



BARBIE PLAY AND THE PUBLIC PEDAGOGY OF ABJECTION

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Abstract

The iconic Barbie doll and young girls' Barbie play, in particular, is an ambiguous site where the distinctions between Barbie as a normative gendered object and girls' subjective desiring and fantasizing through the doll play, collide in an act of abjection. Using Julia Kristeva's (1982) feminist theory of abjection, we substantiate our argument with two ethnographic cases of preadolescent girls' transgressive Barbie play, which includes homosexual enactment, gender bending, and violent acts. We analyze these acts as replacing the dominant symbolic order, or what Kristeva calls the *Law of the Father*, with the maternal, affective, (pre)symbolic bodily performance. Furthermore, we propose to view young girls' Barbie play as a form of public pedagogy that offers opportunities for a productive disruption and critique of the hegemonic gender regimes.

Keywords: abject play, abjection, Barbie doll, Barbie play, girls' culture, public pedagogy, feminist pedagogy

Barbie Play and the Public Pedagogy of Abjection

The Barbie doll is an influential commodity in Western cultures and is saturated with historical and cultural implications and meanings. Barbie has an iconic status due to its consumer popularity and is marketed as an ideal doll for girls that symbolizes a perfect version of White, middle-class womanhood (Blair, 2006; Lord, 1994; Rand, 1995; Rogers, 1999; Smilan, 2015; Steinberg, 1997; Whitney, 2012). Barbie's appearance on the toy market in the United States at the end of the 1950s was symptomatic of the strategic marketing shift from meeting parental demand for toys as training tools to prepare children for adulthood toward appealing directly to young people's own desires. According to toy historian Garry Cross (1997), toymaker giants, such as Mattel® and Hasbro®, transformed "an industry that primarily addressed the needs and values of parents into one [that] appealed directly to the longings and imaginations of children" (p. 5). Barbie's image as a "liberated teenager, almost a young woman" (Cross, 1997, p. 172) was a radical change from previously popular baby dolls that had to be nurtured. As Cross notes, "[i]nstead of teaching girls how to diaper a baby or use floor cleaners," the Barbie doll became an "education in consumption—going to the hair-dresser and shopping for that perfect evening gown for the big dance" (p. 173). Barbie seemed to lead girl players away from domestic responsibilities and parental control into a grown-up fantasy of fashion and dating, which appealed to their sense of power and independence.

Barbie doll has been a subject of inquiry in critical theory, feminist, and popular/visual culture studies for nearly three decades (Blair, 2006; Edut, 1998; Lord, 1994; Motz, 1983; Rogers, 1999; Smilan, 2015; Steinberg, 1997; Whitney, 2012). While most inquiries agree that Barbie is primarily a consumer product driven by Mattel's corporate agenda, which markets an idealized femininity with its emphasis on slim body, fashion, and an upper-middle class lifestyle; a small

number of studies—particularly those that examine young girls’ and/or authors’ own childhood Barbie play—paint a more complex and ambiguous picture about Barbie’s role as a sociocultural artifact. Drawing on phenomenological, ethnographic, and autoethnographic modes of inquiry, these studies claim that the doll is not always used by actual girls according to the dominant script created by Mattel (Esfahani & Carrington, 2012; Kuther & McDonald, 2004; Lord, 1994; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Whitney, 2012).

While viewing Barbie as an object of consumption with particular physical characteristics and exploring the underlying socioeconomic forces that have shaped the doll’s semiotic meaning are indeed necessary to fully understand its cultural impact, this perspective largely discounts how children of various ages and genders actually play with, use, and misuse their Barbie dolls. As an extension of the line of inquiry, which unpacks the process of girls’ Barbie play, we propose to look at Barbie as a rather ambiguous site where the distinctions between Barbie-as-object and children’s subjective desiring and fantasizing through Barbie collide in an act of abjection (Kristeva, 1982). Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s (1982) feminist scholarship, we argue that Barbie play is an ambiguous and often transgressive act through which young girls, who fantasize through Barbie as an iconic symbol of perfect womanhood, experience self-otherness, self-rejection, and incompleteness and are compelled to break Barbie’s symbolic order. To illustrate our argument, we discuss two case studies with preadolescent girls whose Barbie play ranges from homosexual enactment to limb mutilation. Furthermore, we propose to view Barbie play as a form of the public pedagogy of abjection that would offer multiple opportunities for disruption and critique of the normative gender regimes both in and outside of the art classroom.

Barbie as a Consumer Object and Beyond

In academic scholarship, the understanding of Barbie has largely relied on criticism of its iconic status as a perfect model of femininity that may have a limiting effect on girls’ values and lifestyles (Blair, 2006; Collins, et al., 2012; Edut, 1998; Lord, 1994; Motz, 1983; Rogers, 1999; Smilan, 2016; Steinberg, 1997; Whitney, 2012). One of the prominent criticisms by some critical studies, feminist, and social science authors is that Barbie embodies a “corporate curriculum”

created by Mattel (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997, p. 5; also see Blair, 2006; Kuther & McDonald, 2004; Rice, et al., 2016), which may potentially influence girls’ obsessive focus on shopping and fashion, and striving for an overly-thin body. Here, the Barbie doll is often seen as a socioeconomic, cultural, and aesthetic object that represents both corporate and normative patriarchal codes of White, heterosexual, middle-class femininity (Collins et al., 2012; Steinberg, 1997; Whitney, 2012).

According to Erica Rand (1995), Barbie’s hegemonic femininity reflects Mattel’s corporate hegemony, which exists as a “moving equilibrium” between the company’s marketing strategies and the consumer. The company’s basic goal is to continuously reshape the image of Barbie as a “good role model” and an “acceptable fantasy object” for girls based on new consumer demands while keeping its own economic power intact (p. 29). Rand provides an eloquent example of this hegemonic cycle of power: “When critics complained about the unwholesome sexual fantasies [that] Barbie’s breasts might engender, Mattel portrayed her as an antigreaser; when critics complained about Barbie’s antifeminist message, Mattel made her the girl who ‘can do anything’” (p. 29). The company always makes sure it publicly addresses the demands of consumers by releasing new lines of Barbie dolls (i.e., ethnic, astronaut, doctor, teacher, etc.) while maintaining the iconic image of Barbie as a perfect doll for girls and leaving her signature markers unchanged (i.e., a hyper-thin body, a love for shopping and dressing up, a heteronormative romance with Ken, etc.) (Collins, et al., 2012; DuCille, 1994; Whitney, 2012). Furthermore, some authors note that the much-celebrated multicultural Barbie dolls, which are aimed to appeal to girls of color, simply perpetuate the narrative of otherness and function as exotic “accessories” in relation to the iconic White, blonde original (DuCille, 1994; Whitney, 2012). As Whitney asserts, “while Mattel has been creating and producing an array of visually different Barbie dolls, such production works to reinforce the discourse that there is only one Barbie doll, and she is white” (2012, p. 151).

While recognizing the limitations of Barbie’s dominant script as a consumer artifact is crucial, its function in girls’ play appears to be rather ambiguous. When critical scholar and educator Shirley Steinberg (1997) describes her own childhood play with her large collection of Barbies, she recalls her

obsession with trying on different outfits and dating Ken. She states:

I knew at [an] early age that Barbie ... must have an “outfit” for every occasion. ... 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 would go by before I wore something twice. While I was 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? (p. 208)

The concluding question is of key importance when interpreting Barbie’s influence on actual girls, which led us to ask similar questions when approaching our study. Does Barbie directly influence their values and behaviors? Can we view these influences separately from other aspects of girls’ lives, such as race, class, sexuality, and other contextual factors? How is the doll’s meaning constructed through actual girls’ play? Despite being a prolific Barbie critic, Steinberg concludes that the “effect of the Barbie curriculum is idiosyncratic” as it “facilitates conformity” in some girls while “inspir[ing] resistance” in others (p. 217).

The ambiguity of actual Barbie play has been described by a number of feminist, cultural, and ethnographic scholars who are themselves former Barbie players (Lord, 1994; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000). For instance, feminist political scientist Alida Brill calls Barbie her “liberator” who was “a woman and not a baby,” and who led her away from the domestic fantasies of “getting married and having children” and into the world of aspiring career women who were still a minority in the 1960s (quoted in Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000, p. 175). Together with her best friend, Brill designed and sewed Barbie’s clothing, which her parents could not afford to buy, and dreamed of becoming a professional designer.

Feminist scholar Erica Rand (1995), who collected multiple stories of childhood Barbie play from adult women of various economic backgrounds and ethnicities, claims that the Barbie doll is a rather open-ended text that allows for multiple readings and is often used by young players in quite unpredictable ways. From multiple accounts of the doll’s mutilation to Barbie-gone-poor to Barbie turning gay to sexual fantasies surrounding Barbie’s breasts, the stories collected

and re-told by Rand fall largely outside of Mattel’s grand narrative. While some of the girl players who created these deviant narratives loved their Barbies and also enacted dating, dress-up, and other Mattel-sanctioned storylines, others had no fond feelings for the doll itself but used it as a tool for acting out their fantasies.

Some researchers who conducted ethnographic studies by interviewing and/or observing young girls playing with their Barbie dolls, describe similar instances of non-compliant and often deviant acts. Developmental psychologists and educators Tara Kuther and Erin McDonald (2004) who interviewed twenty 6th grade girls about their childhood Barbie play, claim that most girls reported “torture play” such as cutting Barbie’s hair, painting her body, and limb mutilation (p. 42). They note that the girls participating in their study seemed resistant to social pressures of gender expectations and the doll’s “perfect” appearance, which compelled them to defy its dominant script in their play. Likewise, youth studies scholars Naghmeh Nouri Esfahani and Victoria Carrington (2015), who conducted a series of participant observations of six 5-9 year-old girls’ Barbie play in their homes, point out an ambivalence and unpredictability of how girls treated and manipulated their Barbies. They argue that Barbie’s material plasticity (that is, her being a toy made of a mutable and moldable plastic) contributes to the “fluid nature” of the doll and offsets her “rigid feminine appearance as a cultural icon” during girls’ play (p. 124). Young girl participants in their study “re-scripted” and repurposed their dolls by designing their own scenarios, which reflected their cultural and lived experiences (p. 130).

As researchers who explore the interdisciplinary intersections of cultural, feminist, and girlhood studies and feminist art education we, too, are compelled to examine the ambivalence and fluidity of Barbie as an artifact of girls’ consumption and play. Agreeing with Rand (1995), we recognize “the impossibility of judging how and what cultural products signify by looking at the artifacts apart from the consumers and the (partial) context that they can provide” (p. 146). We hope the insights drawn from our study will be helpful for visual culture and art educators who seek to understand young people’s engagement with popular consumer artifacts (which we see as form of public pedagogy) and develop a relevant and engaging curriculum that promotes students’ self-reflexivity and engages them in a discussion about gender and social justice (Cosier, 2007; Keifer-Boyd, 2010; Levy,

2008). Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) feminist theory of abjection, the following section further examines girls' Barbie play as an ambiguous, disruptive site that calls for a violation of Barbie's symbolic order and an affective interruption of the normative gender regimes. We employ Kristeva's theory as an epistemological framework, which guides our interpretations of the particular, context-specific instances of Barbie play, rather than a methodology or a research method.

Barbie Play as a Pedagogical Site of Abjection

We view the ambiguity of the Barbie doll play as an expression of "abjection," as Kristeva (1982) uses the term. According to Kristeva, to abject means to express a rejection of the essentialist meaning of identity which separates the self from the "other" and the subject from the object, thereby establishing normative gender binaries. Her insight allows us to see Barbie play as going beyond girls' desire for a "clean and proper" body demanded by the patriarchal gender norms (Kristeva, 1982, p. 102). Viewing girls' Barbie play as an act of abjection illuminates Kristeva's ceaseless proposal to bring back a *mother-driven symbolic order*,¹ which refuses the deeply embedded social/cultural dualistic thinking guided by the *Law of the Father*. She critically views this symbolic Law of the Father as problematic because it separates mind from body, proper from improper, purity from impurity, life from death, and order from chaos through prohibition and sacrifice and makes these dualistic oppositions natural. She laments the logic of separation, which constrains women by asking them to maintain a "clean and proper [body] in order to be fully symbolic" and, as a result, stifles their creativity and silences their bodies (Kristeva, 1982, p. 102).

Unlike the dualistic, masculine Law of the Father, the mother-driven symbolic order displaces the preeminent separation in a way that accepts and welcomes "anything that breaks boundaries (flow, drain, discharge)" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 103). This logic promotes a filthy, disorderly, or uncivilized body—often discouraged and undesirable—by marking it as "nutritious," "sanguine" and "'natural' maternal" (p. 103). From this perspective, the act of abjecting Barbie through transgressive play speaks to a feminist desire to revolt against the masculine logic that demands that girls sanitize and mask their seemingly "flashy"

¹ We define this term in the following paragraph.

language and practices in order to submit to the dominant order. This subversive trope of female liberation from the masculine symbolic order acknowledges girls' lived experiences with Barbie. This subversion is shaped by the significance of the flesh and willful and excessive transgression of the social norms, or what Kristeva calls the *jouissance*.²

The abjecting Barbie rhetoric allows us to redesignate the feminine as "an other without a name" through which girls' and women's subjective and diverse experiences can displace a hegemonic female identity (Kristeva, 1982, p. 58). That is, "an-other-without-a-name" renounces a female identity that is named by and attributed to masculine rules of language systems, which limit diverse female experiences, meanings, and roles. This approach, as articulated by Kristeva (1982), refuses to define both the subject who names and imagines an object and the object that "ceaselessly flee[s] in a systematic quest of [a subject's] desire" (p. 1). With this mission to make the feminine ambivalent and disidentified, the abjecting Barbie play invites us to focus on a girl's "place" (*where* she is) rather than "being" (*who* she is). Acknowledging her "place" leads us to examine her situationally driven acts and not reduce girls' play with Barbie into a singular, homogeneous, or totalizable experience. According to Kristeva, the situational and *straying*³ nature of these acts is invaluable, as it allows girls and women to constantly question existing gender boundaries. From this perspective, as a site of abjection, Barbie play has the potential to disturb identities, social systems, and orders.

With Kristeva's (1982) celebratory vision for abjection, in refiguring Barbie as a locus for heterogeneous and ceaselessly subversive acts, our study cannot exclude affect in understanding Barbie play outside of patriarchal symbolic order. According to Kristeva (1982), affect, as a pre-verbal practice, offers a "propitious ground for a sublimating discourse" by transforming unconscious desire and repression into ambiguous signals (signifiers) marked by the "vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain," "making [the] conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant" (p. 7). Bridging mind to body and conscious to unconscious, the affect present in the abjecting Barbie play offers girls a way to experience

² In Kristeva's theory, *jouissance* denotes bodily pleasure derived from transgressing the normative patriarchal cultural codes and breaking out of the fixed social position of a female subject.

³ This term generally refers to unruly, disruptive behaviors.

a heterogeneous *she*, in which they can embrace the other(s) in herself through Barbie. Girls' objectification of the self-as-other through Barbie play, thus, has a potential to recognize the Father as lack and loss rather than the Mother by dissociating the maternal with the impure, uncanny, and monstrous. Ultimately, this affective process expands the dimensions of girls' imaginary practice with a drive towards non-objectification, non-identification, and non-differentiation—which works to reinstate the maternal order of (pre)symbolic flesh.

In the following sections of this article, we draw on Kristeva's theoretical insights to interpret two ethnographic cases of preadolescent girls' Barbie play as sites of abjection. We admit that our interpretations may have a particular focus on celebration, rather than critique, of girls' transgressive behaviors during their Barbie play. For example, the instances which involved violent limb mutilation and physical abuse of Barbie in the second case study may be interpreted differently from another feminist perspective—namely as behaviors which may denote the internalization of patriarchal gender norms where domestic violence towards girls and women is a common occurrence. Although we acknowledge a theoretical limitation of our interpretations, we believe that they accurately reflect Kristeva's framework, which theorizes girls' and women's acts of abjection as existing outside of the patriarchal symbolic law.

Case One:⁴ Gay Barbies and a Murdered Ken

The case of Anna Beth, an 8-year-old girl, and her Barbie play comes from a larger body of our participant observation research conducted in the summer of 2010 with Anna Beth⁵ and her 10-year-old friend and neighbor Alan (both White, middle-class preadolescents residing in a Southeastern town). Using a child-friendly Flip video camera that Alan's stepmother gave him for Christmas,

⁴. Our research was conducted in two different sites. Both instances involved children of our close colleagues and/or friends and we have met them prior to our study. While the first case was a larger inquiry into the preadolescents' video-making practices, which took place during a 5-week period, the second study involved only a few visits to document children's Barbie play. While we took field notes after each visit, we used videos recorded by our research participants as major artifacts of analysis. The authors obtained Institution Review Board (IRB) approval and signed image release permission forms prior to conducting research.

⁵. All children's names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Alan and Anna Beth enjoyed recording and re-watching each other's doll play. Anna Beth's doll play involved different action figures, including her favorite *Toy Story* character, the cowgirl Jessie, Liv dolls (fashionable and slim yet flat-chested dolls designed to look like younger teens), and a few Barbie and Ken dolls that she claimed to be her younger sister's favorite playthings. On the few occasions that she played with Barbies, she handled them with a rough, wild energy. Her abrupt, tomboyish gestures, which seemed to fit so organically with Jessie's role as a fearless and mischievous horse rider in a cowboy hat and pantsuit, immediately seemed to mark her Barbie play as excessive. One particular episode of Anna Beth's Barbie play deserves a closer look as it illuminates an indomitable desire for the affective resignification of Barbie's patriarchal symbolic order (or what Kristeva calls the Law of the Father) and the disruption of the binary logic of the "proper-clean and improper-dirty" female body (Kristeva, 1982, p. 72).

"Once upon a time there were two Barbies," began Anna Beth, moving two blonde Barbie dolls on the bedroom floor while Alan made an impromptu video recording of her performance. One of the dolls had a blue evening gown that was torn and partly exposed her naked chest, while another was wearing skinny jeans and tank top. "One was called Barbie Boobs and the other one was called Vanessa," Anna Beth continued. Her spontaneous narration immediately slipped into the transgressive space of demarcating Barbie's exposed breasts, which, to an 8-year-old girl, signify the desirable, grown-up female body, which is yet unattainable to her. The term "boobs," however, is frivolous and somewhat offensive and is often viewed as dirty and the opposite of clean and proper "breasts." Such a language, as part of the sociocultural symbolic order, has patriarchal origins, having being born out of the male desire to objectify and claim women's bodies by marking them as proper versus improper and dirty versus clean. Yet in the context of Anna Beth's play, the word "boobs" serves as Barbie's nickname and therefore reads as subversive to the doll's iconic image as a perfect (that is, clean and proper) woman's body that is unattainable for Anna Beth as a preteen. This functions as a symbolic fracture, a slippage, a leak that undermines that same patriarchal law that produced the dirty/clean and proper/improper binaries.

After this initial challenge, Anna Beth proceeded to the next. "[Barbie

Boobs and Vanessa] were *gay* until,” she chuckled, “a man called Kent came along.” She then grabbed a Ken doll and made the two Barbies kiss in front of him (see Figure 1). “They were kissing,” she said, laughing with delight. “But then Vanessa threw down Barbie Boobs and went out with Kent.” Her narration was supplemented by a vicious gesture of slamming Barbie in a torn dress against the floor. This scene is yet another slippage into abjection that paints the two Barbies as not just girlfriends, like they are supposed to be in the Mattel script, but lovers. Homosexuality is considered a threat to an established social order, and the homosexual body is seen as polluted, unruly, and unnatural. It is the “other” body that we have to reject and expel in order to maintain the normative boundaries of our sexualities (Cosier, 2007; Halberstam, 1998). Yet in Anna Beth’s play, being gay actually precedes and is interrupted by the male figure’s appearance and, therefore, denaturalizes Barbie’s heterosexuality as a social norm or law.



Figure 1. A video frame of Anna Beth’s Barbie Play recorded in 2010 by Alan. Published with permission.

Anna Beth’s performance unfolded with further normative transgressions. As Vanessa abandoned her girlfriend and went out with Kent, she demanded that he carry her on his back. “This is a Barbie way of loving each other,” narrated

Anna Beth with a sarcastic voice as she made Barbie-Vanessa climb on the Ken-Kent’s back as if he was the cowgirl Jessie’s horse. Frustrated, Kent then left Vanessa behind and ventured off to see his “ex-girlfriend” in Liv Doll Land, whom he also had to carry, this time in his hands. He then was caught in a vicious cycle of encounters with “ex-girlfriends” played by two Liv dolls (see Figure 2). The cycle repeated three times until he met Barbie-Vanessa once more, and this time she wanted to set things straight. “You’ve been cheating on me, bad boy!” Anna Beth yelled as Vanessa fought with Kent, pushing him to the ground. “So the three girls went out to dinner,” continued Anna Beth, “until they saw Kent again ... and can you guess what they did?” In the next instant, Kent was brutally attacked and buried under the pile of Liv dolls and Barbie-Vanessa (see Figure 3). Yet his assault went even further: “Then Barbie Boobs came along again. Can I join a Tug-O-War gang? Sure! It’s called Kill Kent!” Bam, bam, bam—Anna Beth repeatedly slammed Barbie Boobs against the pile of bodies until the doll’s dress slipped down, exposing its naked plastic back. “Kent was dead and they did not go to his funeral. The end.”



Figure 2. A video frame of Anna Beth’s Barbie Play recorded in 2010 by Alan. Published with permission.



Figure 3. A video frame of Anna Beth's Barbie Play recorded in 2010 by Alan. Published with permission.

In Anna Beth's scenario, a male doll figure acts as a heteronormative, possessive Law of the Father that views female bodies as ever-present, endless objects of desire. These seemingly objectified and idealized bodies, however, are unruly and disobedient and finally perform a collective attack on this unwanted invader. Ken's murder is full of affect and *jouissance* with a maternal, flashy, irrepressible force spilling out from and overflowing the scene. Barbie Boobs completes the overflow and, as a symbolic figure, completely disappears into this violent act of murdering the law that has created her in the first place. She vanishes into the nauseating chaos, into the (pre)symbolic, and into the initial maternal existence where the law is pure flesh and female bodies are not yet defined as dirty or clean, perfect or imperfect by any language, norm, or law.

Being performed for a boy behind the camera, Anna Beth's playful slippages into abjection appear even more provocative and deliberate. Alan's reactions, which included occasional groaning and moaning as he witnessed the narration unfold, and particularly when the Ken figure got attacked, seem to

further fuel the violent ending. In this process, the Barbie dolls came to embody Anna Beth's imaginary self-as-other that expelled their perfect, clean bodies into the realm of abjection. As in any other girl's play, Barbie-as-object is a rupture between the desired (iconic object) and the desiring (girl subject) that is ambiguous and irreconcilable and, therefore, triggers the maternal symbolic (or what Kristeva called "semiotic") impulses that defy a girl's self-identification and self-objectification within the social order or the Law of the Father. Precisely because Barbie is an unobtainable, uncannily perfect object of female (and male) desire that can never be fulfilled, it can provoke a girl player to lose herself in the other, heterogeneous "I" as a "braided, woven, [and] ambivalent flux" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10).

Case Two: Butch-Femme Barbie Play

Our participant observation of the Barbie play by a 9-year-old girl Stephanie and her 9-year-old neighbor friend Jeff (White, middle-class children from a small Midwestern town), took place in the summer of 2009. The children frequently played together after school. Stephanie received a supersize Barbie doll as a gift just several months before our research, and it was their favorite play item at the time. One afternoon, we brought a video camera when we visited Stephanie's house and placed it on the patio to see how the children respond to it. Stephanie and Jeff were playing together on the patio as usual. When Stephanie first saw a camera on a tripod, she playfully but boldly asked, "Can I use your video camera?" Then, putting her hands together as if she were begging for something, she asked, "Please, please, please?" With permission, they both came close to the camera and started exploring it, searching for the "record" button, and clicking it. With a silly grin, Stephanie quickly stood in front of the camera, cheerfully introducing herself, saying, "Hello, welcome to Stupid Dumb Barbie Show," as if she were a television anchor. She then grabbed a Barbie doll by its long blond hair, lifted it in front of the camera lens, and said, "This is the stupid Barbie." Immediately, her friend Jeff mischievously pulled the doll away and took the Barbie's arm out to slap its head, while grabbing a handful of Barbie's hair to see Barbie's flashy pink earrings. Stephanie snatched it from Jeff's hand, hugged the doll in her arm, and pushed a button on the Barbie's back. A popular Barbie

soundtrack⁶ flowed into the air:

I'm a Barbie doll in a Barbie world.

Life in plastic, it's fantastic.

You can brush my hair and undress me everywhere.

Imagination, life is your creation.

I am a blonde bimbo, in the fantasy world.

Dress me up, make it tight, I am your dolly

You're my doll, rock 'n' roll, feel the glamour in pink

Kiss me here, touch me there, hanky panky

You can touch, you can play, if you say: "I'm always yours."

In response to the song, which provoked the desire for objectification in the symbolic order of Law of the Father, the duo giggled and immediately proceeded to inflict a series of brutalities on the doll. Stephanie forcefully turned the doll upside down, yelling, "You bad girl. Stupid." Violently, she flipped up the doll's pink, scanty miniskirt, uncovering her bottom. She mischievously made a flatulent sound and shouted as she laughed loudly, "Barbie, you fart. What a gross! So smelly. Obnoxious." She troubled Barbie's ideal body as defiled, filthy, and obscene, as if Stephanie herself was not a girl or the kind of normative girl upon whom such rules of femininity are socially imposed.

Stephanie's playful taunts intensified the physical brutishness (see Figure 4). Laughing, she then let Jeff hit the Barbie with its amputated leg and arm. Jeff laughed along with her as she continuously ridiculed the doll verbally. She yanked Barbie's hair, banged it on the floor, and amputated its other arm and leg as well. Stephanie tucked her arm inside the t-shirt she was wearing and grabbed Barbie's amputated arm as if it was her own extended arm. Using the extended arm, she poked Barbie's uncovered bottom. Jeff grabbed Barbie's amputated legs to hit Stephanie. Stephanie ran around giggling, and Jeff chased her to hit her with the Barbie. The physically abused Barbie became a weapon. The outburst of violence left the Barbie doll a physical wreck.

⁶ Here, we refer to an iconic *Barbie Doll* song released in 1997 by the Danish pop group Aqua.



Figure 4. A video frame of Stephanie's Barbie Play recorded in 2009 by Stephanie and Jeff. Published with permission.

Stephanie's violent performance introduced an alternative form of girls' doll play in which a subversive act replaces a socially expected behavior marked by subservient, domestic-oriented, conventional femininity. This new form of play produced new meanings that disrupted norms regarding women's innocence, virtue, and self-restraint. Further, it transformed the consumerist doll play into the productive meaning-making while violence is involved. The Barbie's soundtrack continued to play:

Make me walk, make me talk, do whatever you please

I can act like a star, I can beg on my knees

Come jump in, bimbo friend, let's do it again,

Hit the town, fool around, let's go party.

In quite a different action, Stephanie's playful breaking of the taboo continued to take us into "a land of oblivion," in which she grounded herself in the dominant symbolic order to tear down the veil between the clean/proper and the filthy/

shameful. Soon after, Stephanie picked up the injured Barbie and abruptly started romancing it. As if she were a male lover, she hugged the Barbie in her arms and danced (see Figure 5). She sang a self-composed serenade, “I am falling in love with you, Barbie. You are my lover. I am proposing you to marry me.” She bent forward to kiss Barbie while lifting the doll. She gradually intensified the affection with a shower of kisses and hugs. She acted like she was filled with love and trying to recover Barbie from the tremendous injuries caused by previous violence. In this way, Barbie became a lesbian and their homosexual love was performed as a happy ending. This suggestive homosexual love play disrupted the socially imposed meanings regarding dominant gender roles that Mattel’s Barbie narrative puts forward.



Figure 5. A video frame of Stephanie’s Barbie Play recorded in 2009 by Stephanie and Jeff. Published with permission.

Stephanie’s subversive, carnivalesque act seems to stray onto tabooed ground, a place from which she draws her *jouissance* by challenging the ideal of what a woman’s behavior and body should be in the symbolic order of the patriarchy. This violent act is no longer an object/other that separates her from subjective homogeneity of “I,” but is rather an abject, “an abominable real, inaccessible except through *jouissance*” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). Through *jouissance*,

Stephanie alienates herself from the innocent subject “I” and creates an Other that makes the subject “I” repugnant. Her violent Barbie play transforms the Barbie doll into a site of exile from the normative social order of what girls should be. This exile exemplifies several domains of the abject body that girls’ subversive Barbie play draws upon: the masked nature of femininity, fluid subjectivity, desire, and *jouissance*. Stephanie’s flashy language and shameless behavior express, as Kristeva (1982) would point out, a nature that exists prior to becoming sanitized and masked by the masculine logic of the symbolic order. In this exile, instead of a feminine ideal, Barbie becomes a symbolically disrupted site where Stephanie uses stereotypically masculine language and behaviors toward Barbie, ranging from hatred to love. Such disruptive fantasy play both ambivalently crosses and stays bound to social expectations of heterosexual gender roles. This kind of play is never singular, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable but is essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic.

Afterthought: Barbie Play as a Site of Abject Pedagogy

As evidenced in the two case studies above, through young girls’ Barbie play, Barbie does not merely become an object of their desire and the cause of their consumerist behaviors; instead, their play uses the Barbie doll to (re)create cultural discourses, meanings, and ideas of what it means to be a girl and how girls perform their gender(s) in various public spaces. Importantly, abjecting Barbie play teaches to depart from conventional notions of pedagogy grounded in power/knowledge politics of “intentional teaching and measurable learning” in formal educational sites (Luke, 2010, p. 132). Rather, girls’ Barbie play is located in the sphere of critical public pedagogies, where popular culture artifacts outside of formal schooling help girls challenge the phallogocentric canon of gendered politics that is often present in classroom encounters and that silences girls’ voices and desires. As a site of abject pedagogy, Barbie play might offer a space of freedom that invites maternal, ambivalent, pre-symbolic, transgressive, bodily pleasure-oriented learning. Such an informal pedagogical space facilitates girls’ learning about femininity and sexuality as well as gender relations through popular cultural objects like Barbie, not approaching these issues in a narrow, binary manner, but addressing them with a “boundless[ness]” that “defer[s] to difference in the politics of meaning, reading position, and identity formation” (Luke, 2010, p. 135).

Within the realm of formal public schooling, which is built upon the masculine logic of learning and power/knowledge production, any deviation from established gender norms remains a highly contested ground (Ringrose, 2012). Normative gender boundaries are still heavily policed in schools, from imposing restrictions on bathroom use for gender nonconforming youth to enforcing heteronormativity in prom participation. Art classrooms, however, open up compelling possibilities for productive and critical explorations of consumer cultural objects like Barbie as part of the art education curriculum by bridging popular visual culture and artmaking; and challenging established gender norms (Collins, et al., 2016; Smilan, 2015; Weida, 2011). For example, art educator Courtney Weida (2011) claims that a Barbie-based curriculum can invite students to reimagine the doll outside of the corporate Mattel script and can allow them “to encounter openness and otherness” in order to “de-stigmatize aspects of gender and sexuality that are a part of students’ experiences” (p. 23). As Weida notes, this kind of curriculum can build on contemporary artwork by feminist artists like Andras Kallai’s (2006) *Fat Barbie* sculptures (assemblages of plastic Barbie doll heads and overweight female bodies made out of terracotta clay) and ORLANS’s (1990) self-inflicted plastic surgery performances, which can generate critical conversations about the gendered body, sexuality, and corporate consumer culture; and can allow for students’ own art-making explorations of these issues. While she admits that these topics remain controversial within K-12 public schooling, she asserts that they are necessary because they position students as critical “players and makers” rather than merely consumers of popular artifacts (p. 24).

A few other feminist and visual culture educators effectively used Barbie dolls to construct an engaging and critical curriculum. April Collins collaborated with three other colleagues to conduct an after-school workshop for a group of middle school girls, which invited them to reflect on their childhood play with Barbie and repurpose, or “reinvent” a Barbie doll of their choosing (Collins et al., 2016, p. 102). Using fabric, glitter, nail polish, and other found everyday materials, the girls remade second-hand Barbie dolls that the authors acquired at a garage sale into a very different character, which included such new invented personas like Nun Barbie, Who Cares About My Looks Barbie, Real World Person Barbie, and Dumpster Diver Barbie. While remaking their dolls, the girls lamented about and critiqued their childhood play memories and how Barbie often made them

feel inadequate and imperfect. For these girls, the act of remaking Barbie dolls was joyful and pleasurable and allowed them to “voice an array [of] issues and concerns” about normative gender limitations (Collins et al., 2016, p. 119). Art educator Cathy Smilan’s (2016) arts-based inquiry into her own childhood Barbie play produced somewhat similar results as she embarked on repurposing a number of Barbie dolls to convey a feminist message. She writes, “Barbie, the symbolic antithesis of feminism, can be molded and repositioned to shape the voice of feminist methodologies,” which focus on gender equity and social justice (p. 76).

The aforementioned projects offer a compelling approach that acknowledges and builds on existing public pedagogical spaces that young people create through their everyday play and engagement with consumer culture. Although many theorizations of public pedagogy locate pedagogy outside of the realm of formal schooling and investigate how children and youth engage with, negotiate, and resist dominant sociocultural discourses, norms, and ideologies on the street and in popular culture and media sites, critical understanding of these spaces of play and informal learning can help us challenge and expand the boundaries of existing educational practices (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010a). As Jennifer Sandlin asserts: popular culture and other public pedagogies of youth engagement function as sites for “social justice [and] cultural critique” that offer “critical and counterhegemonic possibilities” for reimagining the meaning and purpose of formal schooling (Sandlin et al., 2010b, p. 3). From this perspective, an abject pedagogy of girls’ Barbie play can be seen as an important and productive practice that challenges prescriptive gender binaries and allows girls to experiment with their desires and identities outside of phallogocentric regimes. As social justice art educators, we can acknowledge this abject pedagogy of children and youth and consider the ways these productive transgressions and venues of students’ informal learning can enter art education curricula committed to the issues of gender equity and social justice (Cosier, 2007; Duncum, 2009; Keifer-Boyd & Maitland-Gholson, 2007; Levy, 2008).

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