

## Article

# “Scrapbooking Caravaggio’s Medusa, Reconfiguring Blake: What It Is, One! Hundred! Demons! and Lynda Barry’s Feminist Intervention in the (Male) Artistic Canon”

Michael, Olga

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*Michael, Olga (2017) “Scrapbooking Caravaggio’s Medusa, Reconfiguring Blake: What It Is, One! Hundred! Demons! and Lynda Barry’s Feminist Intervention in the (Male) Artistic Canon”. ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies, 9 (3). ISSN 1549-6732*

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Olga Michael

Scrapbooking Caravaggio's *Medusa*, Reconfiguring Blake: *What It Is, One! Hundred! Demons!* and Lynda Barry's Feminist Intervention in the (Male) Artistic Canon

## Introduction

Lynda Barry's graphic memoirs, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) and *What It Is* (2009) describe the autobiographical subject's fragmented memories from her childhood and adulthood, primarily in relation to her abusive mother. As such, like the work of other contemporary American women cartoonists, Barry's work negotiates childhood trauma caused by an abusive parent; yet, it is unique in that it expands both what the genre of "autographics" can entail and what the language of comics can be (Whitlock 265).<sup>1</sup> In Hillary Chute's words "Barry's visual style [...] is expressively imaginative [...]. Her work has [...] tactile appeal [...] she paints her words and images with a brush," and her lines are undisciplined, imperfect and scruffy (95). Apart from expanding the medium of comics through her calligraphy and painting, Barry also uses collage in her graphic memoirs. In this article, I situate Barry's graphic memoirs in longer traditions of visual arts, apart from that of

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, *Wimmen's Comix* was the first to include autobiographical work by Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Trina Robbins explains that since then, "autobiography has [...] become a staple of comics drawn by women, and big chunks of women's comix tend to be about the artist's dysfunctional family [and] miserable childhood" (91). Kominsky-Crumb's *Love that Bunch* and *Need More Love*, Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Debbie Dreschler's *Daddy's Girl*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and *Are you My Mother?*, Julie Doucet's *Dirty Plotte*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* are just a few of contemporary women's graphic memoirs negotiating different forms of childhood trauma.

comics, by focusing on her mixing of visual media, in ways that undo divisions between high/ low, amateur art, , text/image, masculine/feminine genders, and monster(mother)/self representations. First, I examine her pastiche incorporation of Michelangelo Merici di Caravaggio's high-art painting of the *Medusa* (c. 1597) in the narrative of maternal abuse in *What It Is* to show how this produces the collapse of boundaries between the aforementioned divisions. Then, I proceed to foreground the ways in which this collapse is mirrored through other components of the graphic memoir; its fusion of Blakean high-art traces with the domesticated, female tradition of scrapbooking; its presentation of words as images; its visual embodiment of the child autobiographical avatar as gender-ambiguous; and its distinctly childish take on painting, that allow the embodiment of gendered ambiguity. Such an ambiguity has the potential to free the autobiographical body from the restrictions of the heteronomatively fixed biological body. Thus, I argue that in its mixing of visual traditions and media, Barry's *What It Is*, like *One Hundred! Demons!* provides a distinctly feminist take on what art is and on the representation of the female subject.

### Pastiche and the Language of Comics

Ingeborg Hoesterey observes that the "contamination of genres and styles, the blurring of boundaries between the arts, and between the arts and popular culture" mark the contemporary artistic production and lead to "a cross-pollination among" different artistic fields (119). While her observation could apply to comics, because of their hybrid conflation of different registers, it refers to postmodern pastiche. In its emergence, pastiche coincides with the proliferation of the graphic memoir at the turn of the century (see Gardner "Autobiography's Biography" 1). Its incorporation in contemporary graphic memoirs can provide a complex body of work that calls for academic examination and for the application of the "new visual literacy" that Marianne Hirsch describes in "Collateral Damage,"

simultaneously demanding a comparative, interdisciplinary method of analysis (1211).<sup>2</sup> Pastiche is an intertextual process that forms a “stylistic medley,” a conflation of different elements (see Dyer 1; Hoesterey 3). Hoesterey notes that “one of the markers that set aesthetic postmodernism apart from modernism is that its artistic practices borrow ostentatiously from the archive of Western culture” (xi). She observes that “the system of art is characterized by an intertextuality of seeing and innovation, a creative transformation of the archive,” which is achieved in the “last quarter of the twentieth century” through the productive exploration of pastiche (18).

Mieke Bal notes that such intertextual processes refer “to the readymade quality of signs [...] that the maker of images finds in earlier images and texts produced by a culture” (*Looking in* 68). In such cases, according to her, a previous meaning “may have been changed, but the new meaning that replaces it will carry the trace of its precursor. The latest artist may reject or reverse, ironize or deconstruct, pluralize or marginalize the meaning of

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<sup>2</sup> Most criticism on intertextuality in contemporary women’s graphic memoirs is concerned with literary references in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (see El Refaie 219; Chute 213-217; Watson “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” 28-32; Watson “The Pleasures of Reading in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*” 303-314; Iuliano 287-309). In “Lolita Is Set Free: Questioning and Re-Inventing Constructions of Adolescent and Pre-Adolescent Female Beauty in Phoebe Gloeckner’s Graphic Memoirs” I examine literary and visual intertextuality in Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (38-66). In “Excavating Childhood: Fairy Tales, Monsters and Abuse Survival in Lynda Barry’s *What It Is*,” I investigate Barry’s reference to and reconfiguration of elements from fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Grimm.

the borrowed motif, but that meaning cannot be undone, ignored or cancelled out” (69). Their identification, she further explains, is an interactive process between the image and the spectator (71). It is precisely this kind of intertextuality, in the form of pastiche that I trace in *What It Is*. Hence, I situate Barry’s work in the broader field of visual culture, which is, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff, “a fluid interpretive structure centered on a response to visual media of both individuals and groups” (4).

Meaning formation becomes, in my analysis, an interactive process between spectators/readers and visual and verbal media on two levels. Firstly, Barry interacts with previous texts and traditions and the outcome of this interaction is performed in her graphic memoirs. Secondly, this article includes the meanings that derive from my own interaction as a reader/spectator both with Barry’s works and with the influences I identify therein. Bal explains that “since viewers bring their own cultural baggage to images, there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined or unified meaning” (*Looking in* 70). Elisabeth El Refaie notes that “the inherent ‘gappiness’ of the comics medium [relating] both to the blank spaces in-between the panels, and to the potential disparities between verbal and visual meaning” invites active reader participation in providing closure (183). If this “gappiness” requires reader participation, as Scott McCloud has also pointed out (67), tracing intertextual references in the comics medium doubles reader involvement. By underscoring the fluidity of meaning creation, I want to demonstrate how the repetition of traits from the archive of Western art becomes at the same time their interpretation and feminist reconfiguration.

In its pastiche arrangements, *What It Is* performs what Griselda Pollock describes as the “differencing” of the male canon, a process that exposes “its engagement with politics of sexual difference while allowing that very problematic to make a difference in how we read art’s histories” (xiv). For Pollock, and similarly for queer theorist, Judith Butler, a feminist re-vision of the canon/norm is necessary to complicate gender hierarchies (Pollock xiv;

Butler *Gender Trouble* xxxiv, *Undoing Gender* 15).<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Betterton also identifies “a productive space in which to explore questions of how meanings are made and for whom” in visual culture studies (13). This process, as she points out, will “enable us to understand how those texts are mobilized and made meaningful in different ways by their different women readers, allowing for and legitimating differences in reading as well as interrogating the relations of power between authoritative text and its interpretation” (13). By focusing on the interpreting subject’s response to a previous text, different meaning formations are allowed as the authority of the canonical text is undermined. While reading *What It Is* without recognizing its intertextual references does not hinder our understanding of it, I want to argue that focusing on and examining them enriches and complicates the development of the narrative and the significance of the graphic memoir as a feminist cultural tool that undoes divisions between high and low art; a division which is, in many cases, gendered (see Parker and Pollock 114-133; Pollock 3-5).

Comics have been among the central participants in efforts to deconstruct the boundaries between high and low art since the 1980s and the Pop Art movement when works of popular culture started entering the space of the museum and the gallery, as Art

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<sup>3</sup> Feminist poet and philosopher Adrienne Rich also argues that “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18). Rich’s call concerns, however, re-visioning the archive of women’s art and literature and creating a maternal canon that will counter that of the fathers. Here, I argue for Barry’s productive engagement with canonical artistic fathers like Caravaggio and Blake as well as with the domesticated, feminine tradition of scrapbooking, thus pointing to the productive cross-pollination between the two distinct categories.

Spiegelman explains (203-205). Barry's graphic memoirs participate in the turn-of-the-century phenomenon described by Jim Collins as "high pop," the repetition and transportation of high artistic works from the space of the gallery to low-cost, mass-produced versions aimed at untrained audiences (1-6). In their pastiche arrangements in the low-art medium of comics and in book forms targeted for mass readership, Barry's graphic memoirs refuse the legitimation offered by the art gallery and the museum, thus rejecting the divisions and hierarchies these institutions reproduce. In addition, they undermine the authority of the master/official and the original, and they do so towards feminist ends: to claim a space in the history of Western art and to introduce the autobiographical subject beyond heteronormative gender and sexuality formations.

Jared Gardner has underlined the availability of the verbal/visual medium for productive engagement with the media of the past, noting that comics allow "the shades of the past to overlap with and speak the impulses of the present [...] [of] making the present aware of its [...] past that is always in the process of becoming" ("Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics" 799). The cultural significance of Barry's work as a feminist statement rests on its intervention in the long history of Western art to demonstrate how its traditions shape the present text as they are also re-shaped in it, simultaneously producing "troubling" gender representations of the child autobiographical avatar.

Barry's graphic memoirs foreground the potential offered by comics to challenge grammatical subject formations (see Butler *Excitable Speech* 1; *Bodies that Matter* 5; *Gender Trouble* xix) via their visual component, which invests the autobiographical body with a plasticity that can free it from the gendered restrictions of grammar on the one hand, and the biological body on the other. This plasticity is underscored by comics' verbal/visual combinations, introduced in bitextual theory as a means that conflates distinct categories like gender and sexuality. In her analysis of fin-de-siècle illustrated novels, Lorraine Jansen

Kooistra describes the gendered division of word and image that has been prevalent in illustration studies, noting that, in Western culture, “the image is female, the word is male” (13). Thomas Mitchell also describes the accepted “otherness” of the visual image in relation to the verbal text. He explains that pictorial otherness

takes a full range of possible social relations inscribed within the field of verbal and visual representation [and] reinforces a stereotypical relation [...] between the freedom to speak and see and the injunction to remain silent and available for observation [...]. [Thus, it becomes] transferable from children to women to colonized subjects to works of art to characterizations of visual representation itself. (*Picture Theory* 162)

Mitchell does not use the term “bitextuality” in his associations of the visual with feminized otherness, but the views expressed in his study of the field of representation as a whole, rather than separated between the verbal and the visual, reflect the same argument that Kooistra makes. Image is perceived as the “other” of the text, colonized by the masculine, phallic *logos*. To complicate the representation of genders in visual/verbal texts, Kooistra describes a bitextual book in parallel to a bisexual or the hermaphrodite body, which “dispenses with the apparent rigidity of male/female categories and allows us to rethink image/text relations according to a more fluid continuum of sex and gender roles” (11). Kooistra’s fluid continuum, and the amalgamation of categories that it entails, is the aspect of comics that facilitates the construction of autobiographical subjects’ emancipation from what Butler describes as linguistic constructivism (*Bodies that Matter* 5).

David Carrier’s description of comics in relation to other “in-between” categories also points to the same potential. Commenting upon the medium’s marginalization throughout the twentieth century and especially upon Fredric Wertham’s polemic against them, he explains that we “expect the world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls in



between is easily felt, depending on our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing. Hence the fascination with, and fear of, cross-dressing, androgyny, people of ‘mixed-race,’ comics and other forms of in-betweenness” (70). Carrier’s description of comics as a unified structure of two distinct elements working together in parallel to human forms of in-betweenness mirrors Kooistra’s argument. In-between subjects, like the hermaphrodite, the cross-dresser, and the cross-gendered person, are among those who are, according to Butler, injured and violated by grammar. Such subjects foreground the heteronormative sexuality, sex, and gender correspondence as a lie, thus causing trouble (*Undoing Gender* 42-43). By so doing, they, like comics, unsettle distinct categories that function in favor of male dominance, the phallus and the *logos*, against female subordination, castration, and the visual. Apart from the in-betweenness they embody, Carrier notes that comics function as a unity, in the same way that the human mind and body do (73). This unity together with the mixing of comics with other media and traditions can further complicate and enrich both the narrative and the gendered representations therein. Barry’s use of Caravaggio’s painting of Medusa forms the first example of how such hybrid mixing is performed in *What It Is*.

#### Mixing of Visual Media I: Caravaggio’s *Medusa*

The narrator describes how she used to play with Medusa as a child (*What It Is* 63-64), after becoming familiar with her from the 1968 horror film, *The Gorgon*, which she watched when she was eight years old (65). In Barry’s graphic memoir, instead of being presented with a still image from the film, we come across Caravaggio’s version of the Medusa. Barry’s choice is noteworthy because this pastiche arrangement on yellow legal paper introduces a high-artistic painting in the place of a low-art horror film in constructing Lynda’s life narrative and thus evokes two cultural formations of the monster. As a museum piece over

400 years old, Caravaggio's painting, preserved at the Uffizi gallery in Florence (see Bal *Quoting Caravaggio* 135), is invested with the status of high art. However, Barry's mass-culture reproduction embodies an example of what Collins describes as "high-pop," in its inclusion of a cheap copy of the painting in the low-art, amateur graphic memoir, addressed to mass, untrained audiences outside the high-art domain of the museum. In so doing, *What It Is* demonstrates the ease through which this process can be performed via the medium of comics. Simultaneously, it connects representations of female monstrosity that go back to the Renaissance and the 1960s with Barry's contemporary imperfect, cartoony versions of the Gorgon (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1: Lynda Barry, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). p. 65.]

The choice of Caravaggio's painting is also important because the process of its creation introduces Medusa as a gender-ambiguous facially cross-dressed figure. In the original, Caravaggio's own facial characteristics are represented in the female monster's face. As Bal explains, Caravaggio based the face of the Medusa on the reflection of his own face in a mirror (*Quoting Caravaggio* 135). By painting a female monster with male facial characteristics, he created a visual representation that is also gender-ambiguous. Facial features become, here, forms of disguise and marks of undecidability as opposed to gender demarcations. Hence, apart from representing the *vagina dentata*, as Freud argues about artistic representations of the Medusa, Caravaggio's monster also embodies the conflation between the monster and the artist's reflection (see Freud *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 273-74). In Western psychoanalysis Medusa or the Gorgon is seen as a metaphorical representation of the primal, castrating mother of infantile fantasy, of the all-devouring maternal uterus (Lacan qtd. in Barzilai 214-218; Creed 166; Schneider 76-91). In *What It Is*,

the mother/monster connection becomes influential in relation to Lynda's life narrative, precisely because her abusive mother is also introduced as monstrous.

The identification between the two can be seen when the narrator notes that she "had a very Gorgon-like mother" even though she had not realized this and in the visual depictions of the monster and the mother (see *What It Is* 65-66). The autobiographical avatar is shown talking about the monster's lethal gaze, which she tried to avoid during her childhood imaginative play, and looking, at the same time, both towards her mother and her own drawing of the Gorgon (63). In addition, a mirroring takes place in two consecutive pages, where Lynda is looking at Caravaggio's depiction of the monster in the movie theatre on the first page and at her mother on the second, with the mother and the monster taking up the same spot on each page (65-66). Apart from facilitating the deconstruction of the aforementioned gendered categories, Caravaggio's *Medusa* also influences how we understand Lynda's relationship with her abusive mother (see Michael "Excavating Childhood").

Discussing Caravaggio's work, Graham L. Hammill notes that "sex is central in [his] aesthetic and historical project insofar as it doesn't signify" and it is not "contained nor reduced by the civilizing process's organization of sexual difference" (63-66). According to Hammill, Caravaggio's poses in his paintings, including that of the Medusa, embody "a demand that resists easy recognition and conscription by a group who wants to read them as transmitting its sense of identity and value" (69). In representing the conflation between the painter's reflection and the radical other of maternal monstrosity, as this was discursively formed in Western art and psychoanalysis, Caravaggio's painting also raises a significant question: Who is the creator and who is the creation? Did the painter create the maternal monster or the other way around? If the Medusa stands for the *vagina dentata*, and if the male artist's facial characteristics are used in his painting of the monster, then this undecidability

undermines divisions between the self and the (m)other, masculine and feminine genders, and the creator and the creation.<sup>4</sup>

Caravaggio also evokes the myth of the Medusa by painting her on a wooden shield. According to the mythical narrative, after “Perseus slew [the monster] [...] Athena embossed her shield with [her] head” to terrify male spectators, as Barbara Creed explains (166). Creed argues that by doing so, Athena aimed at striking “terror into the hearts of men as well as reminding them of their symbolic debt to the imaginary castrating mother” (ibid). Her discussion underlines the terrifying power of the maternal monster against male spectators but does not refer to how its protective aspect can be used towards feminist ends and to what happens when a woman or a girl holds the position of spectator.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what Lynda’s interaction with the Medusa demonstrates in *What It Is*. By incorporating Caravaggio’s painting on the round shield, Barry’s collage preserves its protective element.

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<sup>4</sup> Freud introduces the maternal uterus as the frightening domain of the uncanny and Medusa’s head as an artistic representation of the *vagina dentata*. Similarly, Otto Rank describes the representation of the all-devouring mother in children’s fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretter” and Jacques Lacan talks about the mother in infantile fantasy that resembles the figure of the Gorgon (See Freud “The Uncanny” 193-221; Freud “Medusa’s Head” 273-274; Rank 109; Lacan qtd. in Barzilai 214-218).

<sup>5</sup> Freud also describes the castration threat that Medusa’s head evokes in male spectators but proceeds to explain that being turned into stone denotes stiffness and therefore symbolises erection, hence establishing the male spectator’s phallic ownership. His discussion does not refer to women spectators or to children’s anxiety with regards to the primal mother (“Medusa’s Head” 273-274).

As I explain in “Excavating Childhood: Fairy Tales, Monsters and Abuse Survival in Lynda Barry’s *What It Is*,” the child protagonist enters a creative playing process with the Gorgon, creating her own fairy-tale world, where she tries to escape the monster. Through this process, and in the space allowed by comics to stretch the boundaries of autographics and fuse it with the genre of revisionist fairy tales, the Gorgon transforms into a protector that allows Lynda to love her mother and survive maternal abuse. In addition, Barry’s feminist take on maternal monstrosity, as embodied in Caravaggio’s painting and discursively formed in Western psychoanalysis, becomes reconfigured through its various repetitions and reformations that eventually lead to its transformation into non-threatening, cartoony, friendly creatures: the Magic Cephalopod and the Sea-Ma that are also painted either with the autobiographical avatar or with other creatures attached on their stomach areas. As such, they come to embody the autobiographical self/mother conflation in a way that is not monstrous and functions as a creative inspiration for the adult autobiographical avatar. The collapse of boundaries between masculine/feminine gender representations, self/(m)other depictions and high/low art divisions, evoked through Barry’s reference to Caravaggio’s painting, are mirrored in other components of the graphic memoir. This becomes apparent through an examination of William Blake’s high-artistic illuminated writing tradition, disguised via Barry’s use of scrapbooking procedures.

#### Mixing Visual Media II: William Blake’s Tradition and Scrapbooking

Joseph Witek describes Blake’s work as a precursor to comics (6). Similarly, in the introduction to a special issue of *ImageText* on William Blake and his influence on visual culture, Roger Whitson refers to Thomas W. Mitchell’s coining of the term “image-text” in his book *Blake’s Composite Art*, where he shows “how the tensions and flows of Blake’s illuminated art provide a starting point for investigating what he would later call ‘imagetexts’

more generally,” one of which is that of comics. When it comes to *What It Is*, specifically, readers can trace striking similarities with Blake’s illuminated manuscripts because of Barry’s use of calligraphy, bright colors, and decorative branches and flames that often appear in the book.<sup>6</sup> Barry also incorporates an excerpt from Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* in the book, when the narrator describes the neglect she suffered as a child by her parents and she is drawn as an adult having read Blake’s work (*What It Is* 28, 132).

When asked about Blake’s influence on her second graphic memoir, Barry explains: “I love William Blake. And I know his illuminated texts and they were emboldening influences for me starting about 10 years ago. His work does that thing I’m talking about: It can give you that state of mind that is other than thinking. But actually, the biggest influence on me while I was working on *What It Is* was Emily Dickinson” (“The Lynda Barry Interview”). Below, I explain how elements from Blake’s high-artistic tradition re-appear in *What It Is*, through Barry’s collage, the use of “waste” materials and the tradition of scrapbooking that were also taken up by Emily Dickinson in her domesticated publication of her poems (see Socarides 3-6; Holland 139-141). By so doing, I situate Barry’s work in older male canonical and female counter-canonical artistic traditions that start as early as the eighteenth century: that of Blakean illustrated writing and that of feminized, domesticated craft arts that have been critiqued as amateur non-art.

In Blake’s work, the binary gender divisions that were imposed on humans after their fall from heaven do not apply in paradisiacal existence. Commenting upon Blake’s illuminated poetry, Mitchell notes that “the function of his composite art” is to satirize and expose “the illusion of a dualistic nature,” and to overcome “the fall into a divided Nature

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<sup>6</sup> *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* form two representative samples of William Blake’s illuminated prose and poetry.

with a ‘Resurrection to Unity’” (*Blake’s Composite Art* 31). In *Jerusalem*, one of Blake’s prophetic illuminated narratives, the speaker explains that by accepting the masculine/feminine separation as permanent, individuals enter a path that leads to destruction and death as it also contradicts the state of heavenly unity, where all the divisions of the fallen world are conflated (*Jerusalem* 272-273, 284). As Mitchell notes, in “Blake’s myth sexes are, like time and space, soul and body which they personify, illusions that have arisen with the fall of consciousness from primal unity” (*Blake’s Composite Art* 32). Reflecting Kooistra’s views on the bitextual element of illustrated texts, and Carrier’s notion of comics’ in-betweenness, Mitchell suggests that Blake’s myth is embodied via the verbal/visual amalgam of his texts.

The division of genders emerges at birth with what Butler describes as a linguistic constructivism that fixes sex and gender cohesion (*Bodies that Matter* 5). In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva explains that before having entered the symbolic order and acquiring language, while they are still in the semiotic *chora*, which is associated with the maternal body, human subjects do not perceive gendered divisions (27). If we assume that the set of divisions Blake’s illuminated poems attempt to deconstruct are those that emerge with the separation from the mother’s body at birth, the entry to the symbolic order, and the acquirement of language, then it could be suggested that the Blakean paradise—the divine state—embodies a metaphorical return to the womb, the semiotic “*chora*” in Kristeva’s terms, where the aforementioned divisions collapse (26).

Indeed, Otto Rank has suggested that the “ensuing expulsion from Paradise [...] has become [...] the symbol of the unattainable blessed primal condition [and] represents ... a repetition of painful parturition, the separation from the mother [...] to which men and women are subjected in the same way” (118). Blake’s conflation of the verbal and the visual, the gender-ambiguous characters that appear in his works, and his calligraphy, which I

proceed to describe, reflect a state where linguistic constructivism and binary divisions are undone. His illustrated texts thus come to embody pre-symbolic existence that is associated with the self/mother conflation, in a similar way that Caravaggio's painting of the Medusa does. The "primal unity" that Mitchell identifies in Blake's works and the gender conflation that it entails are embodied via a version of cross-dressing that re-appears in Barry's graphic memoirs and is performed on three levels apart from the verbal/visual combination that each artist uses as a medium: firstly, in the visual embodiments of a gender-ambiguous child protagonist; secondly, in the use of calligraphy that introduces prose text as visual image and, lastly, in how Barry conflates Blake's high-artistic work with female, domesticated traditions of scrapbooking.

The poem "The Little Boy Found," from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Songs 54), demonstrates the gender ambiguity existing before the fall from heaven. It also refers to the problems children encounter when they enter the corrupted world of experience, where they suffer under the negligence and violence of adults. In a similar way, Lynda is shown to suffer because of her mother's abusive behavior and the absence of her father (for examples, see *What It Is* 26, 66). The abandoned boy who is also abused by his father is described as crying and wandering alone at night in the woods. God, who embodies the state of existence before the fall, what Blake envisaged as the "primal unity," comes to his rescue (54). While God is mentioned with the third person pronoun "he," in the visual image the angel-like figure that represents him looks more like a woman than a man. Thus, this visual embodiment confuses the reader in relation to God's gender demarcation and it points to the undecidability of pre-symbolic existence. If God has been constructed through grammatical restrictions as a "he," Blake's visual depiction allows the detachment of God from this masculine gender demarcation, thus demonstrating the potential of visual imagery to deconstruct restrictions that, in Butler's words, violate subjects by imposing heteronormative binary divisions.



Mitchell explains that Blake's supposedly female characters are "associated consistently with bodily coverings—drapery, garments, embroidery, and the weaving process itself—which suggests that the naked figure beneath these 'integuments' will be perceived of as masculine" (*Blake's Composite Art* 50). He also explains that his "female nudes [...] tend to have masculine traits" (50). Thus, our speculations about Blake's characters—both vested and nude—in the state before the fall, are constantly undermined, since their visual embodiments underscore the non-duality and the ambiguity of gender in heaven—in the maternal body. Tom Hayes notes that *Jerusalem* "is about the painful necessity of choosing division over wholeness. All hermaphrodites [...] must finally put off their 'maternal humanity,' their union with the mother [and] they must accept their separateness, their loneliness, their alienation from" her (154).

Nicholas Williams explains that for Blake, human language, like those who use it, is also fallen and "becomes genderless only when worked into its utopian form. But if the medium is still the inescapably gendered language of the fallen world [...] within the limits of this ideological language a genderless utopia is struggling to express itself" (72). The expression of genderless utopia, associated with the maternal and the pre-symbolic state is allowed by the plasticity with which the visual aspect of Blake's illuminated poetry invests human bodies, and by the manipulation of garments in their gendered stylization. Indeed, it is the ability of dressing, and specifically of a version of cross-dressing, that allows Blake's characters to cause gender trouble and to undermine the linguistic constructivism of the symbolic order. For Blake, an adult person enmeshed in the world of experience, gender division and corruption is not able to reach the state before the fall through his/her perception. In contrast, it is only if we see with children's eyes, if we see ourselves as fused with the (m)other via a pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipal sight, that we will be able to understand the divine

state.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in *Jerusalem* children are often shown to guide adults via their innocent vision to spaces of security (272-273, 284).

In Barry's graphic memoirs it is precisely this childish mode of perception that also undermines binary gendered divisions because it conceals the autobiographical subject's ownership or lack of the phallus in her visual representations. Moreover, Barry's vision transforms Blake's perfectly crafted artwork in a way that underscores the significance of childish vision in the art-making process itself. Her graphic memoirs present us with simplistic, amateur visual/verbal compositions that also motivate readers to engage with them in a playful mode. Despite recognizing the value of Blake's work, Barry's comics also deconstruct his artistic authority by preserving an imperfect childish approach in her drawing and writing styles. Both in *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is*, the child autobiographical avatar is drawn as a tomboy, with orange short hair and freckles, wearing boyish as opposed to girly clothes (see *One! Hundred! Demons!* 184-190; *What It Is* 37-38, 64). Visual depictions of Lynda work together to underscore the superficiality of gender demarcation (Figure 2). The left half of the panel below demonstrates a category crisis by introducing the typical representation of the female autobiographical subject looking like a

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<sup>7</sup> I refer to the state where the infant has not yet started to perceive the self as a separate identity before what Lacan describes as the mirror stage. According to Lacan, the mirror stage "manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality [...] to the assumption of an alienating identity" (287-292). Donald Winnicott also describes infants' perception of themselves as continuous with the (m)other in his discussion of transitional objects in his book *Playing and Reality* (1-5).

boy, and thus confusing the reader in relation to what her gender is.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the blue color of her clothes, the green and yellow colors of the background are neutral with regards to gender demarcation. Thus, without the narrator's captions, it could be assumed that she is a boy. By way of comparison, Lynda perceives an ideal girly girls as having long hair, playing with dolls and wearing a dress, but ultimately she "valorizes a hybrid femininity" in her adult rejection of the Barbie doll and her preference for "feisty superheroes" (de Jesús 17).

[Insert: Figure 2. Lynda Barry "Girlness," *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Sasquatch Books, 2002).

p.185, panel 2.]

If we pay attention to Barry's drawing style, it becomes clear that it is her childish perspective on the autobiographical avatar that brings forth the significance of clothes in a rather exaggerated way as it marginalizes the importance of the body as a marker of gender differentiation. Indeed, apart from their hair, the objects they hold and the clothes they wear, the two Lyndas are identical, since the simplicity of Barry's painting style does not allow readers to make inferences about the protagonist's gender based on her bodily features and facial characteristics. Michael Taussig notes that facial characteristics and genitalia are connected in relation to gender demarcation but whereas the former are exposed, clothes conceal the latter (227). However, Lynda's face undoes this connection; stripped of the details that could potentially indicate gender, it is situated in an in-between space. The

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<sup>8</sup> In "When an It Is Labelled a He or a She," Sandra Salmans explains that baby clothing was neutral for centuries and it was only after World War II that genders were color-coded and baby boys wore trousers while girls wore dresses.

autobiographical avatar visualizes the undecidability of gender division and veils the status of ownership or lack of the phallus. Like Blake's gender-ambiguous characters and Caravaggio's Medusa, Lynda's avatar embodies pre-symbolic gender undecidability.

Özge Samanci notes that the artist's use of brush in *One! Hundred! Demons!* establishes a "children's drawing aesthetic" that leads to a lack of detail in the drawn figures. Moreover, she observes that Barry's "conscious ignorance of [...] human anatomy and her distortion of the human body imply a childish cruelty" against it (187). However, it is precisely this childish perspective on the body with its omission of bodily characteristics that could demarcate one's gender and sex that facilitates the representation of Lynda as embodying gender undecidability. Lynda's gender ambiguity, like Blake's gender-ambiguous characters and Caravaggio's monster, dismantles the gender restrictions imposed by grammar and rejects heteronormative femininity ideals imposed on girls. Thus, by repeating and reconfiguring Blakean gender-ambiguity through the lens of a childish eye, Barry's visual embodiments of Lynda demonstrate that through children's point of view one can see beyond gendered divisions, "differencing," in Pollock's words, the Blakean cannon of high art.

#### Cross-Dressing Words as Images, Blake's Illuminated Texts as Scrapbooks

Another way through which gendered divisions and hierarchies between high, masculine and low, feminine art forms and subjectivities are deconstructed has to do with Barry's handwritten calligraphy. This component, together with the rest that have been examined so far, renders *What It Is*, like *One! Hundred! Demons!*, "relevant as a feminist praxis," as Chute states in her analysis of the resignification of "detritus of girlhood as aesthetic collage" in Barry's first graphic memoir (125). Verbal text emerges as cross-dressed in Blake's and Barry's works because it is presented in the form of calligraphy, mirroring the category resistance each artist's characters embody. Kimberly Elam defines handwritten calligraphy as

a “form of drawing based on the linear strokes and marks made by the hand. These strokes and marks are organized in a common system of construction that forms the individual visual signs of the alphabet, which in sequence, become words” (25). Being simultaneously a visual and a verbal image, calligraphic text, like the cross-dressed characters in Blake’s and Barry’s works, refuses to conform to the binary divisions embodied in the verbal/visual separation. Blake’s title page of the *Songs of Innocence*, for example, demonstrates how his verbal text is simultaneously a pictorial one (14). The capital letters of the word “songs” have decorative tails that are transformed into flames and branches that fuse the text with the visual background. Moreover, small human figures are distributed on each letter and the word “Innocence” engraved and printed in small cursive letters invests the verbal text with an instability that further underlines its visual aspect.

Similarly, Barry’s handwritten calligraphy also introduces letters as pictures, but once again through a childish aesthetics with her graphic memoirs resembling children’s picture books. Initial letters in almost every chapter of *One! Hundred! Demons!* and in some of the autobiographical sections in *What It Is* are drawn as visual images. Additionally, Barry’s words are written in both small cursive letters with decorative tails and with capital plain letters. Chute notes that,

On a first glance one might suspect that this shifting lends emphasis to the denotative meaning of a sentence or that it works to imply its spoken quality [...]. Yet this shifting is enacted to ‘break up’ the actual visual surface of the text [...]. The prose [...] also works at the visual level decoratively, containing a rhythm on its surface that is unconnected from the plot it establishes. (110-111)

While Chute identifies the function of the text on a visual level, it is also necessary to note how prose reflects the conflation of divisions embodied in the verbal/visual separation. If we

perceive the visual element of illustrated texts as corresponding to the female, the (m)other, and the body and the verbal text to the male and the mind, then Blake's and Barry's calligraphies mirror the deconstruction of such divisions and introduce, in yet another way, pre-symbolic fluidity and undecidability.

*What It Is* introduces yet another form of cross-dressing, in a way that also captures the peak of Barry's feminist re-imagination and reconfiguration of Blake's tradition in illustrated writing. When Blake's illuminated texts were first produced there were only a few copies available and they were very expensive because of a complicated method of production (see Lincoln 9; Leader xix). The beautifully engraved calligraphic text and the detailed visual embodiments of characters were undertaken from beginning to end solely by the artist himself.<sup>9</sup> Barry's repetition and reconfiguration of Blakean traits produces a fraudulent copy because it involves a distinctly feminine creative process. Simultaneously, it undoes the canonical work's perfection by underlining the amateur childish perspective on artistic creation. While the end result of the pages in *What It Is* and *One! Hundred! Demons!* is very similar to the pages of Blake's illuminated texts, the differences in the creative processes concern the domestication of art. The bright colors, the use of calligraphy and decorative branches and frames are elements that introduce Barry's work as an heir of Blake's tradition. However, the feminist revision of his work lies in the unconventional material Barry uses to produce an end result that "appears" to be similar to his illuminated manuscripts, but that is marked by its difference.

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<sup>9</sup> For catalogues of the currently existing copies of Blake's original works and their holding institutes, see *Works in the William Blake Archive*, <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/indexworks.htm?java=no>.

In the “Outro” of *One! Hundred! Demons!*, the adult autobiographical avatar comments upon the materials she uses in her art. She notes: “I like to paint on legal paper or on the classified section of the newspaper or even pages from old books! I will try any paper, typing paper, wrapping paper even paper bags!” (224). Barry writes and draws on collaged “waste” materials: yellow legal paper, but also envelopes, pieces of different types of paper, fabric and paper cut out of newspapers and books, among other materials. Her use of unconventional material underlines the Do-It-Yourself character of her works and introduces artistic creativity as an everyday domestic process, situating it in the long history of women’s domestic craft arts. Chute notes that Barry’s collages share similarities with those that emerged out of “The Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, in which artists like Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff mixed fabric and paint and explored the use of everyday materials, putting pressure on mainstream concepts of art that devalued ornamentation and handcraft as ‘women’s work’” (111). However, while the Pattern and Decoration movement’s artists sought validation through the high-artistic institute of the art gallery, Barry rejects it in her refusal to exhibit her work in art galleries and by making it publically available in mass-produced book format, aimed at untrained readers.<sup>10</sup> In addition, her insistence on preserving its amateur, childish end result further destabilizes the boundaries between art and non-art, and reacts against canonical rejections of gendered forms of creativity. Indeed, Barry has noted the effort it took on her behalf to convince her publishers to publish *One! Hundred! Demons!* without altering its format (Kirtley 152).

Ann Cvetkovich identifies creativity in contemporary women’s visual arts and specifically in the female process of crafting as a significant means of survival in “a

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<sup>10</sup> Feminist art historians discuss the Pattern and Decoration movement and representative artists (see Broude and Garrard 315; Broude, 225; Felshin 71-85).

depressive culture,” which rejects women’s art as unworthy (159). She notes that the contemporary craft movement is “in dialogue with [...] second-wave feminisms of the 1970s and post-Second World War domestic cultures, as well as with longer histories of women’s culture and industrial culture extending back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century” (171). Women’s crafts have been perceived as amateur forms of art without value and have thus remained restricted within the domestic space since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Schaffer 73-78). Although Cvetkovich describes the reparative power of women’s craft art in a context that constantly devalues it, her discussion concerns works exhibited in museums and art galleries (177-189).<sup>11</sup> While she refers to Barry’s *What It Is* as a how-to book for fighting the feeling of depression through everyday creative activities (204, 211), she does not address its potential as feminist reparative art. By conflating Blake’s tradition with female/childish amateur processes, the graphic memoir refuses to remain restricted within matrilineal circles and oscillates between distinct categories constantly undermining them and foregrounding their permeability. It is precisely in this hybridity and the rejection of the legitimizing, gendered domain of the museum and the gallery that its feminist reparative potential lies.

Coda: Mixing Visual Media/Undoing the Canon

This essay has foregrounded the potential offered by the medium of comics for mixing visual media in contemporary women’s graphic memoir by closely reading, through a comparative lens, excerpts from Barry’s work. Her mixing of traits from different traditions, from Caravaggio’s high-artistic painting to Blake’s illuminated writing and the female craft arts

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<sup>11</sup> Two artists Cvetkovich examines are Seila Pepe and Alison Mitchell. Mitchell’s *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism* also negotiates the return to the maternal body via installations composed by knitted arrangements.



that stretch back to the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, allows us to see how her work intervenes in the history of art, borrowing and reconfiguring elements from its archives towards feminist ends. Barry puts the potential offered by the richly flexible boundaries of comics into productive use in her narration of Lynda's effort to deal with maternal abuse and neglect, and it succeeds in "differencing" Blake and Caravaggio's canonical traditions.

Mitchell refers to "'contexts of object discourse' or *ekphrasis*" to describe cases "when mute objects seem to speak." He provides as one such example the narratives of women and children, noting that such groups often suffer "forms of subjection and abject powerlessness that compel public acts of autobiography" (*Picture Theory* 197). Janet Wolff explores feminine writing and painting within such contexts, noting that "new forms of cultural expression, by virtue of the fact that their very existence challenges and dislocates dominant narratives and discourses, provide the space for different voices to speak and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experience" (9). She describes the new forms of women's cultural expression, in which I position Barry's work, as "feminine sentences" (9). Wolff points out that apart from referring to writing, "feminine sentences" also entails "the secondary meaning of the word 'sentence,' indicating an exploration of the constraints and restrictions experienced by women in a patriarchal culture. Women in this sense," she explains, "are sentenced to containment and silence" (10). According to Wolff, feminist criticism on women's artistic and literary production "is intended as a contribution to the overthrow of that 'sentence,' and to the process whereby women find ways to intervene in an excluding culture, and to articulate their own experience" (10). Situating Barry's work in the same context, this essay shows how mixing and reconfiguring visual media and traditions in comics can undo gendered binary divisions that reproduce hierarchies in the field of visual arts on the one hand, and introduce the female autobiographical subject in ways that free her from heteronormative gender restrictions on the other. In their fertile cross-pollination

between categories and their response to the traditions of Western art, Barry's graphic memoirs demonstrate the reparative potential of graphic memoirs when the language of comics is infused with intertextual references.

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