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# Swedish Norm-Critical Comics and the Comics Pedagogy of Lynda Barry

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This article considers the parallel developments of feminist comics and norm-critical pedagogy and in Sweden in order to explore comics as a medium for questioning norms of representation, in part by way of the influence of Lynda Barry's comics pedagogy on Swedish comics publications and comics curricula. Barry's pedagogical works are inspired by the spontaneous drawing exercises of Ivan Brunetti and rooted in her theory of the image as an embodied, living experience. In dialogue with Barry's comics pedagogy, the article shows how a number of contemporary Swedish graphic novels by Freja Erixån, Ester Eriksson and Lisa Ewald lend themselves to norm-critical approaches that challenge conventional representations of gender and identity through an aesthetics of play and surprise. Rather than mainstreaming or institutionalizing norm-critique, contemporary Swedish feminist comics actively involve the reader in a dialogic process of challenging and reimagining dominant norms.

Swedish feminist comics artists have taken on the comics medium as a tool for critique, working between theory and popular culture in a number of genres, mixing satire and autobiography, fantasy and humor. Often with overtly didactic purposes, contemporary feminist comics model an approach to cultural criticism using humor to satirize everything from politics to popular culture and everyday life. The rise of feminist comics in Sweden has occurred in parallel with the development of what has been called 'norm-critical pedagogy' in Swedish educational theory, an approach to anti-discrimination in the classroom based on queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive education. A term coined by Swedish education theorists in the 2010s, *normkritik* ['norm-critique'] takes its point of departure in queer pedagogy's critique of heteronormativity from an intersectional perspective to promote social change by challenging social norms in the classroom (Laskar and Alm 2017: 137–138; Björkman and Bromseth 2019: 23–28).

By considering the field of comics pedagogy, especially the pedagogical works of Lynda Barry (Barry 2008; Barry 2010; Barry 2014), I will show how the resources of the comics medium can be turned towards the work of norm-critique in and out of the classroom. In this article, I examine the work of three Swedish comics artists whose works engage implicitly or explicitly with comics pedagogy, in part by way of the influence of Barry. Rather than mainstreaming or institutionalizing norm-critique, I argue that these norm-critical comics actively involve the reader in a dialogic process of challenging and reimagining dominant norms of representation.

In Sweden, Barry's pedagogical comics appear on numerous course syllabi, have been referenced in student theses, and are recommended as teaching material by Seriefrämjandet, the Swedish advocacy group for comics. In 2016, the Swedish comics publication *Bild & bubbla* published a sweeping review of Barry's work, titled 'Svaret finns i bilden' ['The answer is in the image'] (Haverholm 2016: 50), with a special focus on her pedagogical works *What It Is*, *Picture This* and *Syllabus*. Two pages of the review are devoted to Barry's pedagogical comics with extended quotations translated to Swedish alongside Barry's images in the original. 'With her playful approach,' the reviewer concludes, 'Lynda Barry is in any case a living example of the beneficial effects of never being done playing [*att aldrig sluta leka*]' (Haverholm 2016: 57).[1] As we will see, Barry's playful approach to comics creation distinguishes a number of contemporary feminist comics artists and their works.

The contemporary Swedish comics artists I consider in this article are ones whose works engage in one way or another with the techniques and approaches suggested by Barry's pedagogical comics. Freja Erixån's works draw particularly on comics pedagogy

[1] All translations from Swedish are my own.

in the form of exercises with inspiration in the drawing styles of children. Erixån's collection, Över min döda kropp [*Over my dead body*] (Erixån 2019), consists of comics composed in conjunction with her workshops held in elementary schools on comics and norm-critique. Another example of contemporary Swedish feminist comics, Ester Eriksson's graphic novel, *Jag, Esters rester* [*I, the remains of Ester*] (Eriksson 2017), is composed of repeated drawings of the Disney character Goofy as a self-representation of the author. Finally, I consider the example of Lisa Ewald's satirical comics, in particular her collection *Måste carpa* [*Got to seize the day*] (Ewald 2017), as an example of the techniques of digital composition to play with and challenge conventional representations of gender and sexuality.

I begin by contextualizing the use of comics for norm-critique through existing research in the field of comics pedagogy, and in particular the pedagogical comics of Lynda Barry. I then discuss the parallel developments of norm-critical pedagogy and feminist comics in Sweden in order to explore comics as a medium for questioning conventional norms of representation.

## Comics Pedagogy Beyond Definitions

The comics pedagogies that I discuss in this article share an approach to comics not just as objects of study but as a tool to think with and through. The editors of the edited collection *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy: Teaching, Learning and Comics* (Kirtley, Garcia and Carlson 2020) emphasize in their introduction the many different kinds of teaching included in comics pedagogy: teaching about comics, teaching with comics, teaching how to make comics. Rather than distinguishing these approaches, comics pedagogy can better be understood as a mode of thinking and theorizing in its own right. As they put it, comics pedagogy provides 'another way of thinking through ideas' and 'a different sort of interaction with the text' (Kirtley, Garcia and Carlson 2020: 13). If comics can be seen as its own mode of thought, then comics pedagogy can be considered not so much an approach to teaching comics as objects of study, but rather to using comics to think and theorize about the world. Charles Hatfield has described the 'unfixability' (Hatfield 2009: 19) of comics in the classroom in that students who read comics in a literature course often do not know whether they are encountering a work of literature or popular culture. This unfixability makes comics suited to challenging conventional categories or dominant norms of representation.

Among the most influential attempts to theorize the comics medium using the form of comics is undoubtedly Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (McCloud 1994). McCloud argues that the ability of comics to generalize or render objects non-specific allows comics to represent not just objects or images but ways of seeing and thinking.

In a frequently cited passage, McCloud explains that drawing cartoon images of the human face creates an image that is more 'universal' (McCloud 1994: 36): a round circle with two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth becomes a universally recognizable image of a human face. Yet, as McCloud's numerous critics have pointed out, the cartoon image of the 'human face' abstracted from the representation of the white, cis-hetero middle-class man is by no means a universal figure. As Yetta Howard puts it in her gloss of McCloud, 'As easy as it is to see two dots and a line as eyes and a mouth, it is considerably more difficult to imagine that face as encompassing ethnic, gender and sexual differences' (Howard 2018: 98). By contrast, Howard's own reading of queer underground comics highlights instead the particularity of difference, what she terms the 'ugly differences' rendered in the materiality of text and image.

In her interview with Leah Misemer, Barry is asked about McCloud's theory of the 'universal' or non-specific face in comics, which she interprets through her own comics pedagogy. Barry describes how she tests McCloud's theory in 'drawing jams' during which students take turns drawing random objects in the place of facial features, demonstrating the ability to recognize a face in even the most abstracted cartoon image. But for Barry, the non-specific face has less to do with universality and more to do with a dialogic relationship between creator and viewer. As Barry explains, 'It's a relationship. And it's one that stutters through time, because somebody might have made that comic in 1954, and then here in 2017, I may activate something from it. Or it may activate some part of me' (Barry and Misemer 2020: 173). In other words, Barry understands McCloud's theory of the 'universal' or non-specific face as a dialogical relationship situated in a particular time and place of creation and reception. For Barry, the potential in McCloud's non-specific face is its ability to 'activate' or incite a response that cannot be determined in advance. As we will see, Barry's comics pedagogy aims at precisely such a dialogic relationship with images and their potential to create something new.

An important source for Barry's own comics pedagogy, Ivan Brunetti's handbook, *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* (Brunetti 2007/2011) is often credited with inspiring an approach to making comics open to anyone regardless of technical proficiency in drawing. In Brunetti's book, cartooning is seen as a 'philosophy' of its own, or a way of thinking and experiencing. '[C]artooning,' the author writes in the introduction, 'is a translation of how we experience, structure, and remember the world' (Brunetti 2011: 8). Encouraging students to experiment without worrying 'about doing something wrong' (Brunetti 2011: 12), Brunetti's weekly exercises themselves encourage play, doodling, spontaneous drawing and stream of consciousness.

Brunetti's spontaneous drawing exercises would provide an important inspiration for the comics pedagogy developed by Lynda Barry. One exercise asks students, 'Draw

quick doodles (5–10 seconds each) of famous cartoon characters, from memory' (Brunetti 2011: 26). Commenting on the exercise of drawing famous cartoon characters, Brunetti writes, 'Note that often these drawings are, technically speaking, 'wrong'— but also kind of right at the same time' (Brunetti 2011: 26). The purpose of spontaneously drawing well-known cartoon characters is not to produce a masterful imitation of the original, but instead to cultivate a drawing style that may be 'technically speaking, 'wrong,'' but which allows the student to develop their own mode of expression through the visual language of comics.

## Lynda Barry's Pedagogy of the Unthinkable

In her autobiographical comic *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Barry 2002), Lynda Barry initiates her series of pedagogical comics by describing the writing and drawing exercises she herself used in the composition of the text. Hillary Chute, discussing the comics in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, argues that Barry uses these comics to invite the reader into the process of creation inasmuch as 'the text does not enshrine or sanctify itself— either as a life narrative or as a work of art—but attempts to inspire the responsive, dialogic creation of narrative through its form' (Chute 2010: 113). Chute notes that even Barry's purportedly autobiographical *One! Hundred! Demons!* begins with a pedagogical comic inviting readers to participate in the process of creation. Each of Barry's subsequent pedagogical works continue this dialogical creation through experiments in comics form that demonstrate the approaches to drawing and writing taught in each exercise. In short, Barry's comics pedagogy teaches an attentiveness to memory and embodiment that she has called in her courses and interviews the 'unthinkable' or the 'other language' (Barry and Misemer 2020: 169). For Barry, learning to draw and write the unthinkable means unlearning the norms underlying how drawings or texts are created and perceived in the first place.

Barry's overtly pedagogical works, *What It Is, Picture This* and *Syllabus*, are hybrid texts consisting of classroom exercises, autobiographical reflections, digital collages and presentations of student art. In part, the texts compile teaching materials and student work from Barry's courses at the University of Wisconsin's art department from 2012–2014. As sources for her comics pedagogy, Barry cites her former teacher Marilyn Frasca, as well as Brunetti, whose book provides the basis for many of her exercises in spontaneous drawing. In her brief discussion of Barry's method of composition in *What It Is*, Ann Cvetkovich writes, 'The pages from her daily notebook that she reproduces at the end of *What It Is* are a brilliant example of how process is the material' (Cvetkovich 2012: 205). Cvetkovich's idea that 'process is the material' refers to Barry's approach to writing about the self in which the author is permitted to create without knowing 'what

it is' that they are actually creating. In other words, Barry's comics pedagogy opens up the question of 'what it is' in an image or in writing without defining or determining in advance what that might be.

Barry's *Syllabus* contains her most detailed exposition of comics theory to be found across her works and interviews. Barry defines an image in a way that goes beyond the semiotics-inspired focus on iconicity found in most comics theory. For Barry, images acquire meaning not merely as icons, but as living beings animated through an active process of identification and embodiment (Barry 2014: 15). Though she does not cite McCloud, Barry's image theory seems informed by McCloud's concept of the image as a living extension of identity. Summarizing the media theory of Marshall McLuhan, McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, 'Icons demand our participation to make them work. There is no life here except that which you give to it' (McCloud 1994: 59). McCloud draws on McLuhan's theory of mediation as an 'extension' of the body, by which inanimate objects 'extend' the individual's sense of self. Like McCloud, Barry sees the image as an extension of the self that reflects the capacity to invest emotional or psychical value in an external object, like the child's blanket. Unlike McCloud, Barry's theory of the image is embodied, encompassing dimensions of experience beyond visual iconicity: 'It's there,' she writes, 'it can't <u>not</u> be there. It appears because it is there and ever-there – it appears because place and time and a certain state of mind are given over to it, like water and light and a certain time of year to a seed' (Barry 2014: 15).

Through her comics pedagogy, Barry aims for students to recover the experience of drawing as a child, using spontaneous drawing and writing exercises to move beyond conventional drawing styles. In *What It Is*, Barry describes a series of creativity exercises that ask students to recover living images from their childhood memories (**Figure 1**). In a full-page collage framed by doodles and other text in the margins, Barry describes a method for matching words and images because, as she puts it, 'images need a place to land' (Barry 2008: 149). The exercise is not intended to identify the correct label for each image, but to use pictures to 'help us find words to help us find images' (Barry 2008: 149). Barry's exercise asks students to combine words and images to disturb conventional associations and invoke instead a living image from their own childhoods.

In *Syllabus*, Barry gives an even more detailed description of her teaching practice in the comics classroom. At the beginning of each lesson, students may be asked to sketch 2-minute self-portraits on index cards, or color in a page completely using crayons. She describes her surprise at the embarrassment students express when required to draw using crayons, and by asking students to confront feelings of shame and embarrassment, she also recovers those experiences for creativity in the present: 'Sometimes we say this kind of picture looks like a kid drew it. And people are dismayed by this and even

**Figure 1:** Lynda Barry (2008) What It Is. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly. © Lynda Barry.

ashamed enough to destroy the picture – get rid of it – immediately. But what if the way kids draw – that kind of line that we call 'childish' – what if that is what a line looks like when someone is having an experience by hand? <u>A live wire</u>!' (Barry 2014: 30−31). The 'live wire' Barry describes is the living image, recovered from the norms that dictate what is 'good' or 'beautiful' and which produce feelings of embarrassment when they are violated. Recovering this capacity to produce images spontaneously is thus essential to challenging the norms of conventional representation.

Barry's exercises and the examples of student work she includes in her books are pedagogically grounded in her theory of the image. In Barry's comics pedagogy, considerable focus is placed on spontaneous drawing based on the exercises designed by Brunetti. As she explains:

> Ivan Brunetti pointed out that there are things all of us can draw in a way that is recognizable: a car, a castle, a cat. A house on fire is one of these things. Without knowing it consciously, we all have ideas about door shapes, roof-lines, window styles, and the color and nature of fire. There is also the matter of where the viewer is standing: point of view. All of these things show up without effort—they are already in us. (Barry 2014: 104)

In Barry's exercises, the purpose of spontaneous drawing is to evoke the student's memories and at the same time raise questions about the norms and conventions of representing people and objects. One drawing exercise included in *Syllabus* focuses on identity specifically: 'You begin by writing down a name of an occupation or style of person…, then pass your paper to the person beside you so everyone has a new page' (Barry 2014: 108). Each student is given one minute to draw a figure corresponding to the 'type' indicated by the previous student. Reflecting on the results of this exercise, Barry writes, 'I notice things like how the garbage man has no head and the nurse has sailboats on her scrubs and how drunk the bartender looks. I've seen hundreds of these pages and they always surprise me' (Barry 2014: 110).

Following Brunetti, Barry's comics pedagogy takes its point of departure in what 'we all have ideas about' or what we know '[w]ithout knowing it consciously.' But the effect of Barry's comics pedagogy is not to reproduce conventions or assumptions about 'types' of people or objects, but to produce drawings that challenge those conventions.[2] Rather than accepting the inevitability of categorization, Barry invites students to access what she calls 'another language' though which it may be possible to draw and write about the world otherwise.[3]

## Swedish Norm-Critical Comics

Since the 2000s, Swedish comics and graphic novels have been characterized by the prevalence of feminist and left-wing political comics. Many of these comics have an overtly didactic purpose, such as the works of Karolina Bång and Liv Strömquist, whose works have been translated, published and displayed internationally.[4] Through

[2] In this way, Barry's approach differs radically from that suggested by Will Eisner in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (Eisner 1996), in which stereotyping is understood as a necessity of comic art. For example, Eisner instructs students to draw 'good' and 'bad' versions of everyday objects: 'good flower' and 'bad flower,' 'good light' and 'bad light' (Eisner 1996: 21), so as to master the art of stereotyping.

[3] As José Esteban Muñoz (2014: 249–251) has documented, a significant body of work has developed on the concept of the 'otherwise' or what he calls 'otherwiseness.' As I have been suggesting, Barry's pedagogical works are highly relevant for developing this theoretical trajectory.

[4] On the contemporary Swedish feminist comics boom, see Frangos 2020, Wallin Wictorin and Nordenstam 2017, Lindberg 2016.

feminist comics collectives such as Dotterbolaget (whose name is a play on the Swedish word for 'daughter' and for subsidiary or 'daughter' company), feminist comics have become a recognizable and growing presence in Swedish comics. As Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin (Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin 2019: 77–78) have documented, contemporary Swedish feminist comics follow in the footsteps not only of the American underground *Wimmen's Comix*, but also Swedish magazines such as *Kvinnobulletinen* and the *Fnitter* anthologies of the 1970s and 1980s.

Swedish literary scholar Maria Jönsson has argued that two trends can be identified in the contemporary Swedish graphic novel, an ironic and satirical approach, and a 'non-ironic' or 'reparative' approach that works through play and surprise (Jönsson 2014: 80). Drawing from Eve Sedgwick, Jönsson sees the 'reparative' approach as one that may be critical in a political sense, but which in her view does not necessarily operate through irony or satire. So too, many contemporary Swedish feminist comics combine satire with autobiography, fantasy and other genres and forms. As we will see, play and surprise are crucial to the challenge to dominant norms posed by many contemporary comics.

I examine the works of three creators whose works illustrate a norm-critical approach: Freja Erixån, Ester Eriksson and Lisa Ewald. Barry's pedagogical approach is evident either explicitly or implicitly in each of the works I discuss through techniques of childlike drawing and childhood representations. This is in keeping with the attention Barry has received in Swedish comics publications and the inclusion of her pedagogical comics in comics curricula, including at the influential comics college in Malmö. I want to suggest that these works can be understood in terms of what has been termed in Sweden 'norm-critical pedagogy,' an approach developed and practiced in Swedish schools to implement anti-discrimination legislation in education. For example, Freja Erixån's comics are created in conjunction with workshops in elementary schools on the theme 'Comics and norm-critique.' In Erixån's pedagogical workshops, pupils and teachers are invited to use images to investigate, as she puts it, 'vad som enligt samhället anses vara en norm' ['what is considered the norm according to society'] (Erixån 2019: n.p.).

Swedish theorists Pia Laskar and Erika Alm have described a 'norm-critical turn' in Swedish theory in which the term 'norm-critique' has spread beyond educational contexts to become a common term of discourse in the media. The Swedish word 'norm,' like the identical English word, is a common and easily understood term used to describe what is considered normal or natural. Norm-critical pedagogy aligns itself with the critical or anti-oppressive pedagogy advanced by Paolo Freire, bell hooks and Kevin Kumashiro, whose works are frequently cited. As Laskar and Alm describe, 'Istället för

att fokusera på det förment avvikande har just konstruktionen av vissa positioner som neutrala och omärkta ifrågasatts' ['rather than focusing on the supposedly deviant it is the very construction of certain positions as neutral or unmarked that is called into question'] (Laskar and Alm 2017: 138). In the classroom, norm-critical pedagogy aims to promote social change by raising awareness about the construction of social norms. Since the framework for implementing norm-critical pedagogy in schools is provided by Swedish anti-discrimination legislation, considerable focus is placed on preventing discrimination and harassment associated with legally protected categories. As a result, the juridical context for norm-critical pedagogy has led to a concern over its 'mainstreaming' as an institutionalized practice for managing diversity in the classroom, potentially limiting the effects of its critique.[5]

How can norm-critical comics challenge norms of representations without falling into the trap of mainstreaming? On the back cover of her collection, Över min döda kropp [*Over my dead body*] (Erixån 2019), Freja Erixån describes the motivation for the book: 'Över min döda kropp är resultatet av en länge undertryckt ilska mot den ram som tjejer tvingas in i pga patriarkala strukturer och normativa begränsningar' ['Över min döda kropp is the result of a long-suppressed anger towards the frame that girls are forced into due to patriarchal structures and normative limitations'] (Erixån 2019: n.p.). The drawing style throughout the book is decidedly childish, drawn mostly in crayon and watercolor. Figures are composed through geometrical forms, ovular and triangular shapes arranged in the form of a body without clear arms, hands or legs. Many of the comics in the collection use a repetitive format as if in form of drawing exercises. One exercise repeated through the book consists of a numbered list of objects on one page and a bullet point description on the other. For example, the comic titled 'Fascinerande saker' ['Fascinating things'] begins with a first numbered panel featuring a man naked from the waist down standing in from of a tree with the caption, 'Folk med driv' ['People with drive']. The facing/page text elaborates:

People with drive are fascinating because:

- unusual/exotic
- fun to follow
- inspiration
- often attractive (Erixån 2019: n.p.)

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[5] This is a much larger discussion that can be addressed in this article. A critique of norm-critical pedagogy can be found in Langmann and Månsson 2016. See also Hermansson and Nordenstam 2017 for a critical perspective on the trend towards norm-critical picture books in Swedish children's literature.

The remaining numbered panels contain drawings of 'people who shop online without getting anxiety,' 'people who drive cars without getting anxiety' and 'people who own Lush products.' The numbered panels in the list each contain an image that could be considered a 'norm' in society, yet in each case the image of the norm is unmasked and called into question, re-labeled 'unusual' or 'exotic.'

In another sequence in the middle of the collection (**Figures 2–3**), a figure with a circular face in a pink outline stands silent next to a smaller figure with a blue, ovular body and a brown, artist's hat who asks a series of invasive questions. In one panel, the blue figure asks, 'Vem har sagt att du får bryta utseendekontraktet?' [Who said you could break the appearances contract?'] (Erixån 2019: n.p.). The genders of the figures may not necessarily be determined by their visual coding, but the situation described is clearly gendered, a passive feminine figure subjected to the male gaze as a result of normative expectations of beauty and visual pleasure. In the following panel that concludes the sequence, the blue figure continues, 'Skärp dig. Varför så dum? How come you're not pleasing my eye?' ['Get it together. Why so dumb? How come you're not pleasing my eye?'] (Erixån 2019: n.p.). The questions, 'Why so dumb?' and 'How



**Figure 2:** Freja Erixån (2019) Över min döda kropp. Stockholm: Kartago. © Freja Erixån.

**Figure 3:** Freja Erixån (2019) Över min döda kropp. Stockholm: Kartago. © Freja Erixån.

come you're not pleasing my eye?' express two contradictory norms: the expectation to provide validation for the male-coded figure while remaining merely an object of visual pleasure. The switching between Swedish and English in the original emphasizes the way in which social norms are imposed from the outside. Yet, the silence of the feminine-coded figure remains difficult to interpret throughout the sequence. She could be silenced by the blue figure's incessant questions, or she could be using silence as a weapon to frustrate his expectations. The feminine-coded figure is larger, which may indicate her own power and agency in the encounter, while the lack of arms indicates vulnerability. The composition techniques visually allude to children's drawings, with geometric forms for bodies and backgrounds filled in with watercolor. Throughout Erixån's collection, repetitive exercises inspired by the drawings of children are used as techniques for calling into question norms of gender and representation.

Another contemporary Swedish graphic novel, Ester Eriksson's *Jag, Esters rester* [*I, the remains of Ester*] (Eriksson 2017), illustrates the aesthetics of play through the use of childhood figures to challenge the conventions of self-representation in the form of the graphic memoir. *Jag, Esters rester* is Eriksson's second graphic novel following her debut, *De finns ingenstans att fly* [*There is nowhere to run*] (Eriksson 2016), a fictional narrative based on the author's own experience of mental illness and psychiatric

institutions. Instead of a conventional graphic memoir with sequential narration in grid format, *Jag, Esters rester* consists of single-panel pages originally posed on the author's Instagram, with one or two figures and only minimal backgrounds. A single drawing may be surrounded by speech balloons recounting an entire interaction on one page. The comics in the collection appear hastily drawn in permanent marker with occasional corrections scribbled in ballpoint.

Throughout the comic, Ester appears in the form of the Disney character Goofy, called 'Långben' in Swedish, appearing in many panels next to a version of Minnie Mouse, called 'Musse Pigg' in Swedish (who the book indicates is a version of the graphic novelist My Palm). Goofy and Minnie Mouse are drawn in the author's idiosyncratic style and are not meant to be copies of the original.

The single-panel format of Eriksson's book reflects the serial publication format of social media with one image posted at a time (**Figure 4**). Rather than a sequential narrative, a series of repeated experiences unfolds throughout the book: conversations



**Figure 4:** Ester Eriksson (2017) 'If these are what you call love, I don't want to be here anymore.' Jag, Esters rester. Stockholm: Kartago. © Ester Eriksson.

at a bar, interactions on dating apps, meetings with therapists, and so forth. Eriksson's 'Långben' and 'Musse Pigg' are drawn to express childhood memories and the search for identity in the present. In an interview, Eriksson has said that in the form of the 'Långben' character, 'jag får vara alla mina känslor' ['I'm allowed to be all my feelings'] (Eriksson and Aschenbrenner 2018: n.p.). In this way, Eriksson's use of the Disney character to represent herself plays with the conventions of self-representation in comics to open up and explore other dimensions of the self. Eriksson's repetitive drawing of Disney characters to represent the self evokes the drawing exercises of Barry and Brunetti in which the goal is not to copy the original faithfully, but to access memories and emotions beyond the conventional associations of these figures. Eriksson is thus able to use her book to work through her experiences with mental illness in a style of drawing and writing that reimagines the form of the conventional graphic memoir.

Another example of contemporary feminist comics in Sweden, Lisa Ewald's collections *Allt kommer bli bra* [*Everything is going to be fine*] (Ewald 2013) and *Måste carpa* [*Got to seize the day*] (Ewald 2017), illustrate the aesthetics of play and surprise associated with childhood representations. Ewald's works put on display all the techniques of contemporary comics, combining digital collage with illustration and sequential narration in a sophisticated visual style. Social media and popular culture are frequent topics of the comics, alongside childhood and girlhood in particular. As Swedish literary and gender scholar Maria Margareta Österholm has argued, Ewald's comics treat 'the cute and girlish' with an aesthetics of excess that 'is so overloaded that it becomes a critique' (Österholm 2018: 379).

Like the many-layered digital collages in Lynda Barry's pedagogical comics, Ewald's books combine digital and analogue composition to illustrate the layers of memory and experience underlying representations of gender, sexuality and identity. For example, a two-page spread from Ewald's *Måste carpa* shows two purple hands with red nail-polish placed over cards spread out over a table top with a marble finish (**Figure 5**). The cards appear to be cards in a memory game with objects associated with conventional femininity: 'klänning' ['dress'], 'smink' ['makeup'], 'smycken' ['jewelry'], 'borsta håret' ['hair-brushing'], and so forth (Ewald 2017: n.p.). Through the trope of the memory game, the signifiers of femininity are disassociated from the body, made into objects of a performance to be learned and repeated. Interspersed among the cards is the wildcard, 'trassel' ['tangle'], suggesting the complexity of all representations of gender. The page uses a first-person subjective framing, placing the viewer in the perspective of the purple-armed figure. The purple hands open up a gap between the visual and the tactile, emphasizing a tension between embodiment

**Figure 5:** Lisa Ewald (2017) Måste carpa. Stockholm: Galago. © Lisa Ewald.

and disembodiment. The purple hands may be associated with the 'hand' of the comics creator, and the visual icons of gender contained in the memory cards also allude to the history of stereotyping in visual culture. Through the subjective framing of the image, the reader is invited dialogically to enter into and reshape the visual history of gender evoked by each image. In such examples, Ewald's comics suggest ways to question conventional signifiers of gender and sexuality through the techniques of collage and illustration.

Through techniques rooted in the comics pedagogy of Lynda Barry and Ivan Brunetti—adopting the drawing styles of children, drawing famous cartoon characters, or memory games——the comics of Erixån, Eriksson and Ewald use the resources of the comics medium for the purpose of norm-critique. Gender hierarchies, norms of self-representation, and the signifiers of femininity and girlhood are called into question and

imagined otherwise. As these examples illustrate, the 'norm-critical turn' in Swedish theory and pedagogy is clearly reflected in contemporary Swedish comics. Inasmuch as the comics medium can be understood as its own mode of seeing and thinking, comics pedagogy describes not just an approach to teaching a particular subject, but to using comics to think and theorize about the world. As employed in the process of creating comics, pedagogies of comics can suggest ways of looking and thinking about images and text point beyond dominant norms of representation, using drawing and writing to access what Lynda Barry calls the 'unthinkable.' Feminist comics can thus contribute to the project of a norm-critical pedagogy through their ability to establish a dialogical relationship in which readers are invited into the process of creating meaning so as to challenge conventional representations of gender and identity.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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