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“Reduce Your Appearance instantly!” Representations of the Female Body in Comic Books for Women and Girls

Abstract:

When comic books for girls and women entered the US market in the 1940s they offered a space for an alternative representation of female bodies to the sexually explicit presentations of women in superhero comics that dominated the medium. Comics for girls and women, however, had their own agendas and limitations. With their focus on romance, fashion, and beauty they presented a narrow set of body shapes and types as beautiful and desirable. In presenting ideal female bodies as a woman’s path to success and happiness, comic books, such as *Miss America Comics,* educated their readers on how to subject their bodies to hegemonic beauty ideals. Comic storylines, advice columns, and advertisements went hand-in-hand presenting the female body as currency that, when properly managed, allowed girls and women to elevate their social status, and provided a path to marital bliss and motherhood, or, in some cases, as their only possibility to escape from both. Thus, beyond arguing that comic books were a purveyor of gender-normative messages for girls and presented normative images of the female body, this article also argues that mainstream comics presented their readers occasionally with contradictions, thus negotiating women’s roles in society. By discussing feminist underground comics in the 1970s and 80s, it also shows how feminist activists used comics to make feminist thought accessible to a broader readership and used the medium to educate girls and women about their rights, possibilities, and desires. Using the example of the representation of female bodies in comic books, “Reduce Your Appearance Instantly” contributes to the discussion of popular culture as a distributer of ideology as well as a space to undermine hegemonic power relations.

Keywords: comic books, feminist comics, female body representation

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Assumptions of lowbrow and juvenile shallowness to the contrary, comic strips are historically a site of complex cultural work and negotiation. Or, as the Spanish poet and scholar of feminist comics Ana Merino writes: "The Comic is a space for cultural expression that absorbs … societal dramas and re-writes and re-interprets them" (46). Comics are a genre that in the past has served the distribution of hegemonic ideology as well as giving marginalized radical ideas an easily accessible forum. I will demonstrate comic books' potential as space of cultural negotiation by looking at the representation of female bodies in comic books for girls and women, with an emphasis on the *Miss America Comics* in the 1940s and 50s, and *Tits 'n' Clits* in the 1970s and 80s.

Beginning the 1940s, comic publishers tried to groom a female readership for comic books, creating separate titles appealing to girls through what was believed to be women's interests. *Miss America Comics*, *Miss Beverly Hills of Hollywood,* and similar titles focused on romance, glamor, clothing, and beauty, teaching girls how to embody ideal American femininity. The comic strips were embedded in advice columns and advertisements, suggesting that femininity is to be bought, and is the product of information and hard work rather than biology. Readers were taught to strive for impossible body shapes and perfect body postures, and to evaluate their bodies critically to understand in what ways they were lacking. Compliance with the represented beauty ideals, promised the texts, would provide romance, love, and success. Girls were thus educated to see their bodies as an investment requiring work and money to resemble the arbitrary and historically contingent ideals of femininity that would bring happiness.

But bodies groomed into normative femininity were not only shown to be a path to marital bliss and motherhood, comics depicted them also as a possibility for women to escape from traditional female roles. Some comic book storylines suggested that women who submitted to the norms of ideal femininity would be able to escape lives as housewives and mothers by pursuing careers as actresses and models, and live a life of adventure and excitement. These heroines stayed unmarried in perpetuity, with men courting them, but never making the choice to get married (which, in the 1950s, would have ended their careers). Comic books for girls thus occasionally undermined the ideals they propagated, suggesting that women could aim higher than running a household, and that such a life outside the home might be more desirable.

When feminist underground comics emerged in the 1970s, they ironically subverted comic books' obsession with the female body. Narrating stories about menstruation and women's desires, the frames showed female bodies in a variety of shapes, challenging the idea of hegemonic beauty. Instead of groomed, contained, and ready for consumption, female bodies appeared here as lived-in, unruly, desiring rather than being desired, and unpredictable. Comics served here as a medium to take back the female body from how it was represented in mainstream pop culture by showing it in its diversity and possibilities.

Scholarship in recent years, such as Jeffrey Johnson's *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society* or Mike Madrid's *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*, has explored how comic books reflected their specific historical moments, occasionally, as in Madrid's work, paying attention to questions of gender. Some scholarship has specifically focused on comic strips addressing women and girls, such as Michael Barson's *Agonizing Love: The Golden Era of Romance Comics* or Trina Robbins' *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines,* doing the invaluable work of excavating a history of comic book titles for women, a line of tradition that has been mostly forgotten today. However, scholarship on comics rarely discusses the negotiation of gender and power relations. Starting from the existing research on comics, this article therefore explores the gendered and ideological content of comic books addressing girls and women.

When comic books entered American pop culture in the 1930s, they mostly told the stories of superheroes, people with extraordinary powers and bodies. While they invited their adolescent readership to identify with the protagonists, the stories were clearly located in the realm of the fictional and imaginary. But in the 1940s comic books started to zoom in on quotidian heroes, presumably ordinary people, no longer representing the superhuman, but the human body. This shift of focus, I argue, increased the disciplinary potential of comic books. Even if to reach the ideal of a 23'' waist may seem as utopian to some as to jump from one skyscraper to another, comic books featuring presumably ordinary heroes suggested that it was feasible and desirable to its readers, thus creating a new outlet to spread normative body ideals.

Super Bodies: Women's Bodies and Early Superhero Comics

With the launch of *Superman* in 1938, the early comic books were dominated by superhero stories and tales of superhuman feats and skills (Robbins 8). From its beginnings, the superhero genre presented the perhaps most blatant and exploitative depiction of female bodies in mainstream comic strips with its exaggerated drawing of female superheroes and villains, such as Supergirl or Catwoman. None of their accentuated waists, breasts, and hips were necessary to commit or prevent crimes. Super heroines, their depiction suggested, were ostentatiously female before they were villains or heroes. The super heroine always possessed what was intended to be a representation of extraordinary beauty. She was an object of pleasure for her male counterparts and viewers, an alluring mixture of distraction and destruction. This may not be surprising as the superhero genre catered to the tastes of a male and adolescent readership, despite the fact that almost half of the readership of early comics in the 1940s were women and girls (Lavin 93). The first representations of women in comics, the superhero's sweetheart as well as the super heroine, followed the traditions of femmes fatales, vamps, and "good girls" borrowed from pulp fiction. Comics allowed the addition of dream bodies to the already established stock figures.

Beginning with the first comic strip heroines, such as Sheena, “Queen of the Jungle” launched in 1938, women in comics were dressed in costumes that left as little as possible to the imagination (Madrid 39). As male superhero costumes were designed to emphasize strength or agility, female superhero costumes emphasized the wearer’s female body, making it her most prominent super-skill. During the war comic books featured a few patriotic female superheroes, such as Wonder Woman, which had an enthusiastic following among servicemen (Lavin 95). Dressed in a leotard with an American flag design, she not only provided nationalist messages but also pin-up views of her body. Before the advent of men’s magazines, the provocatively dressed women heroes allowed fantastical representations of the female body that curbed the potentially feminist messages their actions suggested. After World War II, the market for superheroes dwindled, abandoned by a readership tired of fighting and battles (Robbins 11). To keep their readerships’ interest, female superheroes were even more bluntly pornographically represented. The naked arms and legs race was ended by the Comics Code in 1954, when the comic industry, organized in the Comics Magazine Association, self-regulated sexual content to prevent the government from stepping in. Titles that followed the code received a seal of approval, printed on the cover page, signaling to parents that the content was free of pornographic depictions. The Comics Code regulated a number of issues that were considered to endanger adolescent readers, such as the depiction of drugs and the representation of female bodies: “Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure. Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable. Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities” (qtd. in Madrid 33). The more realistic depiction of female bodies led to a further decline of the superhero genre, and also effectively ended some of the more feminist messages the comics provided as they did not conform with the gender conservative 1950s morals (Madrid 190, 252). Female superheroes became tamer in the expression of their sexuality and lost their independence, being at that time more often than not damsels in distress, to be saved by their male counterparts. When in the late 1950s DC comics revived the superhero genre with a new range of characters, women appeared mostly as sidekicks and love interests, having their powers securely contained.

Before the Comics Code put a temporary end to pornographically inspired depictions of female bodies, the comic industry attempted to create comics for a specifically female market by toning down the sexual representation of female bodies. As the provocative depiction of female superheroes was thought to be possibly off-putting to girls, Timely Comics (later Marvel), created Miss America, a crime-fighting debutante who appeared in a costume that fully covered her body. Miss America, in her civilian life the 16-year old Madeline Joyce, received her super powers through a freak accident during an electrical storm, and committed her new powers to the protection of “defenseless citizens” (“The Mystery” 3). The character debuted in *Marvel Mystery*

Comics # 49 and received her own title in 1944 with the publication of *Miss America Comics # 1.* While Miss America was inspired by the success of Wonder Woman, the storylines lacked the feminist undertones and employed funny and quirky stories that depicted a super heroine with teenage sentiments. Comic book for girls therefore offered a site in which women's bodies were represented in less exploitative ways. However, the focus on fashion, glamor, and romance in girl's comics disciplined the female body in other ways.

Patsy Walker and the Ideal Female Body

Miss America was quickly outshined by another comic series that featured the un-super character of teenager Patsy Walker, debuting in the second issue of *Miss America Comics,* who became the signature character of the title.

Patsy Walker was the female answer to the successful Archie comic series, which followed the everyday adventures of Archibald "Chick" Andrews and his romantic interests Betty and Veronica. Archie debuted in 1941 in *Pep Comics* by MLJ Magazines and gained a steady following during the war, telling tales of normalcy and providing comic relief, even after the originators of the series had been drafted (Nolan 15). Archie comics did without provocatively dressed women and promoted themselves as a "clean and wholesome" alternative to superhero comics (qtd. in Robbins 9). The success of the Archie comics shows that there was a market for comics recording ordinary life and ordinary bodies. Archie's success inspired other publishers to create their own comic teen stories, focusing on the quotidian rather than the extraordinary. Timely comics, in the attempt to attract a specifically female audience, created female teen characters that, like Archie, had to overcome a plethora of social embarrassments and everyday hurdles, often to emerge victorious from their ordeals saved by their own wits or the kindness of strangers.

With the decline of interest in superheroes, Miss America was banished to the back pages of *Miss America Comics*, while unspectacular Patsy Walker became the title's lead. From then on, the publication's focus shifted further from the female super body to the super female body. Instead of super heroic tales, the title offered fashion advice, romance comics, and cooking tips. Supervising editor Jean Goodman in the first issue defined the topics of *Miss America Comics*: "We'd like to show how to dress charmingly, youthfully, femininely—and at little cost; how to take advantage of the golden opportunities that keynotes the American way of life; we'd like to help guide you in your career, give you beauty tips and—oh, there are so many wonderful things we can talk about each month" (2). As it turns out, the beauty and fashion tips were all the career advice *Miss America Comics* provided its readers. Early representations in comic strips of women working during the war, were replaced by depictions of grown women as housewives and mothers, accompanying the changing gender ideals in post-war America, when women were relegated from soldiers at the home front to mistresses of domestic bliss. Girls' most pressing endeavor was now depicted as finding the right man to marry, and for this they needed to be equipped with the right body and poise.

The early covers of *Miss America Comics* featured staged photographs of teen couples vaguely enthralled in a somewhat romantic, and often comic situation: Mostly a female coercing a visibly reluctant male into expressions of affection, reflecting the premise the entire series was built on: romance is a female pursuit. The early installments translated the more abstract commitment to the war effort into teen-friendly terms: Volunteering with the harvest becomes an opportunity to spend time with boys, or to lose weight to achieve a "svelte" figure ("Patsy Walker," August 1945, 30). Over the years, Patsy Walker and other female teen characters, Timely added, provided their readership with the same obstacles clad in in different storylines: the perils of teen-hood, indifferent or emotionally klutzy boys, girl rivalry usually sparked by interest for the same boy, cajoling money from parents to buy clothes meant to impress boys and outshine rivals. In these stories, girls' lives are firmly centered on their romantic adventures. And romantic success, the stories made abundantly clear, depended on good looks. The teenage girls are drawn with feminine bodies: accentuated breasts and hips, a tiny waist, and shapely, long legs. Occasionally, a girl appears that does not fit the description, and she usually fares badly in the stories. In "A Relative Matter" from 1951, Patsy is tasked to entertain her visiting cousin Olga, a girl no "boy in his right mind" would date. Next to the lithe Patsy Walker, Olga appears as overweight, without a defined waist and with legs without ankles. The situation is further aggravated by her old-fashioned hairstyle, glasses, and bumpkin dress. In line with the logic of *Miss America Comics*, Olga of the bad looks is also obnoxious. Comics commonly conflated a character's inability or unwillingness to conform to feminine ideals with a flawed character, marking a lack of femininity as a character deformity viewers were invited to despise and laugh about. As Patsy summarizes, "Olga can't help being homely, but with her nasty personality she becomes twice as repulsive!" (44) or as Buzz Baxter, Patsy's boyfriend puts it: "I'd have to knock a guy unconscious before he'd date that monster" (45). At the climax of the story, Olga is arrested by a dog-catcher whom she mistakes as her date and by whom she is mistaken for a shaggy flea-ridden stray. Olga, narrated as a character beyond redemption has earned her punishment — public embarrassment — within the ethical frame *Miss America Comics* created.

In a number of installments, slender Patsy is worried about her weight and attempts to reduce it further. In "Her Excuse to Reduce" from 1947, Patsy as slender as ever, exclaims: "I'm getting as fat as a blimp!" and "I'm becoming a circus freak!" (28, 29). When boyfriend Buzz fails to take her out to an event she hopes to attend, she convinces herself that her weight must be the reason. While all is solved to everyone's satisfaction in the end, the story displays the anxiety young girls were believed to experience around their bodies. The advice columns, essays, and stories that framed the comic strips in *Miss America Comics* were as unforgiving as the comics themselves. Since 1945, *Miss America Comics* regularly featured diet advice to its teen audience, normalizing the idea that girls should watch their figure. In a short series of fictional letters in 1945, a fictional teenage girl Vicky describes in letters to her equally fictional friend Betty Ann her adventures at school, centering on the character of the new girl in class, "Four-Eyes." Not enough that "Four-Eyes" is wearing glasses "but everything that seems wrong with a girl is wrong with 'Four-Eyes.' Her hems are always coming down. She is awfully fat! Her dresses are never pressed. And her hair is always stringy and very unfashionable…She's the plain all-wrong type" (15). With little reflection on the part of the writer, she describes how "Four-Eyes," who comes to her new school from a working-class background, is bullied — —an attitude that at no point is depicted as wrong or cruel behavior. The un-pressed dresses, stringy hair, and abundant body shape are all signs for the girl's lack of effort to fit feminine ideals. This warrants the unkind treatment she receives within the logic of the letter writer. "Four-Eyes" is fortunate to get a break when it turns out that she, by chance, meets a famous film star, who is kind enough to appear at a sale to raise funds for the school dance. This boosts the tormented girl's reputation and draws Vicky's interest to her. While "Four-Eyes" shows grace in every situation described, this helps her little with her peers. Vicky concludes that "Four-Eyes" expressed the wish to take part in the dance she has helped to raise funds for, and Vicky writes: "I am morally obligated to see that she does," concluding that it will be impossible to find her a date because of her looks (65). In another letter a month later, Vicky decides to make "Four-Eyes" over ("Sometimes I suspect a spark of genius in me!... No one, not even her fairy-godmother could do for "Four-Eyes" what I did. I completely remodeled that girl…[57]). First, Vicky puts "Four-Eyes" on a radical fast to lose weight ("You will have to stop eating. That's all" [62]). "Four-Eyes" consents to the new regimen because she is ready to do "anything" to get a date and go to the dance (62). As soon as "Four-Eyes" agrees to the regimen, Vicky reveals the girl's name, Lizbeth. Lizbeth's willingness to subject herself to feminine ideals elevates her into personhood. After a few days on lettuce and lemon juice only, Lizbeth gets increasingly sick, and after losing 10 pounds in 8 days finally faints in school and needs to be taken to the hospital where she is diagnosed with malnutrition that is so severe that her upset parents worry about long-term damage. The doctors decide to put Lizbeth on a diet that does not threaten her health, but support her in further losing weight. Despite its implicit warnings against extreme diets, the story has, of course, a happy ending, rewarding Lizbeth for her efforts. Lizbeth emerges as a swan, goes to the dance and dances with the most coveted boy. Everybody regrets having been so "mean and catty" to her (63). Here the letters reflect on the unkind behavior toward Lizbeth, but only after she has redeemed herself, and adjusted her body to fit the hegemonic ideal. Lizbeth's father, to his credit, by the end of the story is still upset with the ordeals his daughter had to undergo and sees no merit in her transformation. He liked his daughter as she was, but his opinion is overruled by the overwhelming appreciation Lizbeth experiences from her peers after losing weight.

Women, stories such as “A Relative Matter” and “Dear Betty Ann” suggested, can measure their value only in how well they navigate the dating market. Good looks and a docile character earn a better number and quality of dates. It is not only the teenage girls that are objectified in these stories, men are too: they become tokens or collectibles that provide social status, services, and material value (“What do most fellows do with their allowance” explains Buzz, is they “spend it feeding their girls, buying them cokes, buying them candy” [“Patsy Walker” June 1946, 32]). Not only are the dates depicted as a source for flowers, drinks, and gifts, they also drive the girls around, run errands for them, and serve as messengers (“Lana”). Buzz and his peers are mere sidekicks and plot prompters for the ambition-driven, determined, and competing women in these stories, prizes the girls compete for but who are not allowed to have a will of their own. The romantic interests are seldom outfitted with a distinct character, but represent a generic manliness that is clueless, klutzy, and in need of female guidance. The girls, however, utilize the boys to gain access to privileges they are not granted, for instance, owning and driving cars, and holding well-paid part-time jobs to earn disposable income. Very rarely do the comic strips discuss affection, emotional security, trust, or sexual desire. The relationships the Miss America comic strips presented provide pragmatic and quite unromantic perspectives on dating [1].

Other than in “Dear Betty Ann” where Lizbeth’s father appears in a protective role towards his daughter, fathers in *Miss America Comics* appear mostly as stand-in romantic interests. When Patsy Walker reads in a book in “Cheating the Cheaters” from 1950 “’Behind **every** great man, there is a **woman**! A woman whose love and sacrifice is devoted to the success of the man **she believes** in!’” she thinks to herself: “(Sigh) If only there were someone I could get behind! Someone whose success I could nobly **devote** myself to” (4). She then first puts her ambition toward advancing her father’s career, who, annoyed by her sudden attention, gently guides her focus on boyfriend Buzz and his sports exploits. Fathers appear as their daughters’ training objects to learn to interact with men. They also appear as money sources for dresses and other expenses ,only slightly removed from the roles boyfriends play in the stories.

As men are the means to improve one’s social standing, affection-averse men need to be tricked and manipulated into relationships. And this is done with wit and a perfect body. Girls are enticed in these texts to subject themselves entirely to the judgment of men, including, as one advice columnist recommends, their brothers, even their younger ones, as they as men, understand what other men like. Sisters should submit not only to their brother’s judgment of their clothes and hairstyles (“He knows how he and his pals like the sweet sex to look” [Holmes 62]), but also the company they keep since “They know how girls rate. Since a girl’s judged by the company she keeps, they’re anxious that [their sister’s] company be tops” (Holmes 63). Friends of brothers are assigned similar powers over girls, but since they are also potential “life savers,” even potential love interests, as they can pose as dance partners and prom dates (Holmes 63). A smart girl is therefore supposed to win the favors of her brothers' friends. The article gives detailed instructions how to do that: "She never hangs around when they're in a huddle, or attracts their attention to how cute she is. But she is likely to pop up with a bowl of popcorn or a plate of fudge. And, included in a conversation, she listens with interest to the things they say" (Holmes 62). Girls are trained to submit to a worldview in which men are the judges of their bodies and selves, as it is their success with men that defines their value. But the article also suggests to girls that they utilize the men in their lives to access the privilege they do not have. As with driving, where girls having no access to cars utilize their boyfriends as chauffeurs, brothers, too, are described as useful: "Brothers are precious commodities" (Holmes 63) since "boys can go places and do things that girls cannot. They're bound to learn more of the world than we possibly can" (Holmes 62). Girls can retrieve the knowledge not available to them by behaving properly feminine towards their brothers, and therewith access what they are barred from.

"Lose Ugly Fat!"

In the *Miss America Comics*, female bodies are men's most reliable weakness. Boys and men can be most effectively manipulated into doing anything one of the female protagonists wants with the promise of a glimpse of female leg or décolletage. Her body becomes a girl's currency in reaching her aims, and her main path to social advancement. The (teenage) girls who compete for romantic success in the *Miss America Comics* are drawn with the exact same body features: tiny waist, fully developed breasts and hips, and shapely legs. Patsy, as well as other teenage protagonists and their rivals, are only distinguished by hair color and styles; their bodies and, at times, their facial features are often exact copies of each other. This emphasizes the normativity of beautiful bodies in these texts. There is only one physical model a girl can aspire to. This becomes absurd in catfights, when girls who seem to be drawn with the exact same bodies accuse each other of physical flaws ("Bathing Baby," 44-50).

The advice columns and abundant advertisements that framed the stories directly communicated to the readers that they are expected to fit the beauty standards, too. The "Charm Corner," *Miss America Comics'* name for its advice columns consistently reminded readers that there is a correlation between a small waist line and number of dates ("Don't be a Pin-Up Girl," 18). Another article suggests that domestic labor, such as cleaning and doing the laundry, is the perfect workout to keep a woman's body fit ("Good G-room-ing," 18-19). Dieting advice consistently suggests that losing weight is a question of exercising restraint over one's eating, fitting closely with other advice on ideal feminine behavior in *Miss America Comics* that claimed that femininity consisted of restraining, controlling, and supervising one's desires, urges, moods, and body ("This Little Piggie," 38).

Advertisements fed off the normative messages in the comic strips and advice columns that depicted bodies not fitting the hegemonic ideals as problems that needed to be solved. Ads, such as one for the "spot reducer," a massage cream that promised to melt fat at all the right places, offered remedies for a few dollars (52). An advertisement for a hand-held massage machine claimed: "Take Off Ugly Fat: Don't Stay Fat—You can lose pounds and inches safely" ("Electric Spot Reducer," 25). Another ad maintained: "Chew Chewing Gum: Reduce up to 5 Pounds a week." The chewing gum in question was supposed to help readers to reduce "to a beautiful, glamorous, slim, graceful figure" with "NO starving. NO exercise. NO laxatives. NO drugs. NO steam baths. NO massage" ("Kelpidine Chewing Gum" 45). The "Bulge Master," a spandex-forerunner, promised: "Look slimmer, more youthful: Reduce your appearance instantly" (11).

Most striking perhaps, are the many advertisements that utilize comic strips to sell their product. While shorter and framed in marketing language they are not always easy to distinguish from the regular comic strips surrounding them. A comic strip ad for Sel-Tex Pills (that promise the reader that she can lose as many pounds as she wants) headlines "How an unhappy **fat** girl became a happy slim girl." In the story Jane asks: "Sis, why do you get all the dates while I always stay at home, I'm just as pretty as you." Sis replies: "I'll tell you, Jane – but don't be offended. Frankly your figure is awful." The last image shows Jane, slender now after taking the pills, dancing with a handsome man who says "Why you're as light as a feather. What a gorgeous slim figure you have" (49). In a comic ad for "Mini Gym," the protagonist overhears a former date speaking badly about her body and decides to work out to change her shape. These ads echo the storylines of "Dear Betty Ann," or the messages of "Oh! Brother!" But unlike the editorial sections of the magazine, the ads promise that any dating problems a teenage girl may encounter are easily resolved with the right product.

The ads also reveal the complexity of post-war beauty ideals. The "'Mini-Gym' turns dateless Dorothy into Dazzling Dotty!" (41) However, this is not simply achieved by reducing Dotty's weight, but by adding curves to her slender body. While a small waist was crucial for female beauty, so were full breasts and hips. Supplements, creams, and devices therefore commonly promised to reduce fat at some places of the body and adding it to others. The ad for NUMAL supplements warns girls: "Skinny girls are not glamour girls."

> If you are a normal, healthy underweight person and are ashamed of your skinny, scrawny figure, NUMAL can help you add pounds and pounds of firm, attractive flesh to your figure […] So don't let them snicker at your skinny, scrawny figure. A skinny, scarecrow figure is neither fashionable nor glamorous. Remember, the girls with the glamorous curves get the dates. (51)

While girls in the *Miss America Comics* are expected to have mastered the narrow range between too skinny and insufficiently skinny, non-competitors for romantic attention such as mothers, fathers, coaches, and teachers are occasionally drawn with round bodies, insinuating that perfect female bodies are a privilege (and burden) of youth and that after growing up and finding one's spouse, the body is of less importance. On the exceptional occasion of the appearance of an ethnic other in the *Miss America Comics* they, too, are drawn with bodies not complying with hegemonic beauty ideals ("Mitzi"). The body shape clearly separates the heroines from their sidekicks, marking who is worthy of attention.

In contrast to the teen drama the girls experience, the adults are mostly depicted as having reached a zen-like state in life. Mothers perpetually clean their homes; men are shown reading in their armchairs, if not at work. Grown-up life is depicted as firmly gendered, following a strictly heteronormative order and clear division of labor. The teen protagonists train for the roles they observe in their parents: girls are endlessly interested in domestic chores, or grooming, and center their lives on the men in their lives. Boys are represented in their interest in sports, (substituting for future work careers), or, when shown at home, sitting in their armchairs and reading, just like their fathers. Domestic space is clearly gendered as a space of labor for girls and women, and a space of recreation for boys and men.

However, this gendered pattern is broken in the comic strips centering on glamorous or aspiring actresses. Hedy De Vine, one of the other *Miss America Comics* protagonists, lives the life of a successful movie star. She lives in her own home and instead of a boyfriend she is accompanied by a fiancé. The Hedy De Vine stories seemingly break with the gendered ideology the teen comics laid out. De Vine is financially independent. She has achieved her success on her own account and has some control over her life and work. However, the conflicts and tensions De Vine has to master on an average of four pages are similar to the teen comic storylines: Her rival Sandra threatens her success and relationship, the fiancé needs to be nudged into romance, and her body and looks are De Vine's capital. However, the stories diverge in their definition of ideal femininity. The teen comics suggest that motherhood and marriage are what girls should strive for. De Vine as a working woman of sorts proposes an alternative. While her fiancé asks her repeatedly to marry, she perpetually postpones, since marriage would end her career. By holding out on setting a wedding date, De Vine places her career and success over the promises of marriage and motherhood.

However, the subversive potential the adventures of a working woman could pose to the gender-conservative universe of the *Miss America Comics* is firmly contained by the movie star plot. Not only because it is unachievable for most, but also because the stardom Hedy represents is not centered around her work, or the money she makes, but rather on the fantasy of being loved by the masses and being adored and envied for her good looks. Like in the teen comic storylines, it is her body groomed into hegemonic femininity that brings her success. *Miss America Comics* may push the boundaries of what constitutes women's success (by showing an unmarried adult woman who works for a living), but stays well within what constituted appropriate feminine behaviors.

Timely tried to cash in on the new independence girls and women experienced during World War II with its "career girl" series, starting with *Tessie the Typist* in 1944. Reflecting the reality of homefront culture, Tessie, a girl fresh out of high school, tries a number of odd jobs that before the war were held by men, and now abandoned as men were drafted and sent overseas (Robbins 30). In 1945, Timely added to the series *Nellie the Nurse* and *Millie the Model.* But it was only Millie who became a success. After the war, popular culture aided the social push for women to vacate their war jobs and to return home to create spaces for returning servicemen. Movies, comics, and romantic literature defined love and domestic bliss as new priorities for women, with the occasional escapist fantasy of more glamorous lifestyles movie stars were thought to engage in. Dreamy plotlines about actresses, models, and film stars acknowledged women's and girl's desire for more independent and adventurous lifestyles without overtly challenging the status quo. In the late 1940s and early 1950s romance comics such as *Young Romance*, *Young Love*, *Young Brides*, and *In Love* flooded the market, telling everyday-stories of finding love. Glamour comics boomed equally. Hedy De Vine got her own title in 1947, but she was soon joined by other glamor girl comics, such as *Miss Beverly Hills of Hollywood* that debuted in 1949 but ran for only nine issues. The title featured, next to advice and celebrity interviews, the adventures of aspiring actress Beverly and her boyfriend Will Shire, often guest-starring real-life celebrities such as Alan Ladd. The magazine, as short-lived as it was, is remarkable for its explicit discussion of body ideals. *Miss Beverly Hills* redefined Hollywood glamor stars as authority over health and beauty. Essays on and interviews with celebrities made visible that beautiful bodies required work, money, and discipline ("Will Shire Interviews"). The editorial section included information on the nutritional values of food items, and on the value of exercise. Gossip sections commonly discussed not only a film star's new movie but also their weight and body shape ("Picture Patter"). Interviewed or featured celebrities commonly disclosed their weight, and sometimes shared tips on how they maintained it. *Miss Beverly Hills* thus presented the body as a continuous project rather than an entity determined by biology.

In the comic stories the glamorous bodies are commonly set against a foil of normal bodies. While in *Miss America Comics* body weight often functioned as a marker of age — most young people were slender, most older people were not—in *Miss Beverly Hills* the bodies of film stars were slender, but the bodies of film producers, directors, wait staff, and others working with and serving the stars were often not. The film stars' bodies are thus, intentionally or not, marked as extraordinary rather than normal. And a beautiful body was depicted as an actor's work just as it was to learn his or her lines. Normal people in the storylines were not expected to embody perfection. With the beautiful body marked as exceptional, advice to readers was in general more forgiving than in *Miss America Comics*. In the comic strip advice column, "Beverly's Designs on You," readers are provided with beauty tips, too. But instead of proposing diets, the authors suggested that readers work with their body shapes rather than trying to alter them. Much advice is given on how to dress one's body to one's advantage. Readers are further reminded that posture and smarts are at least as important as one's weight ("Beverly's Designs on You" July/August 1949, 14; Nov/Dec 1949, 28-29). The glamorous body became here an illusion that can be produced at will, but in its perfection only at great expense.

Feminist Underground Comics: Redefining the Female Body.

In 1963, underground comics (or comix) started to challenge not only the conventions comics had established by this point, but also the middle-class values they traditionally transported (Robbins 83). Initially, the field was dominated by male artists and despite their iconoclastic aspirations, they occasionally lashed out against the parallel forming women's liberation movements by creating comix featuring violence against women (Robbins 85). Feminist underground newspapers such as *It Ain't Me, Babe* in the 1970s were the first to publish comic strips with explicit feminist content (Robbins 86). Eventually, the first feminist underground comic books emerged, published by women artists partly to protest the male-dominated culture of comix, partly to create comics that recorded women's life experiences and sexuality. The female artists created spaces in which they could experiment with content they thought important. Their comix, such as *Pandora's Box, Wimmen's Comix* or the iconic *Abortion Eve* tried to educate women on their bodies, homosexual desire, and their reproductive rights in a way that was easily accessible. The comic book style was a way to reach young women and to counterbalance the images of female bodies they encountered in mainstream pop culture in the 1970s. Ana Merino claims that these feminist comix, created, produced, and sold by women, allowed them to enter the public sphere and discuss women's issues that had found no space in popular culture before (47). But it is not only the issues that are new. Feminist comix, Merino claims, created their own aesthetic sensibilities. As an example she gives the door- and windowless worlds comics artist Julie Doucet creates to express women's lack of liberties and exit strategies (48).

In 1972, Joyce Farmer (art) and Lyn Chevely (script) published under the name Nanny Goat Productions the comic anthology series *Tits 'n' Clits*, which was one of the first all-female artists comic books with feminist content. It had a run of 15 years, albeit with irregular publication patterns. Print runs varied, but could range between 10,000 to 20,000 copies ("Tits & Clits"). The title is rarely found in histories of comic books, perhaps because of its limited reach, or because of its radical content. The cover of the first issue underscores the rebellious attitude of its creators:

A woman in a red cocktail dress stomps into a public men's bathroom to get a roll of toilet paper, telling an upset man at a urinal "'S ok, love! Just need some paper!" Quite literally she is crossing the gender binary and violating perceptions of propriety ("'S ok").

The challenge to the gender binary is a recurring theme in *Tits 'n' Clits.* In the 1976 issue, the comic strip "Mr. Right" shows a man and woman meeting at a bar and going home together. When they undress it turns out that they have cross-dressed. Not only is gender fluid in the title, also the reversal of gendered expectations is used to make them visible (27-28). The cover of issue 6 shows a heterosexual couple after sex, the woman exclaiming: "Hey! That was great! Uh…What did you use for birth control?" ("Hey! That was Great!")

Provocative cover pages were one of the signature moves of *Tits 'n' Clits*, published by small independent presses and mostly sold in feminist bookstores. The second issue showed a woman dressed in the colors of the American flag, who exclaims: "I leaked, but it's ok, it's on the red stripe!" ("I leaked"). Issue number 3 featured women rallying toward the Capitol with vibrators and dildos in their hands ("We Shall Overcome!").

Tits 'n' Clits had not only a feminist agenda, it also intended to counteract the misogynist depiction of women in mainstream and underground comics, as well as the exploitative representation of women in mainstream culture and men's magazines. One of the first stories, "The Menses is the Message!" deals with the female body in ways unseen before in comic strips, discussing in detail the downsides of PMS ("Does Wonder Woman work during her period?" 12) and the money women have to spend on hygiene products, putting an extra burden on women with little income. Women's bodies are shown in different forms and shapes, different ages, and, later on, of different races. Beauty and sexual attractiveness are redefined as feeling comfortable with one's body, physical and emotional well-being, and being self-confident with one's desires. Despite its political and anti-pornographic agenda, *Tits 'n' Clits* with its explicit sexual depictions was not protected from censorship. In 1973 the owners of Fahrenheit 451, an alternative bookstore for alternative literature in Laguna Beach that carried *Tits 'n' Clits*, were arrested for selling obscene literature (Robbins 88).

Farmer and Chevely were counselors at a women's free clinic and thought of using the genre to bring information and ideas to a broader audience of women (Robbins 89). They had worked together on *Abortion Eve,* published in 1973, which tells the stories of five pregnant Eves who meet at an abortion clinic. The women—white, African-American, and Latina—coming from different walks of life, have very different stories. But they also have something in common. As the introduction under the title "Are Some People More Likely to Suffer from 'Unwanted Pregnancy' than Others?" wittily states: "Extensive analysis shows the one common denominator in people who have an unwanted pregnancy is: THEY ARE ALL FEMALE!" (1). Women, the stories make abundantly clear, should have the authority therefore to decide over their pregnancies. Instead of relying on male expertise to make these decisions, they should have access to female expertise. The comic book presents this in the character of Mary Multipary, the counselor at the clinic in which the women meet. Mary provides the Eves (and the readers) with information on the procedure, legal implications, and forms of birth control. When Farmer and Chevely created *Tits' n' Clits,* they used Mary's character recurrently to provide information on birth control, alternative medicine, and feminist thought. Besides presenting a decidedly feminist perspective, *Tits 'n' Clits* challenged male authority over the female body in other ways. Male gynecologists, for instance, are questioned in their ability to understand the female bodily experience. In "Fonda Peters Vaginal Drip," the protagonist responds to her gynecologist's statement: "It looks like we have a little problem here" poignantly with "'We' have a problem???" (18).

Tits 'n' Clits constantly ventured into the many taboos mainstream culture had built around the female body. The first issue not only discussed menstruation and STDs, it also included stories on sex between children, and it sexualized breastfeeding. Later issues discussed menopause, sex toys, masturbation, and female homosexuality. Women's bodies are celebrated in these stories as leaking, unpredictable, and driven by desire.

While attempting to avoid the normative depiction of female bodies, *Tits 'n' Clits* suffered from its own blind spots: Despite the variety in body shapes, most bodies drawn in the first issues were white, able-bodied, clean-shaven, sexually active, and mostly engaged in heterosexual acts. Some of this was amended in later issues, but other feminist cartoon artists started new titles to have their own stories and identities told. Most prominently perhaps, Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch out for* followed a group of women mostly lesbians, including a Muslim, a transgendered teenager, and a drag king, living in a mid-sized American town. In *Dykes to Watch out for* cartoonist Bechdel also introduced her by now famous test to determine gender bias in films[2]. The Bechdel-Test asks of a movie whether it shows two female (named) characters talking to each about something other than men. That the Patsy Walker and Hedy De Vine stories often would have failed the test shows that women comics such as *Tits 'n' Clits* redefined radically how women in comic strips were represented.

Conclusion

When in the 1940s and 1950s comic books started to address a female readership, they created images of female bodies that were not overtly sexualized. They presented an alternative to the highly objectified depiction of female bodies in superhero comics. But whereas in superhero comics the protagonists' bodies were marked as superhuman, the beautiful bodies in teen comics were implied to be normal.

Comic books for girls created a space in which teenage girls' interests were supposed to be reflected and addressed. But they only covered interests that agreed with the gender-conservative ideas of femininity that became popular after the war. Young female bodies followed contemporary beauty ideals and showed practically no diversity. Comic strips, advice columns and advertisements created the impression that only girls following hegemonic ideas of femininity and subjecting their bodies to recommended beauty practices will find happiness. The girl protagonists were continuously competing for boys. Successful dating appeared as a girl's only choice to achieve what she wanted. To be successful, she needed to embody the beauty ideals presented to her.

Glamor and celebrity comics, while in general following this logic, created interesting contradictions. While the teen comics showed motherhood and marriage as the goals girls aspired to, glamor comics suggested that a girl could aim higher. But again, such achievement was not based on her talents or intelligence, but on her appearance. However, glamor comics acknowledged the work and production process behind a body that conformed to beauty ideals, and depicted them as the exception rather than the norm.

Feminist underground comics, finally, used the medium as a way to inscribe women's experiences and diverse bodies into popular culture. Comic books therefore thought and presented the female body in different, and sometimes contradictory ways. From the classis trope that emphasized "tits 'n' ass" to be observed for the pleasure of the male viewers to the radical reclaiming of "tits 'n' clits" as sources of female pleasure belonging to their owners, the many forms of the female body in comics emphasizes how popular culture is a market place of ideas that, like the body itself, is impossible to contain.

Endnotes

[1] Michelle Nolan argues that the teen comics nonetheless were the beginning of romance comics that became popular in the 1950s (14).

[2] For more information on the Bechdel test as well as an excerpt of the comic strip in which it was introduced, see: Asher Cantrell, "10 Famous Films that Surprisingly Fail the Bechdel Test."

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