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Of Monsters and Mothers

Filipina American Identity and Maternal Legacies in Lynda J. Barry's One Hundred Demons

The late Filipino American author and cultural critic N. V. M. Gonzalez described the Filipino imagination as a slow yet tenacious “rhizomatous” growth working toward the “Filipinization of America” (Gonzalez and Campomanes 1987, 63).¹ Gonzalez’s optimism aside, “Filipinization” thus far has amounted to Filipinas magazine, words such as “boondocks” and “yo-yo,” and hip hop icons DJ Q-Bert and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz. However, unnoticed by most, one Filipino American artist has contributed greatly to this process, single-handedly redefining and influencing American popular culture for over twenty years. Lynda J. Barry, born in 1956, is best known for her syndicated alternative newspaper comic strip, *Ernie Pook’s Comeek*, and its high-spirited “gifted child” Marlys Mullen, and for her disturbing first novel, *Cruddy* (1999). Praised by *The Village Voice* as “one of the greatest cartoonists in the world,” Barry is heralded for developing both the alternative and the “wimmin’s” comics traditions (qtd. in Hempel 27 November 1988). Many of her fans are unaware, however, that Barry’s earliest cartoons include stories of her growing up a working-class, mixed-race Filipina in Seattle in the 1960s.² *One Hundred Demons*, a series of twenty-panel full-color comic strips published semi-monthly online at <Salon.com> from 7 April 2000 to 15 January 2001, is Barry’s return to a more personal, autobiographical art form.³

[*Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2004, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–26]
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The comics in *One Hundred Demons* are Barry's explorations of incidents and memories that trouble or haunt her—namely, her childhood and its manifold tragedies, large and small. Each cartoon showcases the hallmarks of her powerful storytelling aesthetic: Barry's deliberately “naive” graphic style complements the searingly candid musings of its young narrator and the often harsh subjects of the strips themselves. These darkly humorous and exquisitely rendered memories of coming of age meld family history and Filipino folktales and superstitions to adolescent angst and American popular culture; thematically, *One Hundred Demons* explores racial identity, and maternal and cultural legacies.

This essay discusses Lynda Barry's substantial but overlooked contributions to the growing body of “peminist”—Filipina American feminist—writings and to contemporary Filipino American cultural production in general.⁴ But first I will contextualize Barry's work within contemporary cartoon history and criticism as well as within the genre of Asian American mother/daughter writing.

“New” and “Wimmin's” Comix⁵

One of very few syndicated American female cartoonists, Lynda Barry is lauded for her signature storytelling and bold graphic style—what critic Bob Callahan deems her “brilliant narrative skills” (1991, 12–13). Stylistically Barry's work is seen as embodying the spirit of “New Comics” as well as “wimmin's,” or feminist, comics. “New Comics” describes comic art oppositional to the corporate-produced and syndicated comic strips such as *Spiderman* and *Garfield*, created by independent artists such as Art Spiegelman (*Maus I and II*), Los Bros Hernandez (*Love and Rockets*), and Roberta Gregory (*Naughty Bits*).⁶ Indeed, Spiegelman insists on the term “comix” to emphasize the “co-mixture” of text and graphics in this art form; he maintains that comix are twenty-first-century art—“graphic literature”—rather than just amusing cartoons about “funny animals” (1992). Callahan, in his introduction to *The New Comics Anthology* (which includes work by Barry), maintains that New Comics signal the shift from “entertainment to new pop art form”; furthermore, he notes the important contributions of women artists such as Barry to the genre of New Comics as a whole: strong autobiographical storytelling and an overtly feminist stance (1991, 12). Interestingly, Callahan maintains that the autobiographi-

cal writings in *The New Comics Anthology* best demonstrate comics as a “vital new branch of contemporary literature” (12).⁷

Barry is also regarded as a vanguard feminist or “wimmin’s” cartoonist for she helped to develop the genre’s hallmark, the autobiographical narrative. In the early 1970s American women cartoonists created their own artistic venues to counter the misogynistic underground comics scene of the period (R. Crumb, *Zap Comics*).⁸ Beginning with the foundational feminist cartoon collectives *Tits and Clits* and *Wimmin’s Comix*, wimmin’s comix have been characterized by a specifically feminist and autobiographical tone.⁹ Cartoonist and historian Trina Robbins notes: “Autobiography has since become a staple of comics drawn by women, and big chunks of women’s comix tend to be about the artist’s dysfunctional family, miserable childhood, fat thighs and boyfriend problems” (1999, 91). Cartoonist Diane Noomin, creator of *Didi Glitz* and editor of *Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art* (which includes work by Barry), maintains that wimmin’s comics manifest an “uncompromising vision reflecting a female perspective . . . frequently expressed in deeply felt, autobiographical narratives. Often the art graphically reflects inner turmoil” (Noomin 1991, 7). Indeed, in her introduction to Noomin’s *Twisted Sisters 2: Drawing the Line*, Susie Bright contends that this is the most important aspect of wimmin’s comics: “There is literally no place besides comix where you can find women speaking the truth and using their pictures to show you, in vivid detail, what it means to live your life outside of the stereotypes and delusions that we see on television, in shopping malls and at newsstands” (1995, 7).

Bright’s statement describes Barry’s achievement in *One Hundred Demons* exactly. The centering of the Filipina American perspective in mainstream online magazine such as *Salon.com* is very significant because it represents active resistance to the erasure and invisibility that has characterized the Filipino American experience in general.¹⁰ Claiming space and asserting voice is particularly important for American Pinays¹¹ for the following reasons: compounding mainstream American culture’s tiresome stereotyping of all Asian American women as passive, submissive “lotus blossoms” and/or exotic-erotic “dragon ladies” is the parallel erasure of Filipinas from the construction “Asian American women,” which is most often understood to signify solely women of Japanese or Chinese descent. Moreover, Filipino Americans continue to be marginalized within Asian

America itself as well as within the field of Asian American cultural studies, and this marginalization complicates further the struggles of Filipinas to be acknowledged beyond the roles of mothers/daughters in cultural nationalist Filipino America. In the new millennium, Filipina Americans struggle to assert a Pinay presence—we are just beginning to develop our own peminisms to transcend the limited models of mainstream feminism, Asian American cultural nationalism, and even Asian American feminism, which have often ignored and/or marginalized us. Contemporary Filipina American cultural productions testify to these complicated realities and must be regarded as tremendous acts of courage, defiance, and love.

Robert G. Lee, in *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, describes how cartoons have been used historically in mainstream media to promulgate stereotypes of and thus otherize all Asians. Read against this history, Barry's re-presenting Filipina America in *One Hundred Demons* is truly oppositional. Far from being merely quirky stories about adolescent angst, *One Hundred Demons* is a peminist act of re-visioning that offers us new ways of theorizing and being. In what follows, I analyze the themes of identity and maternal legacies in the cartoons entitled *The Aswang* and *Girlness* and delineate Barry's unique contributions to Asian American women's writing, to peminism, and to the Filipinization of America itself.¹²

The Mother/Daughter Theme in Contemporary Asian American Women's Writing

"Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Mother/daughter stories often present analyses of gender identity and conflict; what U.S. third world feminist writers have added to this genre is the delineation of how women of color of all generations must negotiate not only sexism in American society but its simultaneous intertwining with racism, classism, heterosexism, and imperialism. Lynda Barry, like many other Asian American women writers (for example, M. Evelina Galang, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Maxine Hong Kingston), retells and reworks childhood memories and Filipino folktales in order to discover her history and thus herself. In retelling the stories of her mother and *lola* (grandmother), and analyzing her very different relationships with both of them,

she constructs a hybrid new identity, consciously deciding which aspects she will claim and which she must discard. The full-color graphics of *One Hundred Demons* are an integral part of this process of self-creation: Barry's comics enable the reader literally to "see" Barry's world as she does and thus enter it even more fully.¹³ Indeed, while Barry's narrative compels us to "read" further, the striking visual contrast of Lynda to her mother and *lola* throughout her cartoons underscores the distances she, as a red-haired, fair-skinned mestiza in America, must travel in order to find herself and to find her way back to her family.¹⁴

Wendy Ho, in *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*, writes that Asian American mother/daughter storytelling is an urgent political and communal act that goes far beyond "purely personal or psychological therapy work." She contends that "recovering each other's stories is a form of personal and communal struggle and agency. . . . [The stories themselves offer] inventive and eclectic strategies for survival. Necessity—not privilege—requires the reformation of identity, family, culture and community in [our] daily lives" (1999, 212, 238).¹⁵ While Ho focuses on Chinese American writers Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Fae Myenne Ng, her analysis offers important insights into the mother/daughter writing of all Asian American women writers. For example, the following passage neatly describes the major themes Barry explores in *One Hundred Demons*:

[T]he immigrant mothers' experiences in these writers' stories are significantly embedded in [Asian] traditions and ways of being and thinking, which have been further dislocated and relocated—culturally, geopolitically and historically—in the U.S. Sadly, many of the daughters do not understand the value of this legacy: They have lost or devalued the meanings of their mothers' stories in their Anglo-American translations. Kingston, Tan and Ng portray how difficult it is for daughters and mothers situated in alienating societal structures to reclaim a significant bond with one another and to meaningfully share their conflicted experiences and stories. The painful distances and tensions between their private communication and its comprehensions are intimately intertwined with the social-political world in which their personal dialogue and relationships are situated. Despite the difficulties, these communications are vital to their daughters' material and social-emotional survival in the United States. (Ho 1999, 41–42)

This passage underscores the centrality of mother/daughter storytelling to the well-being of all Asian American women. Likewise, in addition to exploring the generational and cultural tensions between immigrant mothers and their Americanized daughters, in *One Hundred Demons* Barry expands the idea of “alienating societal structures” to her mother’s stories of life back home in the Philippines, particularly during World War II, and how this horrifying chapter continues to haunt and traumatize her family. Barry presents Pinay identity formation as an amalgam of the cultural and familial inheritances of genes, language, stories, and foods but also of the trauma of war and its aftermath, as well as the emotional effects of imperialism, migration and exile, and assimilation—themes that have great resonance for Filipino Americans because of our being subjected to U.S. imperialism and neocolonialism since the 1890s.

One Hundred Demons, then, is one Pinay’s representation of her childhood demons; nevertheless, because of its emphasis on probing the sense of alienation and deracination that many Filipino Americans experience, it is also a form of decolonization. Resisting cultural imperialism’s call to reject and forget Filipino history and culture, Lynda’s struggle to reclaim her mother and her mother’s stories is a powerful statement of Pinay pride. Moreover, Lynda’s estrangement from her mother culturally, physically, and emotionally fuels her desire to understand her mother’s history and culture, and how they have affected their mother/daughter relationship. Thus delving into the psyches of her foremothers, Barry recenters Filipino American women’s life stories and experiences as crucial to understanding the past’s exponential repercussions for future generations.

Barry’s unflinching insistence on exploring the tangled realities of her lived experiences and those of her foremothers in *One Hundred Demons* echoes the third world feminist exploration of the borderland space posited by Gloria Anzaldúa and many other contemporary U.S. feminists of color.¹⁶ Anzaldúa maintains that “mestiza consciousness” offers us new ways of being that transcend the oppositional forces/narratives that would divide us: “The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (1987, 79). Likewise, Barry’s focus on identity and maternal legacies links her to other American-born Filipina writers such as Virginia Cerenio and

M. Evelina Galang. Barry plumbs and maps the terrain of the peminist space, a political stance she herself espouses:

You asked if I consider myself to be a feminist, peminist/pinayist etc. And to this I say, HELL YES! THAT AND MORE! Actually I'm basically a hermit who loves to draw pictures and write stories! I am on the side of the people! I am against the MAN! I don't know if you have ever seen my picture but I look like the most white middle-aged old lady hippie possible. Kind of a cross between Granny Clampett and The Cowardly Lion. It's a weird way to be Filipina! My mom is half white. My dad is a whiter shade of pale. But N'ako! My Lola is from Ilo-Ilo, naman! She is very matapang [brave]! She will even kill the aswang! And I was raised on adobo and lumpia! (2001)

The Aswang

The *Aswang* was originally published on 20 October 2000 at <Salon.com>. In this cartoon Barry brings a very esoteric Filipino folktale into the mainstream by revising it in a distinctly peminist way: she utilizes the folktale metaphorically to describe and also symbolize the generations of mother/daughter estrangement in her own family.¹⁷

In Tagalog (Pilipino) *aswang* means “demon or ghost,” but it most often refers to a specific kind of monster: a strikingly beautiful woman during the day (or in Barry’s telling, a dog); at night the *aswang* is transformed into a malevolent vampire of sorts, who cuts herself in half at the waist (leaving her lower half hidden in the trees) to search for an unsuspecting pregnant woman from whom she can suck out the liver of the unborn child with her long, needle-like tongue.¹⁸ This tale is used to keep children in line, much like the Mexican folktale of “La Llorona,” as Barry explained in an e-mail:

My version of the Aswang tale is the version I learned from several of my female relatives. My grandma, her sister, a second cousin, you know how the aswang gets brought up all the time in so many situations! They added or left things out depending on what lesson they were trying to teach us. Once Grandma told me the aswang was coming for me because I left my clothes on the floor! (2001)

The comic begins with preteen Lynda’s recalling the complicated folktale

told by her grandmother; panels 2–8 highlight Lynda’s struggle to understand the *aswang*. Throughout the comic Lynda’s grandma models for her the process of reinvention by retelling the *aswang* story to fit her purposes. Barry then follows her lead as a cartoonist by using the *aswang* tale as a jumping off point to discuss the dislocations between mothers and daughters in her family; moreover, she reimagines the *aswang* symbolically as the monster of that estrangement. Indeed, the graphic element of this online comic—again, the arresting visual contrast between Lynda and her mother and grandmother—represents and reinforces the cultural, physical, and emotional distances between these women; moreover, it underscores both the urgency of the author’s need to explore this distance, as well as the poignancy of child Lynda’s struggle to comprehend this “complicated monster.” This same theme of estrangement/alienation is explored throughout *One Hundred Demons*.

Lynda is fascinated by the *aswang* tale, while her mother is afraid of it. In panel 10 Lynda blithely describes her fear of her “unpredictable and quite violent” mother, and she shares that her grandma “protects” her from her mother indirectly. Lynda then relates that as a child she could understand monsters much better than people (11). She notes that monsters “usually had a reason for being the way they were. . . . [They] hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them” (11–12) [Figure 1]. This implies that Lynda understands that monsters are not inherently evil or bad but are victims of circumstance and, because the pictures and narrative here strongly link “monsters” to Lynda’s mother, Barry thus establishes the search for that transformative “something” as the goal of the comic.

Clearly Lynda’s interest in the *aswang* story binds her and her grandmother more closely together; at the same time it alienates them both from Lynda’s mother. The characters’ dialogue in panels 9–12 alludes to the fact that the *aswang* story upsets Lynda’s mother—and Grandma uses the story to taunt her daughter. In fact, in panel 12 Grandma gleefully informs Lynda that the *aswang* has followed Lynda’s mother from the Philippines to the United States despite her mother’s wish to escape it. In this way the *aswang* tale itself symbolizes and becomes the medium by which the cycle of maternal estrangement is reactivated on U.S. soil; in its very retelling the mother/daughter estrangement and granddaughter/grandma bonding are reinforced. Thus the *aswang* tale itself here describes, mirrors, and enables this cycle of maternal estrangement; more important, Barry’s cartoon

“The Aswang” from One Hundred Demons. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 1: Panel 12 from “The Aswang”

rendering of the folktale and its relation to her family delineates how all three women became complicit in this debilitating system.

Barry's *aswang* is a "demon" with multiple significations: it symbolizes her maternal history, the fractured female relationships in her family, and the replication of this troubling system through four generations: how grandmas, like the *aswang* herself, suck the life from their own daughters by bonding with and thus "stealing" their granddaughters' affection away from their own mothers. The next six panels (13–18) explore further this cycle of generational mother/daughter estrangement. Panel 13 describes Grandma's disinterest in and detachment from her own daughter as well as her over-investment in Lynda, while 14 underscores how the cycle of mother/daughter estrangement is already in place between Lynda and her mom: "It broke my heart that she didn't seem to like me much." Indeed, Lynda's pain is magnified as she witnesses both her grandmother's obvious anguish at the mention of her mother and her own mother's futile attempts to attract Grandma's attention. For example, panels 15–16 show Lynda's *lola* turning away as Lynda's mother happily reminisces about her grandma. Grandma can't bear to remember her own estrangement from her own daughter and mother, but she is compelled to enact the same cycle with her own granddaughter. When Lynda inquires about her mother as a child, Grandma describes her daughter in dismissive, derogatory terms, well aware that she is listening: "Your mommy? Always crying! Always scardy-scardy! Always following me everywhere! N'ako! She make me mad!" (15). Grandma obviously intends this to hurt her daughter, and with this exchange Lynda gains compassion for her mother, realizing that she too suffered from the same maternal neglect. The text of panel 16 states: "The histories of vampire and people are not so different, really. How many of us can honestly see our own reflection?" It implies that Lynda's mother and grandmother cannot recognize nor acknowledge their active roles in the perpetuation of a system that has harmed four generations of their family. Moreover, the text's linking vampires/monsters and mothers/daughters implies that the power of this system of maternal estrangement is inescapable and unstoppable.

Barry writes in panel 17: "In the exposing light of day how many of our dark truths would cause us to feel an agony we could not endure? Even the most inexperienced vampires know they must avoid the sun at all costs." Again, the text alludes to how the *aswang* (the maternal estrangement)

maintains itself: the graphic here shows the now very hurt Grandma pushing Lynda away for asking about her mother, thus the wounding of the women across three generations is complete. Now the *aswang* awaits the emergence of the next generation (Lynda's children) to further aggrandize its power.

In 18 Lynda's mom tells her that having kids is "like hell": "Kids are a punishment." The graphic shows Grandma putting her arm around Lynda and laughing at her daughter's words, agreeing with her daughter that kids are hell, while at the same time reasserting her preference for her granddaughter. Grandma reinforces her alliance with Lynda as well as her estrangement from Lynda's mom, furthering the cycle of maternal estrangement between the generations. The cyclical nature of emotional pain experienced and inflicted by the adults reinforces the sense of mother/daughter struggle; ironically Lynda's love for both women only fuels this debilitating cycle as it draws her further in: "I loved them both; it was in my blood to love them."

Barry underscores the continuing presence of the *aswang* for the women in her family when Grandma tells Lynda that television pictures flicker because the *aswang* is landing on its antennae (19). Like the women in Lynda's family, the *aswang* has become Americanized; she is resourceful, resilient, adaptable. The panel's dialogue shows Grandma exclaiming, "Ha-la! La-goot-ka-na. [Ah ha! You're done for!] . . . The *aswang* is here!" But Lynda, unlike her mother, never doubts the *aswang*'s presence; she's more interested in knowing where the *aswang* came from, why and how she got there. The graphic shows the child Lynda asking, "What turned her into an *aswang*, seriously?" (19). The adult Lynda, like the child in the comic, is still trying to figure out this tale, and in turn, her maternal relationships; graphically Barry emphasizes Lynda's place in this cycle, and the increasing urgency of Lynda's solving the mystery of the *aswang* in the following way: now the adult Lynda resembles her mother and grandma, for she shares their exact same hairstyle from earlier in the comic. This detail portends that the adult Lynda is compelled by circumstance and history to assume her place in this cycle (as granddaughter, daughter, and now, possibly, mother).

Moreover, the gravity of Lynda's quest to understand the *aswang* is underscored in the comic's final panel, where she asks, "Who was the first *aswang* of the world? I'm 44 years old but I still don't know the answer. I

never did have children. There must be a better way to fight vampires but I just couldn't think of it in time" (20). Here Barry reflects upon her decision to remain childless, and upon art as "the only way [she] know[s] how to fight" vampires/monsters—the only way she knows to stop the cycle of maternal estrangement and the harm it has visited upon the women in her family. Barry centralizes cartooning as an important way to disentangle, theorize, and address this conflict; moreover, she revisits the classic dilemma of the American women's artist novel—being forced to choose between the role of artist or the role of mother/wife—by commenting on her own creative process and reasons for drawing herself drawing.¹⁹ Barry suggests that choosing art (rejecting motherhood) prevents from hurting both her own foremothers and potential offspring; the *aswang* here is transformed into her artistic muse. Yet ironically Barry's depiction of herself as a childless, 44-year-old cartoonist closely resembles the *aswang* itself: detached from her body/reproductive capacity, she is all mind/artistic production. In essence Lynda becomes the *aswang*, an "unnatural" (non-reproductive) being "preying" on mother/ daughter pairs to feed her art. Similarly, Lynda "preys" on the cycle of maternal estrangement itself, laying it bare to learn of its power and then conquer it, but curiously, the *aswang* does not "die." As the subject of this cyber comic, it is rhizomatically reborn, and it lives on in the reader's imagination.

The *Aswang's* final panel implies that stopping this cycle of estrangement demanded Lynda's rejecting motherhood for the mothering of art, yet she is not sure she has made the right choice. Lynda's mother told her that children were a "punishment"; Lynda herself is childless but still has doubts: "There must be a better way to fight vampires but I couldn't think of it in time" (20). In short, did she escape "punishment"—or merely punish herself? Surely now the *aswang* can't prey on her and her "kids," but did Lynda "win" all the same?

In sum, *The Aswang* explores, in a very innovative format, the replication of mother/daughter trauma in Filipino American families, and how Pinay daughters, far removed from language, culture, and experiences of their immigrant mothers, must negotiate cultural and generational alienation by creating new methodologies for understanding. Lynda inherits the story of the *aswang* from her *lola*, and in it she finds a way to decipher the legacies of emotional distance and pain in her own family. *Girlness*, which I discuss below, further develops these themes.

Girlness

Girlness, published 25 August 2000 at <Salon.com>, details Barry's struggle to understand her childhood gendering as a tomboy by default—a thwarted “girlish girl.” These twenty panels offer a deft deconstruction of Filipina American girlhood as mitigated through class and race, family history, and maternal legacy. Like *The Aswang*, this comic explores Lynda's complicated, tenuous relationship with her mother. In these panels Lynda muses that her mother's debilitating angst and negativity are rooted to her desperate childhood in the Philippines during World War II. Again, as in *The Aswang*, Barry underscores that family history/trauma has a cumulative effect on subsequent generations, affecting all aspects of identity formation and family relationships. In this example it results in Lynda's mother's inability to be a “momish mom,” and her denial of Lynda's desire to be a “girlish girl.”

In the twenty-first century, the field of girls' studies is still very new; consequently studies of the lives of girls of color are scarce.²⁰ Sherrie Inness, in the introduction to *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Culture*, writes, “Too often girls' culture is shunted aside by scholars as less significant or less important than the study of adult women's issues, but girls' culture is what helps to create not just an individual woman but all women in our society” (1998, 11). Barry's cartoon explorations of how working-class girls of color become women, and how the category of “girl” is constructed through simultaneous articulations of race and class identity, are therefore very significant. For example, in panels 3–4 Barry re-creates graphically the gendered terrain of her childhood: the “us vs. them” dichotomy between short-haired, working-class tomboys of color in shorts and slacks versus mostly white middle-class “girlish girls” with long hair, nice dresses, nicer houses, and lots of toys. These strongly contrasting panels emphasize that even little girls understand fundamentally how gender is very much constructed by race and class. Similarly panel 5 underscores how class privilege signified by consumerism is central to constructions of American “girlness”: the child Lynda understands that acquisition of consumer goods equals middle-class femininity. The poignant graphic of a hopeful Lynda trying to trade an empty Band-Aid box for a rich girl's pretty doll says volumes, as does

panel 6, where Barry notes that even the girlish girls' dolls are outfitted with the same accouterments of privilege as their owners.

Panel 7 introduces Lynda's mom; she is a surprising and jarring contrast to her daughter. Lynda looks white, has freckles, and short, coarse curly red hair, while her Pinay mom has dark skin, "long silky black hair and sparkle jewelry and manicured nails. . . . She love[d] pretty clothes and perfume." Clearly Lynda's mother indulges her own desire for "girlness" through conventional "feminine" dress and proper consumption of gendered consumer goods—the adult equivalents of Lynda's "clothes, hair, and toys." In fact, Lynda's mother indulges her passion for girlness as much as she disallows the same for her own daughter: the graphic here shows Lynda's mother brushing her long flowing locks, with Lynda looking on admiringly. When Lynda asks if she can grow out her own hair, her mother says "no" because Lynda's hair "would look like hell." This same mean-spirited disparagement of Lynda's appearance and denial of her "girlness" is also evident in panel 15.

The graphic in panel 8 highlights Lynda's mother's fury when she sees little rich girls with girlish accessories, and Lynda inherits this same feeling: "A furious envy exploded inside." But Lynda rightly recognizes this fury as envy: her mother's remembering her own denial as a child compounds Lynda's envy of her girlish mom and of the little girls who have what she does not (9). In trying to comprehend her mother's attitudes and actions, Lynda realizes that her mother's envy is rooted in her childhood deprivation during World War II. The graphic in panel 9 shows how Lynda's mother denies her a Barbie doll because she didn't have one during the war. Panel 10 describes Lynda's mother's tragic family history: a mestiza whose American father was killed before the outbreak of World War II in the Philippines, Lynda's mother spent her childhood in "hiding, living in cemeteries [sic], and being chased out of every village [she] came too." Remembering these horrible circumstances, and seemingly unable to escape them, Lynda's mother is overcome, resentfully claiming that her daughter doesn't appreciate sacrifices made for her, doesn't appreciate what she has: Lynda has it "so damn easy." While Lynda's mom's strong emotions here exemplify guilt-inducing Filipino parenting that expects girls to be grateful, deferent, and self-denigrating, they also demonstrate the lingering effects of post-World War II survivor guilt and trauma, echoing Vladek's outbursts against Artie in Spiegelman's *Maus*. Thus

Lynda's childhood replicates her mother's: both are marked by trauma, deprivation, and fatherlessness.

It is not surprising that, given the immense impact of the war on Lynda's mother's life and psyche, and upon their mother/daughter relationship, Lynda wonders if the two of them would be different if the war had not happened: "Would she be able to be a more momish mom if the war had never happened? Would I have been a more girlish girl? Or would we have turned out the way we were anyway?" (11). This is the crux of the comic: how much their relationship is just personality, character, circumstance? Given the legacy of wartime deprivation and trauma, is Lynda's mother's denial of her desire for girlness merely a way of shielding her daughter from want and pain, or does it indicate that her mother was not nurtured in her childhood and is thus incapable of offering nurturing to her own daughter? How will this legacy affect Lynda? Can she ever escape it?

In a very interesting plot twist, Barry, in the next panel, introduces Mariko, a mixed race Mexican and Japanese American beauty and the only girl on Lynda's street with "girlness" (12). As Barry notes in the comic, historical forces placed Lynda's and Mariko's moms on different sides during World War II, yet they share similarly rigid ideologies about forcing girlness upon their daughters. Her juxtaposition of Filipina and Japanese American mothers/daughters is significant given the contentious history between these communities since the occupation; this history also undergirds the anti-Filipino discrimination at which Barry hints in panel 13.²¹

Mariko's mom is a homemaker, unlike the other mothers on the street, which indicates Mariko's class privilege (13). Moreover, it is clear from the graphic in this panel that Mariko's mother doesn't like Lynda (she won't allow Mariko to let Lynda play with her toys), which further underscores the inter-ethnic tensions between their families. Panel 14 emphasizes the irony of Lynda's and Mariko's respective genderings: "Our moms had both been in the same war but they had daughters who were complete opposites." The graphic portrays Mariko crying when she dirties her tennis shoes, an everyday occurrence with Lynda. When Lynda implies that dirt is not a tragedy, Mariko's ominous reply, "You don't know my mom," speaks volumes.

In panel 15 Lynda asks: "Which is worse? Girlness that was insisted upon or girlness that was forbidden? Frilly clothes you couldn't play in or ratty clothes you were ashamed of? Her mom or my mom?" [Figure 2].

"Girlness" from One Hundred Demons. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 2: Panel from "Girlness"

Barry suggests that maternal enforcement of narrowly defined gender identities hurts both Lynda and Mariko because it denies them the chance to construct their own versions of girliness; in this way she underscores the disquieting reality that girls are disempowered not only by patriarchy and racism but by maternal repression and denigration. For example, the comic shows Lynda's mom insulting and denying her. Lynda asks for a pink and purple shirt, to which her mom replies: "So you can look like a corpse? I'm the one who has to look at you, you know." A sign in the background here announces, "Back to school hell"; meanwhile, the resigned Lynda replies, "Never mind," signaling her familiarity with being denied.

The remainder of the comic describes how the adult Lynda revisits and resolves these complicated memories and issues when she hosts a visiting teenager, Norabelle, with whom she shares a love of Super Monkey Head (16).²² Through Norabelle Lynda learns to nurture her inner girlish girl and to move beyond the internalized self-denial she learned from her mother. Panel 17 chronicles Lynda's shopping spree for Norabelle and her transformation into the indulgent mother she never had. The detailed graphics describing each purchase indicate Lynda's reveling in the teen consumerism denied her. Moreover, Lynda is fascinated by Norabelle's distinct "girlness," of which she writes: "If you could have taken me and Mariko and mixed us together, stirring until our mothers dissolved, you would have gotten Norabelle, a true Powerpuff Girl" (emphasis added, 18). Of note is Lynda's valorization of a hybrid femininity which transcends that imposed by mothers: her ascribing to Norabelle attributes of the feisty superheroes emphasizes the Powerpuff's signification of a more empowering, androgynous girlness.²³ Additionally, Barry specifically draws upon cartoon-based icons of girlhood in this comic, rejecting the more conventional white American girl icon of Barbie; her juxtaposition of preteen girls' pop cultures also suggests a hybrid girlness. For example, she links Hello Kitty, a two-dimensional cartoon cat who lacks a mouth and is usually dressed in pink or red, to the animated, aggressive Powerpuff Girls, who make ample use of their voices and superhero skills, and dress in the more androgynous colors of blue, green, and purple.

Norabelle's suggestion that Lynda buy herself a package of Super Monkey Head stationery sends Lynda reeling: "I paced around the store holding a little box of Japanese stationery that brought back such painful memories I had to put it back. It was too frivolous, too girlish, too late." In

the graphic we see her thinking, “My mom would scream” (19). But Lynda’s young visitor breaks the spell of girlhood pain and denial here: she informs Lynda that “Super Monkey Head doesn’t have an age limit. It’s for everybody.” The previous panels showed how Lynda was taught to stifle her desires, thus it is second nature to deny herself girlish things. Norabelle gives her permission to want and to have them. The final panel of the comic illustrates Lynda’s growth and healing. Norabelle has taught her that “the war is over, and that it’s never too late for Super Monkey Head and her pals” (20). Barry’s using the phrase “the war is over” is very important here: with it she intertwines the war between tomboys versus girlish girls, the war between the child Lynda and her mother, and of course, the legacy of World War II itself, thus underscoring the devastating and deeply resonating kinds of pain that are passed from generation to generation.²⁴ In short, the comic teaches us that it is never too late to change how we think and act, even if those patterns are rooted in our childhoods. Curiously the resolving of mother/daughter issues here occurs not between Lynda and her mother but through the substitution of Norabelle as generous, loving mother, needy Lynda, and indulged daughter all at once. Likewise, this experience allows Lynda herself to be the “momish mom” she never had as well as the “girlish girl” she was taught to deny: Norabelle becomes Lynda’s substitute child *and* her indulgent momish mom at the same time. The comic as a whole can be read as a thank you to Norabelle, as the graphic in panel 20 demonstrates. It depicts Lynda’s letter on Super Monkey Head stationery: “Dear Norabelle: Thanks so much for helping me pick this stationery! It means so much to me. Someday I’ll tell you why.” Barry’s autobiographical comic honors her own experience as it honors Norabelle’s role in her healing; and in its unfolding this cartoon brings healing to its creator *and* its readers as well.

Girlness presents a number of key issues: the maternal legacy of rigid gender expectations and enforcement, the legacy of war as survivor guilt and psychological trauma passed on to the next generation, and most curiously, the acquisition of consumer goods to signify healing aspects of the denied self. Reading beyond the seemingly consumerist focus of *Girlness* we can discern Barry’s grappling with the complex terrain of the Pinay borderlands. Lynda’s beginning to understand her childhood, her mother’s attitudes and actions, and their conflicted mother/daughter relationship as a legacy of the unspeakable horrors of war models for us

the proactive, conscious re-visioning of the past (as in *The Aswang*) and gives us hope that change is possible—that we are not doomed to repeat the past.

Conclusion

In “The Tragic Sense of Filipino History,” Filipino American novelist Peter Bacho maintains that “the sorrow and downright tragedy of Filipino history have long been the main components of the engine that drives Filipino literature” (1997, 1). Reflecting upon the changing face of multicultural America and the relative class privilege that characterizes post-1965 Filipino immigrants, Bacho poses the question: “How will these later, less hostile conditions affect the literature they produce? What will these new, younger voices say?” (8). Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons* strongly counters Bacho’s concern that newer Filipino American writing, exemplifying different “gender-based, generational and geographical insights” than its predecessors (for example, Carlos Bulosan and Bienvendio Santos), might have lost its oppositional and resistant incisiveness (9).

Indeed, situating Lynda Barry’s work in the canon of Filipino American literature has important implications for both Filipino American and Asian American literary and cultural studies. Consideration of her comics enables important bridges to be made across what have been regarded as unrelated, disparate fields as well as the further complication of the fields of Asian American women’s and graphic literatures themselves: for example, the broadening of the genre of Filipino American writing by American-born Pinays who espouse a distinctly feminist sensibility; the expanding of the field of Asian American women’s writing, particularly about grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, family history, and cultural legacy; and the stretching of wimmin’s comix and New Comics to include Asian American artists. In short, Barry’s art provides a new and exciting terrain from which to theorize the Pinay experience in America and encourages our looking to newer theoretical possibilities inherent within less mainstream Filipina American cultural productions (for example, e-zines such as Sabrina Margarita Alcantara Tan’s *Bamboo Girl*).

Moreover, Barry’s comics have much to offer their readers. Wendy Ho notes that in Asian American mother/daughter stories:

[T]here is a strong desire on the part of the mother-daughter pairs to reclaim one another's repressed stories and voices—to break, in acts of memory and language, the disciplining injunctions to silence and set the records straight about their realities. By attending to these women's talk story practices, a reader explores more nuanced understandings about the diverse ways women perceive and access the world they inhabit; that is, how they pursue, acquire, and express knowledge derived from their specific positionings. . . . The recovery and reconstruction of the narratives of self and the struggles between mothers and daughters can provide vital entry into complex individual lives as well as into an ongoing, collective history of women and social communities; a history that criss-crosses and stitches together diverse generations, cultures, languages, classes, nations and peoples. (1999, 235, 238)

This certainly applies to both *The Aswang* and *Girlness* due to their emphases on understanding and healing relationships between women through storytelling. Barry's work is pertinent and timely because it gives voice to a specific perspective vastly underrepresented in Asian American cultural and women's studies as well as mainstream feminist studies. Furthermore, these mother/daughter comics offer the reader a complex, self-reflexive, unflinching example of how Filipina Americans make meaning of our lives—how we theorize and thus claim our own experiences in a unique way. Moreover, Barry's explorations of the complexities of the Pinay experience in America underscore the significance of all female relationships, no matter how tenuous or difficult.

Most important, *The Aswang* and *Girlness*, in addition to all the other comics in the *One Hundred Demons* series, offer significant contributions to the field of U.S. third world women's studies or feminisms of color. Barry's feminist explorations of identity and cultural legacy through the reclaiming of Filipina American women's voices and explicating of maternal legacies are comic portrayals of the Pinay mestiza consciousness in action. Like Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Barry leaves much of her transliterated Tagalog untranslated, forcing the non-Tagalog reader to enter her borderlands and thus experience firsthand the tensions and negotiations that characterize the immigrant Filipina American reality.

Comics are an inherently postmodern art form; however, like most writing by U.S. women of color, Barry's comics value multiplicity while resisting alienation. Indeed, Barry's work shows how the process of

creating and engaging with art heals both the author and reader. Through her cartoons Barry remembers and honors her own experiences, as well as the realities of her mother and grandmother, Mariko, Norabelle, and all the girls in her neighborhood, offering us a model of understanding and compassion. Her comics thus share the womanist impulse of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, which, through the metaphor of returning, honors the neighborhood girls who, unlike the author, were unable to leave, and to tell their stories publicly. In this way Lynda Barry reconfigures cartooning as both political and necessary for survival, underscoring the power of storytelling in all its forms to remember, to theorize, and thus to transform our worlds, especially the worlds of those most often forgotten and dismissed.

In "The Power of Culture" Lisa Lowe writes:

Alternative cultural forms and practices do not offer havens of resolution but are rather often eloquent descriptions of the ways in which the law, labor exploitation, racialization, and gendering work to prohibit alternatives. Some cultural forms succeed in making it possible to live and inhabit alternatives in the encounter with those prohibitions; some permit us to imagine what we have still yet to live. (1998, 19)

One Hundred Demons accomplishes both: it shows us the sometimes harrowing experience of growing up Pinay in America, but at the same time models for us ways to revisit our pasts and reimagine our futures. Barry discontinued *One Hundred Demons* at <Salon.com>, yet the popularity of the print version of *One Hundred Demons* and its burgeoning critical acclaim are testaments to Barry's comix genius and rhizomatic ambitions. Through her comix the further Filipinization and peminization of American culture are all but assured.

NOTES

Maraming salamat po to: Lynda Barry for her swift response to my questions and for permission to reproduce her work for this article; Cathy Quinones for sending me the link to *The Aswang* when it first appeared; Eloisa de Jesús (my mom) for translating Barry's transliterated Tagalog; and Karen Kuo for commenting on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Furthermore, Gonzalez and Campomanes note: "What has been emerging as Filipino American literature is an egress through the cultural soil of East and West, that rhizomatous growth on an Americanized tropical soil and later, on American earth itself. . . . True to its rhizomatous nature, the Filipino imagina-

tion may be expected to keep on testing the American soil for spots where more of its rootstalks can break through. Although there is no indication of change in the cultural weather, roots in the nature of things are not so much a fact of life as rootedness itself” (1997, 68, 73).

2. Interestingly, Barry initially drew Maryls Mullen as a Filipina, as is evident in the comic *Fine Dining* in Barry’s compilation *The Greatest of Marlys*, (2000c, 6). *Dinuguan* and *bagoong* are particularly redolent Filipino foods. Barry decided not to develop this aspect further in *Ernie Pook’s Comeek*. Moreover, Barry’s *My Uncle Vinnie*, from *Everything in the World*, was the first to feature her extended Filipino family and her use of transliterated Tagalog (Pilipino) (1986, 47–49). Barry’s work in *One Hundred Demons* is very reminiscent of this comic.
3. Barry has since published these cartoons in a collection of the same name (2000d). This essay refers to the original, twenty-panel (five pages, four panels per page) full-color comics as they appeared originally in *Salon.com*. My close readings of Barry’s work below refer to each cartoon as numbered consecutively 1–20.
4. “Peminist” describes Filipina American feminist thought, with the “p” signifying specifically “Pinay/Pilipina.” Some Filipina American critics prefer the term “Pinayism” or “Pinay studies” to describe Filipina American feminist theorizing; nevertheless, all of these terms describe Filipina American struggles against racism, sexism, imperialism, and homophobia, and for decolonization, consciousness, and liberation; in this way, peminism shares much with womanism, feminisms of color, and U.S. third world feminisms. I prefer the term “peminist” because it signifies both an assertion of a specifically Filipina American standpoint as well as a radical repudiation of hegemonic white feminism. For more information, see my forthcoming anthology *Pinay Power: Peminist Critical Theory* (2005), Routledge Press.
5. In *A Century of Women Cartoonists* (1993), cartoonist and historian Trina Robbins notes: “In 1992, with issue #17, *Wimmen’s Comix* officially removed the “men” from its name and became *Wimmin’s Comix*” (147).
6. See Callahan (1991) for a comprehensive reading of the genre.
7. Moreover, the entry “Lynda Jean Barry” in the *Lambiek Comiclopedia* (2002) notes: “Barry has achieved, in some ways, the alternative comics dream. Her work reaches adults who might not read any other comics, adults who, because of work like Barry’s, don’t question that this art form can produce sophisticated reading matter.”
8. Cartoonist Roberta Gregory, creator of the infamous character *Bitchy Bitch*, describes her harrowing experience in editing the violent, misogynistic work of Robert Crumb for *Fantagraphics Books* in her comic *Naughty Bits #1* (1991).
9. See the chapter entitled “Womyn’s Comics” in Trina Robbins’s *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women’s Comics from Teens to Zines* (1999) for a comprehensive history of the genre.
10. Space restrictions prevent me from addressing these themes in more depth. For more information see Campomanes (1995) and San Juan, Jr. (1994).

11. Tagalog slang for “woman,” this term is often used by Filipina Americans instead of “Filipina.”
12. Other *One Hundred Demons* comics that explore the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality include *Head Lice*, *Hate*, *Common Scents*, *Resilience*, *Dogs*, and *The Visitor*.
13. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* notes: “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled . . . an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it. . . . Storytellers in all media know that sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story’s character. And since viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning, cartoons have historically held an advantage in breaking into world popular culture” ([1993] 1994, 36f–g, 42c–d). Space limitations preclude my engaging in further discussions of comix rhetoric in relation to reader response. See McCloud ([1993] 1994) for astute discussions and examples of how comics make meaning.
14. I explore this aspect of Barry’s work in “Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry’s *One Hundred Demons*” (2004).
15. I must note here that Sau-ling Wong’s “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon” (1995) critiques the popularity of Asian American mother/daughter novels as related to their perceived kowtowing to orientalist mainstream feminist desires for exotic ethnic stories that promulgate stereotypes of brutal Asian patriarchy. I agree with Wendy Ho’s contention that Wong’s analysis is limited by her assuming a very unsophisticated readership, both Asian and non-Asian (1999, 47). Furthermore I contend that Barry’s work resists the “sugar sisterhood” critique because her cartoons have not had the mainstream commercial success that has marked Tan as a panderer of orientalist fantasies but also because *One Hundred Demons* does not focus on patriarchal oppression in Filipino American culture but highlights matriarchal oppression: mother/daughter estrangement and alienation.
16. See Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1987) as well as her groundbreaking edited volume (with Cherríe Morraga), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1982). Also, Chela Sandoval’s “Mestizaje as Method: Feminists-of-Color Challenge the Canon” (1998) is a comprehensive history of the development theory and praxis of feminisms of color and its reception in contemporary cultural studies; the article includes a comprehensive bibliography of key writings by U.S. feminists of color.
17. Barry described the autobiographical aspect of her art in the following way: “The strips are about as autobiographical as a dream. Which is to say, all of the elements are from my life, but the arrangement of them in a story, the condensing and the story line itself is more intuitive. Nothing in the stories are untrue, but nothing in the stories are presented as unassailable fact. This is the hard part about autobiography! . . . So yes, the 100 *Demons* strips are autobiographical in the loose sense of being able to tell a story with all true elements arranged in order to give a narrative” (2001).

18. Many variants of the *aswang* tale exist throughout the Philippines.
19. For example, see Linda Huf's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Artist as Heroine in American Literature* (1983).
20. Recent works that specifically theorize the lives of Asian American girls include Vicki Nam's groundbreaking *Yell-Oh! Girls: Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American* (2001), the first anthology of writings by Asian American girls, and Yen Le Espiritu's "'We Don't Sleep around Like White Girls Do': Family, Culture, and Gender in Filipina American Lives" (2001).
21. Of this aspect of *Girlness*, Barry notes in an e-mail: "The tangle of WW II and the Japanese and Filipinos specifically is something that is just barely brought up in the strip but anyone who has grown up with people who lived in the Philippines during the occupation will pick up on it. Again, I didn't set out to talk about it. It's there because it was there, IS there, in my life (2001).
22. Barry revealed that Super Monkey Head is, as I had suspected, a stand-in for the cartoon character Hello Kitty, a very popular Asian American girlhood icon: "Yes, Super Monkey Head was put there to replace Hello Kitty, which I also love, adore, etc. but felt certain that copyright laws would prevent me from putting Hello Kitty in the strip" (2001).
23. Craig McCracken's *Powerpuff Girls*—Blossum, Buttercup, and Bubbles—are the Cartoon Network's kindergarten superheroes who fight crime and evil. See the *Powerpuff Girls* Web site for more information.
24. Jessica Hagedorn asks this same question in *Burning Heart: Portraits of the Philippines* (1999). Thanks to Floyd Cheung for sending me this reference.

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