Introduction
Feminist Comics in the Nordic Region—Queer, Humour and the Body

Guest Editors: Mike Classon Frangos and Anna Nordenstam

This special issue of *European Comic Art* presents articles on the diversity of contemporary feminist comics in the Nordic region. The Nordic countries have seen an explosion in feminist comics and graphic novels since the first decade of the twenty-first century. In Sweden, feminist comics have become commercial successes, winning prestigious prizes, and appearing in exhibitions, Instagram, and other social media. Recently, a new generation of artists has entered the scene with a renewed focus on queer and intersectional issues. This special issue directs attention to feminist comic art throughout the Nordic region—with representation from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden—by established creators as well as emerging voices. The history of feminist comics can be traced back to the social movements of the 1970s, but the energy and creativity of contemporary feminist comics is new, reflecting both international trends and conditions specific to the region and to each national context.

The term ‘Nordic’ has a complicated history and its implications deserve comment, especially in feminist terms. The Nordic region refers to the area consisting of Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Finland, the Åland Islands, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. While the Nordic countries have often been regarded in terms of historical ties and commonalities, the idea of ‘Nordic’ homogeneity is ‘more a product of nation-building processes, than a description of actual existing
conditions’. During the twentieth century, the development of strong welfare states in the Nordic countries was connected to notions of homogeneity with a social democratic welfare model intended to overcome inequalities, including those related to gender. Since the rise of the welfare state, gender equality has become part of the Nordic political imaginary. Though the Nordic countries frequently top global indexes on gender equality, the ‘gender-progressive’ image of the Nordics has also been questioned in as much as ‘the gender binary man–woman still dominates in Nordic gender-branding discourse’. Since the 1980s, the welfare state has been weakened as a result of neoliberalism, with significant privatisations in, for example, the health and school sectors, while at the same time right-wing populism and anti-immigration campaigns have been on the rise.

In terms of academic scholarship in feminist and gender studies, as well as comics studies, Nordic collaboration and research networks have been an important factor in supporting researchers and research projects in the Nordic countries. For example, the pioneering project The History of Nordic Women’s Literature was the first feminist literary history of the Nordic region. The Nordic Summer University: Nordic Networks for Interdisciplinary Study and Research has been a platform for conferences and an important meeting point for both gender studies and comics studies. Researchers on comics and cartoons, including feminist comics, from the Nordic countries have also met through NNCORE: Nordic Network for Comics Research. Feminist comics research is lively and expanding in the Nordic region today.

Nevertheless, feminist researchers tend to question the usefulness of the term ‘Nordic’, especially as a description of feminist and gender

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4 On the significance of the ‘Nordic’ framework for this project, see Maria B. Berglund, Värv och verk: Föornyelse och tradition i Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria från tillkomst till tryckt bok [Vocation and work: Renewal and tradition in Nordic women’s literary history from origins to printed book] (Karlstad: Karlstad University, 2013).

studies scholarship. Edited collections and special issues in these fields are frequently published with ‘Nordic’ in the title, but individual chapters are often national in focus with few points of connection between the chapters. For our purposes, we use the term ‘Nordic’ to refer to a geographical region with historical and cultural ties rather than any specific shared identity. In framing this special issue on ‘Feminist Comics in the Nordic Region’, we aim not to identify what is specific to the Nordic region about feminist comics but rather to raise a set of issues and questions related to feminist research in a specific medium, that of comics.

The idea of a distinctly ‘Nordic’ comics culture has been critiqued by Rikke Platz Cortsen and Ralf Kauranen, who have compared the development of ‘New Nordic Comics’ with other recent coinages such as ‘New Nordic Cooking’ and ‘Nordic Noir’. They argue that rather than displaying identifiably ‘Nordic’ features, aside from the use of Nordic languages, place names or the names of characters, recent comics in the Nordic region are part of a ‘broader transnational comics culture’ in terms of their themes or styles. ‘Nordic’ in this context refers to a deliberate branding exercise on the part of publishers of comics anthologies. Cortsen and Kauranen follow Bart Beaty who has discussed the emergence of comics cultures in the Nordic region as an example of the increasing globalisation of the alternative comics scene since the 1990s.

In this sense, ‘Nordic’ or northern European comics are not necessarily distinct from other comics cultures, apart from the historical and cultural ties characterising the region itself.

While the articles in this special issue on ‘Feminist Comics in the Nordic Region’ are mostly focused on national contexts, regional connections are apparent in the specific case studies. The influence of Swedish comics artist Liv Strömquist, among others, on feminist comics in Denmark, Norway and Finland, and the popularity of Norwegian cartoonists such as Lisa Myrhe, demonstrate the regional circulation of feminist comics in the Nordic countries. Swedish-language comics published in Finland by the Finland-Swedish minority, such as those

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6 See, for example, Anna Jónasdóttir, Bente Rosenbeck, Drude von der Fehr, eds., *Is There a Nordic Feminism?: Nordic Feminist Thought and Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 1998).
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of Edith Hammar, attest to the region’s shared cultural ties. Comics originally published in English, such as those by H-P Lehkonen, or translated into English, such as the works of Åsa Grennvall and Rikke Villadsen, point further to the transnational character of Nordic feminist comics.

Many of the articles in this special issue approach the topic of feminist critique through queer, trans or non-binary lenses. In the Nordic countries, as is the case internationally, comics and graphic novels have become important media for queer, trans and non-binary artists, such as, for example, Olivia Skoglund and Elias Ericson in Sweden, and H-P Lehkonen and Edith Hammar in Finland (whose works are taken up by the articles by Nina Ernst and by Anna Vuorinne and Ralf Kauranen, in this issue). While the Nordic countries share a comparatively progressive approach to queer and trans rights, the artists examined by Ernst, as well as Vuorinne and Kauranen, represent their lived experiences in societies where homophobia and transphobia continue to exist. In Vuorinne and Kauranen’s article ‘Visions of Queer Places: Migration and Utopia in Finnish Queer Comics’ two contemporary queer comics from Finland, H-P Lehkonen’s *Life Outside the Circle* (2017–2018) and Edith Hammar’s *Homo Line* (2020), are analysed, showing how the comics express queer utopianism and hopeful representations of queer, trans and non-binary lives, especially through the genre conventions of romance and autobiography. Vuorinne and Kauranen’s analysis is intersectional, showing how the comics depict identity in relation to migration and place. Ernst’s article, ‘Bodily Experience and Visual Metaphor in Two Swedish Trans Graphic Narratives’, analyses representations of trans experience in Olivia Skoglund’s debut graphic memoir, *Nästan i mål! En komisk transition* [Almost there: A comical transition] (2020) and Elias Ericson’s graphic novel *Diana & Charlie* (2021). Skoglund’s memoir focuses on Olivia, a trans woman, and Ericson’s graphic novel is about the relationship between two trans and non-binary characters and their friendship in the face of heteronormativity and transphobia. For Ernst, Elisabeth El Rafaie’s visual metaphor theory offers a way to understand how both comics artists depict bodily experience, appearance, and perception, especially in terms of the struggle for gender recognition and the misgendering of trans people.

Gender and the body are also significant themes of this special issue. As demonstrated by the examples in the articles by Maria Margareta Österholm, Charlotte Johanne Fabricius and Adriana Margareta Dancus, the comics medium and its verbal-visual strategies have
been used to call into question dominant representations of gender and embodiment regarding, for example, childbirth and menstruation, important feminist issues throughout the history of women’s and LGBTQIA+ movements. In Österholm’s article ‘The Pain and the Creeping Feeling’, two graphic novels by the Swedish comics artist Åsa Grennvall, *Det känns som hundra år* [It feels like a hundred years] (1999) and *Deras ryggar luktrade så gott* [Their backs smelled so good] (2014), are analysed in terms of the norms of girlhood and growing up. Österholm reads these graphic novels in relation to the theoretical concept of *skewedness*, a variation and development of queer theory originating in Norwegian and Swedish gender studies research, as well as theories of queer temporality, showing how the norms of girlhood and growing up are unattainable for the protagonists. Fabricius’s article ‘Processual Aesthetics and Feminist Trouble: The Comics of Rikke Villadsen’ shows how Villadsen’s comics-works challenge norms of gender and sexuality through their play with genre and form, including visual pastiche. Fabricius develops the term *processual aesthetics* in the context of Villadsen’s comics by way of queer theory. Fabricius shows how the tensions on and off the pages of Villadsen’s comics reflect the encounter between second-wave feminism and contemporary feminist body politics. In each case, the articles in this issue are interested in the broad range of forms and modes of expression for feminist critique to be found in comics from the Nordic region.

Among the rhetorical strategies deployed by comics for the purpose of social critique are humour, irony and satire. In particular, the articles by Leena Romu, Ernst and Dancus show how feminist comics use humour politically to raise awareness about feminist issues and to make difficult subject-matter accessible. Romu’s article ‘Smashing the Ideals of Docile Femininity’ opens the issue by giving an historical overview of the development of Finnish feminist comics by situating the magazines *Naarassarjat* [Female comics] (1992–1993), *Irtoparta* [Detachable beard/Fake beard] (2001–2007) and a web-based magazine *Nettinarttu* [Web bitch] (2004–2009) within the discussion of women’s comics in Finland in the early 1990s and 2000s and considering the influence of these magazines on contemporary feminist comics. Analysing this material, Romu shows the significance of humoristic strategies of feminist resistance in Finnish comics. Dancus also focuses on humour, satire and irony in her close reading of the comic *Fødselen* [The birth] (2020), by the Norwegian cartoonist, blogger, and nurse Hanne Monge Sigbjørnsen, called Tegnehanne. The comic depicts Tegnehanne’s own
negative experiences with childbirth during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Dancus shows how Tegnehanne draws on and contributes to the field of Nordic feminist comics by using humour, irony and satire to engage with central debates in contemporary feminist activism in Norway.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue illustrate the range of contemporary feminist comics in the Nordic region, as well as the different themes and approaches of feminist analysis in comics studies. While the comics analysed by the authors in this issue exemplify different aesthetic forms and styles, they are political in their representation of feminist issues, and demonstrate the importance of the medium as part of a movement for social change.

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