

## ***Bitch* Rhetoric: Planetary Accusation or Proclamation?**

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Deconnick's and De Landro's *Bitch Planet: Extraordinary Machine* series is a comic book adaptation and reappropriation of 20<sup>th</sup> century sexploitation films, specifically the subgenre known as "Women In Prison" movies. My research focuses on what I have simply termed *Bitch Rhetoric*, in which both the word "bitch" itself and meanings behind it are being used as a reappropriation of the word by feminist authors and artists. From pop-culture phrases like "bitches get things done," a viral phenomenon after Alexandria Ocasio Cortez used the phrase in 2020, to Bitch Media, who publishes *Bitch Magazine*, which often has suggestions for "bitchreads," the term has been reappropriated by feminists to represent feminist rebellion and non-conformity in a very loud, punk, in-your-face discourse.

Gender is often the major factor involved in how the term "bitch" is being used. Just using binary gender terms alone, a man calling another man, a man calling a woman, a woman calling another woman, or a woman calling a man a bitch all have completely different meanings behind the word (see Appendix 1). When you include fluid gender and sexuality, historically rooted contextual norms, the immediate situational context(s), pop culture uses (music), and whether there is a dog involved in any of this, the word "bitch" is all over the place in terms of meaning.

As an adaptation, BP is also an "Extraordinary Machine" in that it is a comic book adaption of a filmic subgenre of Women In Prison (WIP) sexploitation films from the 1970s-1980s that were essentially in the category of softcore pornography. In Deconnick's and De Landro's adaptation, the plot centers around a science fiction prison planet nicknamed "Bitch Planet." The term is both the rebellious title of the series but is based on a derogatory name for a female penal colony that is used by the patriarchy in the series. The series is in a futuristic

setting that resembles and reflects the 1950s patriarchal, “housewife” culture. Women are labeled as “Non-Compliant” if they refuse to do things like maintain their figure or be a good cook, and in general just not being June Cleaver from *Leave It to Beaver*. Repeat offenders are tattooed with an “NC” for non-compliant on the back of their necks and exiled to Bitch Planet<sup>1</sup>. Once there, the prisoners participate in what has been traditionally an all-male sport and they regularly beat and kill their guards. There is even a very popular reappropriation-adaptation of the typical sexploitation “shower scene”<sup>2</sup> in which the tables are turned on a guard who is caught red-handed in the act of a sexually traumatizing voyeuristic transgression.

Like *Bitch Magazine*, BP is using the word as a sort of in-your-face, punk rhetoric that is usually accompanied by a range of feminist viewpoints. “Bitch” functions similarly to other reappropriated terms referring to race in that there is still the classic derogatory form of the word. This can create confusion depending on how the word is being used, what context it is being used in, tone of voice and/or body language, who is using the word, and who the word is directed at. If a nude woman were to appear on the cover of *Bitch Planet*, there might be some question(s) as to whether it was misogynistic pornography or feminist reappropriation. This would be partly due to the fact that we don’t not know who is calling whom a bitch. But the name of the author, Kelly Sue DeConnick, at least begins to establish the potential that this is a woman using the word, and that they are using it in an ironic way.

BP often has images of women flipping us the bird, captions such as “Are you WOMAN enough to survive Bitch Planet” and “Girl Gangs... Caged and Enraged.” It is clear that the meaning of “bitch” shifts with both the media form and the imagery. In film studies this is referred to as the Kuleshov effect. One scene, in this case one aspect of this multimodal visual text, defines another scene/aspect by their (juxta)position to one another. Just the text

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<sup>1</sup> I am currently doing Convergence Culture research on fans who get “NC” tattoos and add their own touches to it, like Pride colors or galaxies inside the outline of the letters.

<sup>2</sup> Contains female nudity.

“Bitch Planet” on its own is ambiguous, which is all you will usually see on your receipt for the purchase of the book. Add in the “Sue” of Kelly Sue, a compilation of images of women rebelling, and the cover contextualizes the use of the word as a punkdom. Also notice that in this case, the artwork can stand on its own and project a relatively consistent meaning. The text, “Bitch Planet,” is too intersubjective on its own to have a consistent meaning. From a *memetic* standpoint, the cover art is the smallest unit of cultural meaning *Bitch Planet* can be reduced to, not the ambiguous text.

Bitch rhetoric has become pervasive in our culture. While phrasing and titular series are using the word as a form of rebellion, I found it interesting that in an interview with BP author, Kelly Sue DeConnick, she revealed that around her own child it was called “B-Planet.” This is indicative of the fact that at its core, the word is still rooted in a semi-profane category. The offensive nature of the word becomes a punkdom meant to thumb its nose at the patriarchy. What makes it rebellious is its position as profanity, much in the same way that *Pussy Riot* does, but it also depends on who is saying it to whom and in what context. When the word appears on a *Bitch Magazine cover*, imagery is what shifts the meaning; the Kuleshov effect. *Bitch Planet*, which has rather vague and ambiguous artwork for a lot of the covers, is relying on that semi-profane status of the word hoping it titillates your curiosity while Valentine De Landro’s artwork contextualizes the term for the reader. In fact, as far as memes go, De Landro’s artwork is the smallest unit of cultural meaning this example can be reduced to, not the text “Bitch Planet,” which is just too intersubjective. While some may find the word distasteful, shifts in meaning have taken this word from an accusation to a very loud proclamation in many ways.

## Appendix 1

F = Female, M = Male, NB = Non Binary

**F to M** = Derogatory but may also be sexual. "Your *my* bitch now!"\*

**F to F** = Confusing. "She's a bitch," "that bitch," "she's *my* bitch," "bitch, please," etc.\*

**F to Public about F** = *Bitch Planet, Bitch Magazine*, "Bitches get things done," etc. This is one of the most common reappropriation forms.

**M to M** = Derogatory. "I'll make you *my* bitch" or "you're just a little bitch."\*

**M to F** = Derogatory but may depend on the male's sexuality and/or gender performance. "You bitch!" vs. "bitch, please."

**M to Public about F** = Derogatory, sexual gendering and othering. Hip-Hop's and other musical genre's use of the word, for example. I include this because it is a major purveyor of the word.

**NB to M/F/Public** = ????. Immediate, situational, gender performance context necessary to evaluate.

\*Ownership of the bitch is also very common in the use of the word.

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