
Liv Strömquist's *Fruit of Knowledge* and the Gender of Comics

Mike Classon Frangos

Abstract

The recent boom in feminist comics by Swedish artists has produced a body of work that has only recently come to the attention of English-language readers. This article focuses on the comics of Liv Strömquist, specifically *Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy* (2018), the first of her book-length works to be published in English translation. Strömquist's text is situated in the broader context of feminist comics, particularly the work of Julie Doucet. Drawing on Swedish sources including reviews, interviews and comics scholarship, the article examines how Strömquist uses the comics medium to challenge and re-signify dominant representations of gender, sexuality and the body.

Keywords: feminist comics, gender, Julie Doucet, menstrual art, Liv Strömquist, Swedish comics

Swedish artist Liv Strömquist has been at the centre of an explosion of feminist and left-wing political comics in Sweden since the early 2000s. Strömquist's comics have won prestigious literary awards, and she has been a regular contributor on Swedish radio, television and several podcasts. Although Strömquist's comics have been translated and published in numerous languages, the English publication of *Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy* (2018, first published in Swedish as *Kunskapens frukt*, 2014) marks the introduction of Strömquist's work for English-speaking readers in book-length format.¹ During the same

- 1 Liv Strömquist, *Kunskapens frukt* (Stockholm: Ordfront Forlag, 2014); *Fruit of Knowledge: The Vulva vs. The Patriarchy*, trans. Melissa Bowers (London: Virago, 2018). Throughout the article, I quote from Bowers's translation of *Fruit of Knowledge* unless otherwise noted. Images are reproduced from the original Swedish edition. All other quotes from Swedish are given in my own translation. Selections of Strömquist's comics in English translation can also be found in two anthologies published by the

year, Strömquist garnered headlines in international media for a public art installation exhibiting her comics in Stockholm's Slussen metro station. The project, titled *The Night Garden* (2018–2019), drew from drawings and illustrations originally published in the author's previous books, including *Kunskapens frukt*, along with original work for the installation. Considered shocking for its images of menstruating women, the installation prompted the Sweden Democrats, a right-wing populist party, to call for the replacement of Strömquist's publically funded menstrual art by twentieth-century Swedish landscape paintings.² When one image from *Kunskapens frukt*, *Isprinsessa* [Ice princess], depicting an ice skater with visible menstrual bleeding (Fig. 1), was included separately in a gallery exhibition, one visitor was reported to have 'svimmat på grund av äckelkänslor' [fainted from disgust].³

The comics collected in *Kunskapens frukt* can be described as an extended consideration of the representation of female sexuality and female-gendered bodies in the history of science and culture. Strömquist's comics are filled with footnotes and references to academic sources that function to legitimate the author's discussions of cultural history and gender studies. Swedish reviewers have tended to characterise Strömquist's comics as 'genusvetenskap i serieform' [gender studies in comics form], referring to the overtly pedagogical orientation of her work.⁴ Characteristic of Strömquist's approach is the use of humorous and pedagogical comics to illustrate and comment on historical and contemporary forms of oppression and resistance, not least in relation to gender. While these comics may seem like straightforwardly pedagogical explanations of political and historical topics, the medium itself is utilised humorously to illustrate her subjects through self-reflexivity and clever juxtapositions of image and text. In *Kunskapens frukt*, footnotes operate alongside speech and thought bubbles to disrupt the sequence of images and to contextualise the events and personages

Swedish publisher Galago. See Johannes Klennel, ed., *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights: An Anthology of Alternative Swedish Comics*, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Ordfront Galago, 2008) and Johannes Klennel, ed., *From the Shadow of the Northern Lights: An Anthology of Swedish Comics*, vol. 2 (Stockholm: Ordfront Galago, 2010). This article was written with support of funding from Östersjöstiftelsen (The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies) within the project 'A Multidisciplinary Study of Feminist Comic Art'.

- 2 John Falkirk, 'SD kritiska mot konst i tunnelbanan' [SD critical of art in the subway], *Dagens Nyheter* (28 March 2018).
- 3 Jonas Thente, 'Liv Strömquist: En besökare svimmade på grund av äckelkänslor' [Liv Strömquist: One visitor fainted out of disgust], *Dagens Nyheter* (8 February 2015).
- 4 Bella Stenberg, 'Strömquists skarpa blick på samtidskulturen' [Strömquist's sharp eye on contemporary culture], *Kulturdelen* (17 September 2010).

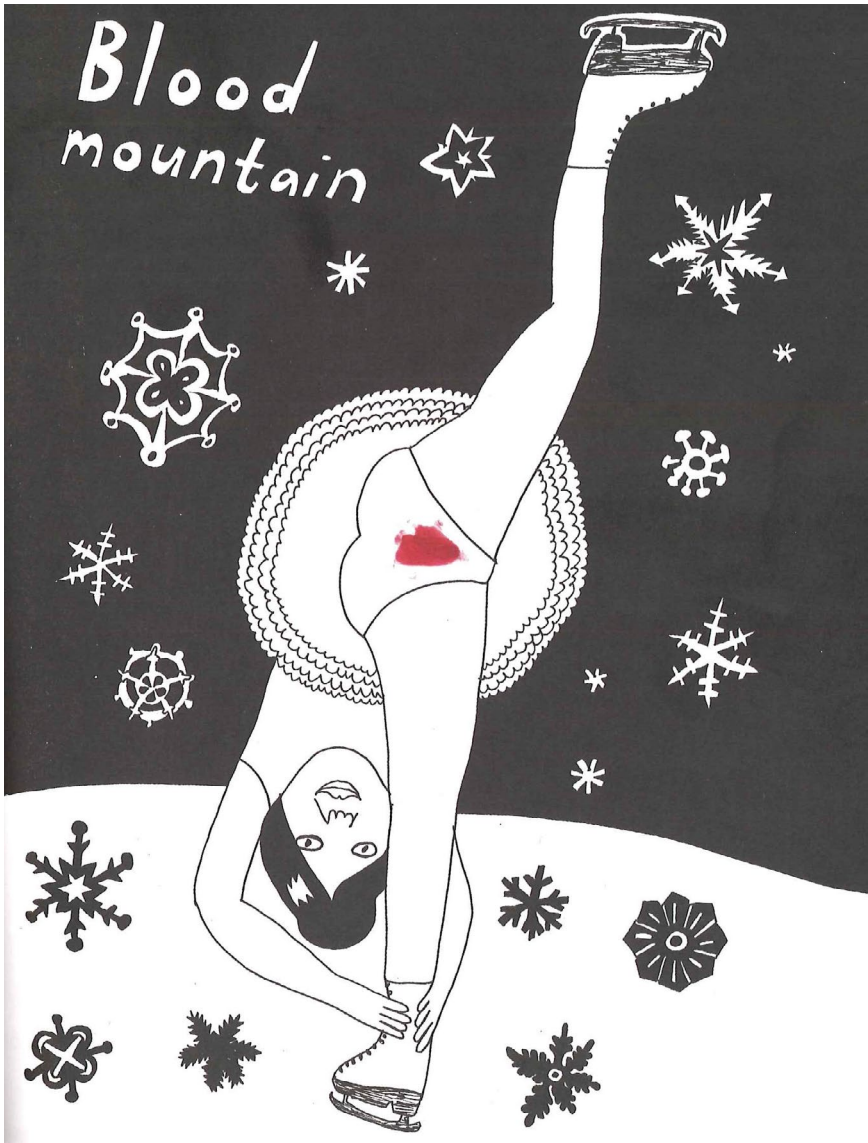


Figure 1: Liv Strömquist, 'Blood Mountain', *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), splash page.

depicted. A visual representation of the author frequently appears in Strömquist's comics, not simply to extend the pedagogical exegesis of the text but also to comment meta-textually on the work of critical analysis in which it is engaged.

In this article, I situate *Kunskapens frukt* in the context of feminist comics, paying particular attention to how Strömquist's work blends feminist and queer theory, gender studies and menstrual art and activism in the comics medium. The representation of menstruation specifically has a long history in comics by women, from Trina Robbins and Julie Doucet to Alison Bechdel and Phoebe Gloeckner.⁵ The work of Julie Doucet can be seen as a particularly important point of reference for *Kunskapens frukt* inasmuch as Strömquist herself has acknowledged Doucet as an inspiration.⁶ Though all of Strömquist's texts explicitly take up feminist and other political themes, *Kunskapens frukt* is the work that most explicitly problematises the representation of gender in the comics medium itself. Strömquist's comics are thus highly relevant to ongoing discussions within comics studies on feminist and queer comics. As Hillary Chute has argued, 'how comics' textuality takes the body seriously, both within its diegetic frames, as presentation, and outside of them, as inscription, is one of the central reasons it can be linked so strongly to feminist inquiry and strategy'.⁷ In her groundbreaking study of autobiographical comics by women, Chute describes how the practice of drawing by hand involves an 'intimacy' with the physical 'body on the page' of the artist.⁸ Yet, as Yetta Howard has suggested, the representation of gendered, racialised and 'othered' bodies in comics is highly symbolic, relying on the deployment of specific conventions.⁹

5 For discussions of embodiment in comics with reference to menstruation in terms of abjection, see Ann Miller, *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 229–241; Elizabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 68–71. I am also indebted to Alisia Chase's reading of Julie Doucet: Alisia Chase, 'You Must Look at the Personal Clutter: Diaristic Indulgence, Female Adolescence, and Feminist Autobiography', in *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*, ed. Jane Tolmie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 207–240.

6 Strömquist refers to Doucet as 'legend, idol and pioneer' in an Instagram comment to a post in which she and Doucet take a selfie at Small Press Expo 2018. See Liv Strömquist, 18 September 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn4DzTkB-sh/> (accessed 13 February 2020).

7 Hillary Chute, 'Feminist Graphic Art', *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 153–170 (157).

8 Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 10.

9 Yetta Howard, *Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 98. Relevant for my argument is Howard's reading of Roberta Gregory's comic *Bitchy Butch* in *ibid.*, 85–93.

How comics artists can disrupt, critique or re-signify the gendered conventions of representation within comics is thus an overtly political question for feminist creators.

Though Strömquist's work has thus far largely escaped the notice of English-language scholarship, the recent explosion of feminist comics in Sweden has received critical attention from a number of Swedish researchers, including Anna Nordenstam, Margareta Wallin Wictorin, Ylva Lindberg, Maria Jönsson, Anders Johansson, and others. Strömquist has been a major focus of these critics' attention, alongside other feminist comics artists such as Nina Hemmingsson, Nanna Johansson and Sara Granér. Nevertheless, *Kunskapens frukt* has not yet received any major scholarly attention in either Swedish or English, apart from isolated reviews.¹⁰ In this article, I draw from Swedish-language reviews, interviews and academic criticism to situate my examination of Strömquist's work. As the research of my Swedish colleagues makes clear, the use of political satire in feminist comics raises broader theoretical questions about the work of critique and critical reading.¹¹ How can we understand comics as a medium for the critique of dominant representations of gender and sexuality, and what are the limits of such forms of critique? My argument in this article is that *Kunskapens frukt* uses self-reflexive metacomics to call attention to the cultural and historical contingency of *all* gendered representations, including the author's own. In doing so, I argue that Strömquist does reparative work, using her comics to imagine alternatives to the dominant conditions of representation for sexed and gendered bodies.

'The Two-Gender Cultural Paradigm'

The Swedish word *frukt* in the title *Kunskapens frukt*, like its English cognate 'fruit', evokes the fruits or results of an activity or labour, including scientific endeavour, as well as the 'forbidden fruit' of the Garden of Eden. The title *Kunskapens frukt* refers thus to the 'forbidden fruit' of sexual knowledge in two senses: not only the results of the

10 Chute's brief *New York Times* review of the English publication of *Fruit of Knowledge* praises the author's 'weird, hybrid, this-only-really-happens-in-comics tone' and describes the book as 'didactic, goofy, academic'. See Hillary Chute, 'When Comics Writers Defy Gender Norms', *New York Times* (27 December 2018).

11 On critical reading and its genealogies, see especially Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015). Felski's provocative arguments on critical reading have provoked debates in literary studies that I do not have space to summarise here, but see also the essays collected in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

centuries-long study of female sexuality within Western patriarchal culture, but also the alternative archive of women's histories and experiences delegitimised and suppressed within that culture. In other words, the comics in *Kunskapens frukt* document how the categories of sex and gender have themselves emerged as effects of a culturally and historically specific production of knowledge and not as 'natural' objects or facts.

The first page of *Kunskapens frukt* begins with a character, who may be an avatar or self-representation of the author, standing against a white semicircle surrounded by a larger black background. The white semicircle gives the impression she is in a spotlight on stage. The first panel shows the avatar of the author-narrator casually acknowledging the reader's presence with a surprised greeting, 'Oh, hi!' (Fig. 2).¹² The reader of Strömquist's work is directly addressed as a comrade or fellow traveller, someone likely to share a personal stake in feminist struggle or gender politics. In the following panel, the author's self-representation continues her direct address to the reader: 'You may think it's a problem that the part of the body known as the "female genitalia" has been made invisible and shameful in our culture'. Strömquist's author-narrator forms air quotes with her hands to imitate the quotation marks around the term 'female genitalia', a gesture repeated in the page's final panel. She continues, 'But there's a MUCH, MUCH bigger and MORE SERIOUS PROBLEM IN OUR CULTURE! Namely, certain men who've been entirely TOO interested in the part of the body known as the "female genitalia!"' The use of repetition and air quotes questions the obviousness of 'sex' as a natural category preceding 'gender', while continuing to address the reader as a sympathetic audience sharing the author's goals and objectives.

The problem of thinking gender, we are told in *Kunskapens frukt*, is not simply the stigmatisation of the female body, but rather the way in which knowledge about sexed and gendered bodies has been and continues to be produced through a discourse that is entirely too interested in the objects it seeks to define. What appears in the pages that follow is a humorous and pedagogical exegesis of male theologians and scientists who have participated in the production of knowledge about the female body, from Saint Augustine to Baron Cuvier and the medical psychologist John Money, among others.¹³ Each of these figures is

12 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 5.

13 Baron Cuvier dissected the body of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus to find evidence in support of scientific racism, while John Money advocated surgical



Figure 2: Liv Strömquist, *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), 5.

treated in turn in *Kunskapens frukt*, but the treatment of Money is particularly significant. Strömquist discusses Money's theories advocating surgical intervention in the bodies of intersex babies as an example of the construction of sexed and gendered bodies according to what is referred to as 'den kulturella föreställningen om två kön' [the two-gender cultural paradigm]. According to the 'cultural paradigm' of the gender binary, the presence of 'sex organs that can't be categorised as "male" or "female"' is seen as 'störig' [pretty annoying], a complication that Money's theories are meant to address.¹⁴ As Myra Hird has written in her influential analysis of Money's work, 'That something as "natural" as "sex" can be, or indeed needs to be, produced artificially is a paradox that seems to have escaped the medical fraternity'.¹⁵

To illustrate Money's views on surgically intervening in the bodies of intersex babies, Strömquist draws two surgeons in the midst of an operation. The surgeons discuss their own actions, comically ventriloquising the terms of poststructuralist gender theory (Fig. 3). One surgeon explains:

There are many different ways to organize sex [kön] and gender [genus] in different societies! It was actually not until the 19th century that there first arose an OBSESSION with the scientific categorization of sex [kön] and

intervention to reshape the genitalia of intersex babies to conform to the binary gender system. See Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 14–15, 21–23.

14 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 14.

15 Myra Hird, 'Gender's nature: Intersexuality, transsexualism and the "sex"/"gender" binary'. *Feminist Theory* 1, no. 3 (2000): 347–364 (353). Hird is not specifically cited by Strömquist, but much of Hird's argument about Money's theories is rehased in the text.

sexual organs [*könsorgan*] as ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ [*avvikande*] and THIS has to do with an expanded exercise of disciplinary power, what Foucault calls ‘biopower’.¹⁶

In response to this deft theoretical exegesis, the other surgeon initiates an exercise of the very disciplinary power that the first doctor has just described: ‘Yeah, yeah!!! Pass the scalpel!!’. Strömquist’s comic places the Foucauldian critique of biopower in the speech bubbles of the surgeons whose business it is, literally, to construct sexed bodies. By situating the discourse of critical theory among the agents of disciplinary power themselves, Strömquist’s comics refuse the position of distance that the practitioners of critical theory might otherwise adopt with respect to the discourses they attempt to expose. Instead, the doctors themselves expound on the theory and practice of biopower while coolly exercising its effects on what Foucault once called ‘docile bodies’.¹⁷

The first surgeon’s hands are raised in an ambivalent gesture, indicating perhaps resignation, disgust, joy, or discovery. Compared with the cool and expressionless functioning of power, the discourse of critical theory appears at best wryly ironic and at worst helpless or even complicit. The surgeon may be aware of what is happening but is incapable of stopping it, or he may be so carried away by his exegesis of Foucault that he has lost sight of the material effects of his and his colleague’s actions. What reaction is expected of readers when faced with a panel like this one? In an interview with Fredrik Strömberg in the Swedish comics trade publication *Bild & Bubbla*, Strömquist has described how she attempts to include an element of humour in every

16 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 15. Here, I have departed from Bowers’s translation, which renders *kön* and *könsorgan* as ‘genders’ and ‘genitals’, respectively. As Toril Moi has pointed out, the fact that Scandinavian languages have tended to use the same word for sex and gender (in Swedish, *kön*) has not prevented the emergence of a sex/gender binary in those languages, expressed in contemporary Swedish with the terms *kön* and *genus*. As I am arguing, Strömquist uses a poststructuralist vocabulary indebted to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to suggest that so-called ‘biological’ sex is, like gender, also a product of cultural and material practices. See Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

17 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 136. The situation of the operating table illustrates literally the idea of power operating on ‘docile bodies’ as though from above. But the previous page in Strömquist’s comic makes it clear that the body is seen as an agent playing an active role in resisting categorisation and troubling the assumption of the gender binary. A substantial body of feminist theory has emerged in dialogue with Foucault’s theories, including feminist criticisms of Foucault. For a useful overview and starting point, see Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).



Figure 3: Liv Strömquist, 'Män som varit för intresserade av det som brukar kallas "det kvinnliga könsorganet"' [Men who have been too interested in that which is usually called 'the female sexual organ'], *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), 15.

panel, even in comics that are overtly pedagogical.¹⁸ In the comic of the two surgeons discussing Foucault, I would suggest that humour results from the contrast between the raw efficacy of power's effects on the body and the critical discourse necessary to explicate and contextualise its operation. The surgeons in the panel are deadly serious as they construct a sexed body through surgical intervention, but the second surgeon's response ('Yeah, yeah!!! Pass the scalpel!!!') is too nonchalant to be considered entirely disinterested. As the narrator continues in a caption box, 'For these doctors, creating lady parts was just another way of goofing off on the job, the way we might scroll through Facebook today'.¹⁹ In other words, the use of humour in Strömquist's comics calls

18 Fredrik Strömberg, 'Anarkism, punk och feminism' [Anarchism, punk and feminism], *Bild & Bubbla* 185, no. 4 (2010): 21–33 (27).

19 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 15.

attention to the way power is exercised on the body with a capriciousness that effortlessly incorporates and disarms the critical discourses directed against it.

Feminist Metacomics and Strömquist's Reparative Work

When Swedish reviewers describe Strömquist's writing as 'gender studies in comics form', they refer no doubt to her ability to distil the difficult concepts of poststructuralist feminist and queer theory into a comprehensible and accessible form that is highly relevant for contemporary feminist activism. Strömquist uses the comics medium not only to explicate theoretical concepts, but also to suggest alternatives to the dominant conditions of representation for sexed and gendered bodies.

But how, then, can we understand the way that Strömquist's comics make use of the discourse of critical theory? Among Swedish literary scholars, Strömquist's engagement with critical theory has been at the forefront of discussions of her work. Maria Jönsson has described Strömquist's earlier comics in terms of 'den groteska realismens materiella-kroppsliga och återfödande princip' [grotesque realism's principle of material-corporeality and rebirth], which she goes on to distinguish from what she describes as 'a certain humorous approach cultivated in the contemporary graphic novel, an approach that is certainly critical but does not primarily work with irony'.²⁰ Reading Eve Sedgwick's influential work on paranoid and reparative reading alongside Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Jönsson associates carnivalesque satire in contemporary comics with the negative strategies of paranoid reading, while an alternative, *icke-ironisk* [non-ironic] mode of humour is associated with what Sedgwick calls reparative reading.²¹ In her essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', Sedgwick describes paranoid reading as a 'tracing-and-exposure project' characteristic of modes of cultural and ideological analysis that seek to expose or demystify the hidden relations of power embedded in any given aesthetic object or cultural product.²² An instance of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' first

20 Maria Jönsson, 'Ironiska, groteska och reparativa strategier' [Ironic, grotesque and reparative strategies], *Finsk Tidskrift* 3–4 (2014): 71–85 (75, 80). Jönsson categorises Strömquist's early work as exemplifying Sedgwick's paranoid approach, but I would argue that this oversimplifies Strömquist's work and does not take into account the imaginative alternatives opened up by her texts.

21 Jönsson, 'Ironiska, groteska och reparativa strategier', 71.

22 Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

described by Paul Ricoeur, paranoid reading's limitations are most apparent when it is framed as the only possible style of reading, in other words, 'when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds'.²³ By contrast, reparative reading, according to Sedgwick, looks beyond paranoid reading's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' to discover alternative modes of being and living made possible within the realms of culture and aesthetics. Similar to the camp aesthetics of drag performances, reparative reading highlights 'the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them'.²⁴ In this sense, contemporary comics can work as an example of what Sedgwick terms the 'reparative impulse' to explore alternative styles of living within a patriarchal and heteronormative culture.

Referring to the political comics collected in Strömquist's earlier volume *Ja till Liv!* [Yes to life!] (2011), Swedish literary critic Anders Johansson extends Jönsson's argument by theorising what he calls her *icke-ironiska poetik* [non-ironic poetics]. 'Instead of suggesting a depth under the surface, a metaphysics beyond the physical', he argues, somewhat cryptically, 'they [Strömquist's comics] show the physics of the metaphysical, the wrath of the material'.²⁵ In Johansson's analysis, Strömquist's comics eschew the purely negative stance of critical theory, the move of unmasking the reality of social relations under the surface of an aesthetic object. From this perspective, power has no metaphysical status beyond materiality itself, as in the surgeon's use of the scalpel to create sexed bodies on the operating table. Strömquist's comics, in this view, are not primarily concerned with a project of exposing and demystifying power relations, but instead dramatise the

23 Ibid., 126.

24 Ibid., 150–151.

25 Anders Johansson, *Critica Obscura: Litteraturkritiska essäer* [Critica Obscura: Literary critical essays] (Umeå: Bokförlaget h:ström, 2012), 80. Johansson's argument refers specifically to Strömquist's comics satirising Sweden's centre-right government after the election of 2006. Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin have similarly argued that the work of Strömquist and other creators of political comics in Sweden can be seen as a response to the shock of centre-right government and its program of neoliberal reforms at a time when other media were often surprisingly complacent. See Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin, "'Högerideologi som dansbands-melodi": Politisk satir i svenska feministiska serier' [Right-wing ideology as dance-band melody: Political satire in Swedish feminist comics], in *De tecknade seriernas språk: Uttryck och form* [The language of comics: Expression and form], ed. David Gedin (Stockholm: Medströms förlag, 2017), 167–186 (170).

situated-ness of *any* understanding of the natural or material world. In fact, I would suggest that this line of analysis can be extended to Strömquist's appropriation of critical theory and its modes of argumentation at large. As Ylva Lindberg has pointed out, Strömquist's comics 'completely ridicule [the argumentative genre] through unexpected associations and conspicuous elements of youth slang marked by a number of English borrowings'.²⁶ 'Theory', even gender theory, does not convey any authoritative status in Strömquist's work, but instead competes for legitimacy with other discourses such as medicine, psychology, self-help, popular culture, mythology—all of which are cited and juxtaposed in these comics.

In this context, we can understand the significance of self-reflexive comics in *Kunskapens frukt*. Swedish literary critic Anna Nordenstam as well as Anders Johansson have pointed out the frequency of self-representations of the author in Strömquist's works, which are usually perceived as defying the trend towards autobiographical graphic novels.²⁷ As metatextual interruptions that break up the flow of the narrative, self-reflexive comics, or 'metacomics', force the reader to consider the text's own status as a comic and the situated-ness of the position of the author. As Roy T. Cook explains, metacomics call attention to 'the conventional aspects of comics and how those conventions shape our ideas of what comics are and what they can do'.²⁸ Although it is tempting to see Strömquist's comics as illustrated gender studies textbooks, the use of metacomics disrupts their pedagogical content by calling attention to the conventions of the medium. Self-reflexivity is, as Rita Felski has argued, a privileged mode of contemporary critique, in which '[t]he critical observer is a self-observer: the goal is to objectify

26 Ylva Lindberg, 'Satiriska feministiska serier: Nina Hemmingson och Liv Strömquist' [Satirical feminist comics: Nina Hemmingson and Liv Strömquist], *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap* 2 (2014), 83–99 (91).

27 Anna Nordenstam, 'Feminism och serier: Serietecknaren Liv Strömquist' [Feminism and comics: Comics artist Liv Strömquist], in *Liv, lust och litteratur: Festskrift till Lisbeth Larsson* [Life, lust and literature: Festschrift for Lisbeth Larsson], ed. Kristina Hermansson, Christian Lenemark and Cecilia Pettersson (Gothenburg: Makadam, 2014), 118–130 (126–128); Johansson, *Critica Obscura*, 76. In her *Bild & Bubbla* interview with Fredrik Strömberg, Strömquist says that she both is and is not the character she draws in her comics. See Strömberg, 'Anarkism, punk och feminism', 30.

28 Roy T. Cook, 'Why Comics Are Not Films: Metacomics and Medium-Specific Conventions', in *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach*, ed. Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook (London: Wiley, 2012), 165–187 (182). El Refaie similarly calls attention to metatextual moments in autobiographical comics that create 'increased awareness of the mediating role of the author/artist on the part of readers'. El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 166.

one's own thought by looking at it from outside, so as to puncture the illusion of any spontaneous or immediate understanding'.²⁹ But, as we will see, Strömquist's metacomics do not primarily serve the purpose of exposing or demystifying in the paranoid mode of critical theory, as her humorous approach goes beyond merely attempting 'to puncture the illusion' of representation.

A self-representation of the author reappears in the first chapter of *Kunskapens frukt* after the exposition of the theories of John Money on the surgical reconstruction of the genitals of intersex babies. She stands once again against a white spotlight-like semicircle on a black background and resumes her commentary: 'So, if future generations ask why we, in our day, felt compelled to surgically alter the genitalia of healthy babies [...] we can say we did it out of LOVE! LOVE for the binary two-gender system!!'³⁰ For Strömquist, what might have appeared to be disinterested knowledge produced by an authoritative discourse is revealed as the result of an 'obsessive' interest in the female body. Rather than hate or greed or rapaciousness, the affect motivating this interest is said to be 'love', a love for 'the binary two-gender system'. When the author's self-representation appears in the panel to point out that surgical intervention on the bodies of intersex babies can be interpreted as an act of 'love' for the gender binary, she unexpectedly breaks into a rendition of Savage Garden's 1998 single 'Truly Madly Deeply' in a sequence that spans two pages of the comic: 'Our society wants to STAND with the binary two-gender system on a mountain!!! It wants to BATHE with the binary two-gender system in the sea!! It wants to LAY LIKE THIS FOREVER! Until the SKY falls down on it!'³¹ Strömquist's avatar performs an act of sentimental devotion to the same system she is in the midst of critiquing.³² In the next panel, an ambiguously gendered character wearing a hat marked 'crew' appears on stage to whisper into her ear, interrupting the performance (Fig. 4). Here, sex and gender continue to exert an affective pull that even the most seasoned gender theorist can find difficult to resist. Strömquist's metacomical, far from 'objectify[ing] one's own thought' through the lens of critical theory,

29 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 135.

30 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 16.

31 *Ibid.*, 16–17.

32 In the original publication of *Kunskapens frukt*, these lyrics are rendered in Strömquist's own Swedish translation, so the allusion to Savage Garden may be lost on many Swedish readers. To what extent the authorial avatar's performance is meant to be seen as ironic is up to interpretation. This moment in the text could be a camp appropriation of the discourse of sentimental romance, or an admission of one's own complicity in that discourse, or both.



Figure 4: Liv Strömquist, ‘Män som varit för intresserade av det som brukar kallas “det kvinnliga könsorganet”’, *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), 17.

illustrates the passionate attachment to representations of sex and gender mobilised and remobilised in different contexts.

The first chapter of *Kunskapens frukt* ends with the description of a particularly vexed case of historical recovery: the efforts of Swedish researchers in 1965 to exhume the remains of the cross-dressing seventeenth-century Swedish monarch Queen Christina and to examine them, unsuccessfully, for signs of hermaphroditism. The last page of the chapter consists of a portrait of the historical Queen Christina with an added speech bubble containing the text: ‘Fuck off för evigt’ [Fuck off forever] (Fig. 5).³³ The image that Strömquist chooses here is significant, a seventeenth-century Italian engraving of Christina entering Rome in masculine attire after her abdication.³⁴ ‘Fuck off forever’ can be interpreted as the author’s own articulation of resistance to the medico-scientific interest in classifying and labelling the sexed and gendered body, a response that anachronistically connects the past and the present. Strömquist’s use of the image of Queen Christina is an example of the move to reclaim a historical figure for feminist and queer work in the present, which can be placed in dialogue with other recent Swedish attempts to reimagine Queen Christina as a trans icon.³⁵

33 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 30.

34 The engraving is reproduced in Per Bjurström, *Feast and Theatre in Queen Christina’s Rome* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1966), 13.

35 One such attempt is Aleksa Lundberg and Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s 2017 play *Kung Kristina Alexander* [King Kristina Alexander]. Eva Borgström considers the complicated politics of the competing discourses regarding Queen Christina’s gender iden-



Figure 5: Liv Strömquist, 'Män som varit för intresserade av det som brukar kallas "det kvinnliga könsorganet"', *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), 30.

Crucially, Strömquist does not suggest any definitive interpretation of her own of Queen Christina's gender or sexual identities. Instead, 'Fuck off forever' expresses a disidentification with dominant representations of sex and gender and the cultural and material practices that enable them. As José Muñoz defines the term, 'A disidentification is neither an identification nor a counter-identification – it is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment'.³⁶ Disidentification refers, thus, to an open-ended project of re-signification, not simply unmasking identity-formations, but working 'on, with, and against' dominant discourses and practices to reimagine given identifications. Similarly, I suggest that Stromquist's work seeks not simply to debunk gendered identities as constructions, but rather to undertake the reparative work of articulating disidentification and imagining alternatives.

tity in her article 'Drottning Kristina och hermefroditeus tankefigur' [Queen Kristina and the figure of the hermaphrodite], *lambda Nordica* 4, no. 1 (1998): 6–30.

36 José Esteban Muñoz, 'Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover* (and Other STDs)' *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000): 67–79 (70).

Menstrual Activism and the Power of Disidentification

The final chapters of *Kunskapens frukt* deal with menstruation and the menstrual taboo, which had also been the focus of Strömquist's contribution to the Swedish radio program *Sommar* [Summer], broadcast during the summer of 2013 in advance of the book's publication. The last chapter in *Kunskapens frukt*, titled 'Blood Mountain' (English in the original), is a long sequence of over thirty pages using comics to explore the menstrual taboo, the menstrual products industry, Sigmund Freud's interest in menstruation, and the representation of menstruation in culture and art. As Strömquist's narrative voice reminds us, 'menstruation is a taboo – a taboo that has played out differently in different cultures'.³⁷ As Chris Bobel has argued, contemporary menstrual art and activism have been heavily influenced by the understanding of menstruation as a construction in terms that resonate with those that Strömquist employs in *Kunskapens frukt*. Contemporary menstrual activists continue the efforts of earlier generations of feminists to challenge the silence and invisibility of menstruation, particularly in relation to the commercial menstrual products industry. According to Bobel, challenging the gender binary that constructs menstruating bodies as 'other' and in need of regulation and control is an important component of menstrual activism. Contemporary menstrual activism is described as a project of disassociating menstruation from the gendered body, or 'degendering menstruation'.³⁸ Since, as Bobel puts it, 'not all women menstruate, and not only women menstruate', menstrual activism is thus understood as a queer project in which menstruation itself functions as a site of resistance to binary gender.³⁹

In addition to an educational discourse seeking to raise awareness regarding issues of women's health and the environmental impact of commercial menstrual products, menstrual activism often takes the form of shock tactics in a range of media, including comics. As both Breanne Fahs and Chris Bobel have documented, comics, blogs and zines have played a major role in menstrual activism since the 1990s in articulating a radical challenge to dominant discourses of menstru-

37 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 102.

38 Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 160.

39 Bobel continues, 'not all women menstruate, and not only women menstruate. Postmenopausal women, women posthysterectomy, and some athletes, for example, do not menstruate, and some preoperative transmen do menstruate (as do many intersexuals)'. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

ation and menstruating bodies.⁴⁰ Representations of menstruation in comics extend a broader feminist genealogy of menstrual art, including works such as Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) and *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), Emily Culpepper's *Period Piece* (1974) and Barbara Hammer's *Menses* (1974). In 2014, the Swedish illustrated magazine, *Re:public* published a cover story on menstrual activism titled 'Mensmakt' [Period power].⁴¹ The authors refer to Bobel's research on contemporary menstrual activism and feature images from Swedish activist Josefin Persdotter's exhibition *Period Pieces*. Persdotter's art includes images of young women with visible menstrual bleeding, as well as menstrual blood on the face and lips. Alongside *Kunskapens frukt*, another collection of menstrual comics was published in Sweden in 2014, *Kvinnor ritar bara serier om mens* [Women only draw comics about menstruation], an anthology of comics depicting menstruation from a variety of perspectives and aesthetic styles, including one comic by a trans man. The title of the anthology is drawn from a remark reported by Liv Strömquist in her 2013 contribution to the Swedish radio program *Sommar*. During the episode, Strömquist describes being told by a male colleague that comics by women are not worth reading because 'kvinnor ritar bara serier om mens'. In the foreword to the collection, Frida Ulvegren describes her reaction to Strömquist's program: 'I felt that I had to tell all my stories about my period! Preferably in comics form and preferably right away'.⁴²

In comics, representations of menstruation do feminist work by making visible aspects of bodily experience that are normally rendered invisible. Julie Doucet's strip 'Heavy Flow' (1993), collected in *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort!* [Lift your leg, my fish is dead!],⁴³ may be among the most famous depictions of menstruation in comics, utilising simultaneously an exaggerated self-representation of the author and a carnivalesque reversal of the menstrual taboo. Through absurdist humour and grotesque exaggeration, Doucet's comics can be thought of as examples of activist shock tactics that challenge the norms of silence and invisibility around menstruation. 'Heavy Flow' portrays the

40 See Breanne Fahs, *Out For Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 105–112; Bobel, *New Blood*, 114–131.

41 Johanna Lagerfors and Johanna Wiman, 'Mensmakt' [Period power], *Re:public* (12 June 2014). Note that the Swedish word *mens* covers both the technical usage of 'menstruation' as well as the everyday sense of 'period'.

42 Sara Olausson and Frida Ulvegren, eds, *Kvinnor ritar bara serier om mens* (Sundbyberg: Kartago, 2014), 5.

43 Julie Doucet, *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort!* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 1993).



Figure 6: Julie Doucet, 'Tampax Again', *Lève ta jambe mon poisson est mort!* (1993), 30.

menstruating Julie emerging out of the private space of the home and into the streets, transformed into a grotesque giant with her unruly bodily fluids bleeding out over the city. I agree with Fredrik Køhlert that Doucet deploys 'grotesque female materiality' as a critique of 'normative and restricting representations of the female body'.⁴⁴ Yet, what is striking about the representations of menstruation in Doucet's comics at large is the wide variety of situations and settings in which menstruation is depicted and discussed. As Alisia Chase has written, 'Doucet seems determined to normalize the myriad ways in which women experience their menses, given the frequency with which she makes it the main subject of her comics'.⁴⁵ Just as menstrual activism has employed a variety of tactics to raise awareness and challenge norms, Doucet's comics can be seen as part of a broader project of not only critiquing in negative terms the menstrual taboo but also affirmatively calling into being alternatives.

44 Frederik Byrn Køhlert, 'Female Grotesques: Carnavalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3, no. 1 (2012): 19–38 (19).

45 Chase, 'You Must Look at the Personal Clutter', 234.

In Doucet's strip 'Tampax Again!' (Fig. 6), also collected in *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort*, two prepubescent boys playing at the beach ask each other what they want for Christmas. One boy says, 'Me, I want a TAMPAX!' and continues, 'I saw on T.V. [...] that with it you can do everything: go swimming in the sea, go horseback riding, go biking, everything!'⁴⁶ The boy who proclaims his desire for a tampax is drawn standing with raised arms so that the ocean bisects his upper body. 'Tampax Again!' invokes the typical imagery and settings of advertising for menstrual products, but this time it is male consumers who are imagined as desiring the fulfilment and freedom that these objects are thought to convey.

So too, Strömquist contributes to the project of imagining menstruation otherwise in order to call attention to the site of the menstruating body as one that troubles the gender binary. In one panel in *Kunskapens frukt*, Strömquist imagines Plato and Socrates undergoing PMS, with the wives of the ancient Greek philosophers complaining, 'OMG I just CAN'T DEAL with Plato's PMS right now!! He's such a whiner!!'⁴⁷ In her comics on male menstruation, Strömquist footnotes Thomas Lacquer's research on the history of medico-scientific conceptions of gender and the body. As Strömquist summarises on the same page, 'In ancient Greece, bleeding between the legs wasn't used as a dividing line between men's and women's bodies; it was something everybody did because (it was believed) they needed to release excess blood'. Haemorrhoidal bleeding was, for example, seen by the ancient Greeks as a male version of menstruation, according to Lacquer.⁴⁸ Like the gender binary itself, the association between menstruation and female-gendered bodies turns out to be culturally and historically contingent and therefore capable of being imagined otherwise.⁴⁹

In a panel of text in all capital letters, with bolded text and underlining, Strömquist writes, 'I hope you realize that *IF* we lived in a

46 Julie Doucet, *Lève ta jambe, mon poisson est mort!*, 30.

47 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 123.

48 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 36–37.

49 In a 2015 interview with Sverker Lenas for *Dagens Nyheter* on *Kunskapens frukt*, Strömquist explains her engagement with biological determinism from a feminist perspective: 'When I became active in what is usually called third-wave feminism, it was a lot about positioning oneself against biological determinism [*biologismen*]. Since we were always in polemics against ideas about women's sexual difference [*särart*], there was a justified unwillingness to take up issues that had to do with biology, like the uterus. Now feminism has established a better platform, we've won over biological determinism, so we can discuss things like PMS'. Sverker Lenas, "'Jag är jätteglad för det här priset'" ['I am very happy for this prize'], *Dagens Nyheter* (10 February 2015).

matriarchy, PMS would be granted EXTREMELY high status – like the male melancholy of the nineteenth century, or the approval-seeking of some male podcasters today'.⁵⁰ The next page depicts a woman sitting in the pose of Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, illustrating what Strömquist considers the creative melancholy of PMS. As she puts it: 'a woman, hand on her stomach, elegantly beset by menstrual cramps, immersed in deep PMS melancholy'.⁵¹ From a non-binary perspective in which menstruation is no longer exclusively coupled with female bodies, Rodin's thinker could just as easily be seen as depicting the privileged status of menstruation. Not only is menstruation itself re-signified as a potentially elevated state associated with creativity, but a landmark work of the male canon of art is evoked in Strömquist's reparative work of feminist recuperation.

The following page continues Strömquist's utopian imagination of menstruation under a matriarchy (Fig. 7). The page breaks the linear form of the comics grid with two separate images placed against a white background, each illustrating a possible depiction of menstruation outside of the conventions of 'a binary two-gender society'.⁵² First, a photographic reproduction of Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker* is juxtaposed with a drawing of an ice skater with visible menstrual bleeding and men's skates. Strömquist's menstruating male ice skater reimagines the menstruating female ice skater appearing on the first page of 'Blood Mountain', an illustration that has been exhibited separately with the title *Isprinsessa* [Ice princess] (see Fig. 1). The caption reminds the reader the 'ice princess' is wearing men's ice skates, emphasising the depiction of male menstruation. 'I could have drawn the first page of this chapter like this', Strömquist tells the reader, '[o]r in some completely different way!! Which I am too socially conditioned [*normstyrd*] to even think of!!!' The Swedish compound word *normstyrd* [norm-steered] could perhaps be translated more usefully as 'normative' or 'governed by norms'. Once again, the comic refers metatextually to its own status as a comic in order to point out the limits of its own project of thinking outside the dominant norms of representation. On the page, image and text fit together uneasily to highlight the limits of the artist's own utopian imagination. In order to reimagine the menstruating 'ice princess' with stubble and men's ice skates, the author supplements the image with three captions and two arrows. Strömquist's captions denaturalise the

50 Strömquist, *Fruit of Knowledge*, 120.

51 *Ibid.*, 121.

52 *Ibid.*, 122.



Figure 7: Liv Strömquist, 'Blood Mountain', *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), 122.

conventional association between menstruation and female bodies and, at the same time, reorient the reader's horizon of interpretation beyond the gender binary. Just as the grid of the comics page disappears at this moment, the relationship between image and text also seems to become destabilised in a tension that, as Charles Hatfield has argued influentially, is characteristic of the comics medium.⁵³

How, then, can we understand the reparative work of 'Blood Mountain'? As I have been suggesting, Strömquist's comics go beyond the paranoid method of critical theory. Imagining menstruation under a matriarchy, or the possibility of male menstruation, does more than satirically expose the implacability of the menstrual taboo. Instead, Strömquist's utopian imagination is articulated through a metacomic in which the author reveals the limits of her own project. Uneasy combinations of image and text break the seamless flow of panels to remind the reader that all representations of sexed and gendered bodies are contingent, including the author's own. 'Blood Mountain' invites readers to disidentify with dominant discourses of the menstruating body by offering a feminist reinterpretation of the history of art and culture. Indeed, in posing the question of male menstruation, Strömquist aligns herself with a recurring trope of menstrual activism. In a famous article first published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1978, Gloria Steinem asked, 'What would happen, for instance, if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not?' She continues, 'The answer is clear – menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine event'.⁵⁴

It's Alright (I'm Only Bleeding)

One illustration appearing in Strömquist's exhibition of menstrual art in the Stockholm metro that was not originally published in *Kunskapens frukt* is the drawing *It's Alright (I'm Only Bleeding)* (Fig. 8). This image in particular seemed to generate particularly strong reactions in the form of graffiti and defacement after the exhibition's opening. A female ice skater sits with legs spread showing visible stains of menstrual bleeding. Like Strömquist's other images in the exhibition, the drawing is in black and white with a single streak of red. The caption refers to a song by Bob Dylan, 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', an acoustic track on the *Bringing It All Back Home* album (1965). Ström-

53 Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 36–40.

54 Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 366.



Figure 8: Liv Strömquist, *It's Alright (I'm Only Bleeding)*, *The Night Garden* (2017–2019), installation in Stockholm metro, Slussen station.

quist's illustration re-appropriates Dylan's expression of masculine angst and discontent into a symbol of female creativity. At the same time, the ice skater sits in a pose of peaceful contemplation rather than melancholic angst. The title, *It's Alright (I'm Only Bleeding)*, suggests the normalisation of menstruation more than a deliberate attempt to shock and provoke.

What makes Strömquist's public menstrual art so unsettling for some viewers? The Stockholm metro exhibition does indeed challenge the menstrual taboo by bringing the private into the public. Reporting on the controversy sparked by these images, *The Guardian*, for example, asks 'whether the wait for the train is the right time for breaking

taboos'.⁵⁵ But Strömquist's 'breaking' of 'taboos' is not necessarily meant to shock but to normalise. As she explains in her artist's statement on the work, 'In these drawings, I have been inspired by the genre of the "pastoral idyll" with its idealised representations of rural simplicity and tranquillity, as a comforting fantasy for stressed urbanites'.⁵⁶ What makes Strömquist's exhibition provocative does not seem to be its transgression of the menstrual taboo, but rather the suggestion that this taboo is neither natural nor intrinsic to society. The resting ice skater stares back at the spectator, coolly and comfortably catching him or her in the act of viewing menstrual blood, without showing signs of embarrassment or shame. By not allowing a disavowal of the experience of witnessing menstrual bleeding, the image may place some viewers in an uncomfortable position through its return of the gaze.⁵⁷ Here, Strömquist disidentifies with the menstrual taboo and the dominant discourse that would associate menstrual blood with the ugly or the unclean. The viewer is thus invited to reinterpret menstruation as a pastoral site of 'simplicity and tranquillity'. The sitting ice skater returns our gaze as if to reassure us, in a reparative gesture, that it truly is 'alright' since menstruation is, after all, 'only bleeding'.

Finally, how does Liv Strömquist's work help us understand comics as a medium for theorising gender? Strömquist's comics are not primarily interested in exposing or demystifying, nor in shocking the reader through transgression. Re-appropriated images such as Queen Christina's 'fuck off forever' invite reparative readings towards a disidentification with the history of medico-scientific attempts to classify and label the female body. Strömquist ventriloquises the discourse of critical theory to stage for her readers a mode of resistance to dominant understandings of sex and gender. The comic's plentiful footnotes notwithstanding, critical theory does not provide an authoritative discourse, but is instead placed in dialogue with a multitude of competing perspectives. As we have seen, *Kunskapens frukt* uses self-referential metacomics to situate the practice of representing sex and gender.

55 Elle Hunt, "'Enjoy Menstruation, Even On the Subway": Stockholm Art Sparks Row', *The Guardian* (2 November 2017).

56 SL (Storstockholms Lokaltrafik), 'Liv Strömquist, Slussen', <http://slkonst.se/konstvaxlingar/liv-stroemquist-slussen/?Index=4> (accessed 28 January 2019).

57 Compare Køhlert's reading of the gaze in Doucet's comics: 'In Doucet's comics, moreover, the woman often stares back, and by repeatedly drawing the cartoon version of herself as meeting the reader's gaze by appearing to look straight out of the page, Doucet adds another assertive layer of defiant agency and resistance that further unsettles the power dynamics between observer and observed'. Køhlert, 'Female Grotesques', 35–36.

Disidentifying with dominant representations of sex and gender, including the menstrual taboo that sees menstruation as a private matter excluded from the public sphere, *Kunskapens frukt* deploys a utopian imagination in which menstruation need not be tied to specific bodies or genders, or governed by norms of silence and invisibility. In other words, by employing the presence of the author self-referentially in the comic and utilising tensions between image and text on the page, Strömquist's comics can be said to, in Chute's terms, 'take the body seriously'.

Mike Classon Frangos is Senior Lecturer in English literature at Linnaeus University in Sweden. He is currently participating in the interdisciplinary projects 'A Multidisciplinary Study of Feminist Comic Art' and 'Contemporary Swedish Feminist Comics as Medium for Activism and Critique'. His research focuses on feminist and queer comics, popular culture and modern literature in English and Swedish.
Email: mike.classon.frangos@lnu.se