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What Barbie Dolls Have to Say...

What Barbie Dolls Have to Say about Postwar American Culture

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What can Barbie—the quintessential blond bimbo—tell us about postwar American culture? Inscribed on Barbie are the traditional notions as well as the changing values of a culture that was in the process of dramatic social, cultural, and political transformation. As an artifact of postwar cultural ambiguity, Barbie characterized not only conservatism and conformity but also, as revisionist historians have argued, contradiction, conflict, and contestation. "Reading" the Barbie doll as a historical text sheds light on the continuities and changes in teen culture, gender roles, sexuality, and consumer culture.

When the teenage Barbie doll debuted in 1959 she was a rebel among her contemporaries. Baby dolls had socialized "baby boomers" to assume maternal and domestic roles consistent with the dominant postwar gender ideology, devised as a buttress against unsettling change. But unlike the bent-limbed baby dolls, Barbie, who had disproportionately long chorus girl legs, would help girls imagine themselves as autonomous adolescents.

Barbie was the exemplar "teenager" (a term first coined during the war years) who represented a "teen culture" that rapidly proliferated in the postwar years due to rising prosperity, spreading suburbs, and expanding leisure time. As a representation of a middle-class suburban teen empowered with new purchasing power, Barbie's mini magazines, records, clothing, and accessories were versions of those that fueled the new teen market. Like real girls, "Babysitter Barbie" would have shopped with money earned as a babysitter, one of the only jobs available to suburban adolescent girls in the postwar economy.

Though dressed in her foundational bathing suit, Barbie's extensive wardrobe exemplified the ethos of an expanding consumer culture where spending replaced saving. While thrift and frugality had prevailed among Depression and war-time generations these were no longer valued; Americans were encouraged to find fulfillment in goods and gadgets. Stimulating consumer desire among America's youngest shoppers, Barbie TV ads encouraged little girls to "Come feast your eyes on Barbie and Midge. . ." (Doc. 1). And they did! Giddy with excitement over the doll, dream house, and the "extra clothing and accessories" her friends had, one Nicaraguan student recalled that she and her sister incessantly begged their single mother for Barbie dolls their family could probably ill afford. (Doc. 2)

Barbie's glamorous outfits were like those designed by Christian Dior who had inaugurated a transformation of women's bodies shortly after WWII. Barbie's body had been shaped, in part, by the introduction of Dior's haute couture that

contributed to the gradual sexualization of women (mothers included) in the 1950s. The "New Look" replaced the former wartime cultural ideal of broad-shouldered females (like Rosie the Riveter) that spoke to the 20 million women war workers. By the late 1940s, however, a masculinized silhouette had been replaced by the feminine hour-glass. To accentuate female sexual characteristics shoulder pads yielded to padded bras. Sensible "flats" were replaced with high heels that further exaggerated sexual difference: they forced the bust forward and the backside outward. Like June Cleaver who vacuumed the house while wearing pumps in the new TV sit-coms of the period, Barbie had tiny, tippy-toed feet that also kept her immobilized, dependent, and contained within the household domain where women were safely idealized for their maternal devotion. Yet, mothers and other women had steadily and silently continued to increase their presence in the work force. Though Barbie could not stand on her own two feet, like other women she had one foot in the modern era. The teenage model simultaneously represented independent young women "on the go" who were not only accepted but also celebrated in *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962).

Barbie's body had been shaped as well by her ancestor, Lilli, a coquettish-looking German doll that male bachelors brought to bars and dangled from their rear-view mirrors. Just like Lilli whom she closely resembled, Barbie donned a striped strapless jersey bathing suit that accented her cinched waist and accentuated her voluptuous figure. (Stripes only provide protective camouflage from predators to zebras in herds.) The stripes on Barbie's suit underscored her full breasts which looked a lot like the ample bumpers that embellished (and protected) 50s' progesterone infused automobiles. The new technology of constrictive undergarments reshaped the feminine form, such that breasts like Barbie's became symbols of postwar abundance, motherhood, and sexual appeal. Despite Mattel's claims that parents thanked them for the doll's "educational value," critics objected to Barbie's sexually provocative "look" (Doc. 3). To many, Barbie's eroticized body-sideways glancing eyes (heavily outlined in black eyeliner), pursed red lips, and scarlet finger nails-were markers of sexual desire. But as Ruth Handler, the originator of Barbie and the founder of Mattel, explained: "The doll has clean hair and a clean face. . .wears gloves and [has] shoes to match" (Doc 3). As the sanitized version of Lilli, Barbie simultaneously neutralized the eras cultural dissonance. Barbie embodied both the sensuality of Marilyn Monroe and the innocence of Debbie Reynolds.

Like these blond-headed, white-skinned pop culture icons, Barbie emerged in a period of intense cultural negotiation over racial difference. One-half of all the teenage college students who participated in the Freedom Rides that tested the desegregation of buses in the South were young women. But Barbie, who had her own sports car, was unlikely to have used public transportation. Nor was she likely to have counted African Americans among her friends, despite the huge migration of people of color and Latinas/os to American cities in the postwar period. What are the chances that Barbie would have left the segregated suburbs for the city's slums where most resided? One Latina recalled that while "We did not look like Barbie, [and] nor did we aspire to" (Doc. 2), Barbie's blond hair, blue eyes, and pink skin nevertheless epitomized an American race, gender, and class ideal that prevailed in postwar popular culture. Nor was this lost on ethnic or African-American girls. "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. 'Here', they said, 'this is beautiful'. . . " (Doc 4) Toni Morrison realized that as an African American girl she could never "look like" Barbie. Unlike the desires of others, hers was "to dismember it." Clearly, the social uses of Barbie by little girls could also have embryonic political meanings. Later on as teenagers themselves, many former Barbie players were drawn to sixties' youth culture