

# Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls

## *New Directions in Doll Studies*

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### Introduction

The articles in this issue demonstrate that dolls are ubiquitous cultural forms central to girlhood and young womanhood. Yet understanding the historical and contemporary significance of dolls is a relatively recent development. The age-old trivialization of girls and devaluation of youth cultures led to the customary disregard of dolls as legitimate sources of documentary evidence even among scholars. It was not until the late nineteenth century that changing notions of childhood first gave rise to research on children, and a new appreciation of the meanings of play. In 1896, G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the child-study movement, a professor of psychology, and president of Clark University, co-authored with A.C. Ellis the pioneering, “A Study of Dolls,” in which he argued that doll play taught girls key lessons in femininity and maternity. Although Hall argued that “the educational value of toys was enormous” (160), dolls once again lapsed into scholarly obscurity. It was during the late 1930s that Mamie Phipps Clark, then a Master’s student in psychology, used dolls to study the self-esteem of African American children. The subsequent doll studies she conducted with her husband, Kenneth Clark, played a role in the 1954 landmark desegregation decision, yet failed to perpetuate doll research. It was on the (high) heels of Barbie who debuted a few years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, that dolls became the focus of a lively (and still on-going) discourse among parents and pundits but not among academics about their social meanings in the lives of girls.

Scholarly interest in dolls awaited the convergence of historical forces, theoretical frameworks, and disciplinary developments still decades in the making. Among feminists who made adult women the focus of the Second Wave, the insight that dolls reinforced gender stereotyping squelched instead of stimulated scholarly interest in dolls and



girls. It was not until the 1980s that the emergence of girl-centered research, the influence of American Studies' interdisciplinarity, and the re-evaluation of mass culture by British cultural studies scholars led a new generation of scholars (baby boomers raised on postwar children's culture) to question the patriarchal imperative of dolls and the presumed passivity of girl players. The new interpretive frameworks, historical contexts, and methods of analysis revealed that dolls were not uniform, static artifacts of a single dominant culture. In *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (Formanek-Brunell: 1993), for example, I demonstrate that businessmen, women doll makers, and girls who were frequently at odds over the meanings of dolls, struggled with each other to define the place and purpose of dolls in girlhood.

In the 1990s dolls became the subject of greater scrutiny by psychologists, sociologists, educators and other academics all interested in what dolls had to say about girls' identities and grown-ups' ideals. What influenced the acceleration of doll research was the rise of Girl Power, girls' studies, cultural studies, multiculturalism, the commercial success of the American Girl Doll (AGD) line, and the proliferation of the Barbie brand. Paying closer attention to the intersection of gender, age, race, class, and sexuality than previous researchers, Ann duCille (1994), Elizabeth Chin (1999), Mary Rogers (1998), Erica Rand (1994), Sherrie A. Inness (1998), and others in departments of English, anthropology, sociology, and Women and Gender Studies examined Barbie dolls and a variety of players' beliefs and behaviors. Since then, scholars across the academy, cultural critics, and feminist activists have critically examined the role of mass-produced and mass-marketed dolls in the socialization, sexualization, commodification, exoticization, commercialization, racialization, and essentialization of girlhood in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> While many argue that dolls reinforce normative notions, they also point to the ways in which dolls and the girls who play with them negotiate, revise, and disrupt the cultural categories of girlhood.

Pointing to new directions in doll studies is an emergent generation of researchers whose articles are included in this special issue. What is *new* about them, their questions, perspectives, research, and findings? Plenty. Those conducting doll research today are likely to see dolls as dynamic texts that represent layered versions of realities that are mediated by the often contradictory ideologies, values, or worldviews of doll

creators, producers, consumers, and players. Consequently, their work engages the complexities and contending elements embodied in dolls as well as the conflicts embedded in the cultures that produce and play with dolls. Their scholarship utilizes a variety of critical practices in order to analyze the textuality of dolls and to interpret the ambivalence and/or agency that dolls generate in girls and young women.

Bodies function as critical sites whether the focus is on doll objects, images, or on characters in stories, dolls that are commercially-produced or homemade, Jewish, Latina, or African-American. In addition to dolls' bodies, the authors consider those of girls and young women who use their bodies as doll players, producers, or performers. Collectively, the authors see dolls' flexible (rather than fixed) meanings among multiple audiences. Different understandings are influenced by broad and overlapping contextual frameworks (such as, for example, hip hop; Jewish history; fashion; and architecture) as well as discursive backgrounds. The varied meanings of dolls to different generations is readily apparent among these largely GenX and Generation Y (Millennials) scholars and their young research subjects whose viewpoints and voices are represented herein. These contributors upend notions of scholarly objectivity by privileging subjectivities and professionalizing subcultural principles and practices—like DIY (Do-It-Yourself).

Before summarizing their findings, it is worth considering in some detail how the scholarly conversation about dolls is being furthered by researchers who intermingle disciplinary specializations; blend post-structuralist theoretical perspectives with feminist epistemologies; employ innovative sources of evidence; devise novel methodologies and research designs; and consequently, explore new themes in doll studies from cultural work to historical memory, reception practices to (sub)-cultural production, and the construction of identities (and buildings) to the functions of fandom.

## **New Disciplinary Approaches to Doll Research**

The new approaches to the study of dolls have much to do with the training of these twenty-first century scholars. There are those trained in literature with deep roots in girlhood and cultural studies and others who hail from communications—the discipline that has generated the

remarkable growth of girls' media studies. Doll researchers are also rising from more unexpected academic domains, such as architecture: one of the authors deconstructs Barbie's Dream House. The educational backgrounds of other doll scholars are even more multi-, inter-, and post-disciplinary. For example, cultural heritage studies incorporates elements of museum studies, cultural studies, memory studies, material culture, object studies, and anthropology. The relatively new field of book history that broadly examines the creation, dissemination, and reception of script and print, provides unprecedented opportunities to read paper doll publications in a new light. Combined, the changing academic landscape is complicating understandings of the artifacts of girlhood in ways that move beyond established approaches, dominant interpretations, and familiar critiques.

## Theoretical Applications

Scholarly application of theories—from contemporary feminist to post-structuralist—is providing critical doll studies research with new frameworks for understanding how dolls and related texts like books about dolls function culturally, socially, politically, and psychologically. Based on the understanding that narratives appear in a variety of literary and non-literary forms of expression, one contributor draws upon narrative theory in order to analyze the characters and narratives in nineteenth-century paper doll books and to speculate on the meaning-making of children who read and played with them. Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), a scholarly monograph reviewed in this issue by Elizabeth Chin, utilizes performance theory to analyze Raggedy Ann books and dolls as well as other canonical texts, and other "scriptive things" (8). In order to examine homemade dolls rather than store bought objects, another scholar turns to DIY theorist Henry Jenkins and his theory of participatory culture.

## Methodological Approaches

New doll scholarship is based on a variety of often creatively combined methodologies. Cross-disciplinary investigations link traditional meth-

ods (even ancient literary techniques like reverse chronology) with overlapping categories of analysis (such as gender, for example), and other scholarly approaches including the more recent approach of off centering. By integrating textual and visual culture analyses with material culture methods, new light is shed on the dynamic interactions among dolls, girls, and broader socio-cultural forces.

Ethnographic methods also have been imaginatively adapted to doll research. One scholar, April Mandrona, devised an autoethnography. And the e-ethnography, an electronic method of doll data collection used by Molly Brookfield is characteristic of generational access to technology and ease with new media. The techno savvy of late twentieth-century girls' culture is clearly evident in the methods used by these twenty-something researchers. Data collection was made possible, for instance, by transforming a leading social media site into a research domain, using email, and blogs. In this study, and in Rebecca Hains' in which preteens videotaped their own doll play narratives, girls become active agents in the research process. At the same time, researchers like Hains and Brookfield who presented themselves as peers to those they studied diminished the divide between the girl subject and woman subject respectively, and the research scholar. To that end, April Mandrona interrogated her girlhood self: Annette Kuhn's (1995) memory work provided a method for analyzing personal items as historical objects.

## **Bodies of Evidence**

Just as they have constructed girls and girlhood more broadly, contributors to this issue have also expanded understandings of what constitutes a doll. Consequently, their doll-based research goes beyond childhood and even outside the proverbial nursery. Looking in less obvious locales has increased the variety of sources and sites of play and performance, and extended the study of dolls to include female adolescents and young women. Fiction remains one of the most accessible documentary sources—especially so since the publication of *American Girl Doll* books. Yet, scholars like Hannah Field are also reexamining paper dolls, standing as they do at the cross section between material culture and print culture, mass produced and homemade creations. By examining the methods and analyzing the meanings of the goods that girls make,

investigators can mine a largely untapped source of information about girlhood.

## **Doll Research Design**

Despite the variety of methods and materials of the new doll research, the size and scope is relatively small. Although not all, many of the studies are themselves like miniatures that represent or reproduce in a reduced size. Hains' study, for example, is based on an "afternoon's observation" of a handful of girls' play. During their "show-and-tell-playtime," the girls made meanings that clearly diverged from the intentions of the dolls' producers and the interpretations of scholars. Molly Brookfield's study that provides insight into a generational cohort of doll players is based on scarcely more than a dozen research subjects. And then there is April Mandrona who examines one especially small-scale site of doll production—her own.

## **New Themes in Doll Studies**

The methodological, theoretical, and evidentiary innovations currently employed in doll studies make possible the exploration of new themes, such as the cultural work of dolls and their role in the construction of historical memory. Robin Bernstein's (2011) new book reviewed in this issue by Elizabeth Chin, argues that iconic female figures from Little Eva and Topsy to Raggedy Ann reinforced racial and gender norms. In her essay, Lisa Marcus examines the broader cultural purposes of iconic Jewish girls in the twentieth century. American Girl Doll Rebecca Rubin, and the books bundled with her, extend and expand the cultural work of Anne Frank whose transformation into "Hollywood Anne" played an important role in the reconstruction of historical memory. While lauded for introducing millions of girls to American history, romanticized representations of girls create a past that is acceptable and affirming, but not authentic. In her review, Mary McMurray similarly critiques the Barbie museum for erasing girls' memories and for encasing a more essentialized girlhood. What girls actually think about the past is less evident in the exhibit than in museum visitors' "My Barbie"

stories that disclose their desires as well as disappointments. How girls renegotiate the past in light of present circumstances is evident in Rebecca Hains' essay about the ways in which Bratz dolls' racial diversity provided African-American girls with "an avenue to explore race, racism, and U.S. history." Frederika Eilers considers the significance of girls being able to modify the designs of the early folded cardboard Barbie Dream House before the plastic model, requiring adult assembly, turned Barbie into a homemaker with a refrigerator and a stove.

Hains' study of how black girls receive Bratz dolls exemplifies the exploration of reception practices and (sub)cultural productions themes. Enabling the preteens to videotape their own doll play narratives provides a unique lens into youthful productions of meanings. Hains shows that the girls' appropriation of the dolls with various skin tones act out scenarios relevant to their everyday lives. Whether in the twenty-first century or the nineteenth, girls often play with dolls in ways that are contrary to commercial interests. Hannah Field finds that paper dolls show evidence of greater use than the commercially-printed books with which they were paired. April Mandrona's homemade creations reveal another way in which girls circumvent mainstream children's culture. She privileges the handmade artifacts of girlhood found in attics more so than in museums for the insights they provide into girls who also creatively construct dolls and their identities.

In addition to production and self-expression, dolls are also sites of identity formation seen as shifting, performative, and prescriptive. The assimilationist identity of American Girl Doll Rebecca Rubin, for example, draws upon a century of "fictions of Jewish American girlhood" similarly embodying broader cultural anxieties about difference and ideologies about belonging. The Fuller paper dolls designed to illustrate accompanying moral tales had surprisingly more mutable identities outside of their narrative context and content. Other authors show how the relational aspects of doll-related identities persist as girls grow into young women. How young women construct adult identities by building on girlhood memories is revealed by the first generation of American Girl Doll players. Molly Brookfield's self-presentation as an American Girl Doll "fan" is an identity she shared with her young adult research subjects. Jennifer Whitney's study of Nicki Minaj demonstrates why her puckish appropriation of Barbie appeals to her fan base.

This doll-themed issue begins with three essays that examine doll-and-book combinations. Lisa Marcus's, "Dolling Up History: Fictions of Jewish American Girlhood," examines American Girl Doll Rebecca Rubin, and the box-set of books that accompany her. Marcus finds evidence of a repackaged "nostalgic and triumphalist narrative in which America figures as benevolent sanctuary and the Holocaust, American anti-Semitism, and the costs of assimilation are elided and smoothed away." Marcus traces the roots of this reassuring narrative to the Americanization of Anne Frank as a key icon of Jewish American girlhood. These and other "dolloed up versions of history" stand in contrast to more conflicted ones by prominent Jewish women writers like the late Adrienne Rich, and serve as a caution against "buying into" nostalgic icons of girlhood.

Informed by the central assertion of book history that "forms affect meaning," Hannah Field investigates early nineteenth-century paper doll books in, "A Story, Exemplified in a Series of Figures: Paper Doll versus Moral Tale in the Early Nineteenth Century." Field examines the tension between the moral narratives in paper doll books that required female figures to undergo numerous costume changes (by actually changing their heads!) but subsequently degraded and disciplined the characters for their love of finery, fashion, and vanity. Did girl readers/players absorb the stories' textual morals or did they go so far as to read against the grain? The potential was certainly there as the book and the paper dolls could exist independently of each other. Field's analysis of the wear patterns of the paper dolls and their clothing suggests that girls' literary and play practices may have departed from the gendered expectations of publishers and parents.

Girls' responses to more modern morality tales are considered in "From American Girls into American Women: A Critique of Women's Nostalgic Readings of the American Girl Dolls." Molly Brookfield's study examines the complexities of nostalgia for American Girl dolls among nineteen young women who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing upon postmodern theories of nostalgia and the meanings of objects, Brookfield challenges the persistent perception that girls are duped by dolls and that their nostalgia is naïve. Instead, she finds that reflective nostalgia among former AG doll players includes both affection for AG dolls as well as criticism of the company for commercializing and universalizing girlhood. Rather than romanticizing the past,

the young women draw upon their ironic insights into their nostalgia in order to construct empowered identities attuned to the materialism of womanhood in the twenty-first century.

The second set of essays examines doll productions and performances beginning with “Barbie versus Le Modulor: It’s a matter of proportion!” In this study, Frederika Eilers compares Barbie to Le Modulor, a figure devised by the modern architect Le Corbusier, in order to consider the impact of Barbie’s unrealistic proportions on her Dream House. Eilers argues that when placing these objects in conversation with each other, the ideal body types and the model spaces designed for them share a common basis in modern methods and values such as the exclusion of “non-ideal” users like Becky, Barbie’s wheel-chair bound friend.

“Handmade Identities: Girls, Dolls and DIY” examines the study of dolls, girls’ identities, and the contemporary DIY (do-it-yourself) craft movement, areas of inquiry that until now have remained separate. Departing from the more typical scholarly focus on mass-produced dolls and their impact on feminine socialization, April Mandrona uses memory work analysis in order to examine the doll-making activities of girls. She argues that young doll makers’ creative productions are active negotiations of cultural meanings that make possible girls’ participation in the construction of their girlhood identities.

Rebecca C. Hains’ essay, “An Afternoon of Productive Play with Problematic Dolls: The Importance of Foregrounding Children’s Voices in Research,” expands current understandings of Bratz dolls by providing intriguing evidence of the dolls’ oppositional potential among girls whose perspectives are often absent from scholarly studies and popular critiques. By making herself into a “near peer” and enabling girl subjects to record their collectively-produced stories with a camcorder, Hains provided favorable conditions that gave rise to unexpected results. While the girls in the study predictably marveled at the fashion dolls’ “cool” clothing and accessories, they also disrupted the standardized fashion-based narrative that led them to identify as sexual objects. They did so by ignoring some prompts (such as the fashionable clothing) and responding to others: the Bratz’ variable skin tones fostered the development of alternative scripts clearly not intended by the dolls’ manufacturer. Like other bricoleurs who use DIY techniques (combining available materials into creative constructions), the girls’ doll stories drew upon classroom lessons and mainstream media to enact their own

historical understandings of racism, slavery, and freedom in the African American past.

Jennifer Dawn Whitney's "Some Assembly Required: Black Barbie and the Fabrication of Nicki Minaj" explores the public persona of hip hop artist Nicki Minaj whose controversial appropriation of the Barbie doll has generated both fandom and criticism. Using feminist and post-structuralist theory to understand the lyrical and visual performances, Whitney argues that Minaj's aim is to playfully subvert the iconic doll. In the process of co-opting Barbie, Whitney argues, Nicki Minaj provokes her fans to "liberate and pluralize how we think about Barbie, race and idealized femininity in the West."

The last section concludes with several reviews relevant to this doll-themed issue. Cultural anthropologist, Elizabeth Chin reviews Robin Bernstein's (2011) *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* and Mary McMurray reviews *Celebrating 50 Fabulous Years with America's Favorite Doll*, a Barbie exhibit at the Toy and Miniature Museum in Kansas City, Missouri.

By historicizing, theorizing, contextualizing, and analyzing dolls, the authors reveal the complex meanings of dolls to girls and grownups across time, space, cultures, and disciplines. By exploring the dynamics among representations and reception, productions and performances, genders and generations, the essays and reviews forge new directions in the interrogation of the doll as an artifact of the cultural construct and lived experiences of girls and young women.



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## Note

1. For an extensive annotated bibliography of scholarly publications on dolls, see "Dolls" entry, *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (forthcoming).

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