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From *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* to Our Comics, Ourselves*:*

Feminist Interventions in Sex Ed in the Health Humanities

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> It's important to remember that these first editions [of Our Bodies, Ourselves] were not a book but course material to be used in a group for discussion. They were never considered a finished product. . . . It was very open and forward looking. There was a sense of 'there's always another way to look at it.'"(Davis 2007, 22-23)

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In 2006, forty years after the Boston Women's Health Collective published Our Bodies, Our Selves, a "Think Tank on Emergent Paradigms in Women's Health" took place at the University of Toronto Medical Center. Organized by psychologist Gillian Einstein and philosopher Margret Shildrick, the meeting addressed the fact that "the practice of women's health [had] become a jumble of biomedical expectations, reproductive health politics, and surveillance of conditions more common in women" (Einstein and Shildrick 2009, 294). Einstein and Shildrick urged the physicians and scholars present to draw on postconventional feminist theory and philosophy to move the field of women's health beyond "medicine as usual": as institutionalized, as taught, and as practiced. They wanted the meeting to catalyze a more complex understanding of health and illness and a fuller account of the way that biomedical technologies were shaping our embodied experiences. They hoped it would "contribute to contemporary biomedicine by providing theoretical underpinnings to develop 1) an

understanding of bodies in context, 2) an epistemology of ignorance, and 3) an openness to the risk of the unknown. . . ."[i]

The meeting was a lively one. Participants shared analyses of the current state of women's healthcare, described emerging techniques in tissue engineering, discussed new findings in immunology, and debated contemporary reinterpretations of scientific data. And this diverse group of women—clinicians, biologists, feminist theorists and science studies scholars—forged a consensus statement by the meeting's end: "Anyone who seeks to focus on the well-being of the body—bioscientist, clinician, theoretician—must do so from a more integrated interpretive stance that involves contingency, complexity, collaboration, and conversation" (Einstein and Shildrick 2009, 293). In an article about the Think Tank published the following year in *Science and Medicine,* Einstein and Shildrick expressed the hope "that women's health practice can serve as a site in which both sides of the humanistic/scientific divide can engage with a human self in all its corporeal variety, contingency, and instability. More specifically, by providing a space within the clinic to examine underlying ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions, women's health can continue to contribute to new forms of biomedical practice.[ii] That hope for a practice that transcends "the humanistic/scientific divide" provides the context for what I will be talking about today: the emergence of comics as a medium for sex education.[iii]

"Medical Students: We Want More Sex Ed!"

From 1968, when the first elective lecture series in human sexuality was offered at Indiana University in response to a request from the entire second year class of medical students, to 1972, when at least 29 medical schools were offering formal courses in sex

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education, to 2010, when the Wall Street Journal published this study detailing the problems in medically-based sex education, the medical profession has been a dismal failure in its sex education attempts. In the 'sixties and 'seventies, very few such courses existed, and the emphasis in those few courses was heteronormative, pathologizing, and riddled with inaccuracies. To take just one example, the Human Sexuality course offered at Indiana University (designed by an interdisciplinary planning committee including the director of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research) included not only lectures by a family physician on "Sex Problems as they present to the GP," by a male-female team of sex therapists on "Therapy of Impotence, Premature Ejaculation, and Frigidity," and by an educator and a pediatrician on "Sex Education for Children," but also a lecture by a psychiatrist on "The Sexually Provocative Patient." (Tyler 1970, 1027). Films drawn from the "scientific and stag collections" at the Kinsey Institute were shown for their "desensitization value," while an "actress" offered "three short vignettes of a physician interacting with a female patient who is subtly sexually provocative" in order to demonstrate "how the physician is exposed to sexual stimulation in his daily practice" (Tyler 1970, 1028). Such desensitization included "an illustrated lecture on homosexuality, transvestite-transexuality, fetishism, and sadomasochism." Although the lecturer "emphasized the physician's need to be as tolerant of his patients' variations in their sexual behaviors as he is of their biochemistry," the explanation that "a homosexual individual seeking therapy for influenza should be treated only for the complaints he presents and not those that happen to offend the physician" suggests the limits of tolerance as either a curricular item or an institutional posture (Tyler 1970, 1029).

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A 1971 survey of second year medical students at the UCLA School of Medicine revealed that the students were no more informed about sex than the general population, in fact, they even seemed *less* informed. For example, when presented with the sentence, "There are two kinds of physiological orgiastic response in women, one clitoral and the other vaginal," 36% of the students polled after the sex education class still answered "True." And even more disturbing, when exposed to the assertion that women could not respond to further sexual stimulation after orgasm, a remarkable 28% marked the statement true!

Just three years ago, *Academic Medicine* reported on a study designed "to determine factors associated with students' comfort in addressing patients' sexuality in the clinical context." The investigators invited students enrolled in medical schools and schools of osteopathic medicine in both Canada and the USA to fill out an anonymous web-based survey. From the "2,261 completed survey responses: 910 from men, 1,343 from women, and 8 from individuals who self-identified as "other" gendered," the authors reported, "Over 53% of respondents (n = 1,206) stated that they felt they had not received sufficient training in medical school to address sexual concerns clinically."[iv] In fact, the study concluded, "The development of a modern, comprehensive, and inclusive curriculum to educate aspiring physicians on human sexuality is an important priority for medical educators and organizations." (Shindel *et. al.* 2010, p. 1329)

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The early 1970s was also the era of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), Justin Green's remarkably explicit and powerful underground comic detailing the male protagonist's obsessive compulsive disorder and his elaborate sexual negotiations around

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masturbation. (Green 1972) This "hugely influential text . . . inaugurated comics as a medium of self-expression," according to Hillary Chute. (Chute 14) Strange, isn't it. Just as US medical schools were failing dismally at the task of sex education, outside their walls an explosion of underground comics was changing the cultural landscape. Cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner, whose 1998 *A Child's Life and Other Stories* is a landmark exploration of a young girl's lacerating encounters with drugs and sexual abuse, recalls that she got her own informal sex education from these underground comics. I will come back to nuance that assertion in a minute, but first, let's talk a bit about comics.

For a number of years now, I have been involved in the field of graphic medicine. I teach comics and the making of comics in my graduate seminars in English, and I co-organize the annual international conferences on Graphic Medicine. These conferences, which have taken place in London, Chicago, Toronto, and in Brighton England this July, and Baltimore MD in 2014, bring together a diverse community--gay, straight and trans women and men, cartoonists, health care workers, patients, activists, family members, people with disabilities, caregivers, feminist theorists and literary scholars--to explore the ways that comics can enhance the practice of medicine and illuminate experiences of illness, caregiving, and disability. The concept of *comics and medicine* may not initially seem legible: one neurosurgeon with whom I was talking about graphic medicine asked me *What's funny about illness?* So I now make sure to take some time to explain just why comics and medicine speak to each other, and why comics might be particularly useful in medical education.

Comics (the word is usually taken as singular and understood as a medium rather than a genre) combines gesture with words, thus providing the opportunity to draw on and integrate

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multiple modes of learning, the spatial and the verbal, the right brain and the left brain, the embodied and tactile as well as the rational and linear. The comics medium communicates an experience as complex, layered, and context-dependent as sexuality and gender by presenting time through space, as the sequence of panels expresses the passage of time, inviting the reader/viewer to integrate each moment in time with a new moment in space. The reader thus always experiences the temporal body as a spatial body as well.

Moreover, the reader of a comic is constantly called on to attend to context—to the relationship between subject or event and the situations in which it is embedded, or to put it in other words, to contingency. And with its unique formal feature of panels in sequence separated by a gutter, comics produces a collaborative mode of engagement between reader, text, and images, by requiring the reader to fill in information between panels. As a result a reader cannot be simply a passive participant while reading a comic: she or he must collaborate with the cartoonist and his/her creation. Comics has traditionally been the voice of the marginalized: "Comic books, even more so than newspaper strips before them, attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them: immigrants and children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts"(Hajdu 2008, 25). And even comics whose heteronormativity may seem to shut out marginalized groups, such as superhero comics in particular, have long nurtured a fan culture in which gender queering has been an active response to comics characters, from Batman and Robin to Wonder Woman. This vibrant culture of queer counter-readings has continued right up to present day comics.

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Yet from the early 1950s through the late 1960s, the creative diversity and risk-taking of the comics medium was under attack. Responding to the moral panic produced by Frederic Wertham's muckraking 1954 book The Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) created a 41 point Code to ensure that "violations of standards of good taste, which might tend toward corruption of the comic book as an instructive and wholesome form of entertainment, will be eliminated" (Senate Committee on the Judiciary 1995). The CMAA code, to be *voluntarily* followed by all members, governed both editorial matter (general standards, dialogue, costume, religion, marriage and sex) and advertising matter. Given its far-reaching mission, it's not surprising that the Code contained internal contradictions, such as affirming "the development of comic books as a unique and effective tool for instruction and education" even as it banned "[a]dvertisement of sex or sex instruction books."[v] This new Comics Code was voluntarily adopted by most US publishers, muffling the dissenting voice characteristic of comics and essential to a broader, postconventional view of sexuality under a raft of regulations, such as:

* "Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure."

* "Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable."

* "All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society."

* "Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities."

* "The treatment of live-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage."

* "Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions."

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* "Seduction and rape shall never be shown or suggested."

* "Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden." (Senate Committee on the Judiciary 1955)

Much has been written about the negative effect of these strictures on the comics industry, and particularly on the way they enforced sex and gender normativity. Yet by the early 1960s and 1970s, the very same qualities that the CMAA Code declared off-limits had happily begun to return to the comics scene, in the form of self-published, informally distributed underground comics. In their open embrace of dissent and marginality, these comics had remarkable potential—as Phoebe Gloekner has affirmed--as a medium for sex education.

And yet I want to nuance that claim. Comics *were* offering graphic representations of sexuality, no doubt: yet from a feminist perspective the potential of those representations to provide genuine *sex education* is questionable. Many of the comics produced by the largely male underground comix movement included images that were highly graphic, offensive, and frequently demeaning to women and African-Americans. For example, remember Mr. Natural? And there was R. Crumb's "Angelfood McSpade a black female character abased on the old racist caricatures found in old comic art."[vi] As cartoonist Trina Robbins put it in 1974, "What does concern me in this work is the hostility towards women I see in this work, especially by Crumb. . . . Crumb's porn upsets me, as does the work of a whole lot of other guys who think underground comix means porn. Rape is NOT FUNNY!!!" (Lopes 82)

However, starting with *It Ain't Me Babe Comix* in 1970, women cartoonists began to create comics that challenged the masculinist underground vibe. "[As] self-identified feminists in the seventies, [women underground cartoonists] . . . presented a more coherent politics in

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their intervention in the underground comics movement. They focused on feminist political positions related to sexism, homophobia, physical abuse, and abortion." (Paul Lopes 2011) Sexually graphic, women's underground comics challenged norms by giving image and voice to previously taboo bodily experiences, from defecation, urination, masturbation, sodomy, and cunnilingus, to the reproductive technologies of sanitary napkins, vibrators, condoms, the pill, the IUD, and abortion.

One of my claims today, then, is that *feminist underground* comics spoke to women's experiences of medicine and health as *self-help practices* distinct from the increasingly dominant realm of industrial biomedicine. Disciplinarily far from the positivist realm of biomedical science, these feminist underground comics offered a broader, more accepting, and distinctly non-normative understanding of human sexuality. Not only do these comics play a crucial part in the development of the field of graphic medicine, but they also forged an approach to sex education that would be the backbone of the modern and contemporary women's health movement. These comics embodied the qualities called for by Einstein and Shildrick in 2006: "1) an understanding of bodies in context, 2) an epistemology of ignorance, and 3) an openness to the risk of the unknown" (Einstein and Shildrick 2010, 293).[vii]

So—let's start the genealogy. In San Francisco, the Wimmen's Comix Collective included Michelle Brand, Lora Fountain, Karen Marie Haskel, Aline Kominsky, Lee Mars, Pat Modian, Terre Richards, Sharon Rudahl, Shelby Sampson and Janet Wolf Stanley. Working with Last Gasp press, they published *Wimmen's Comix* (1972), which focused on "marriage, work life, and abortion." (Lopes 83) In Los Angeles, Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely formed Nanny Goat Productions, and began to publish *Tits n' Clits,* "a feminist series with an unprintable name that

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took on the controversial and taboo subjects of menstruation, birth control, and sexual promiscuity [that] sold more than 1000,000 copies" and launched them into the comics pantheon.[viii]

Farmer and Chevely had been living in Laguna Beach and counseling at a free clinic when the California Law legalizing "Therapeutic Abortion "was signed by then Governor Ronald Regan in 1967. As Farmer recalled in her keynote last year at the Third Annual Graphic Medicine Conference, the two women decided to put *Tits n' Clits* on hold to do *Abortion Eve*, a comic presenting the abortion experience through the perspective of a five different women, finishing it just as Roe v. Wade was signed. *Abortion Eve* uses the interwoven narratives and conversations of five women of different ages, races, ethnicities, and class positions to explore and explain the various complex experiences leading to, and arising from, the decision to obtain an abortion. [discuss several panels] Humor mingles with serious information; read today *Abortion Eve* opens a window into a startlingly reproductively free and equitable past. And yet, this comic was lost for years, only appearing pseudonymously on *the Comics with Problems* website, but not (to date) reprinted. Its co-editor Joyce Farmer was a keynote speaker at last summer's "Graphic Medicine: Navigating the Margins" conference in Toronto, and when asked then why the comic had never been reprinted, she explained that the last page raised too many hackles with the religious right. Here it is: the Virgin Mary as Alfred E. Neumann, the *MAD* magazine know-nothing icon.

Another feminist sex ed comic from the 1970s was *Incredible Facts o' Life Sex Education Funnies* (1972) edited by Lora Fountain. Fountain, now a literary agent representing children's fiction and graphic novels for the Paris *Agence Litteraire Lora Fountain & Associates,* was active

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in left politics during her undergraduate years at UCLA, volunteering as a "sex education counselor at the LA Free Clinic and the Venice Youth Clinic."[ix] In an interview with Samantha Meier, she explained that she had been working in several Los Angeles clinics when she realized that they didn't have weren't adequate sex ed materials for young people. "I went to the National Sex Forum at the Glide Foundation and convinced them to give me a grant to develop a sex education comic. Then I talked Gilbert [Shelton], Robert [Crumb], Shary Flenniken, Terre and Ted Richards and a bunch of other cartoonists into doing stories. The fact that they all got paid up front made them pretty easy to convince. That first printing was 25,000 copies, and they sold out almost immediately so there was a second printing of 100,000 copies."[x]

Although Fountain soon realized that "writing and drawing comics wasn't my strong point," she did contribute as a cartoonist to *Incredible Facts o' Life Sex Education Funnies.* This one pager "Fertile Fanny" exemplifies the comic's mixture of entertainment, humor and information. And this two-page spread, "The Abortion Game," a sort of riff on the children's game *Candyland,* is a throw-the dice board game where players advance from "Your period is two weeks late. Go to clinic for Pregnancy Test" to the last space, "Finish. Congratulations! You're no longer pregnant . . . But abortion is a hassle . . . You decide to use more effective birth control now."[xi] Along the way, players may land on spaces marked "You Pay someone else to give you an abortion . . . get an infection. . . Spend all your money for doctor and hospital bills . . .Out of the game for now," " You are between 15 and 20 weeks pregnant. Advance three," or "Go to hospital or clinic for outpatient vacuum aspiration abortion. Go to Finish." Inset panels feature buttons with slogans that remind us how different things were forty years ago: "Love is Beautiful, Overpopulation Isn't/ Zero Population Growth," Support Planned Parenthood NOW!"

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"Repeal All Abortion Laws," and perhaps the most remarkable, "I am an Abortionist." (Fountain 1972) The comic conveys the complex contingencies of the biopolitical regulation of reproduction in the 1970s.

Incredible Facts o' Life's back cover, also by Fountain, combines gentle feminist advice with straight on contraceptive education. Under the banner heading "I wanted to say something . . . but *I didn't want to cause a hassle,"* a raven haired beauty lies in bed, staring straight at the reader, as a hunky blonde man puts his boots on. "There are several safe and effective methods of birth control available for both men and women," the text softly counsels. "Choose the method that is most adaptive to your personal needs. You owe it to yourself . . . and your children." A table below lists the "Birth control method that works best" with percentages of efficacy, from "voluntary sterilization 100%" to "vaginal foam 75-85%." Fairy tale scenario meets factual scientific information, giving sleeping beauty support as her Prince Charming prepares to leave.

Keep those comics in mind as we jump ahead a quarter century and more to Larry Gonick and Christine DeValult's *The Cartoon Guide to* Sex (1999). In an earlier version of this talk, before I was aware of the flowering of underground feminist sex ed comics, I described this as one of the first full length sex ed comics. I was SO wrong. Indeed, in comparison to *Abortion Eve* and *Incredible Facts o' Life Sex Education Funnies*, not only does this comic seem disappointingly timid, but it also perpetuates the flawed approach of those medical sex ed courses. Although composed of images and words that the reader must synthesize rather than the traditional "banking model" of education provided by the standard medical school lecture,

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Cartoon Guide to Sex still replicates the expert knowledge format of those inadequate early medical school sexed classes: the information still flows one-way only, from authors to readers.

Admittedly, this is expert knowledge with a twist, as chapter titles from the table of contents make clear: "Sex is Paradoxical," "Reproduction Causes Sex," "Doing It," "Sexual Health and the Alternative," and "Uninvited Sex" (Gonick and DeVault 1999). To be fair, in their drawings and word bubbles Gonick and DeVault do take a critical perspective that operates at a provocative remove from their deadpan text. So although the text refers in an objective, factual tone to the tradition of gender stereotyping, the exaggerated images convey the affective truth: that stereotyping hurts—physically as well as emotionally. And the parent's clown suit garb possibly undermines his advice, "Life is like a costume drama, but you are NOT supposed to enjoy playing dress-up!" (Gonick and DeVault 1999, 610)

Yet not only does *The Cartoon Guide to Sex* fail to incorporate the powerfully resistant perspective of its 1970s underground feminist precursors (perhaps not surprisingly for an imprint of HarperCollins), in its Preface it also references—perhaps even perpetuates--the 1950s and the chilling effects of the CMA Comics Code. "In a graphic medium, we wondered, exactly how graphic should we make it? Should we use sensitive line drawings? Bawdy cartoons? Fig leaves?" We are left to wonder whether they are merely joking when they warn, "**THIS BOOK CONTAINS EXPLICIT MATERIAL"** and counsel their readers, "In case you're easily embarrassed, you can make your own dust jacket by cutting out a rectangle from a brown paper bag and folding it along the dotted lines as shown" (Gonick and DeVault 1999).

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Soon after the publication of this sex ed comic, the internet had put an end to such attempts at censorship (or at least rendered them ineffective), and web-based publication brought the potential for interactivity to sex education comic books not only through the incorporation of hypertext, but also through links to discussion boards, reader groups, and group projects (McCloud 2000, 166). The work of contemporary cartoonist Martina Fugazzotto can provide one example of these new sex ed public spheres. An award-winning comics artist and illustration-major graduate of Pratt Institute in New York City, Fugazzotto contributes to "gURLcomix," a growing online library of over 150 multi-panel web comics exclusively available on gURL.com.[xii] This website intends to offer "a different approach to the experience of being a teenage girl. gURL.com is intended for girls age 13 and up and is built on the principle that information is a positive thing."[xiii] Like The Cartoon Guide to Sex, gURL also registers the ghostly remnants of the Comics Code: it is careful to set out its perspective explicitly in a tone aimed at a teen-age audience, so readers who may be uncomfortable have the option to read no further.

> Through honest writing, visuals and liberal use of humor, we try to give girls a new way of looking at subjects that are crucial to their lives. We hope to provide connection and identification in a way that is not possible in other media. Our content deals frankly with sexuality, emotions, body image, etc. If this is a problem for you, you might not like it here. Please see our note to parents about that.[xiv]

Fugazzotto's contributions to gURL include "I ♥ Orgasms" "and I ♥ Fantasies." These lively and irreverent comics introduce women to a sex positive perspective, debunking myths that position women as passive victims, like he one described in Emily Martin's now classic essay, "The Egg and the Sperm": "Sperm . . . have a 'mission,' which is to 'move through the

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female genital tract in quest of the ovum. . . . Sperm carry out a 'perilous journey' into the 'warm darkness,' where some 'fall away exhausted.' 'Survivors' 'assault' the egg, the successful candidates 'surrounding the prize'" (Emily Martin 1991, 490). The approach to sex ed in Fugazzotto's "hero's tale" is distinctly postconventional. Deconstructing the narrative of macho spermatic competition, the comic reveals that sexual activity need not be tied to reproduction. Instead, in the last panel drawn from the woman's perspective, we realize who is really in control of the sexual narrative: the still virgin female cartoonist.[xv] Combining visual punch with feminist perspective, Fugazzotto's beautifully crafted comics explore the physiology of sex, correct cultural distortions, calculate the real—and asymmetrical—costs of sex (for women), and offer women important information about little known contraceptive technologies.

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Another highly innovative series of sex ed comics that focuses not on instructional push but what might be called educational pull: the knowledge gained when people share their experiences as a community. Not Your Mother's Meatloaf draws on personal experiences to offer an intentionally non-expert perspective on sexuality, embracing the *amateur,* in all senses of the word. Six issues of NYMM have appeared to date: after the inaugural issue, the themes were "Firsts," "Bodies," "Health," "Age," and most recently "Endings." This series takes a distinctly postconventional perspective on sex and gender education. When Liza Bley began compiling the first issue of NYMM in 2008, she wasn't interested in being "the authoritative voice on sexual health." With her co-editor Saiya Miller, she aspired to "offer a different kind of tool that has the ability to communicate something lacking between the pages of anatomic books and STD brochures." They felt the power of personal stories would "humanize and offer a

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different kind of access to our questions on sex and sexuality than the sterilized, clinical speak of most sex ed curriculum."[xvi] They felt that while some issues related to sex can be explained relatively easily, like the function of the reproductive systems or how to use a condom, there are other questions "not as easily answered, but [which] desperately need to be discussed. Often there are multiple issues and dynamics occurring in these situations, which can be difficult to process, often confusing, and alienating" (Squier 2011).

Just as Not Your Mother's Meatloaf deliberately emphasizes the personal over the expert narrative, the graphic standards for submissions are pluralistic. Miller and Bley have no specific criteria for the comics they accept, except that the submissions must be on 8 ½ x 11 "paper and in black ink." Instead, they affirm the ability of anyone to create a comic. "Our primary focus is educating youth and each other about important issues surrounding sexuality, safer sex, consent, gender, etc. Also: Submissions are anonymous unless you put your name on the comic itself."[xvii]

In its democratic and non-expert approach to sex education, Not Your Mother's Meatloaf reflects what Einstein and Shildrick called "one of the most important functions of the women's health movement": "to lay ignorance bare" (Einstein and Shildrick 2006, 294). Here, they refer to the aptly titled essay by feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance," which explains how "epistemologies of ignorance" function in feminist praxis (Tuana 2006, 2). "There is no better system of the epistemological practices of the women's health movement than the speculum," Tuana observes. While it is first of all a material and instrumental object that has given access to a previously unavailable perspective on our own bodies, she explains, the speculum is also a powerful metaphor for the new perspectives that

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are possible via a feminist analysis of the different ways that women's ignorance is produced and experienced. As Tuana taxonomizes it, ignorance comes in a variety of modes.

Knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know.

We do not even know that we do not know.

They do not want us to know.

Willful ignorance.

Ignorance produced by the construction of epistemologically disadvantaged identities.

Loving ignorance: accepting what we do not know. (Tuana 2006) [my paraphrase]

Tuana's essay argues that the systematic study of ignorance is an essential part of any feminist theory of knowledge, which must make us aware not only of what we do not know, but also of how that ignorance comes into being, whether systematically produced, haphazard, or merely part of the nature of life.

While all five issues of NYMM include many comics exploring forms of ignorance about sexuality, I will close by looking at two comics that treat forms of ignorance featured in Tuana's taxonomy, because they can give us a good sense of the series as a whole. The categories of ignorance they portray are "Ignorance produced by the construction of epistemologically disadvantaged identities," and the countervailing position, "Loving ignorance: accepting what we do not know." (Tuana 2006) Clearly, positionally-produced ignorance about sexuality has a strongly negative effect, while the acceptance of ignorance and release from normative expectations, the comic demonstrates, can actually have a positive effect.

"The Appointment," Nick M. Sonfield's three-page, five panel per page autobiographical comic, illustrates the first category (2008). The protagonist, a first-time gynecology patient and

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only eighteen years old, goes to her physician in order to obtain birth control. She is epistemically disadvantaged by her novice status and her age, and she is also positionally disadvantaged as young woman alone in a male physician's office. The comic begins with a telling interaction that emphasizes those disadvantaged identities: "In the examination room Dr. Plant told me I'd put my robe on backwards. 'Sorry,' I said. 'I've never done this before"(NYMM 2008).[xviii]

The physician takes advantage of her ignorance of the gynecological situation, persuading her to give him her email address in the pretense of putting her in contact with a patient who suffers from the same congenital illness. We learn in succeeding panels that not only has the doctor acted inappropriately in office (failing to leave the exam room for her to dress in private, asking her inappropriate questions, and badgering her for her address) but he has also continued his abusive behavior after the leaves his office by emailing her repeatedly. Her disadvantaged positions (and identities) as a patient with a genetic defect, as a patient subject to the power of the physician, and as an individual without a community, all converge to create the ignorance that harms her. Yet the comic does not end with harm, isolation, and grief. A concluding panel shows her sitting at her computer, sharing the news about this physician's maltreatment with an online community, and generating not only social support and empowerment but also the knowledge she needs to escape such mistreatment in the future.

While "The Appointment" demonstrates the profoundly disempowering effect of ignorance and the healing value of communal knowledge, Liza Bley's one-page comic "Defining Sex & Virginity" (2008) portrays what Tuana (2006) calls "loving ignorance"—accepting

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ignorance as an inevitable part of embodied experience. In contrast to experts' claims to authoritative definitions of sex and virginity, this comic lightheartedly refuses such closure. Instead, it offers a range of different definitions of sex and virginity, affirming the fact that conversation and context lend multiple possible meanings to any experience, including the sexual.

Fundamental to sex education and a cardinal tenet of the women's health movement since its origins in the Boston Women's Health Collective publication, Our Bodies, Ourselves, is the fact that gender, like sex, is also complex, negotiable, and a product of the interaction of biology and society. A final panel, from Sparky Taylor's "My Body, Myself," illustrates how sex education can introduce the broader issue of gender identity, reinvigorating that iconic intervention of the women's health movement. Surveying how being "5/2, stocky, boyish, 26, punk" has taught her "a lot of things about body image," this comic explores the insecurities associated with affirming a particular and individual gender identity, from the discomforts of working out in public, or being told that her frame is "stocky," to a stinging interaction with a friend. "My friend Jon said: "don't worry, the frat boys aren't looking at you," and even though I don't want to be objectified, it still really hurt my feelings" (Taylor 2010). The final three panels provide an alternate vision of a healthy attitude toward sexuality and gender identity. And they do so not by denying our uncertainties but by accepting them, and affirming not only the uncertainty associated with sexuality, but the ambiguity of gender role identity as well.

I have been offering a genealogy of one strand of the history of the women's health movement, the lineage that connects women's underground sex-ed comics of the 1960s and 1970s to women's web-based and 'zine sex-ed comics of the present, in order to argue that

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these feminist sex ed comics exemplify what Einstein and Shildrick called for at the Think Tank in Women's Health in 2006: conversation, collaborative learning, continual change and openness to alternative and innovative perspectives.[xix] By bringing women's experiences of sexuality and gender into the realms of society and culture and incorporating the humanities based tools of narrative and imagery alongside the technologies and practices of medical science, the medium of comics has contributed to a surprisingly new way of "doing" women's health. In short, comics has provided new transdisciplinary tools with which to "seize the means of reproduction," giving us a new model for women's self-help practices. [xx] As with the process of women's health, so with our understanding of the genealogy of women's health innovations: "there's always another way to look at it."

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Notes (incomplete)

[i] Gillian Einstein and Margrit Shildrick, "The postconventional body: Retheorizing Women's Health" Social Science & Medicine 69 (2009) 293–300, 293.

[ii] Gillian Einstein and Margrit Shildrick, "The postconventional body: Retheorizing Women's Health" Social Science & Medicine 69 (2009) 293–300, 293.

[iii] Although the postconventional exploration of both sexuality and gender expression/identity are integral, interconnected features of the comics I survey in this chapter, I use the shorthand term "sex ed" for ease and familiarity. To distinguish between gender expression, gender role, gender identity and biological sex and sexuality, see "Talking the Talk," GLSEN 2002. http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html. As to the term "comics," the field of comics studies is still standardizing its terms and usages. When I am discussing comics as a medium, I use the singular verb, but when I am discussing comics as an aggregate of individual examples of the medium, I use the plural.

[iv] Shindel, Alan W. MD; Ando, Kathryn A. PhD; Nelson, Christian J. PhD; Breyer, Benjamin N. MD; Lue, Tom F. MD; Smith, James F. MD, MS, "Medical Student Sexuality: How Sexual Experience and Sexuality Training Impact U.S. and Canadian Medical Students' Comfort in Dealing with Patients' Sexuality in Clinical Practice" *Academic Medicine*: August 2010 - Volume 85 - Issue 8 - pp 1321-1330, p. 1321. Social mores have changed significantly since the 1960s, and this study accommodated those changes impressively. "So that this study would be as inclusive as possible, we made minor modifications to the instructions and wording of the sexuality instruments, maximizing their applicability to participants whose primary means of sexual expression is not heterosexual coitus (i.e., homosexual participants as well as heterosexual/bisexual participants who frequently engage in noncoital intercourse). These changes consisted primarily of (1) removing gender-specific terms for the participant's partner and replacing them with gender-neutral pronouns/nouns and (2) expanding the scope of what constitutes "sexual intercourse" to include "entering your partner's mouth, vagina, or anus" for the IIEF and "vaginal intercourse and/or stimulation of the genitalia with hands or mouth in the intent of producing orgasm (not as part of foreplay)" for the FSFI. While our instruments were not exact replicas of the instruments validated for use in lesbians and gay men, we believe that this prior work (i.e., these two recently validated instruments) supports the general applicability of these scales to nonheterosexual populations. The survey directed participants who selected a gender identity other than male or female to select whichever (either male or female) instruments were most applicable to their unique cases. Individuals who were not in steady sexual relationships did not complete the ISL." (

[v] Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report, 1955 (Washington, D.C.: United. States Government Printing Office, 1955).http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Comic_book_code_of_1954. See also McCloud 2000, 87.

[vi] Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Phila, PA: Temple University Press, 2009) 82.

[vii] I am arguing that comics as a medium nurtures these new attitudes, just as it illustrates the four theoretical postures essential to further the well-being of the body in general, and women's health in particular, according to Einstein and Shildrick: contingency, complexity, collaboration, and conversation (Einstein and Shildrick 2009, 299).

[viii] Cindy Frazier, "Humor from the Underground" *Languna Beach Coastline Pilot* http://articles.coastlinepilot.com/2010-12-02/entertanment/tn-cpt

[ix] "On Teenage Abortions and the Facts O' Life: An Interview with Lora Fountain," Samantha Meier, http://www.womenscomix@wordpress.com March 3, 2013.

[x] Fountain continues, "I was working at SF General Hospital at the time, and the mail room was inundated for a few weeks! There was a little hate mail, but most was positive." Meier, *op. cit.*

[xi] Lora Fountain, "The Abortion Game" *Incredible Facts O' Life Sex Education Funnies* (LA: The Underground Health Department, 1972).

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[xii]http://www.gurl.com/showoff/comix/pages/1,,716692-1,00.htmlFugazzotto won the Kim Yale award for best new talent at the Friends of Lulu Awards. See Fugazzotto's biography at http://gurl.typepad.com/gurl_comix/martina-fugazzotto.html
[xiii]http://gurl.typepad.com/gurl_comix/martina_fugazzotto/index.html
[xiv]http://gurl.typepad.com/gurl_comix/what-is-gurl-comix.htmlFugazzotto has also contributed a multi-part comic, "The Sex Mission," to"Sex, Etc." . . . part of the Teen-to-Teen Sexuality Education Project developed by Answer."
[xv]http://www.martinamartina.com/martina-fugazzottos-comics.html. See also http://www.sexetc.org/page/comix/
[xvi] Susan M. Squier, email interview with Saiya Miller and Liza Bley, May 2011. See also: http://sexedcomicproject.blogspot.com/
[xvii]http://sexedcomicproject.blogspot.com/2011/05/nymm-at-comics-medicine-conference.html
[xviii]Two other aspects of the epistemology of ignorance explored by NYMM comics from the first issue are:

- Knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know*:* a comic explores the difficult process of acknowledging that a love relationship had become abusive and had to be ended. (Anon, NYMM 2008)
- Willful ignorance. "Holes," by Cynthia Ann Schemmer, tells the story of her "first serious sexual relationship [which] spawned the relationship that our society lacks decent sex ed. A huge factor in this personal story is that my first boyfriend was raised as a born again Christian. . . . So, imagine my reaction when he revealed to me that females only have ONE HOLE to perform our many bodily functions!!!" (Schemmer, NYMM2008)

[xix] Indeed, an argument can be made that women cartoonists launched the feminist intervention into sex and gender education, fueled by the passion of the women's self-help movement in the 1970s. This discussion of feminist sex ed comics still provides only partial genealogy for graphic medicine today: a field that brings together gay, straight and trans women and men, cartoonists, health care workers, patients, family members, caregivers, feminist theorists and literary scholars to explore the ways that comics can enhance the practice of medicine and illuminate experiences of illness, caregiving, and disability
[xx] Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012)>

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