

Brief Introduction: Contagious Imagination

—Jane Tolmie

When I decided to call this book *Contagious Imagination*, it was prepandemic, and I was thinking of contagion in different ways. Since then I have learned what a privilege as well as a pleasure it is to focus on imagination as contagious and shareable in a very dangerous world. It is with this privilege that this book seeks to reorient our attention to the work and art created by comics producers and professors such as Lynda Barry in particular. The recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 2019, Barry continues to attract our attention as someone who both teaches and researches, and who also creates. Her work with children and students is something that makes me think also of Glenn Willmott's afterword for us, on access to and reinvigoration of childlike imagination. The title of a *Washington Post* article says it all: "How MacArthur 'Genius' Lynda Barry Is Exploring Brain Creativity with True Artists: Preschoolers." The MacArthur Foundation describes Barry as a cartoonist, graphic novelist, and educator. In other words, she is the embodiment of research-creation. Natalie Loveless's *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* draws our attention to "the status of art as itself a form of research" (6). Loveless observes that in the context of the university, the real potential for research-creation "rests in its demands for an inter- or trans-disciplinary perspective that, while marshaling the insights of emerging and developing fine arts research methodologies, exceeds the fine arts proper" (6, 7). The offerings in this book reflect that transdisciplinary approach.

In "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Christian speaks to the importance of "rememorying," or the deliberate reconstruction

of memory to void fixed categories (48). Barry is a master of remembering, whether in her patented autobifictionalography or in her constructions of the memories of her created characters. She is also a master of reshaping participant memory via her workshops and her pedagogical practices, with several of her numerous publications being how-to guidelines for the classroom and for personal use alike. In the classroom and in the process of editing this volume, I have considered and continue to consider some aspects of Barry's pedagogical practice and how they constitute radical critiques of academia and the so-called art world alike. Effectively I, together with the authors and artists in this volume, am framing Barry as both an innovative and a dissenting presence within an increasingly neoliberal academy, and indeed economy.

I have used Lynda Barry's work, especially *One Hundred Demons*, in the classroom for many years now. At first I taught the text lecture style, as I myself was trained, focusing on technique, on memory and trauma, and on Barry's attention to the processes of remembering and forgetting. Over time, however, I found myself shifting to a more practical, hands-on introduction to the work, in which students are encouraged to draw and contextualize a demon from their own past, working quietly and independently but then sharing their work. In making this shift, I was moving away from traditional teaching models that were deeply ingrained in my highly traditional literary training, and moving toward a more affective and interactive classroom style. I too participated in the exercises. The book changed me, and the resulting classroom discourses were startlingly different in their personal and connective tones, and in the processes of learning and unlearning that attended them. Since then, I have been very much influenced by texts such as *What It Is* and especially 2014's *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. I have been trying new things and indeed seeing new things.

In *Syllabus* Barry asks: "Is creative concentration contagious?" (2). Passing on creativity is a constant theme in Barry's work, but I realize now that part of her pedagogical practice is to combat neoliberal environments of competition, perfectionism, individualism, and, in fact, maturity. Her work is precisely designed to break down assumptions about good and bad art, about good and bad writing, about self-doubt, self-hatred, and anxiety. She encourages participants to do the same, resisting and rejecting a world of pressures that drive students toward success, wealth, achievement, and, of course, stress and misery. Barry's work invites readers to reclaim art, childhood, self-care, and self-esteem, and to bypass institutional and commercial structures that restrict access to self-knowledge as well as to comics and art. Also in *Syllabus*, Barry observes: "In grade school we didn't listen critically to stories the teacher read to us. Somehow," she urges, we must "restore that state of mind" (46).

The word “accidental,” as in *Notes from an Accidental Professor*, is key to understanding Barry’s approach: it is an approach that embraces doodles, questions high art, and resists intentionality. Susan Kirtley’s excellent book *Lynda Barry: Girlhood through the Looking Glass* (2012) got us all thinking about childhood and the many and mighty ways in which Barry invites us backward in time, offering us the chance to explore the seriousness, beauty, and, of course, profound dangers of childhood. By integrating childhood and adulthood, however, Barry avoids a retrospective and nostalgic overdose: one is invited back not to *be* a child but to regain and rebuild *some* of what is lost in childhood. Kirtley’s detailed study of girlhood throughout Barry’s work leads her to the insight that “action is required of Barry’s girls, but simply engaging with the world is not enough to flourish. The girls must also act in such a way as to lead themselves away from the corruption and disillusionment of adulthood and back toward the hope and magic of childhood” (190). Turning here to Barry’s heroine, or perhaps her antiheroine, from her novel *Cruddy*, Kirtley observes of Roberta Rohbeson that “action in and of itself is not enough” (190). Roberta adapts to the warped adult world and ends up dead. Kirtley points out that “Barry’s heroines are most successful when they pursue their childlike exuberance and return to a state of imaginative play. For Barry’s girls, crossing the border into adulthood brings inescapable angst and anxiety; and to return to, or continue to dwell in, a younger, more hopeful and imaginative place brings fulfillment” (190).

This brings me back to the opening question of *Syllabus*: “Is creative imagination contagious?” (2). What I realize from teaching or adapting some elements of *Syllabus*, in particular, however, is that we are not merely being welcomed back into childish pursuits but being invited to reconsider and critique the value of some of our academic notions of maturity and progress. Glenn Willmott’s afterword is suggestively titled “My Kid Could Do That: Lynda Barry and Subversive Writing for Everyone.” He goes on to observe that Barry’s “practice of a *writable imagism*, which Barry finds rooted in shameless childhood capacities and pursuits . . . struggles to escape the commodity form of writing and, more profoundly, to subvert an impoverished ideology of maturity in consumerist forms of desire and wealth.”

Barry’s work frequently highlights the energy flow between classmates and instructor. Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the importance of praxis, of doing with, not for or to. Freire advocates a pedagogy that is liberatory, and it is interesting to note that he refers to this liberation as a “childbirth” (49). This language of returning to childhood is striking. In several key senses, Barry’s pedagogy is one that seeks this doing *with* rather than for or to; and as such it is a liberatory praxis, in the dialogic sense.

It is also critical of the pedagogy of the oppressed and of certain aspects of the academy. Freire talks about the first step of unveiling or revealing oppression. Let us consider that for a moment.

In one of my classes, I now use an exercise inspired by *Syllabus*. Early in the term, before I have lectured on Barry or exposed my students to her work in any form, I hand out pencils and crayons and paper and ask everyone to draw a self-portrait. This is a change from the demon or monster I sometimes give them in another set of circumstances. I give them a half hour or so. Then we all exchange drawings—I do it too—and talk about them. I ask the class: Who thinks their drawing is good? Without exception, they all think their drawings are bad, that they cannot draw, and that I should not have asked them to; their tension is much higher than when they are asked to draw a demon or monster. I can legitimately format that as a form of oppression. They are so stressed by this first exercise that they cannot take any pleasure, dare I say childish pleasure, in the praxis of drawing. In many interviews and in her classes, Barry urges people just to draw, to forget about good art versus bad art. She has often highlighted the extent to which asking yourself “does this suck?” hinders creativity and contributes to a culture of shame and anticreativity, as it were. In a 2014 interview with *ARTnews*, Barry stresses the importance of having fun, reengaging with childish creativity. She says in this interview that art is there to save us just as our livers are there to “keep us alive.” In the same interview, discussing *Syllabus*, she describes her goal for the book: “I try to attract people who are confident drawing and those who gave up when they were 9. What’s fascinating about the people who gave up at 9 is that their drawing style is intact from then. And these people don’t realize how valuable that is. It’s like watching a baby walking around with a vase, hoping it doesn’t break. That’s what this book is really about. It’s not, ‘everybody can draw like Michelangelo!’ with rainbows around it. It’s about this other astonishing ability that lays dormant in people’s untrained hands” (Casamento).

After doing the self-portrait exercise, I show the class a selection of drawings, and we talk about creativity and preconceptions. In *Syllabus*, Barry asks, “What is a bad drawing?” and “How old do you have to be to make a bad drawing?” (16), and these are some of the questions we pursue collaboratively, alongside the many excellent questions that the students provide themselves. In phase two of Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, which follows on the uncovering or revelation of oppression, “this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both phases, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted” (54). Every time we start working on portraits in class, I am deeply shocked by the depth to which students have internalized and are intimidated by a whole series of assumptions and assertions about art,

quality, self-worth, and the value of creativity. As with many important things in the classroom, it then becomes a series of processes of unlearning. All good teachers and indeed activists know that unlearning, as in decolonization or antiracism, is just as important as learning, in fact usually more so. The simplicity and accessibility of the physical materials are also key to emphasize here; no specialist equipment or expensive things are needed. No mobile classrooms or advanced technologies are necessary to bring these lessons to a group, though of course those can be useful under some circumstances.

It is important to acknowledge that *Syllabus* is accessible in other ways. Barry offers a self-reflexive critical and pedagogical praxis, showing a willingness to admit mistakes, reflecting here, for example, on overinstruction. This approach and style made me less afraid to try new things through a strategy of critical openness and creative generosity. It is an amazing offering of intellectual and creative property to other educators. As the daughter of a Canadian realist painter, I was raised with highly traditional ideas about art, and the work I do on comics continues to puzzle and alienate my family, who remain wedded to limited and narrow definitions of art and the “art world.” But it has been a pleasure in the classroom to see the gradual unfolding of confidences and experiments and insights, into self and others, and very interestingly into politics, that are made possible through active engagement with Barry’s work and her pedagogical philosophies. One of the comments that Barry makes in her interview with Hillary Chute in *Outside the Box* really became clear to me in the classroom, which is that memory and imagination are “absolutely entwined” (77). Barry observes: “I don’t think they can exist without the other, absolutely not. Like that question, can you remember something you can’t imagine?” (77).

Students in my class invariably pointed out how they were remembering new details with each creative exercise, so there was an actual visible connection being made between memory and imagination, right in front of me. Their final project is an extensive scrapbook with a range of creative assignments, moving around between traditional literary analysis, interdisciplinary work, and creative work. This ties in too with Barry’s constant returning to childhood, to early memories, and using them to feed her imaginative projects. In terms of liberatory projects, telling one’s own story in whatever format has always been key, as so many critics, feminist and antiracist critics in particular, have asserted many times. This too is an aspect of anti-oppressive pedagogy, restoring lost voices or giving shape to lost images. In the same interview with Chute, Barry also points out how much more you notice when you are in the habit of drawing things. You see more because you are looking harder and in more places. And her mastery of memory, especially childhood memory, is the sort that invites people in rather than shutting them out.

I regret that I have not taken one of Barry's workshops myself, though I have watched her online many times and would very much like to take one someday. So another aspect of her pedagogical practice that I have to stress here is her creative generosity, the way in which the theme of passing on imagination is so central to both her creative work—for example, when the art teacher helps her out in *One Hundred Demons*—and her how-to books such as *What It Is* and *Syllabus*. She is inviting you, and others, to pass it on too, just as she does in her invitation to join in the Demons project, inviting the audience in rather than expelling the demons. It is emblematic of her inclusive, expansive, and, I argue, anti-oppressive approach to creative concentration. As we all know, this is a difficult time in academia—and, of course, elsewhere. As we muddle through the increased corporatization and face sky-high rates of adjunctification in academia, coupled with crushing service loads for everyone; as our students increasingly apply a corporate model to their classrooms, to their teachers, and to their grades—they want value for their money—Barry's emancipatory creative model gives me hope. I have recently been following many related debates very closely, often with a sense of frustration and emotional drainage. Barry's work reinvigorates me when I am feeling and living these lows, both through her own approach and through the renewed energy I share with my students and colleagues. I will be continuing to research and theorize her various pedagogical models in my upcoming work and teaching, with gratitude and in the hope that, in the vein of *One Hundred Demons*, creative and intellectual generosity truly is something that no one can take away.

Frederick Luis Aldama provides the foreword for this volume, and Glenn Willmott the afterword. Both Aldama and Willmott focus on the synthetic mind-body impact of Barry's outputs. I have divided the book into four parts: "Teaching and Learning," which focuses on critical pedagogy; "Comics and Autobiography," which targets various practices of remembering; "*Cruddy*," a self-explanatory category that offers two extraordinary critical interventions into Barry criticism around a challenging text; and "Research-Creation," which offers two creative, synthetic artistic pieces that embody and enact Barry's own mixed academic and creative investments.¹ As this volume goes to press, Barry's online workshop for *Graphic Medicine*, participated in by one of my graduate students, appeared this very day on my Facebook.² Such moments bring it all together for me: pop culture, artwork, and art *work*. Barry's investment in the by its nature interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary vision of *Graphic Medicine*, which juxtaposes comics and health care, her sharing of teaching and learning simultaneously, offers a snapshot of her in continued, continuous action, bringing my investment in her contagious imagination to a natural and fitting—and inspiring—end.

NOTES

1. I thank all the contributors for their patience during my long postaccident medical leave. Editing errors that remain are of course my own. I owe many thanks to Leah S. Mismar, who generously stepped in to help me out during my ongoing recovery.
2. Graphic Medicine's Facebook page, July 8, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Graphic-Medicine1/photos/a.126487967401266/1315367795179938> (accessed March 19, 2021); see also <https://www.graphicmedicine.org>.

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