

# Remaking Barbie

Popular culture is a tangible environment encompassing visual texts, sets of ideas, systems of exchange, and active webs of relationships between individuals and framed categories generalized and homogenized by society. It is a physical and ideological space in which identity, particularly gender, is created and reinforced through sociocultural ideology. Gender, as relegated by social discourses, is a performance, an ongoing process of realizing and resisting, producing and playing the perceived norms of “feminine” and “masculine.” Such categories, or framed stereotypes, are rooted deep within the social fabric. They exist as relations of power and models of a capitalist society. From birth, children are ushered into this socially constructed reality and begin to negotiate within it. Through their own day-to-day engagement with the world of popular culture and their interactions with peers, children actively make relevant and functional meanings of their own gender (Fiske, 1989). “Girl” becomes understood not a noun, but as a verb, a performance. Performance implies an action that is both voluntary and mimicry. According to Judith Butler, gender performativity is the result of an illusion sustained by the incessant replication of norms that materialize in those whom they direct (Judith Butler discussed in Hey, 2006). For example, the norms of “girl” behavior and dress function ideologically to sculpt an abstract, fixed, “normal” female gender. Gender, according to Butler, must be understood as regulated by the repetition of ideological social norms (Judith Butler discussed in Hey, 2006). This implies that the performance of gender is temporal, reiterated through continual acts of interaction with and against presented social conventions.

During the fall of 2010, I worked with six, fourth and fifth grade, girls at Congaree Elementary in an after school art program geared to providing them with alternative views for

their future. Within group free-draw sessions paired with dialogue, discussion, and gossip about immediate social realities the girls faced, there surfaced active engagement with gendered ideologies through popular culture and peer relations regarding the title "girl." All six girls had strong reactions to notions of what a "girl" is, how she is understood to be, to act, and to look. Through their drawings, the girls actively constructed their subjectivities and also began to deconstruct the codes, or ideological social norms they found themselves wrestling with, such as the gendered nature of popular culture (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Ivashkevich, 2009). For these girls, drawing production can be seen as "a sociocultural practice interwoven with social and cultural discourses of childhood and gender, and embedded in children's peer interactions, daily activities, and participation in popular culture" (Ivashkevich, 2009, p.58).

Through drawing, the girls at Congaree defined and came to understand themselves in relation to and against the girls both in our group and also "other" girls, those outside our group. Our girls referred to the "other girls" as the "divas," the "popular" girls. They described them as being "prissy," wearing "pink," and at times "mean." The girls acknowledged differences not only between boys, who "physically fight," and girls, who "fight with words," but also between different personalities and characters of girls themselves. When associating "girl" with different characteristics of what a girl does, acts like, wears, and plays with, Barbie made her entrance. Each of our girls had a Barbie story. Most admitted to in the past enjoying playing with Barbie, but not now. They said they used to dress her up and play with her, but not anymore. One girl talked about how she mutilated her Barbies by changing their heads from different bodies, cutting their hair and even dismembering their legs. Another girl shared her story of how she enjoyed beating Barbie up outside, while another mentioned that she still has Barbies, but that they are strictly "collectors

items" and not play toys. There was a range of emotional and physical reactions to Barbie, ranging from pleasure to disgust. Like gender, Barbie is plastic. Both are dead and brought to life through imposed ideals and animated interactions that allow for alterations and performances of seemingly fixed, but constantly fluid identities.

Barbie dolls are children of social ideology. Like all popular culture texts, they are pregnant with invisible symbolic meanings through which individuals engage with "widely shared social assumptions about the way the world is, should be or should not be" (Duncum, 2008, p.128). Within everyday life, ideology, understood as characterizing these normalized ideas, ideals, beliefs, and values, "is expressed through cultural sign systems that are constitutive of social practice; ideology informs the way people act in the world and the way people act in turn tends to justify and reinforce ideology" (Duncum, 2008, p.128). Barbie's identity multidimensional and is written as a social text with layers of history, practices, associations, and expectations. Her identity is both manufactured by design and also appropriated by child consumers who recreate her through play. (Wohlwend, 2009). Barbie, herself, both utters and performs.

Tension exists within Barbie play, as children test the social boundaries and gender limits inscribed in Barbie. According to Karen Wohlwend (2009), Barbies, as other toys, are "a text to be read, performed, and consumed with meanings suggested by its materials and its history of attached story lines and practices and also a text to be written, produced, and revised as children improvise new meanings through play" (p.60). Drawing on Barbie, girls have "the capacity to engage in world making, to document the present, explore the past, and anticipate the future, to invent scenarios and control events" (Wilson & Wilson quoted in Thompson, 2006, p.35). "To draw becomes to embody; and it makes manifest movement...what keeps the imaginary in the state of possibility and allows it to be

both diachronic and synchronic. In the end, drawing is rooted in the [dematerialized] space of the image...privileging more the world of shadows than the world of appearances, confirming the possibility and use of a language that, albeit in a fragile way, leaves open an interstitial passage through which the imaginary may realize itself as an image" (Fisher, 2003, p.223).

Drawing, has narrative associations with the literal as an act of thought, of formulating new realities through a process of physical, manual acts. It is an exploration of movement, created by repetitious mark-making. It is a relational form of communication, challenge, and performance. Drawing is playing. They are both obsessively exploratory and open-ended activities. When children play, "they learn to attach different meanings and interpretations to self, other, and object; they learn how to form, break, and challenge social relationships; how to measure time and its passage; and how to assume (or avoid) the biographical consequences of any set of actions" (Denzin, 1975, p.474). In play, as in drawing, children have the power to "select and create images in order to frame the puzzling and amorphous questions that they confront in the process of coming into the world" (Thompson, 2006, p.39).

Engagement with gender by playing with popular culture is an interactional and social experience that demands engagement and meaning-making whereby children are active creators of culture. The present, emergent curriculum is a direct result of these theoretical understandings and my work with the girls at Congaree Elementary. It builds upon issues and concerns that surfaced from the girls' particular social worlds and popular culture texts. This curriculum solicits engagement with the social construct, both noun and verb, "girl," through the deconstruction, appropriation, and recreation of Barbie through performative play.

## References

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Curriculum Theme: Remaking Barbie

Teacher: Courtney Piper

Grade Level: 4th-5th grade (single gender)

State Fine Art Goals:

VA4-1.3, VA4-2.3, VA4-2.4, VA4-3.3, VA4-5.1, VA4-5.2

State Media Arts Goals (if any):

MA4-1.5, MA4-3.1, MA4-3.2, MA4-3.3, MA4-4.1

General goals for the curriculum:

The present, emergent curriculum is a direct result of my work with six, fourth and fifth grade, girls at Congaree Elementary. Building upon issues and concerns that surfaced from the girls' particular social worlds and popular culture texts, this curriculum solicits engagement with the social construct, both noun and verb, "girl," through the deconstruction, appropriation, and recreation of Barbie. The girls will use Barbie as a text to dialogue about the visual representations, social interactions, limits, and multiple realizations of their gender to play with the performance of "girl."

Lesson title (name each lesson to reflect a general unit theme)	Visual Exemplars (list specific images and artists, TV shows, and/or books that you plan to use for each lesson)	Motivation / dialogue (list basic issues and questions to be explored during classroom dialogue and any other motivational strategies that you plan to use for each lesson)	Media / process (list artistic processes that your students will engage in during each lesson)	Concepts and/or design principles to be learned during each lesson	Closure (list an assessment strategy that can be used at the end of each lesson)
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<p>Lesson 1</p> <p>Barbie Girl</p>	<p>-six different, packaged, Barbie dolls</p> <p>-images of multiple, different, Barbie</p> <p>-multiple, different, Barbie coloring books</p>	<p>-what toys did you play with when you were younger/now?</p> <p>-are there different toys made for boys and girls?</p> <p>-what do the different toys say about how boys and girls should play?</p> <p>-what do you think of Barbie?</p> <p>-did/do you play with her?</p> <p>-who is Barbie? what is her story?</p> <p>-what are the many different roles, personalities, characteristics of Barbie?</p> <p>-what does Barbie say about 'girls'?</p> <p>-how does a Barbie coloring book 'tell the story' of who/what Barbie is?</p>	<p>-deconstruct Barbie coloring book: discuss what story is being told about who Barbie is and what she represents</p> <p>-journal about how Barbie 'defines' what a 'girl' is and is not: looks, characteristics, color, beauty, fashion, roles, activities, etc</p> <p>-recreate coloring books: cut, paste, and re-draw a new story for Barbie</p> <p>-journal about what Barbie represents to you, likes, dislikes, pleasures, arguments, 'girl' stereotypes, etc</p>	<p>-build connections between Barbie dolls as a concept, representation, and tool to perform 'girl'</p> <p>-start to appropriate Barbie as a concept, representation, tool, and performance of 'girl'</p> <p>-play with how images, i.e. of Barbie, tell a story by what they depict and what they leave out</p>	<p>-share recreated Barbie story and explain their definition of Barbie</p>
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<p>Lesson 2</p> <p>Barbie Appropriation</p>	<p>-six different, packaged, Barbie dolls</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-give out packaged Barbie dolls</li> <li>-discuss presentation of package: text, color, images, what is absent, etc</li> <li>-who is this made to appeal to?</li> <li>-what messages are being sold?</li> <li>-discuss similarities and differences of all six Barbie dolls and what they say about different representations of 'girl'</li> <li>-what character does each Barbie doll represent?</li> <li>-how are you supposed to play with a Barbie doll?</li> <li>-introduce the idea of role-playing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-journal and describe who your individual Barbie is based on observation of the doll herself and the packaging</li> <li>-next, journal who you imagine Barbie to be, how you would change her: her characteristics, personality, likes, dislikes, hobbies, clothes, friends, etc</li> <li>-draw a picture to describe your Barbie version, give her a new name</li> <li>-partner up and role-play with the Barbies dolls: introduce your Barbie to each other, play out who your Barbie is</li> <li>-draw a picture of your partner's Barbie as learned about through your role-play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-appropriating Barbie, who she 'is' and who you create her to be</li> <li>-role-play and Barbie performance</li> <li>-drawing an interpretation of someone else's Barbie character as learned via play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-share Barbie drawings with the group</li> </ul>
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Lesson 3  Barbie Narratives	-Barbie dolls -examples of photoessays -example of storyboards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-give out Barbie dolls</li> <li>-connect back to the idea of storytelling, discuss how images tell a story</li> <li>-what elements do you need in a story? plot, setting, characters, idea, theme, conflict, ending, etc</li> <li>-show examples and introduce photoessays</li> <li>-reintroduce and discuss relationships and concerns between 'Barbie' and 'girl': is Barbie popular? is she pretty? is she powerful?</li> <li>-what stories can we tell about these 'girl' issues through Barbie dolls?</li> <li>-introduce what a storyboard is</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-partner up to create a photoessay with their Barbie dolls</li> <li>-brainstorm and write elements of their narrative</li> <li>-draw a storyboard of their narrative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-what is a photoessay</li> <li>-what is a storyboard</li> <li>-using Barbie to role-play and appropriate social interactions, concerns, constructs, culture, expectations, etc</li> <li>-express a narrative via text, images, real life situations, and partner collaboration</li> </ul>	-share ideas and storyboard with the group
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<p>Lesson 4</p> <p>Barbie Photo-shoot</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Barbie dolls</li> <li>-six disposable cameras</li> <li>-examples of photoessays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-discuss camera and photography basics via photoessay</li> <li>examples: point of view, angle, zoom, composition, lighting, etc</li> <li>-what elements of your story are important to show? what issue, role-play, situation do you want to show?</li> <li>-how many scenes will you need to tell the story?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-work with partner to compose, pose, and photograph their narrative sequence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-image creation in photography: point of view, angle, zoom, composition, lighting, etc</li> <li>-how we 'create' a story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-completed storyboard and photographed narrative</li> </ul>
<p>Lesson 5</p> <p>Barbie Photoessay</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Barbie dolls</li> <li>-developed pictures taken of photoessays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-discuss photoessay assemblage and picture editing based on desired narrative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-assemble photoessay with partner: arrange pictures in time-sequence to tell a story; write accompanying dialogue/narrative of story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-photoessay assemblage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-share photoessay with the group</li> <li>-discuss issues raised</li> </ul>

<p>Lesson 6</p> <p>Barbie Art</p>	<p>-Barbie dolls</p> <p>-random supplies: glue, scissors, tape, pipe cleaners, paint, fabric, markers, etc</p>	<p>-refer back to the many different characters of Barbie, both those packaged and those created by them and what they say about 'Barbie' and 'girls'</p> <p>-if you could manipulate, re-create, or transform Barbie to represent what you think Barbie is/should be to represent 'girl' what would she look like?</p>	<p>-create Barbie Art: manipulate, re-create, transform Barbie</p> <p>-write an artist statement about your Barbie Art</p>	<p>-construction, appropriation, ownership, performance, manipulation of Barbie</p>	<p>-share Barbie Art and artist statement</p>
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## Lesson 1: Barbie Girl

Teacher: Cortney Piper

Grade Level: 4th-5th (single gender)

Class period: 1 hour

State Fine Art Goals:

VA4-1.3, VA4-2.3, VA4-2.4, VA4-3.3, VA4-5.1, VA4-5.2

State Media Arts Goals (if any):

MA4-1.5, MA4-3.1, MA4-3.2, MA4-3.3, MA4-4.1

### Objectives

- consider gender, specifically “girl,” as a performance
- articulate an understanding of Barbie’s identity/purpose marketed doll; who creates her and for whom
- appropriate Barbie as a concept, representation, and tool to perform individual identities of “girl”
- deconstruct and recreate Barbie coloring books to tell a story about who/what Barbie is/represents

### Concepts and Vocabulary

-gender

as a social construct

as presented by popular culture

as fixed and fluid

-“girl”

as a performance within social relationships and popular culture

as temporal instances of both stereotypes and challenging cross-overs

as multi-faceted, fixed and fluid

-Barbie

the purpose of a doll, how is she meant to be played with

her manufactured and sold identities

the ability to appropriate her and recreate her as a play of social gender construct

## Teacher Materials

-six different, packaged, Barbie dolls

-multiple, different, images of Barbie

-multiple, different, Barbie coloring books

-provide scissors, glue, markers, crayons, pencils

## Student Materials

-sketchbook/journal

## Motivation

-who is Barbie? what can we learn about her by the way she is marketed/sold/manufactured?

-what does Barbie mean to you and what does she say about being a 'girl'?

-what does it mean to play with a Barbie? is it pleasurable, avoided, shunned?

## Dialogue/Discussion

-what toys did you play with when you were younger/now?

-are there different toys made for boys and girls? how do you differentiate between the two?

-what do the different toys say about what boys and girls are like and/or how they should play?

-what do you think of Barbie?

-did/do you play with her?

-how are you 'supposed' to play with Barbie?

-what other ways did/do you play with Barbie?

-who is Barbie? what is her story?

-what are the many different roles, personalities, characteristics of Barbie?

-what does Barbie say about 'girls'?

-how does a Barbie coloring book 'tell the story' of who/what



Barbie is?

-if you could recreate Barbie, who would she be?

## Production

-dialogue/analyze different Barbie dolls: what she is and isn't? who/what is she? what does she represent? who makes her and for whom?

-dialogue/analyze Barbie coloring books: discuss what story is being told about who Barbie is and what she represents as presented in the coloring books.

-journal about how Barbie 'defines' 'girl' through the way she is marketed: looks, characteristics, color, beauty, fashion, roles, activities, personality, interests, etc.

-deconstruct and recreate coloring books: cut, paste, and re-draw a new story for Barbie

-journal about what Barbie represents to you, and how you might change her, as expressed in your recreated coloring book: 'girl' stereotypes, pleasures, roles, character, etc.

## Closure/Assessment

-share recreated Barbie coloring book and explain definition of Barbie.