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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to deliver an analysis on Lynda Barry's making comics philosophies. Barry's practice, based on the author's experience as her student, can be theorized as a pedagogical tool that encourages us finding yourself and embracing your past, though she doesn't emphasize such theorization. My argument is derived from the concept of *autobifictionalography* from Barry's significant book, *One Hundred Demons* (Barry, 2002). Some cartooning methods are introduced in this essay: namely, spontaneous drawing, drawing with eyes-closed, collaborative exercise. These recipes aid to overcome hesitation in drawing with serendipities, and enrich the body and sense awareness. Further, such methods cultivate the discussion on the problem of transnationality in Comics Studies (Eisner, 1985; Groensteen et al., 2007; Kern, 2016; McCloud, 1993; Meskin, 2009). The *daily diary method* (Barry, 2019) inspires in self-exploration over time and space by blurring fiction and nonfiction, which challenges the idea of fixed subjectivity. In regard of relational subjectivity and anti-perfectionist approach, Barry's autobifictionalography aligns with posthuman theories (Barad 2007; Haraway 1985/1991). With such relationship, I consider that Barry's method helps understand posthumanism's complex idea. Finally, I discussed the posthuman ideas and Barry's method along with *Ghost in the Shell* (Shirow, 1991), which is significant manga relating to posthumanism. In conclusion, I believe that Barry's method will benefit anyone, so I am keen to invite more scholars and practitioners to study. As a manga scholar having found my transnational identity by Barry's method, I hope to provide thoughtful connections beyond disciplines.

Manga Otaku meets Lynda Barry: Bodily Making Comics for Finding Yourself

"Most people stop drawing around age four." Lynda Barry, the award-winning underground comics artist, said in a classroom in the United States. She continued, "Because they start becoming aware of the gap between what they draw and what they have in mind" (L. Barry, personal communication, January 28, 2024). This is unfortunately true in my life. I grew up in Japan, watching anime and reading *manga* (Japanese-style comics) like *Sailor Moon* and *Pokémon*, as well as drawing them. One of my favorite games was to make a new type of Pokémon by myself, but I stopped playing it for the reason Barry alludes to. Having realized that my drawings were not as good as the ones I read on magazines, I have always thought, "I wish I could draw."

However, after many years I gave up drawing, I took a class offered by Barry, *Making Comics* in 2024. Barry's course was not about how to draw mainstream comics or how to be good artists. Rather, it was about exploring, imagining, and discovering yourself through cartooning. In the classroom, she shows us videos of people singing, dancing, and sobbing to bring about an uplifting, cheerful and embracing atmosphere. Learning at her classroom gave me an opportunity to accept my duality as an obsessive fan (*otaku*) and as a

doctoral student academically studying manga. Especially, I finally resolved my sense of inadequacy as an otaku, because I was thinking of poor drawing skills as a source of shame. Being a student of Barry was such a privilege, and I am confident in examining my experience of finding my identity with her method.

In this essay, I argue that the comics drawing method developed by Barry (2019) is pedagogically valuable beyond art education, in a way that teaches us how to find ourselves and embrace our past. First, I introduce Barry's background, her notable work *One Hundred Demons*, and her unique philosophy of *autobifictionalography*. Then, I analyze Barry's practice through the lens of finding one's identity by weaving scholarly ideas together from Comics Studies (Eisner, 1985; Groensteen et al., 2007; Kern, 2016; McCloud, 1993; Meskin, 2009). Lastly, I suggest that Barry's concept has pedagogical benefits that reflect the emerging philosophical idea of posthumanism. Thus, I aim to contribute to expanding the scholarly discussion in comics, manga studies, and beyond.

Lynda Barry and the Art of *Autobifictionalography* in *One Hundred Demons*

To begin with, it is necessary to introduce the key person, Lynda Barry. She is an associate professor of Interdisciplinary Creativity at the Art Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. She is not only a teacher, but also an award-winning cartoonist and writer. In 2019, she received the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, often referred to as a "genius grant" (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2020). One example of her inspiring creative commitment is the Arts-based Drawbridge Program. Barry pairs graduate students seeking their PhD with 4-year-old children as co-researchers to help graduate students approach their research in a new way (MacArthur Foundation, 2019). Barry wrote and drew many comic strips and graphic novels—most notably, *One Hundred Demons* (Barry, 2002) is a powerful and critical work.[1]

One Hundred Demons (2002) is a collection of fully colored 19 comic strips, with 216 pages in the unconventional size of the book 16 by 25 cm. The title was inspired by the Buddhist philosophy teaching that each person must overcome 100 demons in a lifetime. Indeed, Barry drew out her monsters, which are her cheerful, embarrassing, or traumatic memories. This is her autobiographical work, yet she does not call it as such. Barry begins this book with a note saying, "this is a work of autobifictionalography" (2002, p. 4) on the left side of the page with her handwriting, as shown in Figure 1.[2] This is a term Barry developed "to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storylines" (Chute, 2010, p. 3). In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), Chute argues that Barry embraces the ambiguous division between fiction and reality, as well as memory and truth in her comics, inviting audiences to question these binaries.

This approach of autobifictionalography is one of the keys for my argument in terms of self-explorations by cartooning. The stories presented in the book are nonfiction based on Barry's memory, but at the same time, her memory is partially fiction because she made up some parts. Thus, I interpret Barry's idea that looking back at your memory is like making fiction, because no one has a perfect memory like camera recordings. Simultaneously, however, it is not fully fiction as it happens to you, and you remember it. This essay introduces this making autobifictionalography activity as the *daily diary method* as the later section. Further, the mixture of fiction and nonfiction of one's past leads to the question of subjectivity, because with Barry's philosophy, the concept of *you* is not always the same as people's perception. In that way, subjectivity is relational and in a constant state of *becoming*, which is discussed further in the last section.

The concept of autobifictionalography is also critical because of its materiality and bodily expressions for finding one's identity. For instance, Chute drew the etymology of fiction as "the material process of making" (2010, p. 109); the Latin *fictio* originally came from the verb *fingo*, defined as "to make by shaping from clay, wax, molten metal, and so on" (p. 109). In such way, Chute emphasizes Barry's hands, material,

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1 Comic strips is a type of comic that is typically tells short stories with images and text. Most common example is newspaper comic strips. However, the definition is ambiguous, under different cultures and scholarship.

2 There is no printed letter in this book, except for the publisher's information. It is all hand-written and collaged.

and physical creation of comics. I agree with her analysis with my experience of self-exploration with Barry's method, especially with the use of specific material by hand. One time, Barry provided Japanese sumi ink and a calligraphy brush for students. It was a practice of exploring different types of ink and brush but was also about bodily exploration. In fact, sumi ink and a calligraphy brush are incredibly sensitive to the movements of the hand; by using these materials, students could grasp their hand pressure, which perhaps came from their mental state or personality. Additionally, the smell of sumi ink evoked my childhood memories, because it is commonly used in elementary school calligraphy classes in Japan. As a Japanese, this material exploration strikes me to rethink my past. Thus, communicating with material helps to know their own body and identity.

Figure 1
Barry's Note on "Autobifictionalography"

Transnationality and Serendipity in Barry's Method

This section introduces three examples of Barry's making comics method and attempts to expand them, along with discussing transnational aspects of Comics studies and the value of self-exploration. First, Barry borrows some recipes for cartooning from *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* by Ivan Brunetti (2011), which highlights the broader Comics Studies discussion on the *masking effect* by Scott McCloud (1993, p. 43). One instance is the "spontaneous drawing" exercise from Brunetti method (p. 25) that students quickly doodle the same object for fifty seconds at first, then repeat it for forty seconds, thirty, twenty, ten, and lastly five seconds, as shown my example in Figure 2. This is an interesting practice because scholars in Comics Studies have discussed the necessity of recurrent characters in consequent panels in comics (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). Although each cat image is not perfectly replicated in Figure 2, people can recognize them as the same character. This phenomenon, in which the brain responds to a simple drawing in a complementary way, often occurs when reading comics, as readers project themselves onto a character. For instance, readers project themselves into a character in comics. McCloud (1993) who is a legendary figure in Comics Studies, calls this the masking effect, and describes it as a technique used by cartoonists to enable readers to imagine themselves in the story by using simply rendered characters.

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Figure 2

Example of Spontaneous Drawing Exercise
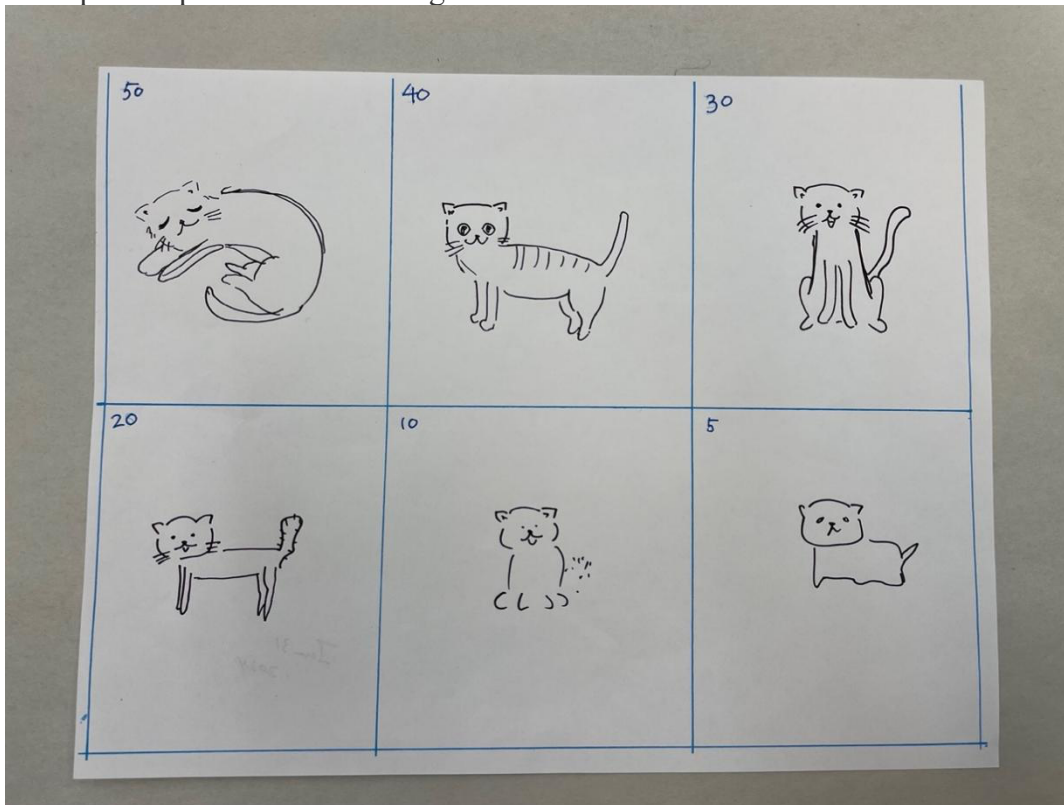
Note. Drawing of cats from fifty seconds to five seconds

This discussion of the masking effect sheds light on the role of transnationality, which is often ignored in Comics Studies. McCloud points out that the masking effect is commonly known as a technique that manga deploys.[3] However, it is hard to define one type of comics as purely Japanese—at least, undeniably, the "masking effect" appears in comics from different cultures. Previously, many scholars have tried to define comics from their structure, cultural context, or contents (Groensteen et al., 2007; Meskin, 2009). The overall tendency is most theorists discuss the definition of comics only in their cultural context, like American, French, or British. However, Kern defines comics as "A visual-verbal text in spacio-temporal design" (A. Kern, personal communication, September 19, 2023). His transnational definition uses broad terms to welcome more varieties of comics, because he believes that different comics culturally interact and influence each other. For instance, Kern (2016) raises the example of *The Upside-down World* comics (1903) created by Gustave Verbeek (see Figure 3). Verbeek is a Dutch-American illustrator and cartoonist, who was born in Nagasaki, Japan, studied art in Paris, and became a famous newspaper cartoonist in the United States. Considering his background, it makes sense as Kern argues that Verbeek got a hint from *jouge-e* (Japanese up-side-down illustrations, see Figure 4). As a result, by reflecting on Barry's method for making comics, we can recognize the need for broader transnational perspectives in comics studies.

Adding to the transnational perspective reflected by the artistic style, I believe that interactions among cultures also impact approaches to comics drawing because such interactions profoundly shape one's identity. In today's globalized world, one's identity cannot be put only in one culture. For example, because I learned to draw comics from Barry, does this mean I am drawing American comics? Or, since I am Japanese, am I drawing manga? In short, it is impossible to draw a border line. I found my art style is influenced by many cultures such as manga, anime (Japan), classmates (mostly American), or picture books (British, French, etc.).

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3 McCloud himself confirms that he does not read manga in Japanese (1993), which may indeed mislead his understanding towards manga itself.

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Like my artistic style, my own view of identity is also cross cultural as an international student in the United States from Japan, having lived in England. Esteban-Guitart and Vila (2015) uses the term "transnational identity" to describe people with intercultural living experiences like mine. While I would note that there can be more than two cultures, I therefore suggest that Barry's cartooning method and self-exploration fit within the same umbrella—transnationality.

Figure 3

Sample Panel from The Upside-down World (Verbeek, 1903)

Note. Both are the same panel, but you can read it in two ways

Figure 4

Example of Jouge-e by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (n.d.) from Asian Art Database[4]
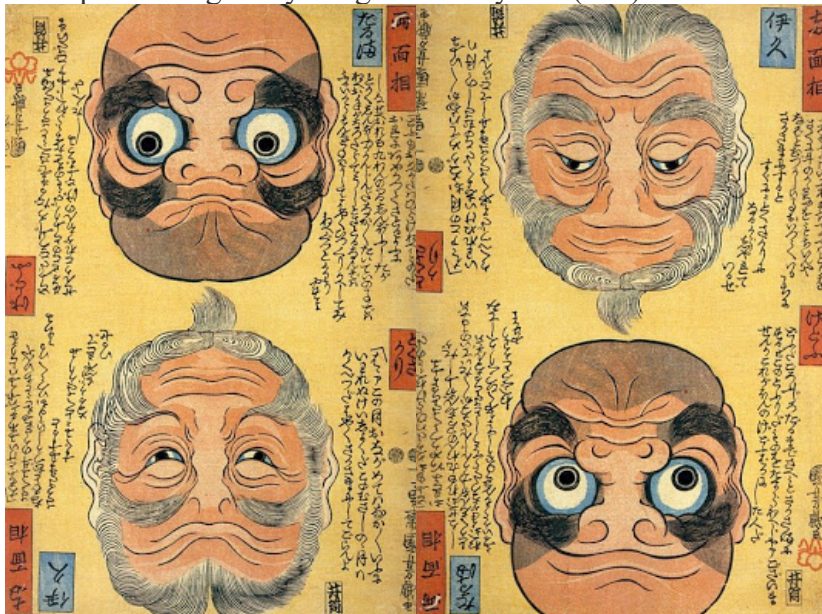
Note. Up-side-down illustrations: the big-eyes face represents *Daruma* (upper left) face and *Gedou* (down right) respectively; the other represents *Tokusakari* (down left) face and *Iku* (upper right) faces[5]

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4 On the Asian Art Database, the image appears on the page of Utagawa Yoshitora, a student of Kuniyoshi, but the art is attributed to Kuniyoshi (Waraku web editorial team, 2017).

5 Daruma (*Bodhidharma* in Sanskrit) is a Buddhist monk who is regarded as the founder of the Chinese Zen Buddhism ("Bodhidharma," 2024). Gedou is the people who believe in teachings other than Buddhism (Weblio, n.d.). Tokusakari is an old man character who

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Second, I believe that Barry's bodily drawing exercises with serendipity are extremely beneficial in searching for self-identity. As I discussed Chute (2010) emphasizing physicality in drawing, Barry let students explore their body through cartooning with deliberate restrictions. Namely, drawing with your eyes closed is fascinating; without vision, people realize secondary perceptions such as touch and sounds rather than vision. Figure 5 is an example of my drawing in the classroom, when students try drawing a giraffe with their eyes closed. Although you can feel the texture of the paper and make a guess for the sizing or placement, the outcome is hilariously surprising. I realized my tendency to draw a character too small compared to the paper size. This exercise brings me unexpected discoveries with a sharper sense of hearing (e.g. the sound of a pen) and touching (e.g. paper's quality, smoothness, thickness, or size). Regarding these changes in my body, eyes-closed cartooning is more than drawing but bodily exploration.

Furthermore, Barry's activity is about collaboration; people share individual drawings or even exchange them with each other frequently to help overcome hesitation. One of my favorites is shown in Figure 6, in which I drew myself as a rabbit, and another character and background were drawn by my classmates. When thinking in a reasonable way, it is strange that the fish stands next to the rabbit. However, my classmates thought it should be there—Barry would say, "It's Comics!" which means you can do anything in comics. Collaborations bring something unexpected, or uncontrollable to my drawing. Finding what one's expectation is or what means normal in cartoon reflects one's mindset. Such serendipity through creating collaborative art, I believe, helps the artist to know their self.

Figure 5
A Picture Drawn with Eyes-closed
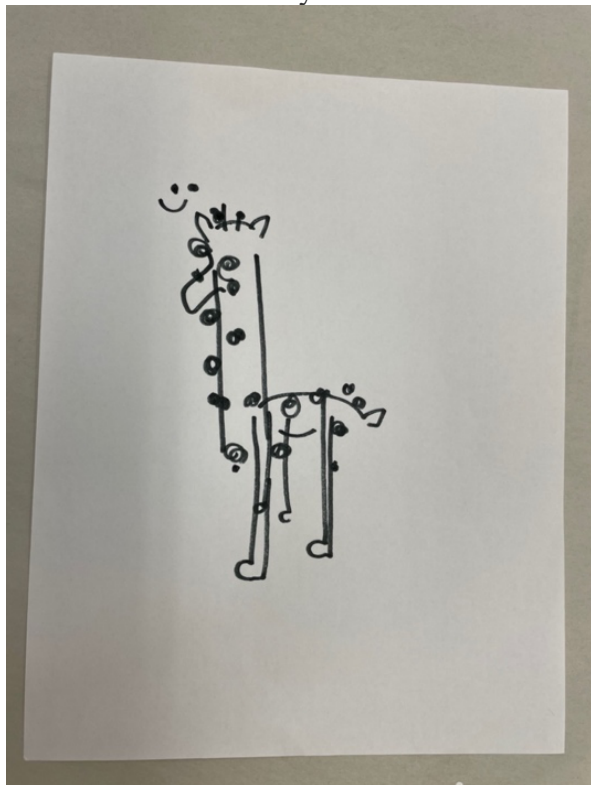
Note. The author intended to draw a giraffe

The three recipes of cartooning, spontaneous drawing, doodling with eyes-closed, and collaboration, encourage overcoming hesitation by drawing quickly, simply, and constantly. Beyond that, these activities

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helps the protagonist in *Noh* (Japanese dance-drama) performance titled "*Tokusa*," as (The Nohgaku Performers Association, n.d.). Iku is the love antagonist of the main character in the *Kabuki* play, *Sukeroku* (Waraku web editorial team, 2017; Weblio, n.d.). The visual pun here is that the face of good becomes the face of evil, when you flip the images (Waraku web editorial team, 2017).

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ultimately enhance transcultural understanding, bodily awareness, and self-discovery. The deliberate restrictions bring serendipity to help discover one's character, as well as developing art skills. Therefore, I suggest that Barry's making comics method can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool with beneficial implications for art education and for reflecting on one's identity.

Figure 6
A Picture of Collaborative Drawing

Note. A rabbit was drawn by the author, and classmates added another characters and backgrounds

Fictionalizing the Memory and Posthumanism

Adding to the transnationality and serendipity in cartooning, Barry's method aids in self-exploration by fictionalizing one's past, particularly the daily diary method (Barry, 2019). Her unique concept of autobifictionalography is reflected in this cartooning recipe. As Barry engaged with her memories in *One Hundred Demons*, this method allows people to engage with and reflect on their past by recreating their memories. This exercise is about writing and drawing in your diary, juxtaposing your near past (e.g. yesterday) and far past (e.g. ten years ago). The link between the two is yourself in the drawing doing the same action or pose. In the writing and cartooning process, some parts can be based on your memory, but for some aspects of the past you may have forgotten, you can make it up. Such mixture of fiction and nonfiction is the recreation of memories, as autobifictionalography is defined in the earlier section.

For example, I drew a diary about myself the day before in 2024, and I needed to look far back at myself in the same pose. Then, I remembered my childhood going back from school with a friend in 2008 (see Figure 7). The reason is that both memories have one thing in common: talking to a friend when we were going home. What happened in both years in the diary is based on my memory, and I vividly remember. However, I did not remember all of the details, such as what type of outfit we were wearing, and what the scenery looked like. So, I recreated my memory by adding details with my imagination. Thus, there are many nonfictional and fictional elements in my diary.

The daily diary method lets people envision their different or hidden "self." This is particularly significant because I believe that the daily diary practice allows for an exploration of time and space. In my case, I explored different times of my life from 12 years old to 28 years old, and different spaces, like past (in Japan) and current (in the United States). It was a reflection of my identity by asking many questions: how my mindset changed over fifteen years; how cultural differences impacted on my fashion or behavior; what smell and sound I was sensing in two different times and spaces; and why I remember them or not. I had this flow of questions and was able to draw smoothly about my past. However, some have a difficult time to practicing the daily diary method.

Figure 7
Example of Daily Diary Method
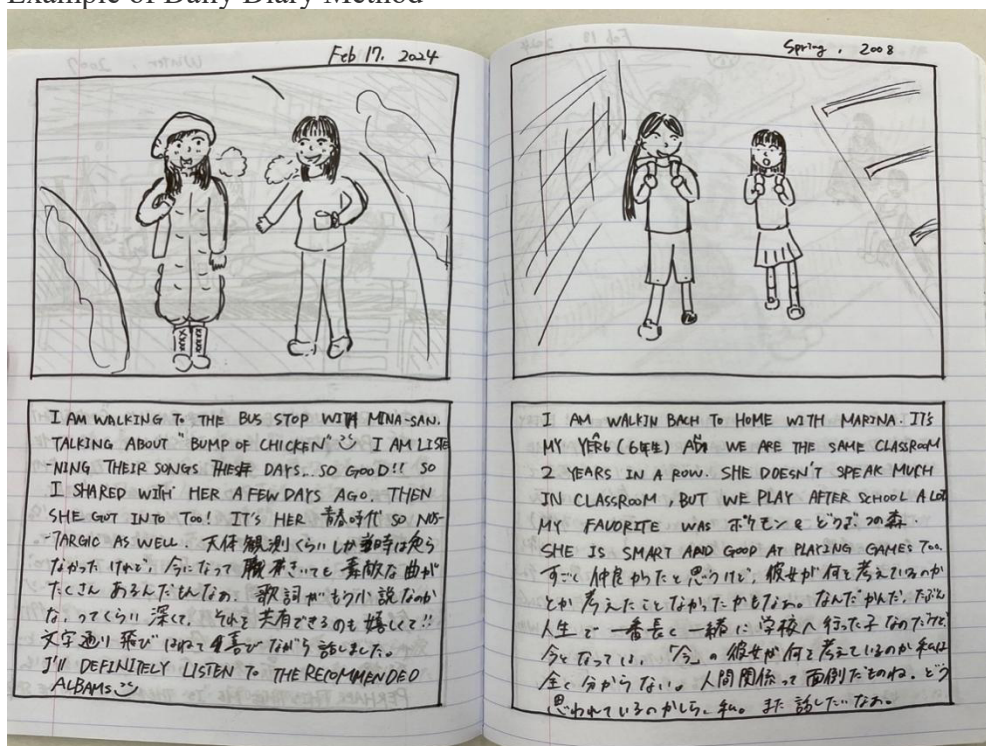
Note. The left page is the author and her colleague in 2024, and the right is the author with the same posture in 2008

Hil Malatino (2020) discussed how they found themselves by practicing Barry's daily diary. For them, it was a shocking experience that they cannot recollect anything from the day before. Malatino is a professor of gender and sexuality studies, and is consciously sensitive to listening and speaking to others. Despite their everyday careful attitude, however, their hands did not move for daily diaries. They described it as "this was about gender. … about gender nonconformance, ambiguity, and performative instability" (2020, p. 48). Malatino speculated his teenage memory; in their life, they were always exposed to strangers' judgment regarding gender. This experience subconsciously made them block out strangers' conversation. The daily diary helped them to uncover their unintentional self-protection apparatus they had been unaware of for years. Thus, self-explorations could be complex, yet the daily diary method helps people to move forward, or at least to begin, their journey.

Lastly, I suggest that Barry's making comics method has potential to serve as a pedagogical tool, particularly in relation to its posthumanistic methodology. Posthumanism is an idea that decenters human beings in the world, and treats them as one part of the flow of life (Barad 2007; Haraway 1985/1991). One can imagine an internet web—there is no subject or object. This perspective on subjectivity corresponds to the subjectivity explored in Barry's method, particularly with the concept of autobifictionalography. As

discussed in the previous paragraph, one's identity exists in flow of changes over time and space. In a way, subjectivity is constantly changing and not fixed, similar to a state of *becoming* (Barad, 2007). The concept of becoming in a New Materialist sense is coexistence and fusion of multiple phenomena and different possibilities (Barad, 2007). Translating phenomena and possibilities into fictions and nonfictions in a diary, its coexistence (autobifictionalography) is the becoming. Hence, in terms of the view towards subjectivity, Barry's method would be a great tool for better understanding posthumanism's complex idea.

Moreover, Barry's anti-perfectionist idea in cartooning resonates with the idea of relational subjectivity in posthuman philosophy. Human beings have developed the technology to achieve greater and greater exactness in art. As a result, in regard to drawings, it is easy to pursue the perfect line, especially with digital tools by Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, Barry does not let students use digital materials because they are designed with a perfectionist spirit that prevents people from making progress in a way that reflects their own creativity. There is no right or wrong line, according to Barry. All lines have their purpose. Figure 8 is my example of an original *mistake* yet somehow the lines work out well; one can see a rabbit character in the second panel (upper-right) that seems like it has a mustache, which was my unintended line. Yet, you can still see the rabbit character across the panel is the same figure in the story. To be against the perfect or planned lines in drawing sounds equivalent to being against the robotic performance which performs perfect action (S. Ridgeley, personal communication, April 9, 2024). I suggest that such non-perfect cartooning relates to the concept of relational subjectivity in posthuman philosophy, like there is no ultimate (perfect) self.

Figure 8
Example of Imperfect Drawings

Note. This is a 4-panel Comic, the second panel (upper-right) contains wrong lines, yet it is perfect as it is

Returning to my introduction as an otaku, I would like to finish this essay with *Ghost in the Shell* (Shirow, 1991), in respect of subjectivity discussion. This manga or anime are often framed as near-future,

dystopian, and cyborg science fiction narratives.[6] Needless to say, *Ghost in the Shell* is an extremely significant work, not only for its commercial success, but also in Comics Studies (Napier, 2001; Orbaugh, 2002). The main point relevant to my argument here is that the core theme of the narrative is the search for identity of the protagonist, whose body parts are almost entirely mechanical. The original author Shirow Masamune asks where a human subjectivity belongs, either body or ghost (soul) in the series.[7] If your body is almost entirely machine, does your personality still exist? Does your identity exist within a memory or mind? These philosophical questions are critical in the narrative, which also strongly relates to the subjectivity discussion of posthumanism. Therefore, it was particularly meaningful for me to consider the relationship between Barry's method, manga, and posthuman philosophy as they relate to the theme of self-exploration.

Conclusion and Implication

The paper thus has presented a thorough analysis of Lynda Barry's making comics philosophy, connecting it with broader scholarly discussions in Comics Studies, transnationality, and posthuman theories. I argue that Barry's comics drawing method (2019) is pedagogically valuable beyond art education, because it encourages us finding yourself and embracing your past. Particularly, the philosophy of autobifictionalography, introduced in *One Hundred Demons* (Barry, 2002), is the first key in its material and bodily awareness. The second discussion was about the problem of transnationality in Comics Studies, and serendipities by three recipes of Barry: spontaneous drawing, drawing with eyes-closed, collaborative exercise. These methods also enrich self-discovery. The third point was about fictionalizing one's past with the daily diary method, which let people recreate their unexplored personalities. Finally, I, as an otaku, discussed the idea of anti-perfectionist and relational subjectivity in Barry's idea with *Ghost in the Shell* (Shirow, 1991), which resonates with posthuman philosophy. Barry's method will benefit anyone, and people will enjoy finding new identities through drawing comics with her philosophy. Thus, I strongly recommend trying Barry's works, especially for teachers, practitioners, parents, or those who are feeling lost. To those who feel like me, "I wish I could draw"—your comics, stories, and yourselves *are* always with you, and in your body.

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6 There are multiple versions of manga, and its adaptation to anime, and live-action films for *Ghost in the Shell, but 1991 is the original.*

7 Strictly speaking, the concept of ghost is not clearly defined by Shirow. But he notes that a soul is the closest concept.

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