framed by the hale of her natural Afro hairstyle, is one of the signature female images of the era. Sought by the FBI for her alleged role in a 1970 revolt of black militant prisoners in Marin County, California, she gave herself up after a few months in hiding and spent over a year in federal prison. There, using only the resources available, she wrote one of the earliest historical analyses of the position of women within slavery” (DuBois 632). Like Angela Davis, Kamau Kogo becomes an iconic figure of rebellion.

As Anderson has explicated, “As early as 1400, a bitch was defined as ‘a malicious, spiteful, promiscuous or otherwise despicable woman’ (602). Over time, the definition of bitch has evolved to include different nuances, without straying too much from its original meaning. According to Jo Freeman, “Bitches are marginal beings in this society. They have no proper place and wouldn’t stay in it if they did. They are women but not true women. They are human but they are not male” (218). Freeman injected power into the meaning of “bitch” by claiming the word for all women and telling them to embrace their inner bitch. “Bitches have to learn to accept themselves as Bitches and to give their sisters the support they need to be creative Bitches. Bitches must learn to be proud of their strength and proud of themselves... We must realize that Bitch is Beautiful and that we have nothing to lose” (Freeman 218). Just like Penny knows when looking into the mirror of

her inner self that black is beautiful, she knows that bitch is beautiful, radical women are beautiful, and lesbians are beautiful, and channels this inner strength to fight the Fathers every step of the way. In other words, she embraces the role of the superhero of radical second wave feminist theory.

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