

When Politics Were Fun: Recovering a History of Humour in U.S. Feminism

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Abstract:

Based on archival research, scholarship from the emerging field of Feminist Humour Studies, and engagements with feminist and poststructuralist theory, in this article I make the case for recovering a history of humour in feminism, with a focus on 20th century US-based feminist practices. I argue that retrieving evidence of feminist humour—whether as political performance (street protests, “zaps”) or cultural artefacts (comics, music, plays, polemical texts)—enables scholars to re-imagine feminism and its past, and opens up new ways of thinking about both. Using humour as a focal point through which to narrate feminist history allows for a recovery of neglected and marginalized voices from the feminist past. In so doing, humour facilitates a redrawing of the conceptual map that informs prevailing narratives about feminism and its history. Furthermore, engaging humour opens up new lines of inquiry for future researchers, including an investigation of how feminists’ engagements with humour—and the new, subversive realities they engendered—helped shape feminist attitudes, subjectivities, and communities over the course of generations.

Keywords: activism; Guerrilla Girls; COYOTE; Flo Kennedy; humour; feminism.

“Comedians are leading the feminist movement,” declared a March 2015 article on the website *mic.com*. Citing much-lauded examples like Amy Poehler, Jessica Williams, Kristen Schaal and Amy Schumer, the article took stock of contemporary female comedians’ growing commitment to broaching issues such as pay equity and reproductive rights in mainstream media, and remarked upon their powerful influence in shaping generational attitudes. According to the article’s author Marcie Bianco, Poehler et al. have come to occupy a vaunted place as champions of gender equality because “comedy can make feminism more palatable and accessible to a general public weary of a movement marred by stereotypes of ‘man-haters.’”¹

¹ Marcie Bianco, “Comedians Are Leading the Feminist Movement--And Here’s What That Says About Us,” *mic.com*, 20 March 2015, <http://mic.com/articles/113262/comedians-are-leading-the-feminist-movement-and-here-s-what-that-says-about-us>. It is worth noting that, later in the article, Bianco argues that the success of feminist humour may also have a dark side: namely, that it might reflect a growing intolerance towards women’s anger and “seriousness,” a denial of women’s articulation of interiority,

Bianco was not alone in her praise of feminist comedians in 2015. In the wake of the critically acclaimed third season of *Inside Amy Schumer*, the blockbuster success of Schumer's romantic comedy *Trainwreck* (2015), the growing popularity of Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer's *Broad City* (2014-present), and Melissa McCarthy's surprise action hit *Spy* (2015), think-pieces and op-eds on the power and seeming omnipresence of funny feminists abounded.² Many of these articles treated feminist humour as a wholly unprecedented phenomenon, or at best gave mention to a handful of "pioneers"—usual suspects like Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett, and Roseanne Barr. Bianco was rare among journalists in arguing that "throughout modern history, women have used humour as one of their most incisive tools against misogyny"; and yet, the examples she provided (Gilda Radner, Jane Curtain, Lucille Ball, and Marla Gibbs) again came from the mainstream pop culture canon.³

As a scholar who studies the history of feminist theory and activism, I have been intrigued by such commentary. On the one hand, I am heartened by the seeming explosion of contemporary feminist comedy, as its varied manifestations offer exciting interventions into what are, unfortunately, perennial debates. On the other hand, I cannot help but think that this moment actually recapitulates a longstanding yet elided tendency among feminists to draw upon humour as a mode of political activism and community formation. Working backwards from the present, one can point to a range of individuals and events from the worlds of professional comedy and activism, including: "third wave" zines; alternative comics like Janeane Garofalo and Margaret Cho; 1980s woman-centered sitcoms like *Murphy Brown* (1988), *Kate and Allie* (1984), and *The Golden Girls* (1985); Whoopi Goldberg's "Live on Broadway" performances and Lily Tomlin's

subjectivity, and self-reflection, and a displacement of energy from legal and policy-oriented remedies for sexual inequality.

² See, for example Rachel Sugar, "2015: The Year Women Took Over the Comedy Box Office," *splitsider.com*, 29 December 2015, <http://splitsider.com/2015/12/2015-the-year-women-took-over-the-comedy-box-office/>; Melena Ryzik, "The Sneaky Power of Amy Schumer, in 'Trainwreck' and Elsewhere," *New York Times*, 8 July 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/movies/the-sneaky-power-of-amy-schumer-in-trainwreck-and-elsewhere.html>; Nick Clark, "Edinburgh Fringe 2015: Stand up if you think women are the punk rock of comedy," *The Independent*, 9 August 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/edinburgh-fringe-2015-male-comedians-in-short-supply-this-year-says-never-mind-the-buzzcocks-star-10447601.html>; Katy Brand, "Next time you're called a 'humourless feminist'? Bust out one of these gags," *The Telegraph*, 9 January 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11334955/Feminist-jokes-to-prove-women-have-a-sense-of-humour.html>; Emily Nussbaum, "The Little Tramp: The Raucous Feminist Humour of 'Inside Amy Schumer,'" *The New Yorker*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/the-little-tramp>. Intriguingly, these articles appeared contemporaneously with others that noted that women's progress in primetime TV has stalled since the 1990s and early 2000s. (See: Megh Wright, "Women's Progress in Primetime TV Has Stalled Since the 2000s, According to Study," *splitsider.com*, 15 September 2015, <http://splitsider.com/2015/09/womens-progress-in-primetime-tv-has-stalled-since-the-2000s-according-to-study/>, and Nell Scovell, "The 'Golden Age for Women in TV' is Actually a Rerun," *New York Times*, 12 September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/opinion/sunday/the-golden-age-for-women-in-tv-is-actually-a-rerun.html>) and documented widespread discrimination against women behind the camera in the film and television industry (see: Maureen Dowd, "The Women of Hollywood Speak Out," *New York Times*, 20 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/magazine/the-women-of-hollywood-speak-out.html>).

³ Bianco, "Comedians Are Leading the Feminist Movement--And Here's What That Says About Us."

one-woman shows; self-proclaimed “fumerist” (feminist humourist) Kate Clinton; feminist journals like *On Our Backs*; events like the Southern Women’s Music and Comedy Festival; the Lavender Menace Zap at the May 1970 Meeting of the National Organization for Women (NOW); Karla Jay’s 1970 Wall Street “Ogle-In”; the 1968 Miss America Pageant Protests; path-breaking stand-up performer Jackie “Moms” Mabley; and “first wave” feminist satirical short stories and plays that highlighted the absurdities of misogyny.

The plethora of examples provided above—and these just scratch the surface—reveal that humour has long pervaded feminist politics, culture, and activism, contrary to the incredible amnesia (or perhaps willful ignorance?) that prevails when it comes to acknowledging the presence of humour in feminist activism. To combat the recurring erasure of humour from feminism, in this article I make a case for recovering a history of humour in feminism, with a specific focus on US-based feminism from the 1960s onwards. In what follows, I argue that retrieving evidence of feminist humour—whether in the form of political activism (street protests, “zaps”) or cultural artefacts (comics, music, plays)—enables scholars to re-imagine and rewrite prevailing narratives about feminism and its past. Furthermore, engaging humour opens up new lines of inquiry for future researchers, including an investigation of how humour helped shape feminist attitudes, subjectivities, and communities over the course of generations.

In pursuing a history of humour in feminism, I seek to contribute both to the young and dynamic field of Humour Studies, and to the more established historiography on US-based feminism. This project fills notable gaps in both fields. Only relatively recently have scholars in Humour Studies begun to investigate the roles women, gender, and sexuality play in comedy and humour;⁴ investigations into humour’s political potential for feminism are even more recent.⁵ Very few of the existing studies of gender, sexuality, and humour have adopted an historical

⁴ Classics and soon-to-be classics of the field include Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Regina Barreca, *They used to call me Snow White—but I drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991); Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), and Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004). Intriguingly, Mary Ritter Beard, the pioneering feminist historian and co-founder of the Sophia Smith Collection (Smith College) and Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Radcliffe College), found the subject of women and humour important enough to co-edit, with Martha Bensley Bruère, a book on it: *Laughing Their Way: Women’s Humor in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

⁵ Here I am referring primarily to cultural studies of feminist humour, such as Linda Mizejewski’s *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), and Domnica Radulescu’s *Women’s Comedic Art as Social Revolution: Five Performers and the Lessons of their Subversive Humor* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2012). Indeed, the field of “Feminist Humour Studies” is incredibly recent. See Kathryn Kein, “Recovering Our Sense of Humor: New Directions in Feminist Humor Studies,” *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 671-681. Humour has played a fleeting role within feminist theory: rare, notable examples include Donna Haraway’s celebration of irony as a tool in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181, and Hélène Cixous’ reflections on the revolutionary power of women’s laughter as refusal in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 875-893.

perspective, or have explicitly addressed the political.⁶ Meanwhile, histories of US-based feminism tend instead to focus on well documented and high profile activists, intellectuals, organizations, conferences, theories, and policy proposals; humour constitutes a marginal and under-examined presence.⁷ In writing a history of humour in feminism, I aim to highlight the diffuse yet undeniably generative “world-building” potential of (funny) feminist creativity. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate that neglecting the humorous impulse within feminism in favour of “serious politics” establishes a false binary: what’s funny is not necessarily frivolous.

To effectively and comprehensively search for humour in the feminist past, I argue that we ought to conceptualize feminism not only as a set of principles and political demands, but also as a practice. Here I am particularly indebted to the work of political theorist Linda Zerilli who, drawing on Hannah Arendt, proposed an understanding of feminism as a practice of freedom realized in “world-building” action. In proposing this definition of feminism, Zerilli explicitly intended to counter “means-ends” or instrumentalist approaches that justified women’s freedom in the name of social justice, social utility, or social improvement.⁸ According to Zerilli, “If we value women’s freedom because it is useful in solving certain social problems, we may not value freedom when it interferes with social utility or when more expedient ways of reaching the same social results can be shown. Freedom disturbs the use of politics as a means to an end; it is always ‘out of order.’”⁹ Freedom, Zerilli asserts, inheres in action; echoing Simone de Beauvoir, she insists that “to be free is to be able to do.”¹⁰

Note here that Zerilli’s definition does not specify what the action is meant to achieve: the moment of doing is a moment of indeterminate transformation. Thus, for her “the problem of freedom for women...[is] a problem of transforming the conditions of the common world.”¹¹

⁶ An excellent example of these few is Sara Warner’s *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performances and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), which focuses specifically on lesbian feminism. See also *Humour and Social Protest*, edited by Marjolein t’Hart and Dennis Bos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); this volume is a supplement of the *International Review of Social History*.

⁷ For histories of feminism focusing on the Women’s Liberation era, see for example Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Delta, 1999); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

For histories of feminism that seek to challenge the “waves” narrative (which tends to favour white women’s experiences), see *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U. S. Feminism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). For earlier histories, see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Viking, 1983); Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States*, 3rd revised edition (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996).

⁸ Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

⁹ Zerilli, 9.

¹⁰ Zerilli, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Zerilli's emphasis on actions that seek to transform to "the world," that is, "the creation of the space in which things become public," further defines feminism as a specific kind of practice: a world-making practice involved in "publicly articulating matters of common concern."¹² The act of publicly articulating common concerns has the potential to forge new bonds of community, possibly even seeding the grounds for what scholars such as Nancy Fraser, José Esteban Muñoz, and Michael Warner have termed counterpublics.¹³

And yet, it is important to stress that the effects of these world-building actions cannot be controlled or known in advance, nor can their meaning be entirely determined by the actors involved. Zerilli cites Arendt directly to note that, "Whoever begins to act must know that he [sic] has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable."¹⁴ For Zerilli, again following Arendt, the unpredictability and "boundlessness" of world-building practices are not to be feared: rather, they enable us to approach feminism "as a practice of freedom that is creative or inaugural."¹⁵ Framing feminism as a practice of freedom that is creative in turn allows a "potential role for imagination" as a "political faculty."¹⁶ In Zerilli's view, "Political claims rely on the ability to exercise imagination, to think from the standpoint of others, and in this way to posit universality and thus community. The universality of such claims depends on their being not epistemologically justified...but taken up by others, in ways that we can neither predict nor control, in a public space."¹⁷

In many ways, Zerilli's definition of feminism as a practice of freedom is congruent with the nature of humour as a practice. Humour—whether manifesting as irony, parody, satire, or carnivalesque play—is not explicitly means-end oriented. It may articulate matters of "common concern" (common to a particular community), but the intention belying the humorous act or creation cannot determine its reception and effects. Humorous acts mobilize the imagination to allow an audience member to view the world from a different perspective, and to envision and explore alternative ways of being and living. Indeed, it has become axiomatic within Humour Studies to argue that humour and the laughter it produces constitute moments of productive disruption that undermine authority and the status quo, however briefly.¹⁸ In so doing, humour can encourage the formation of new, albeit fragile, communities, and simultaneously affirm the value of those communities.¹⁹ It is within such communities that feminists may take care of their

¹² Zerilli, 15, 22.

¹³ See for example Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text* 25, no. 26 (1990): 56–80; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

¹⁴ Zerilli, 14.

¹⁵ Zerilli, 23, 24.

¹⁶ Zerilli, 29.

¹⁷ Zerilli, 30.

¹⁸ Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 15. See also Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter: Bitches, Whores and Other Fumerists," in *Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture*, edited by Sharon Crasnow and Joanne Waugh, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 23-24.

¹⁹ Willett and Willett, 24.

political selves: after all, as Jo Anna Isaak points out, “Laughter is first and foremost a communal response” that produces “sensuous solidarity.”²⁰ Furthermore, while humorous acts may be highly contingent in terms of their impact and effects, contingency is “the condition of world-creating and world-building power,” as Zerilli pointed out vis-à-vis feminism.

In light of the many traits feminism and humour as practices share in common, I maintain that exploring their interrelationship offers new avenues for scholarly work. Specifically, approaching feminism as a practice—one oriented towards freedom and world-building—and examining the role that humorous acts, texts, and performances played in animating this practice opens up feminism’s past to new narratives. It enables scholars to re-evaluate which actors and organizations have been scripted as protagonists in feminism’s past, to re-plot the sites where feminism happened, and to reassess what feminism’s “successes” and “failures” have been. Asking these questions anew allows scholars to de-centre both the well-heeled, bureaucratized feminism of the National Organization of Women, and the highly educated yet fractious feminism of the myriad Women’s Liberation organizations. Furthermore, it facilitates the recovery of neglected and marginalized voices, as well as an accounting of the full extent of feminism’s expressions and social, cultural, and political locations. Much in the way that historians such as Dorothy Sue Cobble and Paula Giddings productively disrupted feminist narratives contoured by the political activities and experiences of white middle class American women by highlighting the activities of working women, union activists, and African American women, using humour as an organizing principle requires that scholars re-map the feminist past and move away from histories whose plots are anchored by purportedly “central” organizations, intellectuals, and activists.²¹

I write this article in the thick of research, and in the midst of discovering the archives’ depths and limits. Given the slipperiness of my central research terms, in its earliest stages my project required an open inductive approach—and a lot of faith in archivists’ judgment regarding what constitutes evidence of humour within feminism. I have combed through the papers of feminist organizations, activists, writers, performers, and artists housed in archives across the United States, and have focused on groups and individuals active from the 1960s to the present.²² In the course of investigating varied and surprising sources, I am discovering the diversity of feminists’ use of humour across a range of media, places, and spaces, as well as recurring patterns in its deployment. Slowly, the rich tapestry of humour within feminism is coming into view.

²⁰ Isaak, 5. Willett and Willett further argue that humour can underwrite a feminist “erotic politics of laughter and joy (17).

²¹ See Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), and Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).

²² Thus far, I have visited the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society of Northern California; the Sophia Smith Collection: Women’s History Archives at Smith College; the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America; the New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts Division; Fales Library at New York University; and the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University. Forthcoming visits are planned to UCLA’s Special Collections, the June Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood, the Getty Institute, and the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn. Suggestions for areas of further research are most welcome.

Some examples drawn from my own research in progress suggest the breadth of humour's manifestations within feminism, and the kinds of voices that can be restored to feminism's history. Beyond the myriad feminist performers and events mentioned at the outset of this article, humour draws attention to overlooked groups such as COYOTE, an early sex workers' rights organization founded in San Francisco in 1973. The group eventually grew beyond San Francisco to establish branches throughout the United States and develop relationships with sex workers' rights groups in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the

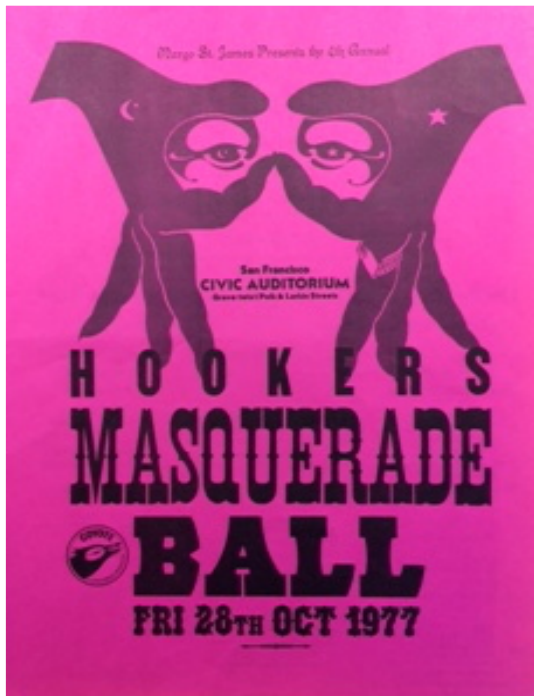


Fig. 1 Advertisement for the 1977 Hookers' Masquerade Ball in San Francisco.

Courtesy of COYOTE Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

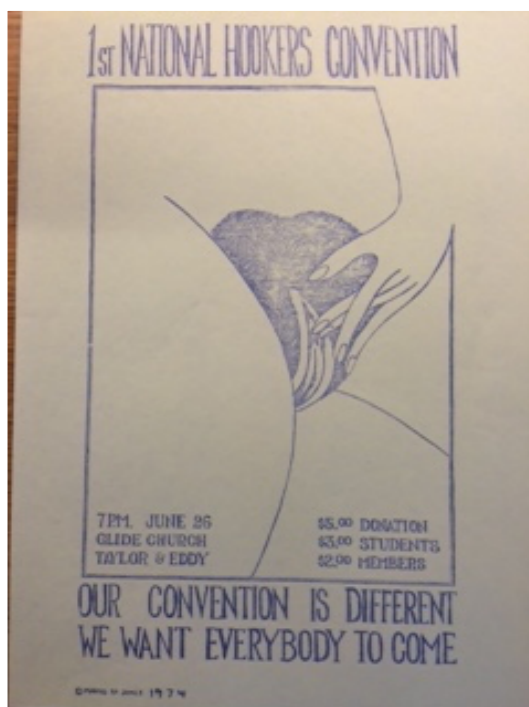


Fig. 2 Flyer for 1st National Hookers Convention, 1974.

Courtesy of COYOTE Records, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

Netherlands. It also forged alliances with prisoners' rights groups, LGBT groups, anti-pornography groups, the Feminist Party, and, perhaps most surprising, the Wages For Housework movement. COYOTE, which stood for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics," described itself in its early promotional literature as "A Loose Woman's Organization."²³ Led by former sex worker Margo St. James, COYOTE cultivated a wide network of sex workers, intellectuals, celebrities, and journalists through its exuberant activism. COYOTE produced cheeky publications like "Coyote Howls" and "Tricks Comics" (illustrated by R. Crumb); hosted International Hookers' Film Festivals; supported theatrical performances such as "The Annie Sprinkle Story" and Carol Leigh's performances as "Scarlot Harlot"; organized National Hooker Conventions, which combined policy workshops with music and comedy performances; held annual Hooker's Masquerade Balls, which advertised themselves as "the social event of the year for heterosexuals, bisexuals, trisexuals, transsexuals, nonsexuals, and other sexual minorities who feel they are discriminated against"; and launched the Florida-based "Kiss and Tell" campaigns that called out hypocritical sexually conservative politicians.

As suggested by its self-description, its explicit and playful use of the terms "hooker" and "tricks," its appeal to comics and theater as modes of public communication and representation, and especially its adoption of the masquerade ball as a key tool for fundraising and political awareness, COYOTE deployed a carnivalesque approach to its activism that mocked and inverted hegemonic sexual morality. COYOTE refused not only the politics of shame, but also the politics of respectability; instead, it celebrated sexual minorities and plurality, and flipped existing narratives by highlighting the perversity and inequities involved in policing sex work. COYOTE was especially attuned to double standards when it came to evaluating and policing sex; to this end, it announced that the inaugural theme of the Hooker's Masquerade Ball was "No Hippo-Critters Allowed." Likewise, COYOTE drew attention to racial and class biases in prostitution law enforcement, and insisted on a view of sex work as *work*, not as crime. Arguably, COYOTE's carnivalesque activism aimed to challenge the frame surrounding public discourse on prostitution, and specifically to undermine the false moralism that justified harsh police crackdowns. It also championed the sex workers' agency, underlining their ability to make decisions on their own behalf. Furthermore, it sought to combat a view of sex as dirty and base, and to celebrate sexual pleasure as inalienable to the human experience. As stated on the flyer for the 1st National Hooker's Convention, COYOTE's sexual politics were "different": "We want everyone to come."

Perhaps a more famous example of funny feminism is the Guerrilla Girls, a collective of pseudonymous artists, academics, and art world professionals whose provocative and playful posters took on sexism and racism in the art world and beyond beginning in 1985. From the outset, humour was an intentional mode of intervention for the "Girls." In an interview in *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back* (1991), "Louise the Poster Girl" stated, "[m]aking point blank demands won't necessarily change a thing...Making demands are the tactics of the 70s and let's face it, they didn't really work very well. So we decided to try another way: humour, irony,

²³ Coyote Records, 1962-1989 (81-M32—90-M1), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

intimidation, and poking fun.”²⁴ To wit, in their Mission Statement the Guerrilla Girls state that they

are a group of women artists, writers, performers, filmmakers and arts professionals who fight discrimination. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of culture, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humour to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny. In 14 years we have produced over 70 posters, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in the art world and the culture at large. Our work has been passed around the world by kindred spirits who consider themselves Guerrilla Girls too. The mystery surrounding our identities has attracted attention and support. We could be anyone; we are everywhere.²⁵

Over the years, the Guerrilla Girls toured nationally and internationally, collaborated with groups like ACT UP, and even did fundraising with female comedians.

Although in recent years the Guerrilla Girls have been more likely to organize and feature in art exhibits than to critique them, in their early years they plastered aesthetically arresting posters throughout New York City that raised provocative questions about racial and gender inequalities in the art world, and about the economic consequences of these inequalities. In addition to a crisp, pop art style, the posters deployed dark humour to express the Girls’ “outsider within” perspective on cultural politics.²⁶ For example, a 1990 poster satirized the tokenistic approach to diversity that prevailed in the art world (and broader culture) through a “Pop Quiz,” which asked: “If February is Black History Month and March is Women’s History Month, what happens the rest of the year?” The answer: “Discrimination.” Over time, the Girls developed a distinctive iconography through such posters that melded aesthetics and politics.

Humorous politics seem especially pronounced among queer feminist activists such as the fire-eating Lesbian Avengers, founded by Ana Simo, Sarah Schulman, Maxine Wolfe, Anne-Christine d’Adesky, Marie Honan, and Anne Maguire in New York in 1992. Like COYOTE, the Lesbian Avengers were active on a range of issues, including police violence, prison abuse, immigration, anti-abortion violence, anti-WTO economic activism, and gay adoption; they also developed alliances with groups such as the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, ACT UP, Camp Sister Spirit, and the Coalition for Women in Prison. Also like COYOTE, the Lesbian Avengers established branches across the United States. The San Francisco branch of the Avengers described itself as “A direct action group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women focused on issues vital to our survival and visibility” founded “on the principle that dykes have been doing social activism for decades but almost never specifically on our own behalf... The Avengers was born out of the need for a political group *of dykes working for dykes*.” In their promotional literature, the Avengers made clear that, “We like dramatic, sexy, media-savvy,

²⁴ Guerrilla Girls Archive, 1985-2010 (MSS 274), Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The language of the Outsider Within is borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (Oct.-Dec., 1986): S14-S32.

GUERRILLA GIRLS' POP QUIZ.

Q. If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year?

A. Discrimination.

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ARTWORLD

Fig. 3 Guerrilla Girls, Pop Quiz, 1990. An updated version appeared in Minneapolis in 2016.

Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy of guerrillagirls.com.

humorous, in-your-face political action. We're pissed off and not interested in being good little girls. But we're also deadly serious about what we're doing for our survival and visibility."²⁷ The Lesbian Avengers are responsible not only for establishing the Dyke March but also taking on sexism and homophobia in both straight society—as witnessed by the San Francisco branch's "weenie roasts" in support of Lorena Bobbitt—and in the LGBT community, evidenced by the San Francisco branch's 1994 protest, "Castro on the Rag."²⁸ Other actions by the San Francisco branch included releasing crickets in the headquarters of Exodus International (known as the Day of the Locusts), protesting the Promise Keepers, singing Christmas carols in public spaces with new queer lyrics ("Come Out for the Holidays"), and mailing toilet paper to conservative former governor Pete Wilson in advance of his inauguration ("Flush Pete Campaign").

As suggested by the various actions mentioned above, the Avengers used a range of humorous techniques for diverse ends. The San Francisco branch's invocations of "weenies" and being "on the rag," for example, provided means to call out sexism and aggressively claim public space. The "weenie roast" served not only to support what the Avengers saw as Lorena Bobbitt's act of defiance and self-defence, but also to implicitly condemn the domestic abuse and marital rape that precipitated Bobbitt's actions. Meanwhile, putting "Castro on the Rag" both conjured a distinctively (cisgendered) female experience, and facetiously drew on the fearful associations between menstruation and female unruliness to highlight the Avengers' rage over the perceived misogyny that prevailed in a nominally lesbian-friendly space. The more light-hearted but equally political "Come Out for the Holidays" similarly endeavoured to draw attention to lesbian concerns while occupying public space ostensibly as carollers. Conversely, actions such as the Day of the Locusts literalized the prophetic threats and visions of homophobic conservative groups as a form of parody and carnivalesque reversal. Unleashing locust surrogates highlighted the absurdity of the homophobes' apocalyptic pronouncements, and demonstrated the Avengers' refusal to be victim to reactionary heterosexism. For the Avengers, then, humour served as a vehicle for playful yet hard-edged defiance.

²⁷ Lesbian Avengers Records (96-10), GLBT Historical Society of Northern California.

²⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 4 (Left) Flyer for Lesbian Avengers Fundraiser. Women's Action Coalition records. Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Fig. 5 (Right) Flyer for “Castro on the Rag” event. Courtesy of Lesbian Avengers Records, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Beyond recovering overlooked organizations, looking for humour allows scholars to revisit pivotal yet elided historical actors. Florynce “Flo” Kennedy, for instance, has suffered incredible neglect within existing histories of feminism.¹ Although some scholars have dismissed Kennedy as a “minor key” in feminist politics, she uniquely helped bridge the gaps between radical (white) feminism, Black Power movements, and queer movements.² As Kennedy’s biographer Sherie Randolph has noted, Kennedy dedicated her life to fighting the interdependent injustices of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. Kennedy’s politics were informed not only by her training as a lawyer, but also by her media savvy and penchant for street theatre. She organized numerous irreverent protests, including the 1968 Miss America protest in Atlantic City, NOW’s “Flush Colgate-Palmolive” demonstration against hiring discrimination that same year, and the “Pee-In on Harvard Yard” in 1973 to protest the lack of restroom facilities for

¹ The astounding neglect of Florynce Kennedy makes Sherie Randolph’s recent biography all the more welcome. See Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce “Flo” Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

² Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Jackson MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 73.

female students.³ She infused all of these actions with joyful profanity and songs, such as “Tired Of Fuckers Fuckin’ Over Me.

Kennedy stressed the need for playful actions because she knew they would get media attention, and because she wanted “politics to be fun.”⁴ In Kennedy’s view, “the best way to recruit is to be having fun...[Other] people like to be dreary. I try to be as undreary as I can be.”⁵ As Randolph observed in her biography, “Kennedy hoped to make fighting for justice irresistibly pleasurable to organizers by emphasizing every moment of joy and humour that could be found in working together and defying an enemy... [H]er street performances at protests not only were meant to agitate and captivate the media and her adversaries but also were designed to inspire the demonstrators.”⁶ Randolph made a point to note that “Kennedy rejected the notion that comedy, especially in the hands of a woman, should be equated with a lack of seriousness. Like black women radicals Toni Cade Bambara and Queen Mother Moore, who were both known for their sarcastic wit, Kennedy made great use of laughter as a weapon and a shield.”⁷ Kennedy simultaneously participated in humorous street theatre and in more legibly political endeavours, such as providing legal counsel to Valerie Solanas, fighting in state courts to legalize abortion, and founding the Feminist Party in 1971, which supported Shirley Chisholm’s campaign for President of the United States.

Although feminist cultural products have not suffered the same neglect as the aforementioned feminist activists, not all aspects of feminist culture have been equally studied and celebrated. Looking for humour, my research has led me to (re)discover early third wave cultural phenomena and ephemera, some of which, such as zines, are only now slowly gaining

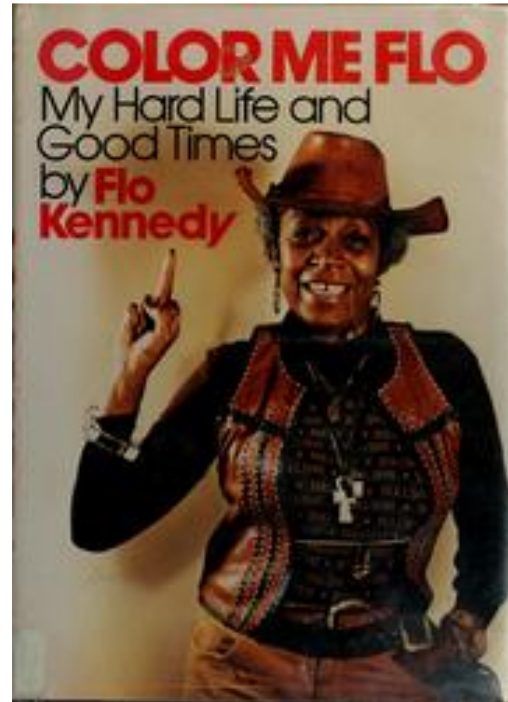


Fig. 6 Cover of Florynce “Flo” Kennedy’s 1976 autobiography, *Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

³ Irene Davall, “To Pee or Not to Pee, Sexism at Harvard,” *On the Issues Magazine Online*, Summer 1990, http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1990summer/summer1990_DAVALL.php.

⁴ Florence Kennedy, “It’s Damn Slick Out There,” interview with Sohnya Sayres, 347; cited in Randolph, 4.

⁵ Abby Karp, “Flo Kennedy,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 14, 1988; cited in Randolph, 153.

⁶ Randolph, 153-154. Randolph observes: “Part of what annoyed [Kennedy’s] adversaries and attracted some feminist followers was Kennedy’s privileging of satirical amusement and unleashed pleasure as part of her political actions.”

⁷ Randolph, 155.

traction as a focus of archival collection and scholarship.⁸ Two particular areas that have attracted my attention in the archives are music—specifically proto-riot grrl punk bands—and (queer) feminist cartoonists. Riot Grrl is not a phenomenon often associated with humour; here, the dominant affect is assumed to be anger. However, it is worth remembering that anger and humour are not antithetical: indeed, the aggression often associated with making jokes is precisely what has led many commentators to assert that women are not and cannot be funny. Moreover, effacing humour within Riot Grrl leads us to overlook the work of pioneering groups such as the Berkeley-based punk group the Yeastie Girlz, whose lyrics and iconography playfully and explicitly engaged female sexuality, pleasure, desire, and stereotypes. In their own words, the Yeastie Girlz saw themselves as “women who reject the way women and their bodies have been treated throughout time. We do not hate men, we only hope to educate and renew their ideas about women.”⁹ The Girlz toured in the United States and Europe with performers like Jello Biafra, Fugazi, Loveslug, and Sweet Baby Jesus. Founded in 1987, the band, which counted Cammie Toloui, Joyce Jiminez, Jane Guskin, Kate Rosenberger, and Wendy O Matik as members at various points in time, mined and mimicked the grotesquery and disgust associated with the female body and female sexuality. They explained their name as a “vaginal twist” on the Beastie Boys, and described their music as “vaginacore acapella rap.” Their band symbol was an androgynous smirking face underscored by two crossed tampons, and their album, *Ovary Action* (1988), featured songs as “You Suck,” “Sperm Brain,” “Orgasm Addict,” and “Fuck Yourself.” Their gig posters often featured photocopied close-up images of female genitalia, and they used tampon applicators as instruments in their performances. Judging by their fan mail, they developed a loyal fan base of women and men that extended beyond the United States into the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, Australia, Japan, and even the Federated States of Micronesia. For many, the Girlz’s raunchy feminist take on sex and gender was central to their appeal. Arguably, they belong to a tradition of ludic feminist musicians such as Peaches, whose work and performance use explicit sex talk to parody the sexual abjection cast upon women’s bodies—and instead find power and pleasure there.

In comparison to feminist cartoonists, Riot Grrl and its predecessors have received considerable scholarly attention.¹⁰ Perhaps because of assumptions about cartoons and comics as “low” cultural forms, the long-standing association between feminism and cartooning—and particularly queer feminists and cartooning—has been woefully neglected. After the successful Broadway adaptation of her graphic novel/memoir *Fun Home* (2006)—as well as the incorporation of the now famous “Bechdel test” into the pop culture lexicon—Alison Bechdel

⁸ In the United States, see for example Barnard’s Zine Library, Rock! Paper! Scissors! Zine Library in Oakland, the West Coast Zine Collection at San Diego State University, DePaul University Zine Collection in Chicago, Hampshire College zine collection in Amherst, Olympia Zine Library in Olympia, Washington, and Zine Archive and Publishing Project in Seattle, Washington. For recent scholarship, see Janice Radway’s ongoing work on Girl Zines and Riot Grrl culture; see for example Janice Radway, “Girls, Reading, and Narrative Gleaning: Crafting Repertoires for Self-Fashioning within Everyday Life,” in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, ed. Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (Mahwah: Erlbaum, 2002), 183-204.

⁹ Yeastie Girlz (2013-M299), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

¹⁰ For welcome exceptions to this general rule, see Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).



Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 Courtesy of Yeastie Girlz Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

has become a familiar figure to publics beyond the devoted community of readers of her long-running and acclaimed cartoon series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. However, as her personal papers, recently acquired by Smith College, reveal, Bechdel belonged to a cohort of primarily queer and feminist cartoonists, many of whom began working in the 1970s.¹¹ Beyond Bechdel, prominent and prolific feminist cartoonists include Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Lee Binswanger, Lee Marrs, Lynda Barry, Nicole Hollander, Roz Chast, Joan Hilty, Ellen Forney, Kris Kovich, Jennifer Camper, Roberta Gregory, Jackie Urbanovic, Juliet Doucet, and Diane Di Massa. Beginning in the 1970s, these artists started forming professional associations and publishing their own work. In 1972, Trina Robbins, member of the Berkeley feminist collective “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” founded *Wimmen’s Comix* to publish an eponymous comic book that featured women artists, and to countervail the sexist underground “comix” scene flourishing in New York and San Francisco at the time.¹² In these early texts, feminists addressed issues rarely covered in comics, including abortion, sexual harassment, sexism, and single-motherhood. Around that same time, Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevely (aka Chin Lively) began self-publishing

¹¹ Notably, Bechdel’s network extended out to include figures like comedian Kate Clinton, performance artist Holly Hughes, scholar and activist Barbara Smith, and writer Susie Bright.

¹² Dez Skinn, *Comix: The Underground Revolution* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 164. Initially members of the *Wimmen’s Comix* Collective included Sharon Rudahl, Trina Robbins, Lee Marrs, Terrie Richards, Pattie Moodian, Michelle Brand, Lora Fountain, Shelby Sampson, Aline Kominsky, Karen Marie Haskell and Janet Wolfe Stanley. The collective folded in 1992 (167). Skinn notes that Robbins also produced “It Ain’t Me, Babe Comix” (Last Gasp, 1970), which constituted the “world’s first all-woman written and drawn comic book” (158).

Tits & Clits, which explicitly addressed female sexuality to counter the misogynistic images of women circulating in male-dominated “comix.”¹³ One year later, Mary Wings published the first lesbian comics, *Come Out Comix* and *Dyke Shorts*.¹⁴ By the 1990s, groups such as the Lesbian Cartoonists’ Network, W.I.C.C.A (Women in Comics Creating Anarchy), and Friends of Lulu had formed in order to promote female professionals in the comics industry.

Although feminist cartoonists faced significant challenges in terms of syndication (does it surprise anyone that mainstream media outlets were not champing at the bit to print feminist cartoons, which derived humour from the absurdities of patriarchy and heteronormativity?), their work nonetheless found diverse and loyal audiences. These artists self-syndicated or published serially in feminist and LGBT magazines, and appeared both nationally and internationally. Working through Bechdel’s papers, one of the most striking findings has been the extensiveness of her readership. She received fan mail from across the United States as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland. As was the case with the *Yeastie Girlz*, the breadth of her reach and resonance with culturally and nationally diverse audiences is remarkable. Part of the power of comics and cartoons for female audiences, as scholars such as Hilary Chute and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley have shown, lies in its world-making power.¹⁵ Untethered from the world as it currently exists, the sequential arts possess a unique ability to visualize “unreal” alternatives. These alternatives have the potential to shift the reader’s perceptions, and to subvert existing systems at the level of the imagination by playing on readers’ fantasies and desires. Particularly for women, cartoons and comics can play on the dynamics of “looking” and being “looked at.” Moreover, they can make the private public, and in so doing rescue from silence and invisibility experiences often relegated to the former realm.

As this overview of select examples from the deep and varied history of humour in feminism has shown, humour allows for the examination of marginalized yet remarkable individuals, groups, and cultural products. The assemblage of activists, organizations, and artists brought together by a focus on humour drives home a fundamental yet often overlooked insight about the character of feminism and feminist history: namely, it is essentially “rhizomatic.” Drawing here on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I argue that humour allows us to “re-map” feminism and conceptualize it as comprising heterogeneous, connected elements with multiple exit and entry points.¹⁶ Conceptualizing feminism “rhizomatically” is both generative and incredibly democratic. It enables us to approach feminism as a collection of non-reductive multiplicities without a centre, and thus without singular origin and causation.¹⁷ A rhizomatic feminism allows us to envision connections between disparate and heterogeneous groups, actors, events, and texts in ways that do not perpetuate hierarchies constructed around supposedly central and peripheral figures. In fact, a reconstituted map of feminism may be not only much

¹³ Skinn, 164.

¹⁴ Skinn, 167.

¹⁵ See Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 6, 9.

more racially and sexually diverse than previous histories allow, but also politically, socio-economically, and even *affectively* diverse. COYOTE, Florynce Kennedy, the Guerrilla Girls, the Lesbian Avengers, the Yeastie Girlz, and feminist cartoonists all figure into a shared, interconnected feminist past along with more familiar actors like NOW and the Redstockings. Humour may serve here as a crucial “lineament” that enables us to apprehend these connections.¹⁸

Such a decentered, multitudinous vision of feminism also offers new ways of narrating feminism’s past. Existing histories have traced feminism’s supposed successes and failures, from the formation of the National Organization of Women to the Woman’s Strike on the one hand, to the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, universal day care legislation, and perennially imperilled reproductive rights on the other. The story that remains to be told is how feminism as a set of ideas, a ground for subjectivity, a basis for community and “counterpublics,” and a political stance persisted over the decades, in spite of the ups and downs suffered by feminism as a movement. Here I argue that the consistent presence of humour within feminist activism and culture played an integral role in the perennial circulation of feminism over the past forty years.

Acknowledging the persistence of feminism enables scholars not only to dispense with the troublesome “wave” metaphor that has been used to characterize the feminist past as a series of ebbs and flows, but also to consider how the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of successive generations of feminists were forged. By tracing “flows” of influence, scholars may gain a better understanding of how outrageous, humorous protest actions may have offered new, appealing models of subjectivity that held out the promise of personal and political transformation. Cultural products such as comics, zines, music, television shows, and films offered new forms of subjectivity and provided points of identification that could ground both new understandings of self and new forms of community, whose existence may be obscured by the lack of concrete organizational structure. These insights offer two possibly interrelated, potentially fruitful lines of inquiry for future researchers: first, a multi-generational oral history that examines how feminists came to their feminism, accompanied by an ethnographic study of present day processes; and second, an analysis of how being a “fan” of particular feminist figures, groups, and cultural products helped forge feminist subjectivities and politicized communities, as fans convened in “real life” at events like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, Comic Cons, or Ladyfest, and online via chat rooms and social media platforms. Here, researchers can draw on a number of conceptual resources from the burgeoning field of Fan Studies, the vast literature on publics and counterpublics, as well as Habermasian Humour Studies scholarship such as Amber Day’s *Satire and Dissent* (2011).¹⁹

In this article, I have endeavoured to make a case for why a history of humour in feminism is worth recovering. I have demonstrated that it would allow for a retrieval of marginalized individuals, groups, and voices, and in so doing recast the narrative of feminism’s past from one of dramatic ruptures and epic battles, to one of persistent presence and diffuse yet undeniable influence. I have further argued that it would allow scholars to engage new theoretical and

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 21.

¹⁹ See Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debates* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2011). For Fan Studies, see for example Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013), and *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

methodological approaches to feminism, and that it would specifically open up new lines of interdisciplinary inquiry into how and why individuals become feminists. Particularly in this moment of concerted mainstream attention to humour as a potent vehicle for feminism, reclaiming this past seems more urgent than ever. The stakes are not merely intellectual, but political as well. Neglecting the humorous impulse within feminism's past establishes a specious break between present-day "funny feminists" and their supposedly dour predecessors. It thus narrows and flattens our understanding of the deep and varied roots of contemporary feminist practices. Perhaps more importantly, it denies feminism its longstanding creative powers of world-building and subject formation, arguably its most potent yet elusive attribute. Recovering humour in the feminist past is thus an act of empowerment that enables us to appreciate the true extent of the cultural, social, and political revolution feminism has affected.

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