

Media/Cultural Studies

CRITICAL APPROACHES

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■ Barbie

The bitch still has everything

Shirley R. Steinberg

This is the book of the generations of Barbie. (1) In the day that Ruth created her, in the likeness of Ruth's daughter and a German whore, she made Barbie. (2) Female first she created her, and blessed her and called her name Barbie after her firstborn. (3) And Barbie lived three years and Ruth created Ken, male and female she created them both. (4) And Barbie begat Skipper and friends, by the year of our lord nineteen hundred and sixty-four, they were three. (5) And Barbie lived fifty years until this record. Within those years, ten friends were created for Skipper; Midge was created to be Barbie's best friend. (6) And in the year nineteen hundred and sixty-eight, Christie was created. Christie was unlike any other creation; her skin was black. (7) And these are the years and days of Barbie, the days of Barbie and the Rockers; the days of Barbie and her pets, including puppy Sachi and horse Rosebud; and the years of Barbie's family, cousins Francie and Jazzie; siblings Tutti, Todd, and Stacie. (8) And through Stacie, friends were born, Whitney and Janet. (9) And through Ken, multiple male friends were born, and like Ken, none of them ever married, and verily their manhood was always in question. (10) However, Barbie was most plentiful with friends, by the year 2009, having multitudes of girlfriends with whom to shop. Among them Cara, who was also black, Teresa, who was made Hispanic, and Kira, who was Asian. (11) Hence Barbie was known through the land as diverse, multicultural, and virtual—having become cyber-connected. (12) And these were the days of Barbie; and it came to pass, when Barbie and her friends began to multiply on the face of the earth, little girls began to buy, as verily, one doll was never enough.

I am taking an artist's license in rewriting scriptures. It only seemed appropriate, as Mattel has been rewriting history and children's play for years.

Playing Barbies in the fifth grade consisted of lugging plastic cases laden with "outfits" to the playground and constructing scenarios around Barbie and "getting" Ken. I knew at this early age that Barbie (as a female) must have an "outfit" for every occasion and that wearing the same thing within some unspoken frame of time was just not done.

When I was twelve or thirteen I began meticulously recording what I wore each day on a calendar. I made sure that at least a month went by before I wore an outfit again. While a high school teacher, my students called attention to my idiosyncrasy by applauding the first day that I duplicated an outfit in the classroom. Did Barbie construct this behavior, or do I just love clothes?

Where does the text of Barbie begin? Fifty years ago, Mattel invested in the production of a slim, blonde doll who (that?) wore a variety of coordinated "outfits." While on vacation in Europe, Mattel co-founder Ruth Handler discovered Lily. Lily was a prominent star of comics—a sexy blonde with loose morals who adorned dashboards throughout Germany and Switzerland. Her origin is not well documented, although her lineage has been traced back to a *Lily* comic strip. Handler decided to take the model of Lily back to the States and create a doll that could wear multiple outfits. She named her Barbie, after her daughter, Barbara. The promotional "hook" that Handler cited was the possibility that the doll could have multiple outfits and girls could just own one doll.

Physiologically, Barbie had perfect breasts (although no nipples), a tiny waist and long, slender legs. Much has been written in a feminist framework about Barbie, discussing the unrealistic body shape, and so on. I won't "go there." Barbie was made slim so that layers of designer fabric would flow nicely and realistically on her body. She was, first and foremost, a model—fabric by Dior, designs by Mackie, nothing was beyond reach for her. I am not offended by her figure; I do wonder, however, about her poorly constructed private parts.

Speaking of private parts, four years later, Barbie was given a boyfriend, Ken—he had no genitals. Ken's crotch was (and is) as flat and smooth as Barbie's. I remember specifically my disappointment in disrobing my first Ken—nothing to see. Possibly that physical defect is in line with the personality that Ken has displayed throughout the years (although Earring Ken had a certain flair). Ken and Barbie have gotten as far as their wedding but never past it. The couple has never had a wedding night and Barbie is always seen pushing a stroller of cousins, younger siblings, or friends. Only Ken's friends of color, Derek and Steve, radiate any machismo sexuality—still crotchless.

Within months of her creation, Barbie was a sensation. Mattel had transformed toys, especially dolls, and Barbie became "us." Little girls were frenzied to own a Barbie, each one coming in her own long, thin box, wearing a black-and-white striped swim suit. Barbie had a blonde ponytail and earrings. She was a teen model. Girls moved from cradling baby dolls to demanding the latest in haute couture à la Mattel. Barbie was sexy, although most of her owners were not even aware of the genre of sexiness—they just loved their Barbies.

Barbie is not only literal, she is virtual. Dozens of websites are devoted to her: *everythinggirl.com*, and *Barbie.com* are cyber environments where fans can log on: *Enter the world of Barbie products. You can browse, buy, and even create a wishlist to email.* Sites encourage shopping, beauty products, princess-ness, and pink.

■ From Research to Obsession

I take my work seriously. Indeed, I think I am a superb researcher. I love the challenge of finding strange and wonderful factoids of trivia in little known academic nooks and crannies. However, this chapter has caused havoc in my life. Four years ago, I became fascinated with Barbie's effect on little girls. I started to pick up Barbies, Barbie furniture, Barbie comics, Barbie books, Barbie jewelry, and Barbie toys wherever I went. I even found the Benetton Barbie in the Istanbul airport (under the sign featuring the Marlboro man).

In order to do thorough textual analyses of Barbie and Barbie accoutrements, I needed to purchase my artifacts. I sit now, with great embarrassment, in an office with no less than forty Barbies, ten Kens, several Skippers (including a beauty princess and a cheer-leading Skipper), and a plethora of "ethnic" and "special edition" Barbies. I have three Barbie watches, a \$300 Barbie jacket from F.A.O. Schwartz, a Barbie McDonald's playset, Christmas playset, and bakery set. I have two Barbie board games, one computer game—Barbie Goes Shopping—and a floppy disk game, Barbie Design Studio. My life is out of control. I am only thankful that this research came long after my children stopped playing with toys—consequently I am the only one in the family who lays claim to this Mattel treasure trove. However, when children come to visit, they plow through my Barbies in an hour and then inquire, "Do you have anything else?" Obviously I don't have enough. What kid law was written which expressed the need to have multiples of any and every toy and object? Even the cyber-conscious Webkins fanatics are not happy with one, or two, or three...they must have every one made. Barbies are that way: you can never have enough.

My ownership of Barbies and paraphernalia qualifies me as an expert. I am a consumer and a scholar; there is no better combination. Historically, I come by the expertise naturally: I have had Barbies since she was invented. However, as I trace my Barbie autobiography, I am only able to single out my fetish for outfits as a permanent influence à la Barbie. I remain untouched from other taint...unless one looks at my research.

■ What Barbie Doesn't Have

Discussing what Barbie doesn't have is easier than what she does have. The list is much shorter. Barbie doesn't have a locomotive, a battleship (although she is a sailor), a rocket (although she is an astronaut), or an Uzi (although she is a soldier). Thematically Mattel still has not invented the Homeless Barbie, the Abortion Barbie, the Alcoholic Barbie, or the S&M Bondage Barbie. As far as special editions, Barbie still has not come out as a criminal—she has, however, come out in special editions of fairy tales (never a witch), "true" history, careers, and in different ethnicities—different from white, that is. There is no northern Barbie, but the Southern Beauty Barbie features "today's Southern belle with charm and style!"

Barbie

Barbie doesn't have holes in her clothes (unless placed there by Bob Mackie); she doesn't ever walk because she has a plane, boat, Corvette, bicycle, horse, roller blades, and Ken. Barbie doesn't have a favorite color other than hot pink; she has one logo and no last name. Actually, I once heard her last name is Roberts; so, where are her people from? Barbie does not have holiday sets for Chanukah or Ramadan, although she does have them for Easter and Christmas. Kmart does not have a Kmart Barbie, but there is a Wal-Mart, Saks Fifth Avenue, Gap, Bloomingdale's, Avon, and Nichole Miller Barbie (the designer whose ties cost \$60).

It is also easier to look at what Barbie isn't. Barbie is never sad, is always available, and "saves the day" in every story written about her. Barbie is timeless; she existed in the days of the *Mayflower*, she was in Oz as Dorothy, and has run for president in several U.S. elections. She has never been a cook but has been a chef; has never been a construction worker but has been a fashion designer. She has been a soloist, a rock star, and the mythical tooth fairy. Barbie is exclusively thematic; Ken, Christie, and the rest are occasionally given professions.

■ The Bitch Has Everything

She does. From the pink condo, to the swimming pool, to the RV, to the recording stage, to more friends than anyone. Everyone loves Barbie and Barbie loves everyone. Barbie proves to us that if we try hard enough, we can own anything and everything. Barbie always succeeds. She becomes whatever she sets her mind to—she influences generations of children and adults and is a perpetual reminder of all that is good, wholesome, and pink in our lives. Barbie is a true American. She stands for the family values that our country holds dear. She is strictly heterosexual, self-providing, philanthropic, and moral. She is also ready to bring "other" people into her life, no matter what color or ethnicity.

Barbie moves in and out of social circles with ease. Her plate is always filled with charity organizations and doing "good." The "Love to Read" Barbie comes with two children (one black and one white) and a book; for every LTR Barbie sold, Mattel donates a dollar to the Reading Is Fundamental organization. As consumers, we are able to support reading by purchasing this doll. That makes all the difference.

■ Intercourse Barbie

As much as Barbie is a virgin in sexual relationships, she is a whore in the corporate world. Barbie has "been in bed" with more Fortune 500 members than anyone. She has worked in and owned her own Pizza Hut and McDonald's, she is a special Wal-Mart edition; she is also the star of *Baywatch* and a perennial guest in Happy Meals. Disney's Epcot Center

features a Magical World of Barbie show, complete with dancers, singers, and fireworks. Avon regularly offers a special edition Barbie, and Hallmark has Barbie Christmas ornaments, a new one issued each year. I already mentioned the Benetton Barbie, my unlikely find in a broken-down Turkish airport. eBay is filled with bidding searchers for the rare Holiday Barbie each year. Barbie wanders in and out of corporate headquarters with ease. Companies know that if they tap into her resources, it is a quick ride to higher profits. No one really wants the tiny hamburger in the child's meal; they all are looking for the Barbie—which one is she? the Kenyan? the ballerina? or the wedding Barbie? As a professional, Barbie chooses from her cellular phone, her video camera, and numerous pink briefcases for "just the right thing" for breaking that glass ceiling.

As a professional, Barbie has set records for changing vocations. In the early days, she was featured as a nurse, a baby-sitter, and a secretary. Within months of political correctness, she became a doctor, a pilot, and a businesswoman. Naturally, many of her careers still smack of nurturing; how can one avoid it with a perpetual pink motif? One of my favorite fashion sets is the Caring Careers Fashion Gift Set. These "play pieces for Barbie at work" include a firefighter suit with pink trim, a teacher set, and a veterinarian's smock. Dr. Barbie is a pediatrician with a little black child and a little white child, all adorned in pink and blue. Astronaut Barbie came out in the 1980s and reappeared in the late 1990s. As a part of the Career Collection, this Barbie first appeared as a space pioneer. A newer version highlights Space Week and NASA and "encourages children of all ages to discover the past and future of the exploration in space." All of the boxes featuring careers have the slogan We Girls Can Do Anything! ribboned across the front. Police Officer Barbie is a "friend to all in the community! In her glittery evening dress, Police Officer Barbie shines with pride at the Police Awards Ball. Everyone applauds as she receives the Best Police Officer Award for her courageous acts in the community." PO Barbie comes with a badge and a short formal gown for the ball.

No group of careers could be complete without acknowledging our armed forces. As sergeants and majors, these booted girls march to the beat of proud, patriotic America. Choosing a favorite would be hard, but, well, okay, I guess mine was the Desert Storm Barbie. "Wearing authentic desert battle dress uniforms" of camouflage material—Sergeant Barbie is a medic, and she's ready for duty! Staff Sergeant Ken is ready too! Their berets bear the distinctive 101st Airborne unit insignia with the motto: Rendezvous with Destiny. Both are proud, patriotic Americans serving their country wherever they are needed."

Rounding up the professions, 1992 ushered in the Barbie for President Gift Set. This was a Toys R Us limited edition. "Barbie hits the campaign trail in spectacular style! Dressed in her winning red and gold suit she's the picture perfect candidate to get out the vote. Then, at her inaugural ball, the festive crowd cheers as Barbie enters in a sensational sparkling gown sprinkled with silver stars!" We girls can do anything. How about the \$75 Statue of Liberty Barbie? Holding the torch of freedom, this golden-haired doll stands perched on a plastic island, adorned with a shimmery crown, beckoning all who will listen to join her in liberty and justice for all. Of course, it may be the only way we can see Lady Liberty, as all visits to her shores are now forbidden.

■ Herstory

Barbie's other identities lie in ethnic and historical roots. Not satisfied with the existential Barbie, Mattel allowed Barbie to revisit, ergo, rewrite the past through a series of historical dolls. Each doll belongs to a collector's set, usually priced from \$5 to \$100 more than a regular Barbie. A collector's doll should be kept in her box, appreciating in value as the ages tick by.

One must take a little boat down *It's a Small World* in Disneyland or Disneyworld to understand how ethnicity is defined by a corporation. Sailing down that channel, listening to hundreds of little dolls sing—constantly—we see different peoples grouped together on their continents. Northern countries show a preponderance of buildings and clothing—countries from south of the equator seem to exhibit dolls wearing scant clothing, selling vegetables, taking a siesta, or climbing trees. No buildings are evident in Africa, and only huts appear in the South American countries. Taking *It's a Small World* seriously as a metaphor for The World, we are able to understand the consciousness that constructed Mattel's line of ethnic Barbies.

Imagine we are sailing through our own small world and meeting these diverse Barbies; we hear their words describing their heritage. Each Barbie is distinct in native dress and manner. The Jamaican Barbie comes with large hoop earrings and a red bandanna. Many exclaim how like Aunt Jemima or a slave she looks. Jamaican Barbie claims that her people speak patois, "a kind of Jamaica talk" filled with English and African words. She also insists Jamaicans are a very "happy" people and are "filled with boonoonooos, much happiness." Culturally, this Barbie teaches us that her country is filled with higglers (women merchants) who sell their food in open markets. Along with pictures of Bob Marley, sugar cane, and palm trees, the Jamaican Barbie is prettily packed in hot pink.

In keeping with the island theme, we move to the Polynesian Barbie. The box never mentions which island she is from, somewhere within the thirteen groups of tropical islands. We are told that people live closely together and are kind to one another. Polynesians like luaus and like to eat.

Another Barbie "of color" is the Indian Barbie. Unlike her island cousins, her box shows a picture of a building, the Taj Mahal. We are reminded that India is a very old country and that most people eat only vegetables and rice "with their fingers." It is not mentioned whether or not Indians are happy or kind. None of these Barbies discuss their skin color or hair texture, and there is no mention of physical attributes. Naturally, they are all standing on tiptoe. Puerto Rican Barbie is dressed all in white as she readies herself for, dare I say? Her confirmation. No self-respecting Puerto Rican girlfriend I have ever done anything but shriek in horror at this plastic sista.

As we visit northern Europe, we do not meet amalgamated Barbies. For instance, there are no British Isles Barbies or Scandinavian Barbies. Each has her own country. The German Barbie looks splendid in her milkmaid's outfit with long blonde braids. We are welcomed to a country that is known for its "breathtaking beauty and hard-working people." Evidently the south of the equator Barbies do not work, or at least not hard.

Mentioned on the box are modern cities, museums, art galleries, and industries. The Norwegian Barbie tells us of her mythological tradition and describes her people as "tall, sturdy, fair-skinned, blonde and blue eyed." Food is not mentioned nearly as often on northern Barbies as on the southern counterparts. Evidently the farther north one moves, the less people talk or think about food.

There is no specifically American Barbie. However, there is a Native American Barbie in the Dolls of the World Collection. NA Barbie is a part of a "proud Indian heritage, rich in culture and tradition." Long ago her people belonged to a tribe. Her dress is that of a Plains Indian, yet she describes homes like those constructed by eastern Indians. Three times she mentions her pride in her people.

What's going on here? Mattel has defined ethnicity as other than white. Regular blonde Barbie is the standard from which the "others" come. As it emulates the dominant culture, the norm is Barbie, without a title. All other Barbies are qualified by their language, foods, and "native" dances. Attempting to be multicultural, parents buy these dolls for their children to teach them about "other" people. No "regular" Barbie ever talks about her regular diet, the personality of "her" people, and her customs. Only the designated "ethnic" dolls have those qualifications. Much like the sign in the local Kmart that designates the location of ethnic hair products, Barbie has otherized dolls into dominant and marginal cultures. Barbie's whiteness privileges her to not be questioned; she is the standard against which all others are measured.

■ The New Social Studies

A couple of years after the ethnic Barbie line, Mattel introduced the American Stories Collection, which featured a Civil War Nurse Barbie, a Pilgrim Barbie, a Pioneer Barbie, and an American Indian Barbie (there she is again). Each doll comes with a storybook that places Barbie in the middle of essential historical action. Each book ends with Barbie "saving the day" and changing history for the better.

As you have probably guessed, the Pilgrim Barbie meets Squanto and he teaches her how to plant corn: "he wasn't savage at all." She grows a successful crop of corn and decides to share it with her neighbors; hence, the first Thanksgiving. And Barbie was there. Conveniently neglected are the Pilgrims' grave robbing, confiscation of Indian lands, and, yes, the sticky matter of genocide.

Since Betsy Ross already made the flag in 1776, Colonial Barbie decides to make a quilt to celebrate the thirteen colonies. The quilt was embroidered "Happy Birthday America," and Barbie and her female helpers were congratulated for it and treated "with great respect." Western Barbie cleverly brings dried apples on the long journey during the westward expansion. When her friends get hungry, the apples are produced to make a delicious apple pie. American Indian Barbie takes care of a papoose, parentage unknown, and tells stories to the little Indian villagers. I will stop here, fearing an overload of saccharine.

Each book is signed on the back with a personal note from the author. History becomes firm in the eyes of the reader as it is legitimized by the author. Here are a few excerpts:

During my research for *Western Promise*, I learned a lot about pioneers. The more I read, the more I admired these courageous, self-reliant people.

Even though it's fun to read books, I still love to hear someone tell a good story! In the early days of the American Indians, there were no books or schools like there are today.

In writing this story for you, I have learned so much! What I noticed most about the story of the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving is how the Native Americans became their friends and helped these strangers in a new land.

I hope you enjoyed imagining Barbie as a colonial girl. Perhaps you will think of her on the next 4th of July and what it must have been like during the early days when America was first "born."

Consumers are told that history is being taught in a friendly way through Mattel. Children now place Barbie within historical contexts in order to understand what *really* happened.

Fairy tales and fiction are not immune from Mattel's rewriting. The Children's Collection Series features heroines from different stories. "Childhood favorites 'come to life' with Barbie. Play out the story of Rapunzel." Barbie as Scarlett O'Hara promises to be one of the most successful dolls of the decade. Promoted in a thirty-minute infomercial by Cathy Lee Gifford (a TV Barbie), the doll is sold as essential for anyone who was affected by the novel or movie version of *Gone with the Wind*. "See Barbie as your favorite character, Scarlett," Cathy Lee advises us. She recalls that when she was a little girl, Barbie was her favorite doll and there is nothing more special than having her best friend become Scarlett. The line between reality and fantasy is blurred. Barbie acting as a character?

■ Barbie as Literary Text

In its merchandising Mattel recognizes the importance of reading and education, creating hundreds of types of reading materials that feature Barbie. Not satisfied with the toy market, Mattel has branched out to themes in magazines, books, newspapers, and film.

The Adventures with Barbie book series features a set of paperback books in which "Barbie stars in her own series of fabulous adventures that tie inspiring messages in with action, suspense and fun with friends—and set an example of independence, responsibility and kindness for young girls everywhere." *Barbie*, the magazine for girls, gives fashion tips, promotes new Barbie themes, teaches fun crafts, and gives beauty advice. The comic market promotes *Barbie Fashion* and *Barbie*. Both comics are monthly and tell "stylish stories" and give "trend-setting tips." Little Golden Books for toddlers include several Barbie titles, including *Very Busy Barbie* (Barbie as a model who gives up her career), *A Picnic Surprise* (Barbie finding an old lady's puppy instead of having fun), and *Barbie, the Big*

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Splash (Barbie's photo shoot is spoiled, but she is able to take disappointment). We constantly are bombarded by the altruistic blonde (in the books she is usually monocolored) giving up something sensational for the good of all humankind. Little girls are taught at an early age that it is more important to give up one's own goal than to disappoint someone else. Disney did it well with *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. It is a female's place to sacrifice for the good of others. What about Pocahontas? Esmeralda? You get the point.

Not to be outdone by three-foot-tall competitors, adults have their own Barbie literature: *Barbie Collector's Magazine* and several weekly and monthly newspapers, the most circulated paper being *Miller's Market Report: News, Advice and Collecting Tips for Barbie Doll Investors*. The tabloid features Barbie events; in an April issue, nineteen "don't miss" gatherings were advertised, including the Great Barbie Show of Southern California, Barbie Comes to Bloomingdale's, Seventh Annual Barbie Grants-A-Wish, and many regional conventions. Barbie clubs adorn the United States from sea to sequined shining sea. There is an annual Barbie world convention, classes on Barbie, and, a couple of years ago, a Barbie summit in New York. To emulate a global consciousness, Mattel organized this summit for women and girls to caucus about their needs and desires from Mattel for the twenty-first century. Always the educator, Barbie proves to us that reading and schooling cannot be left behind. Math becomes essential in order to add up the values of vintage dolls and collectors' items. Barbie, for many, is a full-time occupation. Barbie is the only non-human figure in the famed wax museum of Hollywood. Naturally, she has her own Barbie Boutique on Fifth Avenue adjoining F.A.O. Schwartz, a store that provides myriads of books, magazines, videos, and objects devoted to Barbie. The market flourishes.

What could possibly be next?

Are Barbies good for children? Should our girls play with them? How many Barbies should a child own? Do the dolls teach us what true beauty is? Can a child have self-esteem and not look like Barbie? Should we bend to peer pressure and allow our children to reside in pink-trimmed junior condos, dreaming of far-away places and exotic men? Does Barbie assist in constructing childhood, consciousness? Do Barbie-centered websites increase the obsession with pink consumerism and girliness?

Of course she does—just like any other feature of kinderculture. The effect of the Barbie curriculum is idiosyncratic—for some it facilitates conformity; for others, it inspires resistance. Multiple readings aside, Barbie does operate within the boundaries of particular cultural logics. She does celebrate whiteness, blonde whiteness in particular, as a standard for feminine beauty; she does reify anorexic figures coupled with large breasts as objects of male desire. She does support unbridled consumerism as a reason for being. She never questions American virtue and supports the erasure of the colonial genocide in America's past. Make no mistake, she is a Christian, not a Jew, and certainly not a Muslim—mainstream and not countercultural. No poor girl is Barbie as she repetitively displays her upper-middle-class credentials. Again, the curriculum may not take, no effect is guaranteed, but we must be aware of the terrain on which Barbie operates.

Barbie enthusiasts feel great anticipation about the next line of Barbies. Having featured professions, movie stars, stories, sports, and fashion, could Barbie ever run out of

Barbie

themes? By maintaining authenticity, Mattel is able to continue rewriting history and life. Re-invention of Barbie is a constant in Mattel world. As Barbie adapts to current lifestyles and girl-fads, cross-marketing with Disney and Hollywood gives her extra earning power.

I'd like to see Barbie a bit more realistic: in keeping with real-life professions, wouldn't we be wise to wait for a factory worker Barbie, a prostitute Barbie, a drug pusher Barbie—can a pimp Ken be far behind? What about more politically active Barbies? Protest Barbie, chained to her dream house, Bisexual Barbie, complete with both Ken and Midge (or Steve and Christie)? Green Barbie? Bo-ho Barbie? Neo-Marxist Barbie?

The mind wearies with the possibility. One knows for certain, however, Barbie is with us: (13) Yea, verily, she who is known as Barbie will walk the earth through the millennium, being praised by both women and men and ushering in a new day for all humankind.

* Parts of this chapter also appeared in *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (2004). Ed: Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.