

Playing with Barbie

Doll-like Femininity in the Contemporary West

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Critical and Cultural Theory

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Abstract

In the winter of 2009, Barbie celebrated her 50th birthday. The occasion was marked with all the pageantry befitting a debutante, starlet, or modern-day princess. Lavish parties were hosted in her honour, and fashion models impersonated the doll on the catwalk. Luxury brands created limited edition Barbie products—from cosmetics to cars—to commemorate the milestone. And, at the height of the revelry, the plastic doll even underwent ‘plastic surgery’ in order to squeeze into a couture pair of birthday stilettos. Taking this distinctive cultural moment as its starting point, this thesis examines how the Barbie doll’s complex and indefatigable cultural presence is understood in Western popular culture. A range of media and industries engage with representations of the doll: advertising, consumer, and celebrity cultures; the fashion, beauty, and cosmetic surgery industries; music; reality television; social networking; and pornography. This thesis interrogates how these media and industries, and the discursive practices therein, reproduce images and narratives of Barbie as a uniform and idealised representation of white, affluent femininity in the West. However, as her birthday celebrations suggest, Barbie is also written as a ‘real’ girl. This thesis also interrogates this narrative of ‘realness’ as it helps to explain why the doll has remained relevant for over 50 years, while complicating readings of her position as a uniform cultural object. Moreover, while Barbie is being portrayed as a ‘real’ girl, popular culture narratives also present ‘becoming Barbie’ as an achievable goal for young women and girls. Motivating this research throughout is the question of how such a referential relationship reinforces and destabilises constructions of the feminine subject in our postmodern and posthuman times.

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She was sunshine, Tomorrowland, the future made plastic.

—M.G. Lord¹

¹ M.G. Lord, *Forever Barbie* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), p. 43.

Introduction: 'In a Barbie World'¹

Tiffany was my childhood best friend and my most intimate Barbie doll confidant. Living two houses apart in suburban Los Angeles made it easy for us to meet up after school, dismissing the trials of the playground and the classroom for the glamour, high fashion, and fun of our fantasy Barbie doll world. This playtime began on the wooden floor of her bedroom when we were five years old. Interspersed with riding bikes and games of tag, Barbies were part of a varied and idyllic upbringing. As we grew older, playtime with Barbies became our daily obsession; it was a permanent fixture we looked forward to with eager anticipation. Over time, our dolls were shaped into lasting characters in a nearly decade long soap opera that revolved around our dreams for the future, as well as the family and neighbourhood dramas we witnessed every day.

When I was eight years old, my parents acquired a caravan, which our family religiously piled into for a few weeks each summer to explore some enclave of the great outdoors in the American West. Apart from those summer adventures, the caravan sat idly in the drive. Upon much persuasion, my mother and father agreed to turn a blind eye as Tiffany and I (and later my little sister, Rachel) transformed it over each school year into a tiered cityscape that we called Barbie World. The caravan housed for us all the magic of girlish make-believe; our dolls, and all their accoutrements, were aspirational figures, while the caravan, plastered with tween heartthrob posters, represented a world of possibility. In my memory, Barbie World was a sanctuary. It was an inventive and creative space, only disturbed by ever-increasing homework and the occasional raid from neighbourhood boys.

¹ Aqua, 'Barbie Girl', *Aquarium* (Universal Music, 1997).

What began in childhood as a space of make-believe fantasy fun shifted in our early adolescence. We continued to commiserate in Barbie World, but by the time we were thirteen, it had become our secret shame. Other girls our age began wearing makeup, drinking winecoolers, having romances, and attending unsupervised house parties. We were still interested in creating intricate plotlines and designing fashionable ensembles for our dolls, while experimenting with makeup and crushes all the same. Eventually, we were forced to admit that we were too old to be residing in Barbie World. Nevertheless, it was still a challenge to pack our dolls away into boxes and store them above the garage, where they are still collecting dust today.

At the time of our departure away from Barbie World, the objective must have been to replace our artificial soap operas with both shared and separate suburban realities. Indeed, this is how our conversations shifted. In the gossip of late-night phone calls and slumber parties we buried the embarrassment of a too-long childhood with anxieties and triumphs of grades and sports, boyfriends, and parties. Once we grew even older, though, and I moved away to attend university, our adolescent awkwardness faded, and Barbie transformed again. She became both a pleasant secret and an ironic joke.² We began to send Barbie birthday cards and exchange light-hearted Barbie gifts. As young women, our ability to laugh at our childhood fantasies and youthful naivety surely suggested nostalgia, but it also seemed to imply a type of self-castigation. As we grew to understand what many critics of the doll suggest she represents—primarily unrealistic beauty standards—perhaps in our teasing we were wondering how we fell for it. Had our pretty pink

² This thesis examines the relationship between the life-like characteristics of the doll, and how these have been conflated with the somatics of ‘real’ women. As such, where appropriate, the pronoun ‘it’ is replaced with ‘she’ to highlight this cultural understanding.

dolls duped us? And if so, what did this say about who we were and who we had become?

The above narrative is my personal Barbie story. While undertaking this doctoral thesis, I have come to discover that nearly everyone I have spoken to about this research on Barbie has a tale of her or his own. From the male professor who regretted not having a doll as a child, to my own mother, who disclosed in a forty-five minute phone conversation all her frustrations with the appearance of her ‘Barbie doll co-workers’, it became apparent very quickly that people have diverse Barbie stories that they are keen to recount. As Barbie expert Erica Rand remarks, Mattel (Barbie’s parent corporation) not only seems to write the doll’s narrative fantasy, but ‘ours too’.³ Indeed, Barbie has been a major player in defining moments of popular culture in the West, and she seems to have made an impression upon each person her plastic figure has come in contact with—and those who were denied it—for better or for worse. Crucially, then, many Barbie stories appear to have something in common. Narrators divulge autobiographical details in order to reflect who they were and who they have become.

While I have stated that the above narrative is my personal Barbie story, what I have shared is not quite right. This is how I remember it, but my Barbie-inspired autobiography is full of bittersweet intricacies that have been misinterpreted, left out, or edited over. Her significance is intertwined within a lifelong friendship, but it has had its ups and downs. The doll has served as a personal marker of fantasy and aspiration, but she has also represented unattainable perfection, embarrassment, and vulgar artificiality. Indeed, my relationship with Barbie has proven to be both a ‘pleasant secret’ and an ‘ironic joke’. ‘Bittersweet’ may be the apposite word to convey

³ Erica Rand, *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 61.

my complex personal encounters with Barbie, and the contradictions and ambivalences therein. ‘Bittersweet’ is apposite, too, because it contains oppositions where there may be potential for narrative unravellings that expose the tensions and contradictions structuring my textual relationship with Barbie.

While assessing the cultural construction of the iconic Barbie doll, *Playing with Barbie* interrogates the stories we tell about her. What these stories attempt to express, and what form they take in doing so—the textual, the visual, and/or the corporeal—brings to the fore how the cultural signification of the doll informs and is informed by corresponding narratives of feminine subject formation in the West. The Barbie doll and our Barbie stories bear the markers of traditional Western conceptualisations of gendered subjectivity. This thesis investigates the cultural implications of this referential relationship, and elucidates the discursive contradictions and ambivalences therein. It is my contention that what is erased, unclear, re-written, and/or incomplete in these narratives has the potential to undermine the Western cultural discourse that naturalises femininity and essentialises gender.

In order to hone my analysis of the constructions of gender by way of the Barbie doll, the ‘we’ to which this thesis refers is very specific. I investigate instances of young feminine engagement with Barbie in the contemporary Western world.⁴ Examples are located primarily in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Certainly, Barbie has a global presence, but this research focuses upon how the

⁴ In this thesis, ‘contemporary’ suggests post-war, and much of the time it applies to the 1990s through to the present. ‘Feminine’ is the adjective I use throughout this thesis to describe the gender identity of a woman or girl. Employing ‘feminine’ is a conscious attempt to avoid essentialising bodies and subjectivities, while speaking almost exclusively about cis-gender identities. For a discussion of Barbie as a toy for boys, see: Meg Wolitzer, ‘Barbie as Boy Toy’, in *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, ed. by Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 207-210. For analysis on how children define the doll in specifically non-heteronormative terms, see: Rand.

constructions, interpretations, and applications of the Barbie doll are tied to narratives of the Western, English-speaking feminine subject. Further, this ‘we’ signals identities that often remain unquestioned in mainstream, popular culture representation, the medium which provides the primary material for my analysis. Barbie, and the femininity with which she is in conversation, are both situated within a cultural praxis that privileges white, middle class/affluent, heteronormative, able-bodied subjectivity. The hegemony of these always already assumed positions are addressed throughout the pages of this thesis.

‘Subject’, too, is a concept that requires elucidation. Catherine Belsey defines it as follows:

‘Subject’ can be more precise than ‘identity’ as a way of thinking about the issues [of a self formed in language and culture]. First, as a grammatical term, it places the emphasis squarely on the language we learn from birth, and from which we internalize the meanings, including the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ our culture expects us to live by. Second, it builds in the ambiguity of the grammatical term itself: I am free to say and do what I like to the degree that I accept a certain subjection to those cultural norms. And third, it allows for discontinuities and contradictions. I can adopt a range of subject-positions, and not all of them will necessarily be consistent with each other. ‘Identity’ implies sameness: that’s what the word means. Subjects can differ—even from themselves.⁵

The term ‘subject’ underpins my theoretical analysis of feminine ‘identities’, and takes on the multiple significations Belsey outlines. Crucially, using it also implies a poststructuralist methodology. Indeed, my investigation endeavours to critically engage with plurality of meaning, and to disassemble culturally constructed narratives and linguistically-based oppositions that are written as natural.

At the heart of this research is the conflation of the discourse of feminine subjectivity in the West with the symbol of the doll in order to create a representation of idealised femininity. Narratives in Western culture have, for centuries, fused these

⁵ Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 52.

two seemingly discrete entities, assigning Western feminine subjects the doll-like characteristics of beauty, delicacy, and passivity. English vernacular is peppered with doll-like descriptions for women and girls. The terms ‘doll’, ‘dollface’, and ‘living doll’ suggest arguably complimentary labels that reinforce a paradigm of idealised doll-like femininity. Contemporary popular culture examples provide evidence of the ubiquity of this discursive practice. While in 1994, the grunge band Hole recorded the plaintive tune ‘Doll Parts’ decrying this state of femininity in the West, many other musical acts have come to this ideal with varying, and sometimes very limited, degrees of criticism. Since 1995, the Los Angeles-based Pussycat Dolls have been fully embracing the markers of the doll in their internationally famous burlesque troupe and pop music act. In 2007, songstress Tori Amos released a studio album entitled *American Doll Posse*. Not limited to music, themes that equate the doll with the feminine subject continue to permeate visual and textual media in popular culture. The 2007 film *Lars and the Real Girl* exemplifies this trope, while Joss Whedon’s 2009 science fiction television programme *Dollhouse* suggests a critical reading of the insidious effects of doll-like subjectivity. Further, 2011 saw reality star Kim Kardashian and her sisters pen a fictionalised story of their lives entitled *Dollhouse: A Novel*.⁶ These media examples, along with contemporary cosmetic and fashion lines such as Living Doll, Dollface Beauty Cocktails, Paper Doll, and Dollhouse Shoes, still only begin to illustrate how doll-like femininity is intrinsic to contemporary Western culture’s ideas of femininity.

The figure of the doll, in general, shares a complex relationship with the feminine subject in the West, and Barbie is the most prominent contemporary iteration of the trope of doll-like femininity. In Western culture, Barbie represents a

⁶ Kim, Khloe and Kourtney Kardashian, *Dollhouse: A Novel* (New York: William Morrow, 2012).

feminine ideal. The doll's fashion sense and flawless beauty are normalised as aspirational by campaigns led by high fashion designers such as Bob Mackie and Christian Louboutin, as well as through the clothing lines such as Uniqlo, and cosmetic brands such as MAC. While artists recreate the doll's 'beautiful' likeness into classical works of art, celebrities reference and mimic her cultural iconography in a number of ways.⁷ 1997 brought with it the release of the now infamously cheeky tune 'Barbie Girl' by Aqua. In 2000, rapper 'Lil Kim began to perform as a blow-up doll/Barbie doll in music videos and photoshoots—an image she continues to cultivate. Dolly Parton released a studio album in 2008 entitled *Backwoods Barbie*. And, currently, hip hop star Nicki Minaj is promoting a Barbie doll persona, with a fan base of women and girls in tow. While reproducing the markers of a Barbie doll-like ideal, these celebrities also begin to demonstrate how Barbie doll-like femininity, in particular, can also produce negative connotations.⁸ When this occurs, colloquial terminology such as 'Barbie doll', 'plastic', and 'fake' are used to disparagingly suggest that one has misinterpreted or exceeded the culturally acceptable parameters of doll-like femininity. Celebrities famous for their cosmetically altered Barbie doll-like appearances—Cindy Jackson, Sarah Burge, Heidi Montag, and Valeria Lukyanova—are often cited as cautionary models of how one can take an ideal too far. Thus, Barbie's presence in Western culture, and her relationship to femininity, is

⁷ Artist Jocelyne Grivaud re-creates classical and contemporary artworks with the Barbie doll. See: 'The fine art of Barbie-sitting—in pictures' (29 January 2012) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2012/jan/29/fine-art-posed-by-barbies?fb=ative&CMP=FBCNETTXT9038#/?picture=385148479&index=8>> [accessed: 17 December 2012].

⁸ For the purpose of this thesis, Barbie doll-like femininity is understood as prioritising the biologically female, racially white, able-bodied, heteronormative, affluent subject in the West. A typical Barbie doll-like appearance can be read as codifying these markers of identity, reproducing a feminine-gendered, blonde, blue-eyed, tall, busty, tan, and slender figure.

complex. She is a rich cultural text exemplifying how doll-like femininity is idealised and normalised, while also being strictly policed.

Popular culture encounters with Barbie inspire a range of feminist and academic interpretations of the doll. Barbie can be read a site of creativity, her plastic body symbolising an open-ended and flexible fantasy for children at play.⁹ The loose narrative surrounding Barbie's fictional life—her not-so-serious relationship with Ken, her best-friend-forever status with Midge, and her multiple fantasy career options and outfits—establish the opportunity for feminist readings that suggest choice and opportunity, as well as a space for queer alternatives.¹⁰ In contrast, divergent, but vocal, feminist circles read Barbie as a cultural object with the symbolic power to reinforce traditional and hegemonic feminine ideals. Accusations that Barbie perpetuates a 'false femininity' are frequent within popular and feminist criticisms of the doll.¹¹ Amidst this type of discourse, the plastic figure is regularly argued to be an unrealistic emblem of a uniformity that promotes the narrow range of privileged subject positions indicated above. This type of reading oftentimes aligns with suggestions that the doll is culpable in manufacturing the eating disorders and the low self-esteem of many women and girls.¹² Further, negative readings of Barbie assert that she functions as a teenage sexual object, and that idealised

⁹ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 98.

¹⁰ Rand, p. 123.

¹¹ Examples will be addressed throughout this thesis. For reference, see: *Adios, Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity* ed. by Ophira Edut (Seattle: Seal Press, 1998).

¹² Molly Jong-Fast, 'Barbie, Twelve-Step Toy', in *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, ed. by Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 197-199 (p. 198).

representations of her figure encourage both the infantilisation of women and the oversexualisation of girls.¹³

Such inquiries are provocative, especially as they relate to the politics of girlhood. They can provide productive tools used to highlight many key issues in gender, sexuality, race and embodiment in the West. While this thesis is feminist in its allegiances, it is not the explicit objective to weigh the pros and cons of Barbie, or to suggest 'better' alternatives to the plastic doll. Discussions such as these are theoretically enervated in feminist debate, as well as within girlhood studies—both fields to which this thesis seeks to contribute. Rather, since Barbie is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, this thesis interrogates her sizable impact upon recent Western popular culture, exploring her significance beyond the most popular of feminist questions. This means interrogating the oppositional framework in which these questions are situated. Indeed, it the objective of this research to discover what is theoretically at stake in these oppositions, and their confluences.

In *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, Dani Cavallaro states that '[d]olls are anthropomorphic projections: images of our humanity imprinted on a non-human world'.¹⁴ This oppositional rhetoric is the crux of the dominant analyses of Barbie, and Barbie doll-like femininity. With its separation of the human and the nonhuman, the subject and the object, it relies on a humanist system of thought. A Western philosophical concept 'dominant since the Renaissance', humanism asserts that we live in 'a human-centred model of the world'.¹⁵ As Tony Davies explains: 'Each of us lives our human-ness as a uniquely individual experience; but that experience, we

¹³ For more on this subject see: Gaylyn Studlar, 'Oh "Doll Divine": Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze', in *Camera Obscura*, 16:3 (2001), 196-227.

¹⁴ Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 105.

¹⁵ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 21.

are asked to feel, is part of a larger, all-embracing humanity, a “human condition”.¹⁶ The ‘quality’ of this condition is ‘at once local and universal, historical and timeless’.¹⁷ It is an epistemology that suggests what Roland Barthes calls a ‘universality of human actions’, which precipitate a ‘human essence’.¹⁸ Crucially, as humanism developed during the period of the Enlightenment, the idea of this essence evolved into the concept of a unified human subject. Logical, rational, authoritative, and progressive, the unified subject was written in direct opposition to the objects of the world, which the subject was understood to control. This thesis contends with this system of thought, as, through the popular culture examples described above, the line drawn to distinguish between doll and feminine subjectivity is more permeable than humanism implies.

If we were to approach the Barbie/feminine subject equivalency in Western popular culture through the lens of humanism, such a reading would suggest either that Barbie is, in fact, human, or that women and girls are nonhuman. Interpretations aligning with the former may seem preposterous, but the latter reveals the major obstacle to embracing humanism.¹⁹ The construction of the unified subject in humanism is gendered masculine. Davies states that ‘the decisive semantic stress (hu-*man*-ism) falls on the second syllable; and never more so than when it lays claim to an encompassing universality’.²⁰ This universality of being depends upon ‘erasing markers of bodily difference’.²¹ The white masculine subject determines the universal human norm, while all other identities are defined by their

¹⁶ Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 21.

¹⁷ Davies, p. 22.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, [1957] 2000) p. 100.

¹⁹ Despite its unbelievable premise, this is precisely how Mattel crafts Barbie’s image. See chapter one.

²⁰ Davies, p. 93.

²¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 5.

bodies calling attention to difference. Within humanism, these othered bodies—the feminine, the racialised, the ambiguously sexed, or the differently abled—are relegated to the position of non-human or object. The failure to hold a (white, heteronormative, able-bodied) masculine subject position forecloses rights and leads to systematic disenfranchisement.

Despite humanism's troubling implications, it is difficult to shake free of the idea that "man" is the origin and source of meaning, action and of history'.²²

Alternatives are so difficult to encounter, because, as Davies explains, humanism is

still deeply engrained in contemporary self-consciousness and everyday common sense, to the extent that it requires a conscious effort every time someone appeals to 'human nature' or 'the human condition' to recall how recent such notions are [in the West].²³

While it would seem 'very odd [...] in cultures historically or ethnologically unlike our own, to separate out and privilege "Man" in this way',²⁴ this is precisely what we do when we ascribe Barbie doll-like femininity as fake. Such a description reinforces the oppositional thinking of humanism as it reduces femininity to the nonhuman.

The scope of something so theoretically problematic has not been left unnoticed by feminist theorists, alongside many other critics from diverse disciplines. Simone de Beauvoir, in her 1949 pioneering feminist text, *The Second Sex*, takes issue with the very troubling humanist concept of the universal masculine subject. She begins by stating in the affirmative that 'woman is, like man, a human being: but such a declaration is abstract'.²⁵ She goes on to contextualise this abstraction within Western culture, suggesting that rather than sex and gender being innate, culture determines the markers of a gendered binary. Poststructuralist

²² Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.

²³ Davies, p. 25.

²⁴ Davies, p. 25.

²⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1949] 1997), p. 14.

thought, in general, reveals that ‘man’ is a culturally constructed concept—as is his unified place at the centre of the world. This type of philosophical reading is powerful as it highlights the potential of, and provides the tools needed to refuse, a culturally embedded way of thinking and being. It encourages a way of thinking about the subject beyond binaries, and provides the opportunity to consider alternatives that are fluid, changing, and ambiguous.

The predicament of desiring to embrace a poststructuralist approach to subjectivity, while feeling the pressure of humanism bearing down, creates a useful set of tensions. Neil Badmington offers this insightful reading of such potentiality.

He states that:

Meaning keeps on moving, and cultural criticism must learn to hear the ‘yes’ with the ‘no’, to read the disfunctioning alongside the functioning, to announce how every ‘supposed system’ is at once a deposed system. Humanism is there and not quite there. It comes and goes, it flickers, it drifts, and it is in precisely this wandering that I want to call the possibility of posthumanism.²⁶

According to Badmington, posthumanism mobilises when humanist cohesion, linearity, and authority begin to go awry. Posthumanism does not embrace humanism’s faulty and phallogocentric system of meaning and being, but relishes in its inevitable disjointedness. Troubling and resisting humanism in this way, ‘on the grounds that it inhibits change, difference, and knowledge’, is the starting point at which subjects can begin to be understood as always in process, and where this thesis begins its interrogation of Barbie.²⁷

The stories, bodies, and subjects Barbie informs certainly can be interpreted as potent examples of the process and fragmentation, ambiguity and contradictions crucial to posthumanist thought. And, significantly, narratives of becoming like

²⁶ Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 145.

²⁷ Badmington, p. 37.

Barbie question the position of the humanist subject in relation to the cultural object.

Indeed, Kim Toffoletti proposes that

as the distance between ourselves and our cultural objects falls away, the place of the subject at the centre of the world is destabilised, creating the potential to rethink subjectivity as always in process.²⁸

Such an interpretation is full of posthuman possibilities. However, the narratives that surround Barbie may also reproduce a troubling legacy of humanism. Barbie's image and constructed narrative can be read as one that perpetuates ideas of mastery and control. As such, a posthumanist reading of Barbie is not as straightforward as it may appear. It is this conversation that is pursued throughout this thesis.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each addressing specific themes. In chapter one I identify the cultural narrative—by way of advertising and consumer demand—in which Barbie is constructed to be an aspirational, authentic, and authoritative figure of idealised white Western femininity. Despite this cultural reading, the nuances of Barbie's history and meaning in the West indicate that the iconic doll is cast in contradiction; Barbie is depicted as an idealised figure and as a 'real' girl. At first glance, this contradiction does not seem to negatively affect Barbie's authority or authenticity in popular discourse, but instead is woven into her cultural narrative. She is aspirational and relatable. I go on to address how this complicated representation is influenced, interpreted, and redefined by the women and girls who have encountered her sparkling presence over the last fifty years. Given the doll's popularity and corresponding narrative construction, Barbie seems to matter to how

²⁸ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 72.

women and girls understand themselves as subjects living in the West. By analysing autobiographical Barbie stories, this chapter elucidates how, precisely, the doll seems to matter—operating as a symbol of cohesive and uniform humanist subjectivity. It becomes evident that, as a figure of plastic contradiction, Barbie has the tendency to threaten all that she represents.

In chapter two, I explore how the autobiographical Barbie stories addressed in chapter one are not limited to the conventional definitions of the textual. Through the topic of body modification, attempts at becoming physically Barbie doll-like can be read as discursive practices in autobiography. By specifically interrogating the example of MTV reality star Heidi Montag and her attempts to become Barbie doll-like, the discussion also examines technologies of the feminine body—from tanning and Botox to teeth whitening and cosmetic surgery. Addressing themes of hyperreality and writing on the body, this chapter questions how Barbie doll-like embodiment fits within and challenges humanist narratives of linear progression and bodily improvement. I propose that attempts to write a Barbie doll-like narrative onto the body must take into account inorganic, hyperreal, and cyborg elements, fusing and confusing the subject and the object—especially by way of the Freudian death drive.

Chapter three traces the discursive practice of becoming Barbie doll-like through body modification to its Western cultural entanglement with plastic. In this chapter I examine how, in particular, the plastic Barbie doll has been incorporated into popular visual discourse as a marker of idealised femininity. Through technology such as cinematic and photographic digital editing, representations of fleshy bodies in the visual field are becoming more plastic than ever before. This chapter suggests that as plastic corporeality is especially prominent in fashion advertising and pornography, these representations of Barbie doll-like femininity are

in conversation with traditional ideas of beauty, working in contrast to gendered, sexualised, and racialised excess. Thus, this chapter proposes that the visual trope of woman- or girl-as-Barbie doll works to remove or replace culturally ascribed feminine excess with the smoothness of digital plastic. Investigating this phenomenon beyond representations in the visual field, this chapter also uncovers how plastic informs embodiment, in particular, through the practice of cosmetic surgery. The conclusion of this chapter asserts that, on one hand, the removal of feminine excess can be read as a way to normalise feminine corporeality, aligning it with humanist ideas of uniformity and beauty. On the other, through an analysis of plastic, it becomes evident that a Barbie doll-like appearance signifies another kind of excess with the potential to destabilise and confound.

Chapter three provides a contextualisation for what, precisely, is written onto the body in order to achieve ideal femininity, and how, through plastic, Barbie doll-like representations can challenge hegemonic beauty ideals. It builds on the analysis of the cultural phenomenon of the Barbie doll and its ties to questions of authentic and cohesive subjectivity (given in chapter one) as well as the investigation into how such stories can be written onto and unravelled through the body (explored in chapter two). With these investigations in place, the final chapter of this thesis seeks to investigate how each of these themes converges into one contemporary popular culture example. Through a close reading of the celebrity construction of hip hop artist Nicki Minaj and her alter ego, Harajuku Barbie, this final chapter explores how pastiche, hybridisation, and excess may work to denaturalise cultural constructions that determine white Barbie doll-like femininity to be a cultural ideal. Through lyrical and visual performance, Nicki Minaj's hyperfeminine co-option of Barbie can be read as a playful subversion of the doll's fifty-year history and worldwide brand status. Moreover, this final example is used to assess the significance of Western

cultural history when dealing with the posthuman potential of the Barbie doll. It deals with how the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality must be accounted for within representations of posthuman, fragmentary, and fictionalised subjectivities. With each of these areas of identity understood as constructions with very material consequences, the chapter considers how a Barbie doll-like feminine subject can productively trouble, complicate, and pluralise the way we think about Barbie, idealised femininity, and humanist subjectivity in the West.

Together, these four chapters interrogate ‘common sense’ understandings of femininity in the West through the cultural object of the Barbie doll. Each chapter reveals how Barbie informs and is informed by traditional conceptualisations of femininity in the West. While all four chapters locate her as a troubling figure of uniformity, they also provide examples of her ability to undo naturalised and idealised notions of femininity. In the process, this thesis provides a new way of understanding not only Barbie, and the women and girls who identify with her, but also the cultural constructions of naturalised and idealised femininity in the West.

Chapter One

'Really Real':

Barbie, Aspiration, Authenticity, and the Feminine Subject¹

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make due with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress.

—Sandra Cisneros²

I. Talking Dolls: Humanist Narratives of Barbie

In March 2009, celebrities congregated on the pink carpet outside the scaled-to-life-size re-creation of Barbie's Malibu mansion. The event bubbled with excitement.

Commemorating fifty years of Barbie, stars toasted the doll, sharing birthday well-wishes and personal memories of her with a host of entertainment journalists.

Among them was supermodel Heidi Klum. She enthused:

I didn't think I was going to be a Barbie when I grew up. You know, I definitely think it's every girl's dream, but you never really think that will happen to you. But I do feel that [...] happened in my life.³

Klum may be referring to how her life as a jet-setting celebrity imitates the Barbie brand identity of glamour, high fashion, and fun. It is also possible that she could be

¹ '1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial' (21 May 2007) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8-avPUxyno>> [accessed: 8 May 2012]. (The title of this video suggests that this is the original Barbie commercial, but sources dispute whether it is from 1959 or 1960.)

² Sandra Cisneros, 'Barbie-Q', in *Woman Hollering Creek* (New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 14-16 (p. 14-15).

³ 'Barbie's Fiftieth Birthday Party' (11 March 2009) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bRc6Wx_CUI&feature=related> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

calling attention to how, as a tall, blonde fashion model, she does, indeed, resemble the original white Barbie doll.⁴ Or, perhaps Klum is hinting at the collaboration with Mattel that came to fruition in September 2009, when the company released a special edition doll with her name. Speculation notwithstanding, the supermodel's statement elucidates something specific and noteworthy. She believes that becoming Barbie doll-like is 'every girl's dream', and although she did not see it as a reality for herself, she proclaims that when it did happen, it was a dream come true.

Not simply a personal sentiment, Klum's statement highlights a predominant cultural narrative that circulates around the doll: for women and girls, Barbie doll-like femininity is a 'dream', and for a seemingly lucky few it is achievable. Mattel, from the start, established this type of fantasy relationship between the doll and her targeted market. In one of the earliest Barbie doll commercials, a feminine voice coos over black and white film: 'Someday I'm gonna be exactly like you', but until then, Barbie, 'I'll make believe that I am you'.⁵ Fifty years of similar marketing seems to have secured Barbie's place in the popular culture landscape. She is far more than just a toy; rather, as her birthday celebrations attest, the doll and her many accessories construct a narrative of idealised feminine subjectivity in which consumers are meant to identify and aspire to be like her well into adulthood.⁶

⁴ Beyond their shared fashion model physicality, both Klum and Barbie share similar origins and destinations. As German emigrants to the United States, both have established a life of fame and glamour in the California sunshine.

⁵ '1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial'.

⁶ Throughout this thesis, 'consumer' is understood to signify both one who purchases a commodity—Barbie and her accessories—as well as one who engages with the Barbie doll brand through advertising and popular media sources to produce meaning as well. This research is informed by a reading of Barbie as 'the new post-World War II consumer, around whom proliferating commodities could endlessly circulate'. Catherine Driscoll, 'Barbie Culture' in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, (1), ed. by Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2008), pp. 39-47 (p. 49).

This chapter looks at how Barbie is constructed as an aspirational figure in Western culture. This aspiration, crafted through a complex conversation between Mattel's marketing rhetoric and through the stories consumers tell about her, depends upon the understanding that the doll is authentic and 'real'. From this place of realness, Barbie is not only an ideal, but also a seemingly relatable figure. I interrogate this complex narrative construction, its implications for consumers, and how it informs and is informed by narratives of Western humanist subjectivity, and traditions of femininity therein. Barbie's narrative of aspiration, it seems, is inextricable from how we construct stories of the self.

When asked what makes the doll so special for women and girls, Mattel's former Barbie general manager and senior vice president Richard Dickson replied, 'People grew up with Barbie; they have memories of Barbie.'⁷ Though simple in its delivery, Dickson's comment begins to shed light on the complexity of Barbie's aspirational relationship with her consumers. While occupying an idealised position in Western culture, the doll is not meant to be viewed from afar; women and girls grew up *with* her. Barbie is personal. She is interwoven into the lives of consumers, and, as such, her characteristics are written as intimately achievable. Crucially, this aspirational narrative comes through in the stories that women and girls tell about her, revealing that Barbie-inspired stories are as much about the storyteller as they are about the doll.

In the collection of essays entitled *Bulletproof Diva*, author Lisa Jones begins her chapter, 'A Doll Is Born', in a canny tone. 'This is my doll story', she explains with a parenthetical aside, '(because every black journalist who writes about race gets

⁷ 'Barbie's 50th Birthday Party' (14 March 2009)
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QJWLoyMq5Q>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

around to it sometime)⁸ In the short narrative, Jones recounts her personal experience with Barbie. She describes how she created an alternative lifestyle for her two blonde dolls, as she ‘cut off their hair and dressed them in African print fabric’.⁹ (Jones establishes that, at the time, Mattel’s various versions of black Barbie did not yet exist.) She goes on, pleased to recall that ‘[t]hey lived together, happily polygamous, with a black G.I. Joe’.¹⁰ Things were not always peaceful for Jones or her Barbie dolls in this inventive land of make-believe. One day, ‘after an incident at school, where all the girls looked like Barbie and none of them looked like me’, the author’s younger self ‘galloped down’ the ‘stairs with one Barbie, her blonde head hitting each spoke of the banister [...] until her head popped off’.¹¹ Continuing the assault, she ‘tore off each limb and sat on the stairs for a long time twirling the torso like a baton’.¹²

Jones’s story provides a compelling description for how Barbie’s aspirational qualities affect notions of the self. As a black American woman who came of age post-1950s, the author describes how she is culturally inscribed to have some sort of relationship with Barbie, just like the hyperbolic ‘every black journalist’ who came before her. In this cultural space, Barbie could not have sashayed passed Jones without directly affecting her subject formation. Underlying the writer’s description is the notion that her relationship with the doll is culturally predetermined to be traumatic because she could not meet its aspirational standards. While Jones takes a certain pride in how she creatively negotiated an alternative narrative for her Barbie dolls, it is also apparent from her story that the emblematic, original white Barbie

⁸ Lisa Jones, ‘A Doll is Born’, in *Bulletproof Diva* (Surrey: Anchor, 1997), pp. 149-152 (p. 149).

⁹ Jones, p. 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149-150.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

doll contributed to feelings of inferiority.¹³ As Jones recounts the specific scene from her girlhood, Barbie's aspirational narrative serves as a representation of prejudice and institutionalised racism, and the violence therein. Exasperated, she is left querying: 'Do little black girls still grow up slaughtering or idolizing pink-fleshed, blue-eyed doll babies?'¹⁴ For a writer dealing with issues of race and popular culture, it seems that Jones feels that she would be disingenuous not to address the Barbie doll narrative of aspiration, its impossibilities for her as a woman of colour, and its effects on her sense of self.

While Jones's story is worlds apart from that of Klum, both follow a similar pattern. Both narratives communicate how the storyteller felt about her childhood. Moreover, both narratives suggest that how one interprets Barbie as a child corresponds with the personality one believes she possesses at the time of recitation. For Klum, becoming Barbie doll-like was a girlhood wish fulfilled. The model's story expresses her understanding of societal expectations and how she personally navigated her way through them. According to Klum's account, her memories of the doll's aspirational narrative began as a child and are realised in her present self. For

¹³ Specifically, Jones refers to the Clark doll experiments in 1940s United States. The study, which was utilized in the American Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, found that racial segregation led to internalised racism in children. In these experiments, the interviewed children demarcated black dolls as 'bad', and white dolls as 'nice'. Jones also highlights how Darlene Powell-Hopson recreated the Clark experiments in 1987. Her findings show that: 'When asked which doll is the good doll, which doll is the right color, a large percentage of children, black and white, still chose the white doll. Powell-Hopson's twist was intervention. Before kids were asked to choose, they were told stories about the black dolls, stories that presented them as great beauties, as heroines. The percentages reversed' (p. 150). Robin Bernstein has since revisited the Clark experiments in a series of lectures. Her research complicates the children's rejection of the black dolls, suggesting that it could have been a rejection of violence that led children to dismiss black dolls in the original study. For more on this argument, see: Michael G. Proulx, 'Professor Revisits Clark Doll Tests', in *The Harvard Crimson* (1 December 2011), <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/12/1/clark-dolls-research-media/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

¹⁴ Jones, p. 150.

Jones, her obligatory Barbie doll narrative follows the above structure twofold. First, it reflects an acknowledged creative ingenuity, in spite of the doll's racial and sexual uniformity, that the writer is pleased to have seen develop since her girlhood. Very pointedly, it also conveys that, as a girl, Jones felt a sense of racialised othering due to Barbie's aspirational narrative, to which she continues to relate in her adult life. In *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, Erica Rand calls this type of Barbie doll-inspired storytelling 'revelatory.'¹⁵ It works to reveal something that is understood to be essential about the teller—something that one stresses is either a characteristic sustained at least since childhood, or a trait that one determines to be innate. Klum and Jones's stories, while representing extremes in their encounters with the Barbie doll, together begin to illustrate a larger cultural occurrence surrounding how one chooses to talk about Barbie.

A strikingly demonstrative record from the anthology *The Barbie Chronicles* further bolsters the notion that there is a rhetorical formula to revelatory Barbie stories. In her essay 'Barbie Doesn't Live Here Anymore', Mariflo Stephens asserts that she 'always knew there was something wrong with Barbie'.¹⁶ Her autobiographical account tells of how, although she did spend time playing with the doll as a girl, it was an activity formally encouraged by adults. Her story expresses the difficulty she faced in hours spent dressing and undressing her Barbies. She sardonically recalls, 'I was exhausted. But, was it ever fun, I told myself'.¹⁷ Stephens affirms that she did not enjoy her required recreation with the doll, and, when she had her chance, always opted for climbing trees instead. As such, it comes as no

¹⁵ Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 139.

¹⁶ Mariflo Stephens, 'Barbie Doesn't Live Here Anymore', in *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, ed. by Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Touchstone, 1999), pp. 193-196 (p. 193).

¹⁷ Stephens, p. 193.

surprise to reader and author alike when Stephens's daughter, at age seven, reassuringly finds Barbie to be 'dumb and prissy' as well.¹⁸ Arriving at this denouement, the author's Barbie story reaches an effortless conclusion. Stephens is a responsible adult, she has specific feminist ideals; predictably, her precocious daughter will follow suit and cast Barbie aside as a frivolous plaything.

When a story of self-development follows a linear structure, with no bumps along the way, it is designed to arrive with ease at its predestined conclusion. While this mode of storytelling can be engaging, with the storyteller disclosing an amusing 'truth' as in the case of the observations of Stephens's astute daughter, such marvels rely on a traditional Western approach to narration and, with it, a specific definition of authorship. In his famous essay 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes elucidates the importance of locating the author epistemologically. He explains that through a history of philosophical movements in the West, the post-Enlightenment, humanist, unified subject has become the privileged norm. He calls this the 'prestige of the individual'.¹⁹ The Western literary tradition 'has attached the greatest importance to the "person" of the author'.²⁰ This figure is presumed to operate with knowledge, power, and mastery over the story, over the text, and over the audience. Such *authority* confirms the position of the author as cohesive, as it constructs narrative development in a linear way that, very specifically, is cultivated to make sense.

A narrative of linear progression is culturally prescribed as the standard mode of storytelling; it is how both the reader and the author imagine a story ought to be told, it is what is expected. Catherine Belsey suggests that such narrativity is

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-148 (p. 143).

²⁰ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 143.

understood as ‘common sense’.²¹ Once this ‘common sense’ is dismantled, Stephens’s assertion that ‘I always knew there was something wrong with Barbie’ becomes more than a personal affirmation. It follows a familiar cultural script. Stephens is interpreting her childhood subjectivity through the lens of adulthood in order for it to confirm her adult ideals. This declaration originates in Stephens’s mature self—from the sensible, knowing place of a studied feminist who swears she will provide ‘no false goddesses’ for her daughter to emulate.²² It is with this intention that Stephens’s essay progresses neatly from a vague feeling that Barbie is ‘wrong’ into a pronounced and clearly defined articulation that Barbie represents a ‘false’ femininity. Likewise, Klum’s ‘dream’ come true and Jones’s conductor-like ‘twirling’ of Barbie’s ‘torso like a baton’ exert a similar degree of linear narrative authority. Childhood memories made intelligible through an adult author enable the narrative to flow sequentially, reach a solid conclusion, and, thus are constructed to make sense.

Upon its deconstruction, this ‘common sense’ method of storytelling, with its expectation of ‘truth’ within a narrative, cannot be fulfilled. Belsey explains that, ‘common sense betrays its own inadequacy by its incoherences, its contradictions and its silences’.²³ Significantly, Rand’s observations point to specific inadequacies of ‘common sense’ authorship and narration in Barbie stories. She postulates that the revelatory trend in Barbie storytelling that she identifies in her research may be so vigorous that stories are, in fact, fabricated.²⁴ In one example, she refers to the analysis provided by a women’s and gender studies course:

The students, all women, reported that they didn’t have Barbies, citing the disapproval of feminist mothers. But as the class progressed other truths

²¹ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

²² Stephens, p. 195.

²³ Belsey, p. 3.

²⁴ Rand, p. 94.

emerged. [...] One woman recanted totally. In truth, she desperately wanted to have been a child with a feminist mother who refused her a Barbie; in fact, her mother had bought her one.²⁵

Striving to present her own version of truth, Rand speculates that the reason behind this kind of narrative construction might be to preserve the storyteller's ideal self. She queries her own research: 'How many people have served up invented or semi-invented Barbie tales as flattering images of themselves?'²⁶

Constructing an ideal self through a Barbie-inspired narrative reinforces a key function of linearly progressive revelatory stories. These tales are not simply presenting a 'flattering image' of the narrator, but rather, they can be understood as an attempt to maintain her cohesive subjectivity. When the narrative is autobiographical, not only does it present mastery over the text, but it also suggests that the storyteller is in control of a truthful representation of the self. These representations do not always align with awkward and fragmented realities, but, rather, function in a way that adheres to a humanist conceptualisation of what a subject is meant to be: unified and in control. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains that

we lead our lives as stories, and our identity is constructed both by stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves and by the master narratives that consciously or unconsciously serve as a model for ours.²⁷

These master narratives are usually 'perceived as "obvious"',²⁸ and delineate a common-sense subjectivity that is fully formed. Thus, while each of the stories highlighted above express thematic variations, they all maintain a representation of a cohesive, unified subject in a way that makes sense to the storyteller, as well as to the listener or reader. As Rimmon-Kenan observes, '[t]elling, and even more so writing,

²⁵ Rand, p. 95.

²⁶ Rand, p. 95.

²⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'The Story of "I": Illness and Narrative Identity', in *Narrative*, 10: 1 (2002), 9-27 (p. 11).

²⁸ Belsey, p. 4.

it seems, is a way of taking control'.²⁹ What is written as truth, then, is an attempt by the author to understand herself in a masterful way.

Through the humanist paradigm of authorship and narration, the Barbie storyteller is in control of the text and, specifically, her representation within it. This mastery allows the author to distinguish herself as a subject who is the source of meaning. Such a function may be especially important to consumers, given how Mattel writes the Barbie doll narrative of aspiration. In 1959, the Barbie advertisement discussed above (p. 25) promised that girls could grow up to be 'exactly like' Barbie. With the release of My Size Angel Barbie in 1998, the advertising language is remarkably similar. This Barbie doll was manufactured as child-sized, and came with a matching angel-winged dress for a hypothetical girl child. Following a magical scene where a young girl twirls in her 'gold and sparkly' dress, addressing the Barbie doll, the child's voiceover for this commercial exclaims, 'Now I look just like you!'³⁰ Such language implies that Barbie and/or Mattel is an exterior force that can mould a child's subjectivity into one that is Barbie doll-like. If the subject is at odds with Barbie by way of race or gender identification, then perhaps there is a heightened desire for the subject to define her sense of self through the controlled context of the revelatory narrative. In this way, the subject is able to present a preserved sense of identity, not mediated through Mattel. This narrative of subjectivity becomes understood as the 'true' and 'real' self, insofar as it existed prior to a childhood introduction of the Barbie doll. In doing so, it gives the subject a feeling of control.

²⁹ Rimmon-Kenan, p. 23.

³⁰ '1998 My Size Angel Barbie Doll Commercial' (26 December 2009) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmia02BIZVo&feature=related>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

If the subject is inclined to distinguish herself from the type of femininity that the Barbie doll is understood to represent—such as is the case with Jones and Stephens—then these revelatory Barbie stories may be working in another, ontological way as well. Assuring Barbie consumers that they have the potential to be ‘like’ Barbie can imply a sinister guarantee. Becoming ‘just’ or ‘exactly’ like the doll suggests there is a process: a transition from a knowing, unified subject into a plastic, doll-like object. If this transition is ever completed, then there is an implication that the subject must forfeit her subject status altogether. By textually defining the storyteller as a cohesive, unified subject—and an author with absolute self-knowledge and mastery—these revelatory narratives place her in direct opposition to the (doll-like) object. The subject attempts to feel secure in this position, by delineating such distinctions with finitude. From a (post)humanist perspective, Neil Badmington writes:

Objects [...] confirm the human subject *as a subject*, as something that is not an object, not inanimate, not inhuman. By marking the object’s difference, the subject collects itself into being. (Emphasis in original) ³¹

Revelatory Barbie stories—about an iconic cultural object—function to firmly establish subjectivity that has been threatened by the influence of the Barbie doll and all that Mattel promises she can accomplish by way of her narrative of aspiration.

An overarching humanist discourse informs revelatory Barbie stories, suggesting certain narrative truths. These truths serve as a response to Barbie’s brand identity that conflates glamour, high fashion and fun with an aspirational image of idealised white femininity in the West. The accuracy of the autobiographical account is assumed when a narrator shares her feelings on the doll, and these emotions and perceptions are promoted with the use of reconstructed

³¹ Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 96.

childhood memories. Through the structure of humanist discourse, the author appears to possess an absolute knowledge to create a truthful account, which is validated through a cohesive, linear text. In some of these stories, the author's subjectivity is written as unified in order to combat a perceived threat of becoming 'just like' Barbie. While the authenticity of the account and the authenticity of the narrator are assumed in revelatory Barbie stories, another major component of this narrative construction is the authenticity of Barbie. Barbie's 'realness' is crucial to how women and girls understand their experiences with doll, informing what they say about her. That a plastic doll has inspired fifty years of revelatory stories demonstrates that her influence on feminine subjectivity in the West is pervasive. Before exploring issues of subjectivity further, an investigation into what makes Barbie 'Barbie' is vital.

II. 'Keepin' It Real': Barbie's Narrative of Authenticity³²

Logging on to Mattel's official Barbie website brings an intrepid internet-user face to face with an array of vibrant pink images. Bursts of stars shimmer and sparkle, inviting a hovering cursor to click on games, videos, fashion, shopping, and collectibles. Synchronised to correspond with each guest's visit to the site, an animated advertisement plays without prompting. A masculine voice with an American accent announces: 'Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse'.³³ Mattel's take on reality television, *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* is a multi-episode, web-based series that follows a digitally rendered Barbie on adventures in Malibu, California and beyond. Following a link to discover more information about the programme,

³² '2007 Barbie Jammin' Jeep Wrangler Commercial' (7 November 2007) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJT6vfMO6SY>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

³³ Barbie Website: <www.barbie.com> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

potential consumers are easily interpellated.³⁴ Informal gestures and popular slang welcome Barbie's fans. 'Hey Doll!' the website's text exclaims, while inviting viewers to 'Become Besties' (best friends) and 'Live the Life' of a Barbie doll.³⁵ If ever in doubt, the website repeatedly reminds its audience that Barbie's aspirational qualities are linked to her authenticity. After all, as the voiceover declares, Barbie is '[t]he first name in fashion and fun'.³⁶

The strategy of connecting Barbie's aspiration with a narrative of authenticity has been amazingly successful for Mattel. Indeed, when narrators recalled their interactions with the doll in revelatory Barbie stories, 'the distinction between fake and real [...] mattered in the assessment of the doll's worth'.³⁷ Rand observes that in many Barbie stories there is a definite differentiation 'between official Mattel products and less desirable pretenders'.³⁸ Her storytellers remember recognising items as counterfeit, their childhood selves casting them aside with the inevitable epithet of 'fake'.³⁹ If one did not dress Barbie in her Mattel-authorized wardrobe, for example, but instead received hand-sewn garments, these narrators describe how such clothes were viewed as unglamorous and inauthentic. In order for a Barbie to be considered 'real', and in order for Barbie accessories to be considered 'real'—and thus aspirational—they had to be associated with, and branded by, Mattel. As one of Rand's interview subjects reminisces, for her and her friends, only store-bought, Barbie-branded items would do: they had 'to come in those plastic packages'.⁴⁰ This

³⁴ Louis Althusser's theory of 'interpellation' suggests calling a subject into being by way of ideology. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

³⁵ *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse Website*: <<http://dreamhouse.barbie.com/en-US/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

³⁶ Barbie Website.

³⁷ Rand, p. 96.

³⁸ Rand, p. 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

preoccupation with brand authenticity can be traced to the fact that '[e]arly Barbie commercials direct viewers to look for the Mattel tag' to ensure they were 'getting authentic Barbie products'.⁴¹ Harnessing the new power of American children's television in the 1950s and 1960s, the company concluded each of its Barbie commercials with the rambunctious certification: 'You Can Tell It's Mattel... It's Swell!'⁴² As *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* attests, Mattel continues to authenticate Barbie with the most up-to-date technology. The following section engages with Mattel's decades of branding and marketing of the doll to determine precisely how aspiration and authenticity function together for consumers, informing their ideas of self.

Savvy contemporary consumers are no longer instructed to seek out the Mattel tag on Barbie products. Today Barbie, more so than Mattel, holds the recognisable brand name. Recent promotional campaigns by Mattel and its retailers continue, however, to direct consumers toward authentic Barbie products. Shoppers can purchase the pink, modern, and architecturally innovative Exclusive Barbie Malibu Dreamhouse.⁴³ Likewise, adult collectors can procure all four Exclusive *Mad Men* Barbie dolls, which replicate, with a nod to Barbie's 1960s appearance, characters from the AMC television drama.⁴⁴ In these instances, exclusivity works in myriad ways to evoke authenticity. The word is associated with others like 'elite',

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴² Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 167.

⁴³ 'Toys R' Us Exclusive Barbie Malibu Dreamhouse' <<http://www.toysrus.com/product/index.jsp?productId=11587154>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

⁴⁴ 'Barbie Collector *Mad Men* Complete Four Doll Set BFC [Barbie Fan Club] Exxclusive [sic]' <http://www.amazon.com/Collector-Complete-Exxclusive-Sterling-Holloway/dp/B007P6MKHI/ref=sr_1_3?s=toys-and-games&ie=UTF8&qid=1337773666&sr=1-3> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

‘high-class’, and ‘fashionable’, as well as ‘unique’, ‘special’, and ‘true’.⁴⁵ While the latter synonyms situate ‘exclusive’ alongside ‘authentic’ in denotative terms, the former imply that such realness comes from being upscale and, as such, its limitedness inspires desirability. Exclusivity is also tied to corporate vocabulary as in ‘exclusively belonging to or claimed by a particular establishment or firm’ or holding exclusive ‘rights’ to a product.⁴⁶ In each of these ways, Barbie’s authenticity is reinforced through a process of marketing that not only makes her genuine, but also special, and this has massive consumer appeal.

Mattel’s visual and textual cues demonstrate Barbie’s authenticity in a way that conflates ‘truth’ with ‘uniqueness’ to create specific allure. Coded spoken and sung words in Barbie advertising go far to attract consumers with a promise of something ‘real’.⁴⁷ In 2007, Mattel released a Barbie Jammin’ Jeep Wrangler. In the American advertising jingle, girlish voices sing, ‘We’re jammin’ and glammin’ [...]. We’re keepin’ it real’.⁴⁸ This song is played over an animated sequence where live action girls drive a child-size motorised pink jeep. While the memorable tune is meant to convey the aspirational, carefree attitude of a Barbie doll-like girl cruising along in the California sunshine, the lyrics are also significant in how they position Barbie’s authenticity. ‘Glammin’ identifies Barbie’s uniqueness precisely; in this context she, and the young consumers she is interpellating, are glamorous. Through lyrical exposition, this idea of glamour is then equated with ‘keepin’ it real’. This is a

⁴⁵ ‘Exclusive’, in *OED* (2013) <<http://www.oed.com/>> [accessed: 13 January 2013].

⁴⁶ ‘Exclusive’, in *OED*.

⁴⁷ M. G. Lord discusses how significant television advertising was, and continues to be, for Mattel. The company, and, specifically the Barbie doll, came about at a time when the ‘child-as-consumer’ was just being identified in advertising. Mattel exploited this, and was extremely successful, as they ‘pitched Barbie directly to kids’. M.G. Lord, *Forever Barbie* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994) p. 17.

⁴⁸ ‘2007 Barbie Jammin’ Jeep Wrangler Commercial’.

noteworthy correlation, which provides further insight into how Barbie's authenticity is both perceived and marketed in the West.

At the University of Cambridge Festival of Ideas in 2009, a 'Becoming Barbie' panel assembled to discuss fifty years of the cultural impact of the Barbie doll. Becky Munford contributed to the conversation, elucidating how the etymology of the word 'glamour' can be read in terms of the doll. She explains that Barbie does not 'simply represent glamour as beauty, fascination, and allure; she also represents glamour in its more archaic sense as magic, enchantment, spell'.⁴⁹ She goes on to suggest that 'this idea of an illusory or fictitious beauty, a kind of deceptive charm, has faded in the common usage of this term'.⁵⁰ Munford asserts, however, that Barbie continues to 'glamour' in this anachronistic way.⁵¹ In this respect, Barbie exhibits paradoxical traits. It is certainly possible for her to be both genuine and unique, but when uniqueness is interpreted as 'glamour', or something magical, enchanting, and *deceptive*, this directly conflicts with Barbie's status of 'keepin' it real'.⁵²

Unexpectedly, perhaps Barbie's deceit can be traced to her origin story. In the fastidiously researched and aptly titled *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*, M.G. Lord acerbically describes the doll's ancestry. She states that 'Barbie was knocked off from the "Bild Lilli" doll, a lascivious plaything for

⁴⁹ Becky Munford, 'Becoming Barbie: The pros and cons of female stereotypes' (audio: panel discussion), (26 October 2009) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/audio/2009/oct/26/cambridge-ideas-festival>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

⁵⁰ Munford.

⁵¹ In addition, Barbie, as a conveyor of magic, calls to the fore Raymond Williams's essay 'Advertising: The Magic System'. Here, the theorist argues that an object—like the plastic figure of the Barbie doll—is not enough, in itself, to sell in the capitalist marketplace. Advertising, or what he calls a 'system of organised magic' is necessary. Raymond Williams, 'Advertising: The Magic System', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 170-195 (p. 186).

⁵² Significantly, in the '1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial', the jingle insists that 'at parties' Barbie 'will cast a spell'.

adult men that was based on a [German] postwar comic character'.⁵³ Ruth Handler, the woman who invented Barbie, encountered this erotic doll while she was on a family vacation in Switzerland. She purchased three Lilli dolls at the behest of her teenage daughter, Barbara, and, exhilarated, they toted them back home to California.⁵⁴ According to Handler, who was the wife of Mattel's co-founder, she had been trying 'for years' to convince the 'male designers' at the toy company 'to develop a doll with a woman's body'.⁵⁵ Inspired by watching Barbara play with paper dolls as a girl, Handler intimates that she had been attempting to create a type of three-dimensional figure based on the static paper objects. While Mattel's designers insisted that such a feat of engineering could not be done, Lilli provided proof. As much as the designers resisted making a doll 'with breasts', Handler pushed for a replica, and in 1957, Mattel found a company that would replicate the Lilli doll.⁵⁶

In interviews, Handler 'downplay[ed] Barbie's resemblance to Lilli', asserting that there are many variations between the two dolls.⁵⁷ Yet, Lord surmises that the Barbie prototype and the *Bild* Lilli doll were 'virtually identical'.⁵⁸ Subtle changes were made to the design of Mattel's version, Lord concedes, including modified leg and arm joints.⁵⁹ Further, Mattel was determined to use softer, state-of-the-art material on its model. More delicate facial features were also sketched out, and although 'a sculptor was brought in to refashion Lilli's face, [...] nobody at Mattel liked the results, so the head was cast, with slight modifications, from Lilli's'.⁶⁰ These

⁵³ Lord, p. 7-8.

⁵⁴ Until 1991 Mattel headquarters were in Hawthorne, California. Despite its industrial appearance, Hawthorne is a district with 'glamour-queen precedent: In 1926, Marilyn Monroe was born there'. Lord, p. 18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

subtle changes did not remove Lilli's pinup qualities, though; Mattel needed to persuade American middle class consumers that a German doll 'never intended for children' could transform into an authentically all-American, wholesome toy.⁶¹ Perhaps a daunting task of subterfuge, such a narrative rewriting is not dissimilar from many other American myths. Rather than Barbie operating as an imposter, her authenticity may be found in a tale of transition comparable to the glamour and fiction of the race (white) and class (middle) specific American dream. As such, Barbie's own story has much in common with the revelatory humanist narratives she inspires: it, too, has been crafted to make sense out of conflicting historical fragments.

After developing the prototype, the next step towards transforming the doll (and Handler's dream) into a lucrative business model was to debut it at the American International Toy Fair in 1959. It was winter, and she was 'unseasonably bare in her black and white swimsuit. Voluptuous, half-naked, she curiously didn't make much of a splash.'⁶² Following this description, Lord goes on, calling attention to the doll's immediate reception:

[E]ven when the buyers glimpsed her, it was far from love at first sight. Condemning her sexiness, Sears buyer Lowthar Kieso, toy taskmaster for the catalogue empire that had been one of Mattel's biggest customers, rejected her—an odd bit of prudery at a trade show where, to make sales, models batted their eyelashes and stuck out their chests. Other buyers decided to stock her: not, however, in legions.⁶³

With these near frigid results, Mattel began a fierce campaign, but reception was mixed at best. Nevertheless, the ever-plucky Handler continued to persevere. Instead of back-peddalling on Barbie's obvious sexual overtones, Handler employed marketing experts to exploit the doll's physicality in a way that simultaneously

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶² Ibid., p. 42.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 43.

intrigued children and promised respectability to their middle-class parents. Designed with the loose narrative of a fashion model, the 1959 Barbie doll was scripted as an instructional instrument of femininity. Barbie's advertising suggested that girls 'might even want to spruce up and emulate' the doll.⁶⁴ This clever tactic seemed to assuage many prim parents. By the summer of 1959, both blonde and brunette versions of the doll were vanishing from toyshop shelves. Lord explains that, for many American children, Barbie's release marked a 'watershed moment'.⁶⁵ The doll 'was a handheld piece of true Hollywood: scary, sleazy and spellbinding'.⁶⁶ Echoing Munford's analysis, Lord's quotation perfectly captures the contradictory qualities written into the Barbie doll. '[T]rue Hollywood', itself a paradoxical deception, marks the doll as authentic within a fictional, American dream world. Likewise, 'spellbinding' situates the doll squarely within Munford's thoughtful observations on glamour.

Half a century later, consumers still find something extraordinarily captivating about the first issue doll. In her original form, the 1959 Barbie continues to charm adult devotees willing to spend vast sums to possess some of her magic.⁶⁷ These scrupulous consumers seem to communicate what Walter Benjamin suggests in his essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age Mechanical of Reproduction'. Here, Benjamin asserts that, 'The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.'⁶⁸ In these terms, Barbie, a confirmed, 'copyrighted [...] work of

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁷ In 2006, an original doll sold at auction for \$27,450. Rajini Vaidyanathan, 'Fifty Years of Barbie' (9 March 2009) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7931700.stm>> [accessed: 8 May 2012] (para. 34).

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, [1959] 1999), pp. 211-244 (p. 214).

art',⁶⁹ is only symbolically authenticated through her equivocal origin story. For avid collectors, it is the doll's tangible, branded presence—her trademark date, specific physical characteristics, and, most importantly, the simple fact that she came first in Barbie doll lineage—that determines that the 1959 first issue doll is original and, thus, authentic.

Unlike Barbie doll collectors, Benjamin, does not celebrate the concept of authenticity. Rather, he situates it as a powerful force that conveys authoritarianism, and, specifically Fascism.⁷⁰ Applying the cultural critic's logic to this doll study, authentic Barbie products can be read—like the stories they inspire—as enforcing troubling attitudes about truth, power, and control. Indeed, some feminist political language passionately communicates that the Barbie doll contributes to authoritarian ideas about gender and race in the West. When deconstructed, the 1990s Riot Grrrl battle cry, 'Fuck You and Your Fascist Beauty Standards', is inseparable from the consumption of Barbie doll-like images.⁷¹ Less convincing is the troubling and xenophobic American Cold War conflation of the doll with Nazism, when based solely on her connections to the German *Bild* Lilli doll.⁷² Rather, it is Barbie's uniformity of shape, her representation of hegemonic beauty as achievable, and the discourse of authenticity and exclusivity surrounding her, that suggest a nuanced reading of the doll as a symbol of oppression.

Competing hypotheses about the systems used to manufacture and reproduce Barbie, and her ubiquity through mass production, add to the discussion of the doll's authoritarian associations. Crucially, Barbie and her authorised products are formed

⁶⁹ Lord, p. 12.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, p. 235.

⁷¹ Elisa Albert, 'To Live and Diet in L.A.: A Vegan Tour of Lipo-Land', in *Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image*, ed. by Ophira Edut (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 1998), pp. 250-257 (p. 252).

⁷² For further discussion on this topic, see: Juliette Peers, *The Fashion Doll: from Béb  Jumeau to Barbie* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

on an assembly line. Like the modern artefacts Benjamin discusses, Barbie is an object 'designed for reproducibility'.⁷³ This concept is very appealing to the theorist, as he sees mechanical reproduction as a democratising force of 'great social significance'.⁷⁴ Benjamin asserts that this manufacturing process removes the authenticity, 'aura' or essence, and authority from a work of art.⁷⁵ When an object is reproduced on a large scale, he argues that it becomes accessible and, in this way, loses its signification of originality and domination. Yet, while at the time Benjamin was writing his essay there was much social potential in mechanical reproduction, later the system was adopted as a means of perpetuating violence and oppression. Similarly, it is mechanical reproduction that makes Barbie's hegemony possible. Thus, while Benjamin puts forth an argument for the transformative power of mechanical reproduction, Barbie seems to complicate this belief. Not only can her manufacture and distribution incite critiques of fascist beauty standards, but further, despite the fact that a Barbie is sold every three seconds,⁷⁶ she manages to maintain her authenticity.

Vintage-era Barbie dolls sell at auction for substantially more money than the contemporary dolls in toyshop windows. Barbie dolls that have never been removed from their boxes, encased in a pristine pink habitat surrounded by yellowing plastic, demand the highest prices in the idiosyncratic world of Barbie collectibles. Here, Barbie experts do not indicate authenticity and originality by identifying a singular prototype. Rather, when these enthusiasts refer to the original Barbie, they are recalling a run of three hundred thousand dolls, all issued in the early part of 1959. These fans demonstrate that while mechanical reproduction can churn out

⁷³ Benjamin, p. 218.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, p. 227.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

⁷⁶ Barbie Media Website: <<http://www.barbiemedia.com/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

thousands of plastic Barbie doll clones, authenticity can still be signalled. Benjamin recognises that

[t]he authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.⁷⁷

He is asserting here that a ‘beginning’, a ‘testimony’, and a ‘history’ are crucial to an object’s authenticity. This analysis offers an explanation as to why the earliest Barbie dolls, though replicas of replicas,⁷⁸ still manage to signify an authentic state. The 1959 first issue dolls function as a synecdoche—offering evidence that signals each of Benjamin’s requirements. Despite the fact that the doll is mechanically reproduced, it still performs as an authority, which is extremely important—especially in the exclusive world of Barbie fandom.

While her genealogy may be critical to Barbie doll collectors, this does not legitimate Barbie’s authenticity for many young consumers. Certainly, contemporary advertising and product design allude to the 1959 doll. ‘Barbie’, a name conjuring a bygone era of America, evokes this history, while typeface and more passive branding images reference the first issue doll. When contemporary Barbie advertisements speak to the importance of realness and exclusivity, these pronouncements do not promise a fusty collector’s item. This would be far from ‘keepin’ it real’. The 1959 doll is well beyond her sell-by date in terms of young consumers; she is a relic when it comes to appealing to this market. In order to keep Barbie relevant, then, Mattel relies on the other definition of the word ‘original’. For these consumers, Barbie must forever be ‘creative’, ‘inventive’, ‘novel’, ‘fresh’, and most importantly, ‘new’ in order to convey that she is ‘real’.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Benjamin, p. 215.

⁷⁸ This discussion also brings up theoretical issues of the hyperreal. See chapter two for more on this topic.

⁷⁹ ‘Original’, in *OED*.

Mattel has masterfully located authenticity in a commercial rhetoric that defines originality by encompassing its various meanings. In this way, Barbie is original in that she has a heritage and a point of origin, but, also, Barbie is original in that she is always new—the latter appealing to the majority of consumers. Yet, the Barbie doll is laden with over fifty years of history. How does she dazzle the next generation of young shoppers? Barbie stories highlight significant cultural moments. Mattel appropriates these, and applies them to Barbie’s wardrobe, hair, makeup, skin tone, measurements, career, and lifestyle choices. Consumer demand is critical in determining the next instalment of Barbie’s ever-changing image. With consumer input, Barbie’s originality is redeemed seasonally, with numerous new dolls and a plethora of new accessories available concurrently, and for a limited time. Conveyed mostly through alterations to Barbie’s wardrobe and plastic body, these modifications highlight historical and cultural shifts within idealised white femininity in the West.

In order for Barbie to maintain cultural relevance, her fictional background also must function within many new and revised scenarios. Upon removing Barbie’s Germanic origins, Mattel left many things about the doll’s life up to her consumers’ imaginations. In her work on girlhood studies, Catherine Driscoll explains that despite her clear and recognizable signification, ‘Barbie is never complete’.⁸⁰ Inscribed within the doll’s iconic and marketable image is only the loosest narrative, which enables the shifting and conflating of multifarious identities. Rand explains that

Mattel touts Barbie as a catalyst for fantasy and since the 1960s has deliberately refrained from circulating certain Barbie biographical details or

⁸⁰ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 98.

narratives—such as age, a geographical location, or a wedding—that might foreclose fantasy options.⁸¹

While Barbie's signification may never be complete, she is not simply an empty signifier upon which meaning can be written. It is through Mattel's meticulous engineering and advertising ingenuity that Barbie's narrative persists as enigma. As such, this incompleteness is incorporated into her branded narrative in order to express everlasting newness and authenticity.

From a codified space of detailed ambiguity, Barbie assumes the flexibility to occupy seemingly conflicting fantasies, uphold contrary and innumerable representations, and magically redefine the very meaning she embodies. Because Mattel holds specific information about Barbie strategically under wraps, this act of cloistering becomes inseparable from the very story that is cultivated to keep her contemporary—the primary objective of Mattel.⁸² Thus, while superficial changes to Barbie's body, hair, makeup, and fashion ensembles not only reflect a manufacturing date along with a cultural moment, they also work to maintain a superficial narrative. In 1959, Rand describes how 'Barbie [began] as a good girl'.⁸³ With a variety of career and multi-ethnic options for both Barbie and her friends, Mattel tries to promote (with debatable levels of success) the contemporary doll as a 'paragon of

⁸¹ Rand, p. 8. Barbie's biographical details can be found in artefacts from the 1960s that determine Barbie to be, in fact, Barbara Millicent Roberts. She does have parents, lives in Wisconsin, and attends high school. This biography adheres to a specific 'anglocentrism' discussed at length by Karen Goldman in 'La Princessa Plastica: Hegemonic and Oppositional Representations of *Latinidad*, in *Hispanic Barbie*' in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage Publications, 2011), pp. 375-382 (p. 376).

⁸² This may be so much the case, in fact, that Lord contends that, 'Mattel's focus on the future, which may be the secret of its success, has been at the expense of its past. The company has no archive' (p. 14).

⁸³ Rand, p. 193.

feminism and diversity'.⁸⁴ It is through a combination of attention to detail and subtlety that Barbie remains relevant to shifting ideas of Western femininity, yet is always narratively authentic. The incompleteness that Driscoll describes is a calculated feature which functions both to seemingly belie and reinforce the elasticity of Barbie's image. It is a well-crafted singular representation to which Barbie always returns, while appearing slightly rejuvenated each year that she re-emerges. It is from this shape-shifting narrative structure that the Barbie doll is conditioned to be both 'real' and glamorous, and thus aspirational.

Mattel relies on terms like 'real' and 'glamorous' in order to authenticate the doll and appeal to a large consumer base. Loose narratives are used to perpetuate these ambiguous terms, while Mattel appropriates revelatory Barbie stories to ensure that the doll and her products are new, fresh, and original. While constantly reinvented, Barbie also functions as an authority of feminine uniformity, or 'the first name in fashion and fun'.⁸⁵ Thus, incongruous qualities are written into the doll's script as cohesive, working together to suggest an overall humanist narrative of truth, authority, and the American dream. Established in this role, Barbie is able to interpellate consumers, calling out 'Hey doll!' and inviting them to be 'Besties'.⁸⁶ This marketing approach creates parallels between Barbie and her fans. It identifies girls and women as doll-like, and it also identifies Barbie as life-like. Because of this, Barbie circulates as a powerful signifier. She is situated in a unique position where consumers are not only meant to identify her on toyshop shelves, but also to identify *with* her.

The construction of consumer identification can be traced to Barbie's origin story, where the scope of the doll's realness is hinted at, taking it beyond product

⁸⁴ Rand, p. 193.

⁸⁵ Barbie Website.

⁸⁶ *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* Website.

authenticity. In attempts to disassociate Barbie from the *Bild* Lilli doll (as other and as object), Ruth Handler named her after a ‘real’ girl, her daughter Barbara.⁸⁷ With this narrative foundation, the contemporary representation of the doll as reality television star on *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* appears to make sense. Barbie, a doll that from the start referenced a real-life teenage girl, has used her fashion model glamour to magically progress to celebrity status, complete with a birthday party and runway shows in her honour. This advancement reinforces that the doll is no mere object, narratively blurring her into the realm of subjectivity. Nick Mansfield, in his cultural survey, *Subjectivity*, identifies several key features which elucidate this concept of the self in the West. He explains:

Usually we live an open-ended yet known, measured yet adventurous journey into experience, one we see as generally consistent and purposeful. It is this unfinished yet consistent subjectivity that we generally understand as our selfhood [...].⁸⁸

Mansfield’s assessment helps locate Barbie’s realness in terms of the subject/object divide. Complex and contradictory, authoritative and vague, Barbie’s narrative of authenticity defines the doll as subject. As such, her realness is relatable and aspirational both in marketing language and in fantasy play. Considering this, perhaps it is not simply Barbie’s object status, but how she reaches beyond it, that can be read as equally threatening to opponents of the doll. When the Barbie advertisement voiceover sings ‘[w]e’re keepin’ it real’,⁸⁹ the collusion of the doll with her consumers deserves as much attention as Mattel’s assertion of authenticity.

⁸⁷ While Barbie’s namesake is clearly Handler’s daughter (as Ken, too, is named for Handler’s son), Lord prompts her readers’ inquisitiveness by locating the moniker’s etymological roots. The name Barbara means ‘foreigner’, and is derived from the same linguistic origins as ‘barbarian’, further situating Barbie as a mysterious outsider (p. 43).

⁸⁸ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 4.

⁸⁹ ‘2007 Barbie Jammin’ Jeep Wrangler Commercial’.

III. 'I can be...': Barbie and Feminine Subjectivity⁹⁰

'When I grow up... I can be anything I want.' These are the opening lines of the 2010 documentary-style commercial produced for Mattel. Spoken by two girls—a child ballerina and a teenage pianist—the words, accompanied by a soft acoustic soundtrack, convey a poignancy. The short film goes on to depict these hopeful girls alongside successful women: a helicopter pilot, teacher, artist, designer, athlete, musician, fire fighter, and veterinarian. The interposed images suggest that girls who are inspired to 'dream big' will grow up to be empowered, creative, passionate adults. As the 31 seconds of airtime concludes, the ballerina repeats the opening lines. She is playing with a blonde Ballerina Barbie. As she lifts the doll into the air for a mighty leap, the shot switches to focus on her, practicing a pirouette with pointed toes. Affirming the young girl's assertion that she can be anything, the accomplished artist attests 'and that's everything'. Barbie's branded pink signature closes the advertisement with its seal of approval, while below the logo are the words: 'Over 125 careers and counting',⁹¹

Mattel's 'I can be...' campaign has featured several similarly themed commercials, and the company has also launched a website specifically dedicated to this venture.⁹² On the website, an interactive pink map locates Barbie fans globally, and pins their career aspirations to the country they represent. Ambitious Ashley M. from the United States writes 'I dream of becoming a president because I want change'. Itzel S. from Mexico is determined to be 'a pastry chef'. Jenna B. from the

⁹⁰ 'I can be... TV Commercial' (4 November 2010) <<http://www.shootonline.com/go/index.php?name=Release&op=view&id=rs-web3-4322128-1288892701-2>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

⁹¹ 'I can be... TV Commercial'.

⁹² Barbie Dreams 'I can be...' Website: <<http://barbiedreams.com/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

United Kingdom dreams ‘of becoming a midwife’. And, precocious Janice L. from the Philippines would love to be ‘a fashion writer’. Upon investigation, it seems that Barbie has occupied each of these positions to varying degrees.⁹³ The doll has been retailed as a president, chef, and several incarnations of healthcare professional, including Newborn Baby Doctor. Barbie’s second career, in 1960, was a fashion editor.⁹⁴ The doll’s ever-changing professional path proves to be illustrative of many young girls and women’s career aspirations. Yet, this seemingly straightforward endeavour is quickly complicated with enterprising Belle (and several others) as she proclaims ‘I want to be Barbie’.⁹⁵

The girls and young women who engage with the interactive website are represented as having a robust relationship with the doll, which is emphasised by the website’s graphics. For example, when Maria Luisa L., writes ‘I dream of being a singer’, her comments are bolstered by an image of the doll in that role. Aspiring to be Barbie (or a version of her) is written into Mattel’s cohesive narrative of the doll, and is present in all aspects of her promotion. As such, it is no wonder that girls like Belle express a desire to be Barbie when they grow up. The final sections of this chapter return to the consumer relationship with Barbie, investigating how it informs interpretations of her realness and aspirational image. When Barbie blurs the distinct line between subject and object, confounding humanist ideas about identity in the West, she seems to interpellate her consumers in the process. Barbie stories have shown that this type of interaction influences how women and girls

⁹³ Barbie Careers Website: <<http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/careers.html>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

⁹⁴ Looking every bit the chic combination of former American *Vogue* fashion editor Carrie Donovan and current creative director Grace Coddington, Barbie became a fashion editor once again, this time for FAO Schwarz’s exclusive doll line in 2001.

⁹⁵ The Barbie Dreams ‘I can be...’ Website is interactive and fluid. Each example was listed on 23 March 2012.

understand themselves. As such, these sections interrogate Barbie's dalliances with subjectivity, investigating the philosophical implications for consumers therein.

IIIa. 'Get Your Sparkle On': Barbie as a Real and Aspirational Figure⁹⁶

Surveying aspirations in relation to Barbie can incite debates surrounding issues of causation and correlation. It is easy to note that Barbie has affected the lives of women and girls in significant ways so it is unsurprising to see her career ambitions reflected in the hopes and dreams of many of her young fans. It is even possible that she has acquainted many children with new ideas about work and its potential. In *Girls*, Driscoll explains that in the capitalist West '[g]irls are not usually considered in terms of the material or value they produce, or even will produce in the future, but, rather, through their value in systems of exchange and in relation to (or as) consumption'.⁹⁷ Considering this, it seems that Mattel's career intentions with Barbie are twofold. The doll's many careers do suggest value, as Mattel writes her career path as layered and inspirational. Crucially, however, Barbie's careers are instructional and interpellate women and girls as consumers—of Barbie, and with Barbie. While the 'I can be...' campaign is attempting to distance the doll from this association, perhaps Barbie is always already primarily about consumption. However, as discussed in the previous section, consumers—and their revelatory Barbie stories—play a pivotal role in determining the doll's forays into cultural assimilation. This conversation is not limited to Barbie's career path, though it is related. Fans and critics alike have inspired shifts in the way Barbie's body is

⁹⁶ *Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale* Music Video Website: <<http://www.barbie.com/fashion-fairytale/#/MusicVideo2/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

⁹⁷ Driscoll, *Girls*, p. 115.

perceived as well. An active dialogue between Mattel and Barbie's audience regarding all facets of her narrative seems to engender her realness and aspirationalism, while securing the Barbie brand identity all the more.

Especially transparent in the 'I can be...' campaign, consumer opinion was a defining factor in Mattel earning the esteemed CLIO award in advertising in 2010. The product overview speaks to Mattel's steadfast vision of the doll, and hints at a makeover of sorts:

For the past 50 years, Barbie has been the world's #1 selling doll that girls adore and women admire. The Barbie brand [...] made a bold marketing move to reinvigorate one of its flagship mainstay lines that had been around since the beginning of Barbie—her career line. Moving beyond the sparkle, high fashion and glamour that had defined the marketing strategy in 2009, the brand shifted gears to magnify the doll's aspirational side, positioning Barbie as an inspiration to women in the workplace and motivating girls by becoming an advocate for exploring a world without limits.⁹⁸

One of the key components to reinvigorating Barbie in this way was to obtain input from fans. Via various social media, the company conducted widespread research. Barbie enthusiasts were granted 'control over determining what careers Barbie should choose next, with a first-ever consumer vote'.⁹⁹ The poll attracted 'over one million' participants, with the majority confirming that the doll ought to undertake the 'traditionally male-dominated' vocation of computer engineer.¹⁰⁰ One of many role-specific dolls featured in the 'I can be...' line, Computer Engineer Barbie demonstrates how consumers influence the development of the Barbie narrative.

Through Mattel's inventive marketing campaign, consumer demands were satisfied in a way that was extremely lucrative for the company. After implementing its research to create Computer Engineer Barbie, sales within the 'I can be...' range

⁹⁸ 'After 125 Careers, Barbie Gets Her Geek On', 2011 CLIO Awards
<http://www.clioawards.com/winners_media/2011/pr/pdf/20111111_1_summary.pdf> [accessed: 8 May 2012] (p. 1)

⁹⁹ 'After 125 Careers, Barbie Gets Her Geek On', p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

increased by one hundred and fourteen percent.¹⁰¹ Sales undoubtedly decided Mattel's award-winning advertising season in 2010, but whether the company really achieved all that the project overview outlines is debatable. The research suggests that a pioneering Mattel went 'beyond the sparkle, high fashion and glamour [...] to magnify the doll's aspirational side'. Yet, while Computer Engineer Barbie may have fewer frills and a bit less pink in her outfit, she remains invariably, enchantingly Barbie. She has the same alluring figure, the same shiny long blonde hair, her makeup accentuates her charming smile and her blue eyes twinkle behind stylishly pink spectacles. Most conspicuously of all, she is sporting black sparkly leggings. In terms of appearance, then, Computer Engineer Barbie certainly has not transgressed beyond anything. Nor does such a transgression seem necessary in order to convey all that Barbie signifies.

Indicative in the project overview is that, for Barbie, 'exploring a world without limits' means that the doll needs to leave her 'sparkle, high fashion and glamour' behind in order to be successful. While this may be the implication, it is unfounded: Barbie's stilettos have been chipping away at the glass ceiling for decades.¹⁰² As such, rather than betraying the doll's narrative consistency, Computer Engineer Barbie is cleverly proliferating Mattel's message of adaptability. With trendy language, a new 'geek-chic' wardrobe, and contemporary packaging, Computer Engineer Barbie speaks to consumer demand, without deviating from the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² In terms of 'male dominated careers', computer engineer is far from Barbie's first. She has been an executive (1963, 1985, 1992, 1999), an astronaut (1965, 1986, 1994), a surgeon (1973), various high ranking positions in the military (1989, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994), a US presidential candidate (1994, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012), an engineer (1996), a palaeontologist (1997, 2012), a NASCAAR driver (1998), a Major League baseball player (1999) an airline pilot (1999), a Formula One driver (2000), a producer (2003), a race car driver (2010), and an arctic rescuer (2012). See: Barbie Careers Website.

doll's overall brand identity.¹⁰³ She is popular and profitable because she is an identifiable figure of 'sparkle, high fashion and glamour' excelling in a 'male-dominated career'. Computer Engineer Barbie is not successful because she has relinquished her sparkle in order to become aspirational, but because she has rewritten it.

While responding to consumer interests, Computer Engineer Barbie conveys more about Mattel's marketing insight than about setting a new precedent for the doll's future identity. In fact, as the 'I can be...' campaign has progressed in the last two years, it has entirely abandoned its no sparkle, no high fashion, and no glamour objective. The current 'I can be...' homepage directs browsers to the Barbie 'Career of the Year': in 2012 it is fashion designer. Here, an illustration of Fashion Designer Barbie shows the smiling figure wrapping a dress-form in pink glittery fabric and wearing a necklace that sparkles in the light.¹⁰⁴ Whether it is her jewellery, her smile, or her personality, Barbie continues to sparkle. This is a characteristic of the doll upon which Mattel's branding depends.

Like her glamour, Barbie's sparkle reveals many etymological treasures. Descriptively, 'sparkle' has denotations of the visually shimmering, which suggests the doll's lustrous allure.¹⁰⁵ The word can also be understood to express an action—a kind of 'scatter[ing]'.¹⁰⁶ This definition implies another apt interpretation of the doll. Indeed, Mattel perpetually disseminates flickers of information about Barbie, especially evident in her fleeting career and fashion choices, which is exemplified in the 'I can be...' range. Thus, sparkling represents variety; Barbie is emblematic of what is possible. Rather than one professional or stylistic direction, Barbie, as

¹⁰³ 'After 125 Careers, Barbie Gets Her Geek On', p.2.

¹⁰⁴ Barbie 'I can be...' Website: <http://icanbe.barbie.com/en_us/index.html> [accessed: 8 may 2012].

¹⁰⁵ 'Sparkle', in *OED*.

¹⁰⁶ 'Sparkle', in *OED*.

Driscoll confirms, ‘is sold as multiplicity’.¹⁰⁷ This type of sparkle secures the doll’s aspirational image and narrative integrity, as well as her lucrative future in the marketplace.

Besides personifying a spark of possibility, that a doll can personify anything calls attention to the term’s other significant definition. When Barbie sparkles, she can be read as a ‘real’ girl. When one sparkles, she possesses an appealing ‘liveliness’ or ‘vivacity’.¹⁰⁸ Sparkle denotes personality—life.¹⁰⁹ Mattel’s constructed narrative of Barbie recognises that her sparkle is not limited to the twinkle of her tiara. In the 2010 animated feature *Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale*, the corporation pairs Barbie’s sparkle with the markers of embodiment. These are the lyrics that cheer Barbie on as she embarks on an adventure:

Get your sparkle on.
Show this world where you belong.
All it takes is a little faith,
Believe it.
Get your sparkle on.
Listen to your heart,
And feel it beating strong.
When you’re in doubt,
Glitter it out.
Every time.¹¹⁰

Acknowledging her communicative place in the ‘world’, the lyrics position Barbie as both of the earth—organic—and belonging within human society, as long as she ‘Listen[s] to her heart’. Moreover, the lyrical combining of ‘sparkle’ with a ‘heart’ that is ‘beating’ also testifies to the constructed bodily nature of the doll.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Driscoll, ‘Girl-Doll: Barbie as Puberty Manual’, in *Seven Going On Seventeen*, ed. by Claudia Mitchell and Jaqueline Reid-Walsh (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 224-241 (p. 228).

¹⁰⁸ ‘Sparkle’, in *OED*.

¹⁰⁹ Another element used to elicit aspiration, ‘inner sparkle’ is something fans are encouraged to discover when they visit the *Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale* Website: <<http://www.barbie.com/fashion%2Dfairytale/#/Trailer/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

¹¹⁰ *Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale* Music Video Website: <<http://www.barbie.com/fashion-fairytale/#/MusicVideo2/>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

Together, these complex denotative components of sparkle work doubly to maintain Barbie's narrative of authenticity. Her variety of careers, hairstyles, and wardrobe changes represent the scattering that is intrinsic to 'sparkle'. In turn, this multiplicity sustains Barbie's open-ended fantasy and Mattel's discourse of incompleteness upon which consumers can write their own fantasies. In this way, sparkle functions similarly to Barbie's glamour. It is another ambiguously open detail, which, all the while, adds to the doll's overall uniformity. Crucially, Barbie's sparkle also defines her as 'real'. This realness is not restricted to labelling the doll as original, genuine, or exclusive. Rather, when Barbie sparkles, she is written as an embodied, 'real', living teenage girl. Mattel's branding rhetoric has included the use of 'sparkle' since the 1960s, a fact that conveys the longevity with which Mattel relies on this particular terminology, and its relative connotations.¹¹¹ Barbie's sparkle is a singular element illustrating a ubiquitous theme. Barbie is represented as a 'real' girl, and has been established as such since she was first revealed to consumers.

Noting that Barbie debuted as 'a teenage fashion model', M.G. Lord reinforces the doll's presence as vital and earthly. She remarks that Barbie had 'the world' as 'her runway' and that, in fact, the doll was portrayed, from the start, 'as a living teenager'.¹¹² Effortlessly conveyed, this style of marketing 'strategically ignored the fact that Barbie was a thing'.¹¹³ By depicting her in this way, Mattel achieved brand authentication. Children delineating a difference between playing with Barbie and 'having dolls in general' bolstered this achievement.¹¹⁴ As a teenage fashion model, Barbie did not require nurturing, as is the case with baby dolls. This distinction freed

¹¹¹ Because Mattel does not have an official archive for Barbie, it can be difficult to trace vintage products. The earliest use of 'sparkle' merchandising I found is from Barbie's 'mod', 1960s wardrobe.

¹¹² Lord, p. 41.

¹¹³ Lord, p. 41.

¹¹⁴ Rand, p. 96.

her from the usual script of doll fantasy play. In Mattel's marketing, the difference between Barbie and other dolls was emphasised and she was located as a more relatable figure for consumers. By dissociating from the usual 'game about motherhood', and by writing Barbie as a 'real' girl, the doll became a figure of aspirational identification.¹¹⁵

Barbie's status as a 'real', relatable girl is exemplified in 1970. That year, Mattel released its Living Barbie—a doll with movable joints, flexible limbs, and hands that grip. In an American television commercial starring child actress Maureen McCormick (before her role as Marsha on the US sitcom *The Brady Bunch*) Barbie mimics each of the tween girl's choreographed poses and movements.¹¹⁶ The excited voiceover describes Living Barbie's 'natural' and 'life-like' appearance, aligning it with McCormick's body. 'Suddenly Barbie's moving like you move', the announcer exclaims, promising that the doll is 'acting like a "real" teenager more than ever before'. 'Wow! She's real like me!' McCormick enthuses. Through these visual and rhetorical cues, Mattel discursively emphasises the similarities between the doll and her white, middle-class consumers.

The tone of the television commercial shifts as it nears its conclusion. Barbie is no longer copying the movements of a skipping and somersaulting girl. Rather, she is depicted as using her newfound dexterity to grip a well-travelled suitcase for further European adventures. Here, the voiceover pledges that Barbie's new flexibility will allow her to wear fancy frocks 'more glamorously' than ever before. This transition of tone illustrates Mattel's overall vision of the doll. She is relatable as a 'real', living girl, but she is also aspirational. While the doll and her consumers have much in common, strikingly, she is meant to be several years older than the

¹¹⁵ Driscoll, 'Barbie Culture', p. 39.

¹¹⁶ '1970 Living Barbie Commercial with Maureen McCormick' (21 December 2008) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WflZT24CSOI>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

girls to whom she is predominantly marketed. This distinction is just enough so that it does not disavow her girl-like qualities, but also places her identity just out of reach. With a career, a more mature body, and a narrative of independence, Barbie becomes a promise of the future. Thus, Barbie's debut as a fashion model is significant since she has also become a *model* of idealised white, affluent, American teenage femininity.¹¹⁷

Mattel's marketing approach to present Barbie as both 'real' and aspirational was and continues to be instrumental to the doll's success. Returning to the early television commercial discussed in the first section of this chapter, in the advertisement's lyrics, Barbie is reflected perfectly as an instructional tool to motivate girls and young women:

Barbie, you're beautiful
You make me feel
My Barbie doll is really real.
Barbie's small and so petite
Her clothes and figure look so neat.
[...]
Some day I'm gonna be exactly like you,
'Til then I'll know just what I'll do
[...]
I'll make believe that I am you.¹¹⁸

These lyrics demonstrate how the notion that Barbie is 'real', and that girls can aspire to become her, is inseparable from the Barbie brand. Significantly, as the *OED* explains, the etymological root of the word 'aspire' is 'to breathe'.¹¹⁹ This linguistic genealogy emphasises that Mattel's construction of an aspirational doll is an attempt to convey the lifelike characteristics of a 'real' teenage girl. It is through her somatic qualities that Barbie is designed not only to represent her consumers, but, very visibly, to represent her consumers' hopes for their future somatic selves.

¹¹⁷ For further discussion of how Barbie works as an instructional object specifically for tween girls, see: Driscoll, 'Girl-Doll: Barbie as Puberty Manual'.

¹¹⁸ '1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial'.

¹¹⁹ 'Aspire', in *OED*.

Significantly, then, Mattel created Barbie in a way that would inspire—that is ‘breathe into’—consumers the desire to identify, admire, and covet her life, and, correspondingly, her very ‘real’ body.¹²⁰

Despite the ‘I can be...’ campaign around Barbie’s dedication to depicting an inspirational professional trajectory for her young consumers, the doll’s overall aspirational qualities are inseparable from her physicality. The importance of the somatic to the Barbie brand was established from the outset with the doll’s earliest career, and this focus has been proliferated throughout her commercial promotion. Articulations of becoming Barbie, then, imply a transformation into a glamorous, feminine young woman who is ‘beautiful’, and ‘small and petite’, amongst many other racialised and gendered somatic qualities. As such, Barbie’s body has provoked strong consumer reactions critical of what it seems to indicate. In Lord’s account, a ‘blushing’ mother reviewed the original prototype, offering this opinion of the doll: *‘my daughter would be fascinated. She loves dolls with figures. I don’t think I would buy this for that reason. It has too much of a figure’* (emphasis in original).¹²¹ Barbie has a plastic figure that is culturally recognised as feminine and presented by Mattel as ‘real’. Thus, while Mattel puts forth this realness as aspirational, it also means that consumers take Barbie to task.

Ever since Barbie first took to the catwalk, she has been marking out her status as a beauty icon. Yet, whether the doll represents an achievable standard of beauty has propelled her into many debates surrounding somatic plausibility. As Rand observes, ‘[f]eminists have frequently translated Barbie’s measurements into human terms to underline the unrealistic ideal of beauty that the doll is said to

¹²⁰ ‘Aspire’, in *OED*.

¹²¹ Lord, p. 39.

promote'.¹²² In popular discourse, it is argued that if Barbie were a 'real' teenage fashion model, her extreme chest, waist, and hip ratio would prevent her from strutting down the runway, or even from standing upright.¹²³ Thus, critics of Barbie's corporeality have been vocal, both academically and in the mass media. In 2011, for example, the American morning talk show, *Today*, invited college student and artist Galia Slayen to be their guest.¹²⁴ Aghast viewers watched Slayen unveil her creation: a 'life-size' reconstruction of Barbie. Assembled for a display at Slayen's university during America's National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, the doll stirred up controversy worldwide.¹²⁵ Standing at 'about 6 feet tall with a 39" bust, 18" waist and 33" hips',¹²⁶ the reconstruction is striking in its distortedness.¹²⁷ While Slayen's

¹²² Rand, p. 25.

¹²³ Though this myth has been circulating for years, there is no evidence to suggest its accuracy. Nevertheless, the legend persists and is repeatedly used as ammunition against the narrative of Barbie as an aspirational figure. See: Denise Winterman, 'What would a real life Barbie look like?' (6 March 2009) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7920962.stm>> [accessed: 8 May 2012] (para. 11).

¹²⁴ Over the last several decades, many artists have responded to Barbie in their work. Most notable is Cindy Sherman, with her 1999 untitled black and white photographic series. Slayen's work offers a timely example of how a single work of art/social commentary can reignite the debate and media frenzy surrounding Barbie's body.

¹²⁵ The story was covered extensively in UK at the *Daily Mail* website, while images and editorials about Slayen's reconstruction circulated on international blogs and social networking sites including: <www.huffingtonpost.com>, <www.jezebel.com>, <www.thefrisky.com>, <www.tumblr.com>, <www.twitter.com> and <www.facebook.com>.

¹²⁶ 'Life-size Barbie gets real women talking' (video embedded in article) (14 April 2011) <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/42595605/ns/today-today_people/t/life-size-barbie-gets-real-women-talking/#.T3TNAs3ok8g> [accessed: 8 May 2012] (para. 5).

¹²⁷ By Mattel's account, Barbie's current measurements are: 5 inches (bust), 3 1/4 inches (waist), 5 3/16 inches (hips). If Barbie is one-sixth of a person, then these measurements would be: 30 inches (bust), 19.5 inches (waist), 31.125 inches (hips). Dolls vary, and Barbie has been re-contoured over the years. Nevertheless, Slayen's point is clear: Barbie's dimensions represent a distorted view of feminine embodiment. 'For the Record' <http://www.barbiemedia.com/barbie_facts_for-the-record.html> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

mathematical conversions have been disputed, her model offers an obvious social commentary of Barbie as an abstracted version of feminine embodiment.

Slayen's Barbie doll has prompted the Get Real Barbie campaign in collaboration with the American National Eating Disorders Association. Combining art with activism, the project makes visible the anthropologists Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund's analysis of Barbie's perpetuation of a 'singular anorectic ideal'.¹²⁸ Indeed, Slayen recounts that Barbie was a 'small [...] environmental factor' that contributed to her own battle with anorexia, linking this to the fact that the doll was her 'idol'.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Slayen goes on to assert that her project illustrates that when Barbie is scaled to life-size, she has 'crazy proportions'.¹³⁰ Reflecting on this statement, she proposes that her reconstruction helps people 'realise that [Barbie is] not real'.¹³¹ Thus, while Slayen has joined up with the National Eating Disorders Association, perhaps she is not suggesting that Barbie represents a disordered, but very 'real' body, as is the case with Urla and Swedlund's 'anorectic' model. Instead, it might be more apt to read Slayen's fabrication of Barbie as an attempt to distance the doll from somatic realness by building a life-size visual marker of the doll's anatomical inaccuracies.

Slayen suggests that the crux of the Get Real Barbie campaign is to convey the message that Barbie does not offer an accurate portrayal of feminine embodiment.¹³² Her doll provides visual validation for what feminists have been surmising about the doll's somatic image: 'Barbie is not a realistic body'.¹³³ Ever the meticulous

¹²⁸ Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund, 'The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture', in *Deviant Bodies*, ed. by Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp. 277-313 (p. 306).

¹²⁹ 'Life-size Barbie gets real women talking' (video).

¹³⁰ 'Life-size Barbie gets real women talking' (video).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

researcher, Lord confirms the suspicions surrounding Barbie's questionable proportions. Privy to the motivations of some of Mattel's earliest designers, Lord proves the inaccuracy of the doll's measurements and elucidates the reasoning behind her exaggerated frame:

Fans of conspiracy theories will be disappointed to learn that Barbie's proportions were not the result of some misogynistic plot. They were dictated by the mechanics of clothing construction. The doll is one-sixth the size of a person, but the fabrics she wears are scaled for people. Barbie's middle, her first designer explained, had to be disproportionately narrow to look proportional in clothes.¹³⁴

Lord validates the concerns raised by the mother viewing the original Barbie doll, as well as opinions from scores of sceptics throughout the years. Barbie, indeed, 'has too much of a figure', or, perhaps, too little. Nevertheless, while accounting for 'the mechanics of clothing construction' determines that Barbie's plastic figure is unrealistic (with her clothes off), this process exists in order to heighten the clothed doll's lifelike appearance within the boundaries of a pink plastic box. As such, offering evidence of the intentionality of Barbie's askew proportions has not eased consumer misgivings regarding issues of her corporeality.

Mounting anxiety over Barbie's unrealistic dimensions has had an effect on the company that has spent over five decades establishing that the doll is a 'real' girl. In recent years, Mattel has hastened to clarify Barbie's aspirational narrative and corresponding corporeality. Stating in a press release that the 'Barbie doll is not scaled to human measurements',¹³⁵ the company contradicts years of advertising

¹³³ Carol Ockman, 'Barbie Meets Bouguereau: Constructs of an Ideal Body for the Late Twentieth Century', in *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, ed. by Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Touchstone, 1999), pp. 75-90 (p. 75).

¹³⁴ Lord, p. 12.

¹³⁵ Mattel and Fischer-Price Customer Service Website: <http://service.mattel.com/us/faq_results.asp> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

rhetoric by insisting that the doll is just that: ‘a doll’.¹³⁶ Yet, Mattel has maintained Barbie’s overall narrative of realness in all of its marketing campaigns. This contradiction illustrates that consumer influence upon the doll is significant, but limited. Crucially, however, and regardless of intent, consumer engagement with the company seems to be a key element in sustaining the doll’s cultural currency as ‘real’—even strengthening her position as subject. If ‘the subject is always linked to something outside of it’,¹³⁷ then ‘social and cultural entanglement [...] is implicit in the word’.¹³⁸ In this way, the role of Mattel’s active consumer contributes to Barbie’s realness, relevancy, and aspirational sparkle, but it is an exchange that defines Barbie—as embodied subject—through the privileging of a very narrow set of ideals.

IIIb. An ‘Impossible Ideal’: Barbie, Embodiment, and Feminine Subjectivity¹³⁹

According to M. G. Lord, Barbie’s plastic figure confounds accurate human dimensions. Nevertheless, her body remains a site of corporate promotion, media attention, academic criticism, and feminine aspiration. The cultural focus on Barbie’s corporeality situates her squarely within a traditional reading of gender in humanist discourse. In this scheme a binary exists whereby the ‘mind is rendered equivalent to the masculine and body equivalent to the feminine’.¹⁴⁰ This opposition ‘is used’, writes Elizabeth Grosz, ‘to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social

¹³⁶ Barbie Media Website: <<http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/fast-facts-for-the-record.html>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

¹³⁷ Mansfield, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Mansfield, p. 2.

¹³⁹ Urla and Swedlund, p. 304.

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 14.

positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes'.¹⁴¹ The end result is that women and girls 'are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements'.¹⁴² The cultural significance placed upon Barbie's somatics follows a long-standing tradition in Western philosophical thought wherein feminine subjectivity is allocated to the position of other.

When Barbie exclaims, 'Let's get gorgeous!' the focus on her body—and the bodies of her consumers—conveys her primary interpretation.¹⁴³ Certainly, however, the contemporary character of Barbie is also depicted as using her mind, as Computer Engineer Barbie attests. Yet, she continues to be written and understood through a dualistic lens. Barbie's smarts are often exhibited as an exception or a temporary accessory to the doll's enduring physicality. Alternatively, in marketing rhetoric, Barbie's corporeality is written away altogether in order for her to appear convincingly intelligent. Thus, narratively, Barbie's body and mind struggle to coexist; in popular and academic discourse alike, she is defined by her body, or her mental (in)capacity. Following on from these discursive conventions, when a woman or girl aspires to be Barbie doll-like, this ambition also seems to be written as inextricably tied to the same universalising notions of feminine subjectivity.

Barbie's physicality is generally regarded as perpetuating stereotypical ideas of femininity. Concern is often raised about how the doll signals uniformity of form, reinforcing a very narrow standard of white, able-bodied, slender, heteronormative beauty. With reference to these conventional standards of beauty, Grosz argues that traditional narratives of humanist thought also rigidly 'construct' femininity and

¹⁴¹ Grosz, p. 14.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁴³ Barbie Fashion Website: <<http://www.barbie.com/activities/fashion/>> [accessed: 23 May 2012].

feminine bodies ‘as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable’.¹⁴⁴ Barbie’s plastic form is laden with signifiers that have been taken up to validate these gendered descriptions of embodiment. Along with citing Barbie’s ‘disproportionally narrow’¹⁴⁵ waist as a sign of frailty,¹⁴⁶ her sculpted feet, designed for the highest heels, too, have been read as implying helplessness and immobility.¹⁴⁷ While Barbie is often ridiculed for being impossibly perfect, categorising the doll’s proportions as inaccurate is also a way of defining her feminine likeness as an imperfect representation. Moreover, since her introduction into the marketplace, Barbie’s figure has been a site of constant disapproval for its unruliness, with commentators designating it as overtly and excessively sexual. To reiterate the mother’s concern in the above quotation, Barbie’s figure is simply ‘too much’.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, Urla and Swedlund’s research espouses another conceptualisation of how the doll’s anatomy can be marked as unruly when they assert that she promotes an eating dis-order. Together, these readings support the opinion that Barbie is a symbol of unreliability. These terms are meant to suggest essentialist notions of femininity that define the feminine body and subject as ‘not under conscious control’.¹⁴⁹ Based on these examples, and many others, Barbie is read as representing a feminine embodiment and subjectivity that reinforces troubling gender stereotypes in the West.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Grosz, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ Lord, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Winterman, (para. 11).

¹⁴⁷ In August 2012 Mattel released its ‘I can be...’ presidential doll. This Barbie is the first in the history of the doll to stand without support. ‘Barbie Runs For President and Can Stand Up On Her Own!’ (6 April 2012) <<http://ladylulah.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/barbie-runs-for-president-and-can-stand.html>> [accessed: 8 may 2012]. (See Rand for further discussion on the implications of Barbie’s permanently flexed feet.)

¹⁴⁸ Lord, p. 39.

¹⁴⁹ Grosz, p. 13.

¹⁵⁰ These descriptions, while essentialising, also leave room for contradiction and ambiguity, which might help to destabilise static representations of subjectivity. Such ideas are revisited in chapter three of this thesis.

Deemed to be an inaccurate representation of feminine embodiment, it is curious to see Barbie's physicality coded with terms used to describe an essentialist construction of femininity. Certainly, the Barbie doll is understood as relying on fleshy feminine embodiment as its reference point, so this awkward alignment might be explained by way of a cultural fascination with verisimilitude. If this is the case, Barbie is being taken to task for her perceived referential qualities. Moreover, if Barbie is read as an amplified version of feminine physicality that is 'too much' of a feminine figure, then situating her through a humanist reading may act as a way to control the doll's overall representation. Critically analysing, classifying, and codifying Barbie may be an attempt to master an out of control body that serves as an archetypal surrogate for all that is written as out of control with feminine subjectivity. Yet, in reading Barbie as 'frail, imperfect, unruly' or 'unreliable' in order to highlight the doll's inaccuracies, a contradiction is created. Applying these terms—terms that are usually employed to essentialise the feminine subject—to describe the doll's feminine shortcomings, demonstrates a discursive double bind. Within this framework, there is the suggestion that either femininity is only 'true' when it is inaccurate, or that there is another, more accurate femininity that is strong, perfect, disciplined, and reliable.

Ideas associated with Barbie's stereotypical representation of gender are not confined to analysis of the doll's somatic representations. In 1992, Teen Talk Barbie uttered the now notorious phrase: 'Math class is tough'. Critics of the doll saw this as a prime example of her limitations as an aspiration figure of feminine subjectivity.¹⁵¹ As a fantasy character, Teen Talk Barbie adheres to Belsey's definition of the subject; for her, '[t]he subject is what speaks'.¹⁵² Yet, while it is through 'language' that

¹⁵¹ Rand, p. 70.

¹⁵² Belsey, p. 55.

‘people constitute themselves as subjects’,¹⁵³ when Teen Talk Barbie communicates in this way, she aligns herself with the idea that the feminine subject cannot master one of the most traditionally rational of disciplines: mathematics. Upholding the gendered mind/body divide, this version of the Barbie doll was met with a surge of media and consumer backlash. Her struggles with math class were condemned as an obvious and unacceptable blunder. As such, consumers successfully petitioned Mattel to remove the offending phrase from the talking doll’s catalogue.

Once “Math class is tough’ was erased from Teen Talk Barbie’s list of conversation topics, her monologues centred upon seemingly safer themes. Barbie spent the rest of the mid-1990s gabbing about shopping, pizza parties, and studying to become a doctor. Nevertheless, this accessorised range of talking points did not satisfy some critics. In a feat of guerrilla activism, members of the performance art-based group Barbie Liberation Organization switched the electronic voice boxes of Teen Talk Barbie with those of a version of the talking G.I. Joe doll. The dolls were then surreptitiously returned to their toyshop perches. Unsuspecting consumers were met with Barbie dolls who declared ‘Vengeance is mine!’ and G.I. Joes who insisted ‘Let’s plan our dream wedding!’¹⁵⁴ As a result of Teen Talk Barbie’s initial controversy and subsequent activism, the doll continues to serve as an emblem for critics. She is read as a marker of stereotypical femininity and an absolute failure in terms of Mattel’s visions for a relevant, progressive and inspirational doll. She also has come to mark a particular moment in feminist activism. Yet, while the Barbie Liberation Organization attempted to illustrate hegemonic gender norms through its activism, in this example gender is still perceived in dialectical terms.

¹⁵³ Belsey, p. 54.

¹⁵⁴ David Firestone, ‘While Barbie Talks Tough, G.I. Joe Goes Shopping’, in *The New York Times* (31 December 1993) <<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/12/31/us/while-barbie-talks-tough-g-i-joe-goes-shopping.html>> [accessed: 8 May 2012] (para. 1 and 6).

To rectify some of the particularly negative publicity surrounding Teen Talk Barbie and all she has come to represent, Mattel has made discernable efforts over the years to enhance Barbie's overall intellectual position. Nearly twenty years later, Computer Engineer Barbie is testament to this continuous, albeit vacillating, conversation. The rhetoric surrounding Computer Engineer Barbie suggests that Mattel has taken the doll's intellectual agency to a new level by presenting her with a firmly 'geeky' identity. Yet, this change has come at the expense of Barbie's somatic representation. As previously established (p. 53) the language of the CLIO product overview emphasises that Mattel and Barbie are 'moving beyond the sparkle'. Significantly, this transition suggests that in order for Barbie to occupy her new persona, the company must distance its marketing rhetoric from discussions of the doll's gendered body. In turn, Computer Engineer Barbie, while still visually sparkling, is described in idiosyncratically precise and traditionally masculine terms.

Informing consumers that Mattel 'shifted gears' with Computer Engineer Barbie and the 'I can be...' campaign, the project overview relies on an elaborate metaphor. As an idiom, 'to shift gears' implies a change of approach; in the case of Barbie, this change is meant to take place around how the doll's gender identity is envisioned. Taking this signification further, shifting 'gears' can signal the alteration of attire—a suitable analogy for a doll that has been a stalwart in the world of high fashion.¹⁵⁵ When used colloquially, 'gear' also can signal genitalia.¹⁵⁶ As such, if Barbie were to shift gears in this way she would transition visually and corporeally to possess the smooth plastic mounds and bulges that Mattel appoints as markers of the masculine form. The term 'gears' also suggests mechanics, and with it, reason. Indeed, a Western figurative trope of spinning gears is indicative of the rational

¹⁵⁵ 'Gear', in *OED*.

¹⁵⁶ The *OED* defines 'gear' as 'organs of generation'.

(masculine) thinking brain.¹⁵⁷ To introduce Barbie into a male-dominated profession like computer engineer with this imagery is appropriate—the vocation depends on mechanical and metaphorical gears. Juxtaposed with the language of ‘moving beyond the sparkle’, however, Computer Engineer Barbie’s ‘shifted gears’ reinforces the gendered binary of mind in opposition to body. This language implies that the doll must disavow feminine embodiment in order for her to be written as a rational, thinking subject.

The marketing language used to describe Computer Engineer Barbie discursively denies the doll’s corporeal significance. This practice is similar to the strategies of critics who have worked to rewrite Barbie’s body as inaccurate. Prompted by feminist readings and revelatory Barbie stories, both types of application seek to eliminate the gender inequality that the doll seems to promote. Critics and activists from Slayen to Urla and Swedlund have endeavoured to call attention to perceived somatic falsehoods inherent in the doll in order to bring about change to the shape of her plastic figure. (Alternatively, such critics expect their efforts will influence a shift in the cultural reading of the doll and motivate consumers to seek fantasy play elsewhere.) Indeed, Mattel has altered Barbie’s figure over the years, addressing assessments of her body as it is interpreted during specific cultural moments.¹⁵⁸ With the example of Computer Engineer Barbie, Mattel’s method of achieving gender equality for the doll is to write rationality into her narrative, while simultaneously writing embodiment out of it. Both controlling and denying Barbie’s corporeality in these ways only reiterates gender difference in essentialising and dualistic terms, by way of humanist discourse.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Gear’, in *OED*.

¹⁵⁸ Driscoll, ‘Barbie Culture’, p. 40.

Dualistic representations of gender difference are oftentimes connected to misogyny. In *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, Kim Toffoletti asserts: ‘As woman is aligned in direct opposition to culture, reason and the mind, she cannot occupy the position of human subject. Woman is never “fully” human.’¹⁵⁹ Humanism always already equates the feminine with the status of other. Any attempt to counter this by employing humanist rhetoric refers back to difference, deficiency, and the negation of full subjectivity. Efforts to control Barbie’s body by categorising it as inaccurate illustrate a humanist approach by suggesting that there is a more ‘real’ feminine subjectivity to be embraced. Conversely, there is a sense, especially in the rhetoric surrounding Computer Engineer Barbie, that if the doll can achieve equality by forsaking her corporeality, then there is a chance that women and girls can too. Yet, interpreting the doll in these humanist terms cannot locate women and girls as wholly knowing subjects. The inherent opposition that she describes means that negotiating gender difference through a humanist discourse can only ever go so far.

Notably, Urla and Swedlund’s work of ‘unsettling’ Barbie acutely encapsulates the limitations of a humanist approach to understanding how the doll informs analysis of embodiment and subjectivity. Conducting a comparable experiment to that of Slayen, the anthropologists enlist the services of a classroom of university students to fastidiously measure and convert the doll’s proportions. Recounting their motivations behind this activity, they begin to describe the exercise by acknowledging its humanist premise as

an opportunity for students who have grown up under the regimes of normalizing science—students who no doubt have been measured, weighed, and compared to standards since birth—to use those very tools to unsettle a highly popular cultural ideal.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Urla and Swedlund, p. 294.

Urla and Swedlund's burgeoning social scientists employ a most rational approach—'normalizing science'—to compare the doll with 'two standards' of feminine embodiment: fashion model and US military officer.¹⁶¹ Striking in their discursive assumptions about standard corporeality, the researchers rely on the former to represent the utmost in traditional Western femininity, while the latter is meant to serve as an average-sized, and subsequently (and problematically) more masculine American woman. By measuring Barbie up against these representations of feminine embodiment, Urla and Swedlund's experiment tallies with what Tony Davies assesses in *Humanism*. In the comprehensive guide on the subject, the author contends that '[h]umanity is neither an essence nor an end', but through the project of humanism it is depicted as such.¹⁶² By comparing Barbie to these 'two standards', the researchers use the honed 'tools' of humanist authority to invalidate Barbie's body while simultaneously creating an essentialist feminine body with which to compare it. Preserving humanist methodology to conduct their experiment not only reinforces the notion that the feminine subject is confined to the body, but it also suggests that there is only a small range of variation in 'true' and acceptable feminine corporeality. Considering these narrow parameters, it is not a surprise that the assessment reaches its predictable conclusion: Barbie is an 'impossible ideal'.¹⁶³

Rather than focussing upon how Barbie's 'impossible' proportions do not measure up to fleshy women, Urla and Swedlund's analysis takes a crucial turn. Maintaining the tenet that the body defines the feminine subject, the researchers suggest that the doll presents 'an ideal that constructs *women's* bodies as hopelessly imperfect' (my emphasis).¹⁶⁴ It is their assertion that Barbie acts as a marker of

¹⁶¹ Urla and Swedlund, p. 295.

¹⁶² Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 132.

¹⁶³ Urla and Swedlund, p. 304.

¹⁶⁴ Urla and Swedlund, p. 305.

feminine embodiment which translates into convincing ‘healthy women in the United States’ and, globally, that ‘their bodies are defective’.¹⁶⁵ With these pointed words, Urla and Swedlund articulate the salient concern surrounding Barbie aspirationalism, calling attention to the impetus of Slayen’s Get Real Barbie campaign. Because these researchers conclude that Barbie is an ‘impossible ideal’, their work presupposes both that Barbie is not ‘real’, and that women and girls have failed to obtain the aspirational somatic image of the Barbie doll that Mattel has set forth. As a result, the doll is understood to have a negative impact on how women and girls imagine their own bodies and subjectivities.

This logic puts the women and girls who aspire to be like Barbie in a similarly tenuous position to the doll when it comes to issues of subjectivity. It is nearly ‘impossible’ to be a combination of biologically female, racially white, feminine-gendered, all-American, able-bodied, sexy, blonde, blue-eyed, slender, tan, tall, and busty as well as possess the proportions critics specifically decry as inaccurate. If one does not prevail at meeting this somatic ideal, then she has failed to achieve a desired standard of femininity prescribed in the West. In humanist terms, feminine subjectivity is defined through the body, so this failure becomes a failure of subjectivity as well. Likewise, if girls and women succeed at embodying all of these qualifications, then they too are ‘frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable’. Even at her most successful, in the humanist tradition ‘woman comes to define all that is not human, fixed to a corporeal, natural and essential state’.¹⁶⁶ In this philosophical framework of oppositions, if feminine subjectivity does not forgo corporeality for a masculine rationality, then subjectivity is not fully granted. Crucially, in humanism, subjectivity is what becomes truly ‘impossible’.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶⁶ Toffoletti, p. 20.

IIIc. 'Barbie is us': Deconstructing Barbie's Humanist Representation¹⁶⁷

Reading Barbie's feminine embodiment and subjectivity as perpetuating stereotypical gender roles is often informed through a critical lens that privileges the humanist tradition. Thus, while many outspoken critics of Barbie undermine the doll's somatic accuracy, in the process they reinforce essentialist ideas of the feminine body. Regardless of the limitations, such criticisms have persuaded Mattel to alter Barbie's appearance and narrative within an overarching theme of newness. The corporation has attempted to rewrite the doll's cultural script to incorporate what Rand calls the most 'palatable' of feminist and diverse representations.¹⁶⁸ Significantly, the humanist analysis of Barbie by critics and consumers, and Mattel's corporate response to it, seems to be intended especially for consumers like Belle. Mentioned at the start of this section (p. 51) Belle's testimony on the 'I can be...' website expresses her wish to grow up to 'be Barbie'. Not only does Belle's aspiration to become Barbie inform analysis and alterations of the doll, but her hopes also centre upon a reproduction of the feminine subject in humanism.

While laudable in their attempts to provide a positive role model for Barbie consumers, conversations inclined toward a humanist intervention of the doll continue to precipitate a static idea of gender and express an underlying theme of what femininity ought to be. This theme is presented as truth, and not only speaks to how Barbie is understood, but how (white) feminine subjectivity is defined in general, in the West. Indeed, Barbie's body is written with the same discourse as that of fleshy women and girls. And, crucially, within this static conceptualisation, such

¹⁶⁷ Lord, p. 17.

¹⁶⁸ Rand, p. 193.

narratives elicit tensions and contradictions. Belsey explains the aporia of the feminine subject in Western humanist thought:

[W]omen in our society are at once produced and inhibited by contradictory imperatives. Very broadly, women have access both to the liberal humanist promise of freedom, self-determination and rationality, and at the same time to a specifically feminine ideal of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition.¹⁶⁹

As such, Barbie's conflation of a 'palatable' femininity with reiterations of her as 'frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable', communicate how humanism constructs 'real' feminine subjects in problematic and contradictory terms. Barbie's contradictions go beyond these standards, to encapsulate her 'real' and her ideal qualities. The preceding sections of this chapter have argued that Barbie is, indeed, constructed as both 'real' and ideal. I want now to consider how the doll successfully occupies the position of a relatable girl, while maintaining her aspirational status, and what this means for consumers.

Urla and Swedlund's research is an especially useful starting point in calling attention to the tension between the 'real' and ideal Barbie doll narratives that reside within a broader humanist construction. Recognising that the doll's narrative is at odds in her presentation as 'real' and as an 'impossible ideal', the writers suggest that these descriptions coalesce into an 'ideal that has become curiously normalized'.¹⁷⁰ Influenced by this statement, in her essay 'Barbie Meets Bouguereau', Carol Ockman affirms that 'there is a paradoxical relationship between the knowledge that Barbie's body is unreal and the curious way it has been naturalized as ideal'.¹⁷¹ She suggests that Barthes's notion of the reality effect is an appropriate theory for thinking about this tension.

¹⁶⁹ Belsey, p. 60.

¹⁷⁰ Urla and Swedlund, p. 304.

¹⁷¹ Ockman, p. 76.

Within the Western tradition of literary realism there is an ‘incessant need to authenticate the “real”’.¹⁷² Narrative detail determines a level of specificity that makes such believability possible.¹⁷³ Barthes expresses dismay at this canonical practice, claiming that ‘just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is *signify* it’ (emphasis in original).¹⁷⁴ Troublingly, the details of a narrative are what manifest reality, truth, and authority. Ockman believes that the textual device of the reality effect can be taken beyond the tradition of literary realism, and used to understand Barbie’s narrative construct as well. Convinced that Barbie’s constructed truth can be found in the details of Mattel’s consistent advertising and branding of the doll, Ockman contends that Barbie’s ‘accessories—clothes, environments, fictive friends, and real-life companions’ are what ‘produce a kind of “reality effect” which naturalises Barbie’s body, rendering it paradoxically both authentic and timeless’.¹⁷⁵ With Mattel’s detailed descriptions of glamour and sparkle juxtaposed with broader campaign narratives like that of ‘I can be...’ Barbie, the doll’s fantasy-side collides with Mattel’s attempts at realism. As a result, the two conflicting qualities become conflated. Moreover, through the rhetorical use of ‘really real’ in its early advertising and the contemporary assertion that Barbie is ‘keepin’ it real’ alongside phrases such as ‘I’ll make believe that I am you’, reality and aspiration are fused with feminine identification.

Using Barthes’s analysis of the reality effect to understand how Barbie is both convincingly ‘real’ and ideal provides insight into how Belle and many consumers

¹⁷² Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141-148 (p. 146).

¹⁷³ Ockman, p. 84.

¹⁷⁴ Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, p. 148.

¹⁷⁵ Ockman, p. 85.

like her might relate to the doll. Likewise, this theory also sheds light on more ambiguous or antagonistic relationships with Barbie, examples of which are detailed at the start of this chapter. In many revelatory Barbie stories there is a conscious refusal to identify with the doll. Significantly, such sentiments are often accompanied by allegations that Barbie promotes a ‘false’ or fake femininity.¹⁷⁶ Yet, consumers who articulate a refusal of Barbie’s charms acknowledge through opposition that the doll’s feminine subjectivity has been naturalised as the norm. Indeed, whether expressing a dream to become Barbie doll-like, or addressing a cultural anxiety, it seems that many consumers experience Barbie as a normalising influence on their perceptions of self. The tone and structure in which these experiences are expressed mimic the reality effect. Specific details about the Barbie doll—her appearance, clothing, and accessories—alongside specific details about the consumer, are used to convey a cohesive subjectivity. Just as the details produced by Mattel establish Barbie as a feminine subject and a cultural ideal, so too do Barbie stories represent a storyteller who is an authority on her own unified subjectivity. Both construct subjects with similar narratives of truth, writing the doll, and her consumers, within a traditional, humanist scheme.

While the reality effect is classified as a literary device that reproduces certain humanist ideas about truth, when it is analysed, it highlights the constructed nature of the realist text. Barthes contends that:

The pure and simple ‘representation’ of the ‘real’, the naked relation of ‘what is’ (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning; this resistance confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible*; it suffices to recall that, in the ideology of our time, obsessive reference to the ‘concrete’ (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behaviour) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot signify—and vice versa. (Emphasis in original)¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Stephens, p. 195.

¹⁷⁷ Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, p. 146.

What readers see as ‘real’, natural, or as ‘common sense’ can, indeed, be read as a product of ideology and culture. When this analysis is applied to Barbie, the doll’s narrative of naturalised corporeality and the corresponding realism of a white Western feminine ideal are both contested. The reality effect also works to expose the constructedness of the unified subject in revelatory Barbie stories. The denaturalisation of these narratives disputes the secure status of subjectivity in Western humanist thought, and elucidates the paradoxical nature of feminine representation therein.

Barbie is situated as a ‘real’, ideal, and aspirational figure of white Western femininity. Mattel, its consumers and its critics have used humanist rhetoric to bolster the doll’s position of influence, securing her status as an identifiable subject. Once this position is interrogated, however, Barbie demonstrates that the feminine subject, in humanist terms, is, at best, an inaccurate, unruly entity—occupying a place of the inhuman, the other, the object. Rather than mistaking Barbie solely as a site of gender inequity, however, the doll might be understood as a cultural object that works at ‘exposing the constructed nature of gendered oppositions’.¹⁷⁸ In this way, Barbie can ‘serve’ to ‘displace phallogocentrism as the foundation of humanist subjectivity’, and throw ‘into question the very origins of selfhood on which human existence is grounded’.¹⁷⁹ If this is the case, Barbie can challenge what feminine subjectivity means beyond the humanist paradigm. Crucially, though, this type of posthumanist analysis must be approached with prudence. Badmington cautions: ‘To oppose humanism by claiming to have left it behind is to overlook the very way that

¹⁷⁸ Toffoletti, p. 20-21.

¹⁷⁹ Toffoletti, p. 20-21.

opposition is articulated.¹⁸⁰ While investigating the posthuman potential of Barbie and Barbie doll-like femininity in the following chapters of this thesis, chapter two looks at the cultural interpretations of women and girls like Belle. It examines whether such an aspiration fulfils a humanist agenda when such a narrative is taken beyond the textual to be retold upon the body, and gives even more significance to Lord's affirmation that 'Barbie is us'.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Neil Badmington, 'Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism', in *Posthumanism*, ed. by Neil Badmington (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 1-10 (p. 9).

¹⁸¹ Lord, p. 17.

Chapter Two

'Beyond Fake':

Becoming Barbie and the Posthuman Subject¹

'Barbie Doll' (1971)

*This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.
Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:
You have a great big nose and fat legs.*

*She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.
She went to and fro apologizing.
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.*

*She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.
Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt.
So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.*

*In a casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,
a turned-up putty nose,
dressed in a pink and white nightie.
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.*

—Marge Piercy²

¹ Hole, 'Doll Parts', *Live Through This* (Geffen Records, 1994).

² Marge Piercy, 'Barbie Doll', in *The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Jay Parini (Boston: Thomson, 2006), p. 1221.

I. All Dolled Up: Cultural Appropriations of Barbie

Emily Pounce and Hannah Jagger are best friends from the town of Crewkerne, in Somerset, England. To mark the start of the 2012 summer festivities, the teenagers attended their school prom. A formal dance, the prom first became popular in American colleges and high schools in the early twentieth century.³ Over the years it has grown in importance and spectacle across diverse communities, and has recently proven to be comparably enticing to the youth of Britain. Traditionally, attendees appear at the social function in a stylised fashion, oftentimes emerging from shiny hired vehicles in equally fancy attire. With the prom's ever-increasing focus upon fantasy and aspiration, students' arrivals at the event have become a significant part of the celebration. For the two sixteen-year-old girls, this was especially apparent. '[E]ncased in [pink] plywood and [P]erspex boxes complete with Mattel branding', Pounce and Jagger required a flat-bed trailer to make their grand entrance.⁴ Once they reached the grounds of the country house that was hosting the gathering, the two friends, in matching tiaras and bejewelled frocks, revealed themselves to their classmates—dressed as life-size Barbie dolls. Pounce describes the scene:

It is something I will never forget, the further we got into the car park the more people stopped and noticed. Suddenly everybody surrounded us and took photos, I came out of the box shaking.⁵

³ The *OED* defines 'prom' as the shortened version of 'promenade', and its meaning is derived from 'a leisurely walk, *esp.* one taken in a public place so as to meet or be seen by others. Also (*occas.*): a ride or drive taken in this manner.' See: 'Prom', in the *OED* (2013) <<http://www.oed.com/>> [accessed: 13 January 2013]. Prom signals white middle class and affluent privilege, yet, in similar ways to the Barbie doll, it is written in popular discourse as an event that transcends socioeconomic class, erasing the complex issues of privilege and conspicuous consumption therein. For a detailed discussion of prom see: Amy L. Best, *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ 'Teenagers get "dolloed-up" as Barbies for school prom' (6 July 2012) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/9380394/Teenagers-get-dolloed-up-as-Barbies-for-school-prom.html#>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 1).

⁵ 'Teenagers get "dolloed-up" as Barbies for school prom', para. 4.

She elaborates on how the Barbie doll arrival made her feel: 'like being famous'.⁶

Both girls describe their extravagant entrance, as well as the entire event, as a major success.

Masquerading as Barbie dolls for this singular evening fete led Pounce and Jagger to feel like celebrities. However, their story of playful identification, aspiration and stardom exists within a broader cultural context. Becoming Barbie doll-like is a discursive practice written into contemporary dominant popular and consumer cultures of white, middle-class femininity in the West. And, its consequences signal cultural recognition. Over the last three decades, several women have, indeed, achieved celebrity status based upon their embodied interpretations. In the 1980s and 1990s, Cindy Jackson catapulted to stardom due to her surgical transformation into a living incarnation of the plastic doll.⁷ Following suit, Page Three model and cosmetic surgery proponent, Sarah Burge, now markets herself as 'the human Barbie'.⁸ In the spring of 2012, Ukrainian model Valeria Lukyanova transitioned from Russian-language internet icon to international media star based upon her Barbie doll-like appearance.⁹ Further, in the world of popular music, several artists have also co-opted the Barbie brand to garner fans and sell albums.¹⁰ Yet, Jackson and her ilk are illustrative of the fringes of this phenomenon. In contrast, Pounce and Jagger represent its ubiquity.

⁶ Ibid., para. 5.

⁷ Cindy Jackson, *Living Doll* (London: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 2002).

⁸ The Sarah Burge Website: <<http://www.thesarahburge.co.uk/>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

⁹ Doug Barry, 'Ukrainian Model Has Supposedly Barbified Herself Through Plastic Surgery' (22 April 2012) <<http://jezebel.com/valeria-lukyanova/>> [accessed 5 August 2012].

¹⁰ In 2008, country music icon Dolly Parton released her fortieth studio album entitled *Backwoods Barbie* (Dolly Records). In the world of hip hop, artists Nicki Minaj and Lil' Kim engage in an ongoing rivalry for the title of Black Barbie. See chapter four for an in depth analysis of Minaj's engagement with the Barbie doll.

The aspirational rhetoric that surrounds the Barbie doll is far-reaching in popular culture. Both through Mattel's corporate collaboration and through unauthorised use of the Barbie brand, the doll's image has surpassed the boundaries of toy culture and childhood appeal. Today, Barbie lends her visage and her name to cosmetic and clothing companies aimed at white middle class teen and adult consumers. For example, in 2007, Mattel and cosmetics giant MAC joined marketing forces to produce a line of makeup entitled Barbie Loves MAC. With product names like Real Doll—a 'light bubblegum pink' lipstick—the Barbie Loves MAC campaign perpetuates the doll's aspirational qualities as achievable and consumable.¹¹ British department store Harvey Nichols is among sundry fashion designers and retailers that have recalled the doll's bodily shape, structure, and plastic features in advertising, but for trademark purposes have not directly used her name. An example from the upmarket clothier's Hong Kong-based line is a print advertisement featuring a heavily photo-retouched model. In the image, the young woman's skin is explicitly altered to resemble the plastic sheen and light skin tone of a racially white Barbie doll. Her face has been digitally redrawn to mimic the doll's wide-eyed, smiling expression, as she poses with an armful of accessories in front of a vibrant pink backdrop. The tagline of the advertisement reads: 'Must Must Haves'.¹² Without mentioning the Barbie brand, this advertisement ties into Barbie's aspirational narrative of glamour, high fashion, and fun, and, like MAC, suggests that through consumerism women and girls can, indeed, become versions of the famous icon.

¹¹ 'Barbie Loves MAC' (3 January 2007)
<<http://www.makeupbag.net/2007/01/03/barbie-loves-mac/>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

¹² 'Harvey Nichols: Doll'
<http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/harvey_nichols_doll?size=_original> [accessed: 10 July 2012].

Informed by the aspirational narrative put into place by Mattel, this chapter focuses on the Western popular cultural understanding of primarily white, middle-class femininity that is connected to the visual trope of becoming Barbie doll-like. It examines how the theme of embodied realness—and accusations of somatic inaccuracies directed at the doll—are both translated onto Barbie doll-like fleshy feminine bodies. Paying particular attention to women and girls who explicitly identify with the doll, I look at the dominant cultural rhetoric surrounding this phenomenon and explore its corporeal implications. Considering the narrative of cohesive subjectivity addressed in the previous chapter, here I interrogate whether an assimilation of the Barbie brand onto somatic representations reinforces, or works at dismantling, the subject/object dichotomy of humanist thought and discursive practice. By using examples embedded in fashion and celebrity culture, this chapter seeks to highlight the complications of such Barbie doll-like aspirations.

II. Barbie Conscious: Technology and the Narrative of Improvement

With all the pomp surrounding Barbie's 50th birthday celebrations, the doll also came under a certain amount of heightened public scrutiny in 2009. In an exceptional case, Mattel and fashion designer Christian Louboutin arranged to collaborate on an exclusive version of the doll. This pairing ushered in a round of criticism that ended with Barbie receiving 'plastic surgery' at the behest of the designer.¹³ Controversially, Louboutin claimed that the doll required a session of slimming because her ankles were simply 'too fat' to represent his line of couture

¹³ 'Bashing Barbie: Famous Designer Performs Plastic Surgery' <<http://www.latimes.com/topic/wjw-barbie-body-issue-txt,0,1422435.story>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

footwear.¹⁴ In general, Louboutin's designs on the doll's figure were met with public outcry, creating a scandal that seemed to mar the birthday publicity. Yet, the couturier's adjustments were not Barbie's first time under the knife.

As Barbie's five decades of fame are owed to her versatility, the doll undergoes annual physical makeovers to keep up with the shifting standards of ideal femininity in the West. Sometimes this is limited to hair and makeup changes, but often Mattel reworks Barbie's skin tone and figure.¹⁵ Throughout the years, the doll has been altered to possess an assortment of hip, shoulder, waist, and bust measurements, as well as moveable and bendable limbs.¹⁶ Recently, she was even given her first belly button.¹⁷ This type of reinvention, mandated by Mattel and influenced by consumer input, helps the doll to maintain her cultural relevance as aspirational and reinvigorates her 'real' girl image for a fresh batch of eager consumers. In *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, Erica Rand explains that 'Mattel has been working, since 1958, to situate Barbie in carefully crafted, if purportedly unfixed, relations to both fantasy and reality.'¹⁸ This shrewd act of adaptable branding encourages consumers both to identify with the doll and aspire to be like her.

Louboutin's intervention and, more pointedly, interpretations of it, bring to the fore the narrative themes embedded within Mattel's alterations. For example, when asked to comment upon the designer's decision for *Stylelist.com*, J. Errico, stylist and fashion director for *Nylon* magazine, claims that 'any girl—plastic or not—

¹⁴ Melissa Schweiger, 'Barbie's Ankles Too Fat for Louboutins' (12 October 2009) <<http://main.stylelist.com/2009/10/12/louboutin-barbies-ankles-too-fat/>> [accessed: 10 July 2012] (para. 5).

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of Barbie's skin tone adjustments over the years, see chapter four.

¹⁶ M.G. Lord, *Forever Barbie* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994).

¹⁷ Barbie Media Website: <<http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history/2000s.html>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

¹⁸ Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 92.

would be mad not to take advice from Mr. Louboutin'.¹⁹ The fashion maven's statement, revealing in its irreverence, naturalises Barbie's plastic body, equating it with fleshy femininity. Indeed, when applied to Barbie, phrases like 'plastic surgery' and 'any girl' are both in keeping with Mattel's overall branding of the doll; this language suggests that Barbie is a 'real' girl.²⁰ Errico's statement reinforces Barbie's narrative of realness, demonstrating its cultural pervasiveness. Yet, while Louboutin's plans for the doll seem to complement this Barbie back-story, consumers have made a definite distinction.

When asked by the *Los Angeles Times* for a comment on Louboutin's reimagining of Barbie, one fan exclaims: 'It's crazy [...] She's perfect!'.²¹ She goes on to worry how the news will affect her five-year-old child who 'worships' the doll.²² Journalist Melissa Schweiger is equally dubious in her interrogation of the designer's intent. Frustrated, she remarks on what she sees as unwarranted criticism of 'Ken's better half'.²³ 'Silly us', she begins, '[a]ll these years we thought Barbie was the picture of perfection. Turns out, we were wrong'.²⁴ Both statements illustrate how Barbie's 'real' and ideal qualities come into play in popular discourse, informing consumer perceptions of the doll. The conflation of these qualities, and the brand's corresponding message that Barbie is both relatable and aspirational, specifically situates consumer tensions surrounding Louboutin's intervention.

¹⁹ Schweiger, para. 7.

²⁰ Language that positions the doll as 'real' dominates Mattel's advertising of her. When addressing Barbie's cosmetic reworkings, Mattel states that: 'Because she's plastic, Barbie technically has had "plastic surgery" on her face and body.' See: 'For the Record', Barbie Media Website: <http://www.barbiemedia.com/barbie_facts_for-the-record.html> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

²¹ 'Bashing Barbie: Famous Designer Performs Plastic Surgery', para. 7.

²² 'Bashing Barbie: Famous Designer Performs Plastic Surgery', para. 7.

²³ Schweiger, para. 2.

²⁴ Schweiger, para. 1.

By definition, a couturier is a fashion designer who specialises in the fabrication of apparel based upon an elite client's list of requirements.²⁵ As such, when Barbie encounters Louboutin, fashion tradition dictates that she will be lavished with a bespoke pair of patent leather platforms or shiny pink stilettos. Louboutin turns this expectation upside-down by suggesting that Barbie must be redesigned to fit into *his* shoes. By advocating for an explicitly slimmer doll, the designer seems to be upsetting Barbie's grasp on perfection.²⁶ This act inevitably unsettles Barbie's branded cohesion. Because this branding is so systemically enforced in the Western marketplace, consumers react with shock at the designer's decision. They wonder how a figure that is emblematic of a white, slender, able-bodied feminine ideal could not be 'skinny enough' (read: perfect enough) for Louboutin.²⁷

The designer's criticisms of the doll's ankles and his 'plastic surgery' solution court controversy. Louboutin draws attention to himself while rewriting a modern consumer dream into a Cinderella-story gone awry. Rather than confirming Barbie's codified princess status through a pair of magical slippers made just for her, the doll's body and corresponding narrative of aspiration are dethroned by the

²⁵ 'Couturier', in *OED*.

²⁶ When consumers express surprise that Barbie is being morphed into a more slender version of herself, their disbelief seems to convey the idea that she is already slim, problematically equating slimness with perfection. In contrast, advocates who suggest that an appearance of weight ought to be added to Barbie's figure are implying that such a change would create a more realistic example of femininity. An example of this can be found in cosmetics company The Body Shop's 1997 'Ruby' advertisement. Ruby, a digitally rendered 'Rubenesque' version of a fashion doll is presented as normal or the 'everyday woman'. This type of dominant culture rhetoric surrounding body image creates a false binary where slim is aligned with perfect, and curvy is aligned with normal. For more on Ruby, see: Stuart Elliott, 'For Everyday Products, Ads Use Everyday Woman' (17 August 2005) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/17/business/media/17adco.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

²⁷ 'Bashing Barbie: Famous Designer Performs Plastic Surgery', para. 9.

designer.²⁸ In the process, Louboutin relegates the doll to the position of ugly stepsister, slicing away at her unruly body.²⁹ Through these symbolic acts, Barbie's aspirational qualities are also erased, and the doll is demoted to the symbolic status of a 'real (imperfect) girl'. Dominant cultural understandings equate 'real' feminine subjectivity with a state of otherness. When the designer removes Barbie's perfection, he others the iconic figure. As a result, his product overtakes the doll as the central coveted object of perfection in the corporate collaboration. This process elucidates the problems with 'real' feminine subjectivity and reveals the roots of consumer vexation with the designer.

Louboutin's actions, which privilege his signature red soles over the fashion doll, expose Mattel's attempt at a seamless narrative construction of the Barbie brand. The designer unsettles the fantasy that Barbie is an ideal—be it as fashionista or as Cinderella—and defines her realness through a fairy-tale trope of Barbie as an imperfect, abject stepsister.³⁰ Consumers have been discursively aligned with Barbie as an icon of possibility and as a 'real' girl. When the ideal is removed from her branding, the harsh reality is that consumer identification is left to attach to a less than appealing archetype of femininity. The process of questioning Barbie's perfection also problematises her subjectivity and the subjectivity of the consumers who identify with her.

Extensively drawing upon Louboutin's narrative intervention into the Barbie doll provides an idiosyncratic, but exemplary, model for how consumers relate to the doll's body. In *Barbie Culture*, Mary F. Rogers defines this influence in unequivocal

²⁸ Mattel released a Cinderella Barbie in 1997. Barbie Collector Website: <http://www.barbiecollector.com/search/apachesolr_search/cinderella> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

²⁹ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Cinderella', in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. by Jack Zipes (London: Vintage, [1812] 2007), pp. 106-114 (p. 112).

³⁰ See chapter three for a detailed discussion of the abject.

terms. She says that ‘our Barbies reflect as well as address our very selves. Barbie’s script is ultimately about selfhood.’³¹ The Louboutin controversy illustrates this theory, and confirms the success of Barbie’s narratives of realness and aspiration put forth by Mattel. Significantly, however, overwhelming public reaction eventually pressured the designer to ‘set the record straight’ regarding his comments.³² He retreats from his earlier gibes with a crafted explanation: ‘I just added my little science to Barbie and I’ve been proud to serve her, but fat ankles she didn’t have, she just could have had thinner ankles. That’s all.’³³ With these words, Louboutin reinstates Barbie’s perfection, and positions himself as her humble (albeit, scientific and paternalistic) servant. Indeed, following his apology, the designer was swiftly deemed ‘a yearlong godfather to Barbie’.³⁴ Yet, with Barbie’s aspirational narrative—her Cinderella fantasy—re-inscribed complete with fairy godfather, the securing of her brand identity does not diminish the cultural significance of Louboutin’s mediation. Rather, it adds another layer.³⁵

Louboutin’s act of appeasement highlights an important component of Barbie’s marketing, further calling attention to her influence on consumers. In the above statement, the designer backpedals to promote a seemingly more innocuous narrative of maintenance for the doll.³⁶ This rhetoric is a way of restoring order, and, crucially, it is a way of returning to Mattel’s general script. When the corporation

³¹ Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press, 1999) p. 153.

³² ‘Christian Louboutin explains Barbie “fat ankle” comments’ (16 October 2009) <<http://www.handbag.com/fashion/news/christian-louboutin-explains-barbie-fat-ankle-comments-105989>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 1).

³³ ‘Christian Louboutin explains Barbie “fat ankle” comments’, para. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 4.

³⁵ The Grimm’s ‘Cinderella’ does not feature a fairy godmother. While introduced earlier by Charles Perrault (1697), the godmother character was further popularised by Disney’s animated feature (1950).

³⁶ Significantly, the *OED* explains the etymological root of ‘maintain’ to be ‘to hold in the hand’, giving more credence to the designer’s sense of mastery.

alters Barbie, this process is contrived as a kind of product upkeep, wherein versatility and originality are continuously sought to ensure the doll's overall image.³⁷ The need to stabilise Barbie's narrative in this way elucidates a hegemony of improvement that is located therein. Along with normalising Barbie's body as 'real' and aspirational, Mattel's manufacturing and marketing of the doll can be read as reiterating the message that bodily improvement is normal, natural, and expected for the white middle-class feminine subject in the West. What the Louboutin incident implies is that it is problematic to attempt a somatic intervention that suggests that there is a 'beyond Barbie', but efforts to be like her are culturally prescribed.

Barbie's influence extends to inform ideas of contemporary femininity, manifested in what Rogers defines as 'the emergence of the technobody'.³⁸ She explains that

Barbie is an icon whose 'perfect' body is more attainable than ever before. She exists more widely as an icon in those cultures where women cannot escape endless messages about how to improve, enhance, rework, and even perfect their deficient, flawed bodies.³⁹

In these terms, the technobody is a result of adjustments intended to make the feminine body appear 'better' through the assemblage of contemporary cosmetic and technological practices. Yet, the definition of what 'better' means is never constant. While perfection may appear attainable through a narrative of aspiration tied to Barbie, in reality, this perfection is just out of reach. Because of this deferral, cultural attention is subsequently placed upon feminine somatic imperfections

³⁷ From the start, Mattel's interpretation of Barbie's feminine figure has been read with a critical lens. Because of this, especially in recent years, alterations to the doll are explicitly communicated as contributing to a narrative of realness. While not always convincing critics, fans, and consumers seem to embrace this narrative. Thus, despite the many challenges to creating a 'real', lifelike doll, attempts to make the latest Barbie more 'real' than ever before seems to have a positive effect on consumers, as in the case of Computer Engineer Barbie.

³⁸ Rogers, p. 123.

³⁹ Rogers, p. 122.

inherent in humanist constructions of the body. As a result, despite the technological ‘advancements’ of cosmetic procedures, Rogers asserts that the feminine body is understood as always requiring work.⁴⁰

An analysis of the Barbie doll-like technobody may present a narrative of improvement and enhancement that challenges humanist notions that the feminine subject is fated to a static corporeality. Indeed, Rogers argues that this Barbie doll-like improvement encourages ‘new technologies of the flesh’.⁴¹ Nevertheless, when interrogating a reading of the technobody from this perspective, it quickly becomes apparent that posthuman potential is negated with the return of a humanist discourse of control and mastery. The belief that subjects can reshape their bodies into something better is not posthumanist by default. Instead, it relies precisely upon the humanist promise of the progress of humanity. As R.L. Rutsky, explains:

There is, in fact, nothing *inherently* posthuman about technological or genetic enhancements of the human body. As the very notion of enhancement suggests, these sorts of changes continue to use ‘the human’ as a starting point. They are, in other words, merely an extension of the human for they maintain, and in fact, *reinforce* the traditional conception of the human as an autonomous subject, defined by its mastery over the object world. An enhanced humanity does not involve a historical shift or evolutionary mutation from human to posthuman: it instead involves an all too human fantasy: a fantasy of becoming not posthuman, but superhuman. (Emphasis in original)⁴²

Despite the Barbie doll-like technobody’s challenge to static and humanist ideals written onto the feminine subject, the belief that women and girls can enhance their bodies through work appears to follow a humanist path of linear progression, which endorses the humanist myth of unified, authoritative subjectivity.

⁴⁰ Eighty-one-year-old model, Carmen Dell’Orefice’s quotation in the 2012 HBO documentary *About Face* epitomises this point. When discussing the prevalence of cosmetic surgery, she explains: ‘If you had the ceiling falling down in your living room, wouldn’t you go and have a repair?’ See: *About Face: Supermodels Then and Now*, dir. by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (HBO, 2012).

⁴¹ Rogers, p. 112.

⁴² R.L. Rutsky, ‘Mutation, history, and fantasy in the posthuman’, in *Subject Matters*, 3: 4 (2007), 99-112 (p. 105).

Because the Barbie doll-like technobody is in constant need of upkeep or work, it may also be fastened to another feature of the humanist paradigm: capitalism. Rogers argues that Barbie is ‘an icon of emergent, consumerist “somatics”’, which are defined as ‘a technology of the body driven by the idea that our bodies can be whatever we like if we devote enough money and attention to them.’⁴³ With improvement comes a material cost. The dependence upon capitalistic exchange defines the technobody by the whims of the marketplace, wherein the improvements judged to be best are also the most expensive, and the product list is an endless, ever-deferring step away from perfection. Moreover, a fluctuating cultural script, wherein Barbie, and her slenderised ankles, collaborates with Louboutin one season and promotes MAC makeup the next, also entitles only affluent and middle-class consumers the ‘privilege’ of controlling, reshaping, and rewriting their bodies to keep up.

This analysis of the capitalist underpinnings of the technobody recalls Jean-François Lyotard’s theoretical account of traditional, humanist ways of thinking and being in the postmodern West. He argues that Western cultural traditions problematically operate as a ‘call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity’.⁴⁴ Disappointed by ‘fantasies of realism’,⁴⁵ which abandon complexity in favour of narratives of unified truth, the philosopher instead promotes a fragmented approach—that of the postmodern—urging readers to ‘wage a war on totality’.⁴⁶ This war is not so easily fought, however, as the appearance of fragmentation or fluidity can also lead to a broader sense of unity. In the

⁴³ Rogers, p. 112.

⁴⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1979] 1984) pp. 71-84 (p. 73).

⁴⁵ Lyotard, p. 74.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

postindustrial cultures of the West, there is a discourse of eclecticism, or of what the philosopher calls ‘anything goes’ that is driven by the ‘realism [...] of money’.⁴⁷

Eclecticism, while presented with a postmodern appearance, problematically returns consumers to a state of comfortably unified subjectivity.

Eclecticism is a way of mixing cultural practices in accordance with mass consumer demands of versatility and disposability in order to maintain the status quo. The idea of financially driven pastiche certainly is applicable to practices that promote the Barbie doll-like technobody. Cosmetic surgery, makeup, tattooing, piercing, dieting, teeth alignment, teeth whitening, hair removal, tanning, and/or skin-lightening, and hair straightening, perming, and dying are all consumable procedures that come together to produce a seemingly changeable, but always racially white, idealised feminine corporeality in the West. This type of somatic reinvention can be understood as a manifestation that works to maintain the narrative of the unified Western subject, depending on what broader cultural practices are popular at the time. Indeed, these procedures encourage the consumer to ‘arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others [sic]’.⁴⁸ At the intersection of humanism and capitalism, ‘to secure a self means to secure a lifestyle anchored to consumer goods and services’.⁴⁹ Mattel, its Barbie doll, and their market-place collaborations promote this product-driven cohesive subjectivity.

Narratives of somatic improvement by way of product-based eclecticism are a reflection of how capitalism upholds the humanist project by securing the subject. Louboutin’s Barbie doll plastic surgery, and the implications of commodification therein, imply how this relationship between capitalism and Barbie doll-like

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁴⁹ Rogers, p. 153.

somatics can be taken further. Not only does capitalism work at creating a unified subjectivity through brand identification but, as Kate Soper states, it is ‘the heady testimony of capitalist industry to secure our mastery over nature’.⁵⁰ Barbie’s role in promoting the technobody seems, quite obviously, to attempt this mastery. If the feminine body is equated with nature in humanist discourse, rewriting it as a site of improvement is an effort to overcome or control this nature, in the process promoting femininity to the realm of cohesive, masterful subjectivity. Thus, by way of capitalism, Barbie doll-like corporeality may be firmly situated within discursive practices that reaffirm the ideologies of humanism and the unified subject in the West.

While a capitalist analysis is pertinent to the discussion of posthumanism and the technology of the feminine body, there is also trouble with this type of reading. It does not divorce the idea that technology is masculine and nature is feminine, and that, in consequence, technology can only ever manipulate the feminine subject. Thus, while such an interpretation is compelling, it, too, works at upholding ‘the idea that women in capitalist culture are themselves commodities to be purchased, consumed and manipulated’.⁵¹ By aligning oneself with this epistemology, and applying it to a Barbie doll-like corporeality, there is the risk of essentialising bodies and subjectivities, reducing them to a static and ‘natural’ opposition to the technological. It is certainly important to consider, but the technobody and its implications of capitalist-driven improvement are not the only way to read Barbie’s influence on feminine somatics. As a feminine subject attempts to become more and more Barbie doll-like, she also might be weakening the definite distinctions between subject and object by aligning herself with the practices and commodities that recall

⁵⁰ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p. 16.

⁵¹ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 60.

the plastic doll. If this is the case, there may be something subversive in such practices as well.

III. 'Scripted Reality': Rewriting the Technobody⁵²

Over the course of four years, from 2006 to 2010, MTV's *The Hills* became one of the network's most anticipated television dramas, along the way establishing a new genre: 'scripted reality'.⁵³ The programme followed its young stars through outwardly genuine friendships and romance all set to a constructed backdrop of the glamorous Los Angeles fashion and celebrity industries. Combining the mundanely quotidian with compelling aspirationalism and fabricated drama, the show had the effect of very watchable television. Indeed, with each new season (of which there were six), rumours and gossip spurred on viewership, with the final season garnering notable attention. Fans and new viewers alike eagerly awaited the April 2010 premiere, mainly due to the notoriety that one cast member was achieving away from the series' spying cameras.⁵⁴

In November of the previous year, *The Hills* star, Heidi Montag, made international headlines for undergoing ten cosmetic procedures in one day. The alterations ranged from a brow-lift and chin reduction to breast augmentation, liposuction, and Botox injections. Soon after, the celebrity commented through her Twitter.com account that surgery was the best decision of her life.⁵⁵ Such

⁵² Tracie Egan Morrissey, 'The Hills: Lo Is Still Our Favorite Bitch' (23 October 2007) <<http://jezebel.com/313964/the-hills-lo-is-still-our-favorite-bitch>> [accessed: 20 July 2012] (para. 1).

⁵³ Morrissey, para. 1.

⁵⁴ Mattel's web-based series *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* (discussed in chapter one) seems to follow this style of programming.

⁵⁵ 'Heidi Montag, @heidimontag' (24 May 2010) <<http://twitter.com/heidimontag/statuses/14674449817>> [accessed: 20 July 2012].

pronouncements provoked media frenzy and, as such, the MTV audience grew more and more curious as to how the radical morphology would be depicted on screen. When the first episode of season six aired, it did not disappoint. The camera crew followed a puffy, post-surgery Montag to her hometown in the mountains of Colorado. With cameras rolling, Montag debuted her new look to a shocked family. Her mother and sister expressed their concerns over the transformation with her mother venturing: ‘It sounds to me that you want to look like Barbie.’⁵⁶ Affirming this assessment, Montag asserts that she does ‘want to look like Barbie’.⁵⁷ Dramatic confessions like these helped to secure the popularity of the final season of *The Hills*, and launched Montag further into the spotlight.

In an interview with *Life and Style* magazine, Montag explained her decision to undergo so many radical procedures at one time. She states that, ‘Every starlet is getting surgery every other day to keep up her looks’.⁵⁸ In order to have a chance in the industry, Montag believes that she needs to both maintain and improve her appearance as well. Her reasons for the surgery fall in line with Rogers’s assessment of the feminine technobody, which is informed by discourses of improvement and the ubiquity of the Barbie doll. This never-ending consumerist quest for perfection comes in the form of a white, able-bodied, slender, pneumatic, blonde, tall, tan, corporeality. The fact the Montag already possessed these Barbie doll-like qualities pre-surgery—opting to have her features enhanced once her pursuit for fame, and the paycheque that accompanied it, were both well underway—works to highlight this narrative of improvement. Indeed, Montag’s explicit eagerness to ‘look like Barbie’ suggests that her celebrity image is an ideal representation of Rogers’s theoretical

⁵⁶ ‘Episode One, Season Six’, *The Hills* (MTV, 2010).

⁵⁷ ‘Episode One, Season Six’.

⁵⁸ ‘Heidi Montag goes too far’ (29 January 2010)

<<http://www.lifeandstylemag.com/2010/01/large-1006-cover.html>> [accessed: 5 August 2012) (para. 4).

analysis, as well as the general Western cultural narrative of becoming Barbie doll-like.

Despite this evident alignment with the technobody, statements made by Montag's mother complicate such a reading. Upon hearing her daughter's confirmation of her Barbie doll motivations in the revelatory episode of *The Hills*, Darlene Montag expresses her disappointment. Exasperated, she pleads: 'Why would you want to look like Barbie? To everybody else that saw you, you were Heidi. Nobody in the world could have looked like Heidi Montag.'⁵⁹ With these words, she implies that, in the process of undergoing cosmetic surgery, Heidi Montag has lost her identity. Embedded within such criticism is the conclusion that the young woman's physical transformation has led her away from a 'real' or authentic self.⁶⁰ Or, more pointedly, as many critics in the popular media have decried, cosmetic surgery has made Heidi Montag 'fake'.⁶¹

Equating Barbie with the inauthentic is a common occurrence in popular culture. Critics and academics alike suggest that the doll's figure offers a 'false' ideal for women and girls to emulate.⁶² When it is emulated, this reading is then placed onto women and girls—their Barbie doll-like characteristic have them labelled as 'fake' as well. This phenomenon puts Barbie doll-like corporeality generally, and Montag's manifestation of it specifically, at odds with the technobody and its tenets of improvement. It does not seem likely that a body or a subject is improving if they

⁵⁹ 'Episode One, Season Six'.

⁶⁰ Playing up such assertions, in January 2010, Heidi Montag released her debut album entitled *Superficial* (Warner Music Group).

⁶¹ For example, see: 'Exclusive Video Interview: Tila Tequila On Heidi Montag—"Everything About Her Is Fake!"' (25 January 2010) <<http://www.radaronline.com/exclusives/2010/01/exclusive-video-interview-tila-tequila-heidi-montag-plastic-surgery-everything>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

⁶² Mariflo Stephens, 'Barbie Doesn't Live Here Anymore', in *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, ed. by Yona Zeldis McDonough (New York: Touchstone, 1999), pp. 193-196 (p. 195).

are disparaged as 'fake'. The following investigation considers ideas surrounding Barbie and Barbie doll-like inauthenticity alongside the humanist ideals of the technobody. In the reality star's overt and over-identification with the doll, her somatic interpretations convey something more nuanced than a simple reiteration of white idealised femininity driven by frenzied consumerism and an attempt at mastery therein.

An example of the critical conflation of Barbie's inauthenticity with those who identify with her is the testimony of a Wayne State University student, cited in *Barbie's Queer Accessories*:

I didn't buy into Barbie, but my sister loved Barbie, and now she's just like her. She's materialistic. She cares too much about her appearance. She has a superficial life with superficial values and a gross husband, and I think she's really unhappy. She's never satisfied with what she has. And now her daughters are into Barbie, and I don't know how to counteract Barbie's influence.⁶³

This student touches upon issues of gender, sexuality, and especially consumerism to form her opinion of Barbie's influence. She maintains a similar assessment to Rogers as she suggests that those who 'buy into' a certain type of Barbie doll-like femininity live a product-driven, misinformed existence. It is of crucial importance to interrogate the effects capitalism has on the invention, perpetuation, and implications of the technobody. However, another frequent and unfortunate result of this analysis is the conclusion that women and girls, such as the commenter's sister (and, indeed, Montag), are easily manipulated and led astray by Barbie. As a result, women and girls who work at becoming Barbie doll-like are criticised for being 'superficial', 'materialistic', 'unhappy', and 'never satisfied'. These terms incisively evaluate a subject's level of authenticity and conclude that becoming Barbie doll-like is lacking therein.

⁶³ Rand, p. 103.

The above judgment illustrates what many critics fear most about Barbie: that this doll, and all that she represents, promotes a false femininity that will damage the authentic selves of women and girls. As such, those subjects who actively emulate the doll's appearance are equated with her. Inherent in such an evaluation is that there is a natural, or true state of femininity that Barbie is somehow prohibiting. This assessment speaks to an assumption of what feminine subjectivity ought to be. In the process, a binary is invented between the authentic and the inauthentic, the 'real' and the 'fake'. Taken a step further, such oppositional reasoning, in Neil Badmington's assessment, 'helps "us" to tell the difference between the human and the non-human.'⁶⁴ The anxiety that Mattel and its Barbie doll will corrupt women and girls depends on the presupposition that there is an essential feminine human subject that 'we' must preserve. Conversely, this type of thinking infers that there is a non-human imposter capable of undermining this subject position, which suggests that there is an instability from the start.

Assessments of Barbie doll-like femininity, like those from the student cited above, illustrate an attempt at what Lyotard calls 'ordering the visible'.⁶⁵ As critics make efforts to clearly define distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'fake' in terms of contemporary representations of femininity in the West, their readings demarcate very narrow strictures of appropriateness for the feminine subject. This practice of imposed borders is troubling for Lyotard, as he considers it to be a way of reproducing 'mass conformism'.⁶⁶ In this instance, 'mass conformism' demands that women and girls must stay within certain borders or their subjectivities, and their very humanity, will be called into question. '[S]uperficial', 'materialistic', 'unhappy',

⁶⁴ Neil Badmington, 'Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism', in *Posthumanism*, ed. by Neil Badmington (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 1-10 (p. 3).

⁶⁵ Lyotard, p. 74.

⁶⁶ Lyotard, p. 75.

and ‘never satisfied’ are the terms that police femininity here. Such terms order those subjects who step outside the structure of acceptable femininity into a new category: ‘fake’.⁶⁷ But, what is relegated to the status of ‘fake’—just as what is relegated to the status of ‘real’—is never as clear as it is presented. Such terms merely offer fabricated and shifting definitions.⁶⁸

Before Montag underwent ten cosmetic procedures in one day, her authenticity was already contentious. The performer rose to celebrity stature through a contract with MTV. Starring on *The Hills*, Montag participated in crafted storylines that obfuscated truth and fiction. Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood describe reality programming as a ‘blending of reality and mass mediated experience that evokes life as a movie in which people play themselves’.⁶⁹ *The Hills* is an extreme version of the medium, its ‘scripted reality’ providing stars with lines to recite, along with plots to follow. All of this is set within an MTV-sponsored, product-centric environment. Thus, when Montag converses with her mother regarding her desire to look like Barbie, this seemingly dramatic heart-to-heart is, in all likelihood, prompted, if not scripted, dialogue presented as truth. Again, this type of presentation relies on consumerist eclecticism and is, to borrow Lyotard’s formulation, ‘the degree zero of contemporary general culture’.⁷⁰ It also reflects the influence of the postmodern on popular culture and everyday life in the West.

Most contemporary viewers are savvy to the narrative fabrications of reality television and negotiate how authenticity is worked into their viewing experience.

⁶⁷ Significantly, the *OED* traces the etymology of the word ‘fake’ to ‘invention’ and ‘counterfeit’—both of these terms suggest deceit as well as design and capitalist exchange.

⁶⁸ The parameters that regulate ‘authentic’ feminine subjectivity function similarly to how the hegemony of improvement works, both operating simultaneously.

⁶⁹ Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood, ‘Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television’, in *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32: 2 (2005), 284-295 (284).

⁷⁰ Lyotard, p. 76.

Despite the genre's obvious constructedness, Rose and Wood claim that this type of programming offers its audience the opportunity to pursue a certain type of truth in a more 'sophisticated' way.⁷¹ Indeed, they argue that there is a 'drive for authenticity' amongst consumers of reality television, which 'may be conceived as a reaction to threats of inauthenticity inherent in [the] postmodernism' with which they are engaged.⁷² Their analysis harkens back to Lyotard's ideas of how nostalgia functions: the reality television viewer, aware that the medium cannot capture every truth, feels contented through such an acknowledgement.⁷³ Nevertheless, the postmodern potential of reality television—how it questions, fragments, and toys with ideas of truth—should not be overlooked. Rose and Wood contend that

within the apparent obsession with authenticity lies a postmodern paradox. Although authenticity is desired and earnestly promoted, consumers of reality television revel in the ironic mixture of the factitious and the spontaneous.⁷⁴

When the final episode of *The Hills* aired with an unveiling of a Hollywood backlot setting as its denouement, viewers were at once outraged and satiated, which was the appeal of the programme all along.⁷⁵ The give and take relationship between authenticity and irony that *The Hills* conveys provides an example of how the postmodern is experienced in contemporary popular culture in the West. Montag's role on the programme suggests an active participation in this cultural phenomenon as well.

Montag's contribution to *The Hills* establishes her as a celebrity within an expression of the postmodern in contemporary popular culture in the West.

Speaking generally, in *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, Kim Toffoletti explains that an

⁷¹ Rose and Wood, p. 284.

⁷² Rose and Wood, p. 286.

⁷³ Lyotard, p. 79.

⁷⁴ Rose and Wood, p. 286.

⁷⁵ This feeling recalls Lyotard's ideas of the sublime, wherein subjects are contented by feelings of both pleasure and pain (p. 77).

effect of the postmodern on contemporary Western culture is the erosion of ‘the gap between the real and imaginary’.⁷⁶ *The Hills* delivers a glimpse into how the philosophical and artistic expression of the postmodern has penetrated popular culture in this way. Montag’s constructed celebrity status can be understood to have grown out of the destabilised narratives of truth and fiction circulated by the programme. The starlet’s subsequent pursuit of the Barbie doll-like technobody is a befitting addition to a representation that was always already meditated somewhere between images and narratives that navigate between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ and the aspirational.⁷⁷

Reality television offers viewers and performers alike a peek into how the postmodern rejoices in exposing the constructed nature of representations of truth and fiction. When the postmodern is applied to somatic representations, the blurring of truth and fiction, authentic and inauthentic, and ‘real’ and ‘fake’ takes on another dimension. Montag, as the medium’s breakaway star, is useful for thinking about how representations of mediated embodiment and subjectivity link the potentiality of the postmodern to that of the posthuman. As Toffoletti asserts, it is ‘at the moment where clear distinctions between things collapse’ that ‘the posthuman emerges’ as well.⁷⁸ Montag’s celebrity narrative creates a space to think productively about the constructedness of subjectivity beyond the markers of ‘real’ and ‘fake’. Indeed, Montag’s negotiation in this arena affirms a certain somatic potential Rogers begins to touch upon when she asserts that the cosmetic and technological practices of the technobody ‘defy boundaries once deemed constants of nature’.⁷⁹ Rather than proving that there is an authentic or an inauthentic femininity, the starlet’s

⁷⁶ Toffoletti, p. 32.

⁷⁷ Reality television complicates ideas of aspiration and celebrity culture further. Like Barbie, it promises that consumers have the potential to be stars at any moment.

⁷⁸ Toffoletti p. 32.

⁷⁹ Rogers, p. 112.

representation confounds the distinctions of these terms. Her fleshy body, intervened in by the digital and the surgical, takes on the signifiers of the Barbie doll, and in doing so, challenges the definitions of both 'real' and 'fake'. As such, it is from a space beyond binaries that Montag's Barbie doll-like representation dismantles cohesive subjectivity and invites queries of a posthumanist nature.

With the assertion that 'the posthuman collapses and exceeds the boundaries that once differentiated fact from fiction and illusion from reality', Toffoletti opens up the discussions on Montag to the work of the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard.⁸⁰ In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard explores the philosophical significance of what is possible beyond the 'real' (and the 'fake'). His assertion that the debate surrounding the authentic and the inauthentic produces a false binary is useful for a reading of Barbie who, in Baudrillard's postmodern analysis, would no longer be understood to provide an inaccurate representation of fleshy femininity. Montag's Barbie doll-like femininity, too, should not be conceptualised as a contrivance of Barbie. Rather, both examples can be read as constructs of simulation culture: 'Simulation does not reproduce reality, nor does it mask, hide or obscure reality. It produces reality.'⁸¹ It is a process that moves away from ideas of reproduction and imitation, removing all signs of an origin and an essentialised authenticity.

Simulation-produced reality defines 'contemporary life as *more than real*' (emphasis in original).⁸² The result is what Baudrillard terms 'hyperreality'.⁸³ In a telling example of the fantastic, he explores how hyperreality functions in Western culture. He writes:

⁸⁰ Toffoletti, p. 32.

⁸¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, [1981] 1994, repr. 2010), p. 33.

⁸² Baudrillard, p. 35.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real [...].⁸⁴

Based upon Baudrillard's example, Mattel and Disney, or Barbie and Disneyland, can be read as analogous, which is a fitting comparison. Connected by a high-speed freeway in the Los Angeles basin, the two companies have been entangled geographically, temporally, and corporately. Barbie's earliest commercials were aired during the early days of the Mickey Mouse Club television programme, while Disney Fun Barbie and a variety of Disney princess Barbie dolls are continuously available for purchase. Just like Disneyland, and perhaps informed by it, Barbie is presented as the false representation of femininity, which makes us believe that there is a 'real', more authentic one waiting to be recovered.

Fleshy women and girls are meant to occupy the 'real' or the constants of reality. When Montag becomes Barbie doll-like she disrupts this binary, and is swiftly identified as a false representation in correspondence with Barbie. If we apply Baudrillard's logic, femininity itself can be read as a fabrication 'without origin'.⁸⁵ This is precisely why Montag's Barbie doll-like femininity is so crucial to a discussion of the posthuman. By blurring the line between 'real' and 'fake' with her Barbie doll-like corporeality, the starlet reveals that gendered markers are always fabrications, that is, imitations without origins. Within this process, Montag also blurs the line between subject and object, challenging the static, codified nature of femininity in humanism.

The Hills exposes the effect that the postmodern seems to have on contemporary popular culture in the West. Putting forth a 'scripted reality', the

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 12-13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

programme works at defying clear boundaries between what is deemed to be fact and fiction. Montag's representation of Barbie doll-like femininity in the West takes this interpretation further, writing a mediated 'scripted reality' onto her body. Thus, while criticised in popular discourse for being 'fake', when explored through the lens of the hyperreal, Montag's Barbie doll-like technobody calls attention to the limitations of such an appraisal. Moreover, Montag complicates anti-capitalist readings of the technobody, suggesting that within postmodern culture there is room for femininity and technology to coalesce.

IV. 'A Lifelong Sentence': Bodies as Scripts, Bodies as Archives⁸⁶

Heidi Montag's personal explanation regarding her Barbie doll-like cosmetic procedures follows an interesting trajectory. Early on, during the filming of *The Hills*, the reality star enthused about the results of her makeover and its Barbie doll inspiration. Indeed, it was described as a life-affirming occasion for the starlet.⁸⁷ Following the airing of the final season of the MTV drama (and with the unexpected death of her plastic surgeon), Montag's account begins to shift.⁸⁸ In December 2010, Montag granted *Life and Style* magazine another interview to discuss her re-evaluation of the events. Here, she voices both ambivalence and distress regarding her physical transformation. At one point, she even states that her 'scars are constant reminders that she made a big mistake.' She explains that

⁸⁶ 'Heidi Montag on Surviving Reality TV Scandal: Spencer and I Were Never Those People on "The Hills"' (3 August 2012) <<http://www.celebuzz.com/2012-08-03/heidi-montag-on-her-public-persona-its-like-a-lifelong-sentence/>> [accessed: 4 August 2012] (para. 2).

⁸⁷ 'Heidi Montag @heidi Montag'.

⁸⁸ 'Heidi Montag's Surgeon Killed in Car Crash' (17 August 2010) <<http://www.mtv.co.uk/news/the-hills/234436-the-hills-heidi-montag-surgeon-dead>> [accessed: 4 August 2012].

I would love to not be [known as] ‘plastic girl’ or whatever they call me. Surgery ruined my career and my personal life and just brought a lot of negativity into my world. I wish I could just jump into a time machine and take it all back.⁸⁹

In the end, the *Life and Style* interview claims that Montag is dissatisfied with the results of her transformation, blaming the star’s personal and career woes on her surgeries. Two years later, Montag offers up another analysis, still tinged with regret, but also resignation. She says, ‘I’ll never be able to be Heidi Montag, a normal person, again.’⁹⁰ Acknowledging that her surgeries cannot be undone, she calls her augmentations a ‘lifelong sentence’.⁹¹

Significantly, Montag’s assessment of her public perception—‘plastic girl’—echoes how she describes her post-surgery subjectivity. Separating her authentic self from the character she portrayed on *The Hills* as ‘Hills Heidi’ for the August 2012 interview,⁹² the actress insists that in her mind, this distinction was not always so intelligible. Starring on the ‘scripted reality’ television programme, the young actress contends, caused her to blur her identity with the role she was playing. Thus, at her most infamous, she says that she had ‘become’ her character—an inauthentic and plastic version of herself.⁹³ Montag claims that this was an unsettling occurrence, and that it ‘almost destroy[ed]’ her.⁹⁴ She concludes her most recent interview by explaining that she will ‘never compromise’ herself again for fame, nor will she

⁸⁹ ‘Heidi Montag reveals her scars a year after surgery’ (21 December 2010) <<http://www.lifeandstylemag.com/2010/12/heidi-cover-story.html>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 4).

⁹⁰ ‘Heidi Montag on Surviving Reality TV Scandal: Spencer and I Were Never Those People on “The Hills”’, para. 2.

⁹¹ ‘Heidi Montag on Surviving Reality TV Scandal: Spencer and I Were Never Those People on “The Hills”’, para. 2.

⁹² *Ibid.*, para. 6.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, para 4. (See chapter three for a broader description of plastic.)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 6.

‘pretend to be someone’ she is not, instead aiming to represent herself in the most authentic way possible.⁹⁵

Montag expresses a certain degree of repentance surrounding her cosmetic procedures. Since undergoing the ten alterations, and, indeed, since this decision garnered so much negative publicity, her statements have become increasingly preoccupied with issues of normality and authenticity. Such announcements could be considered as providing insight into Montag—allowing the reader or consumer to clearly identify the ‘real’ from the ‘fake’, the authentic from the inauthentic. However, it is important to remember that this opposition is a fabrication. The post-surgery, media-savvy Montag and her attempts to align with the authentic only enhance her hyperreality. Nevertheless, although Montag’s account can be read to mirror Baudrillard’s observations on the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ and the confluence (and excess) therein, it is an imperfect reflection. Whereas Baudrillard reads hyperreality through the terrain of landscape, Montag presents another terrain that requires specific investigation, that of the gendered body.

IVa. A ‘Cyborg Myth’: The Posthuman Body as a Fictional Text⁹⁶

In terms of its posthuman potential, Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality suggests, with its destabilisation of ‘real’ and ‘fake’, that culture is made up of fictions. While useful for thinking about the binary oppositions of ‘real’ and ‘fake’, and deconstructing narratives that present a specific femininity as natural, the theory of the hyperreal seems to fall short in how such fictions manifest for embodied subjects.

⁹⁵ Ibid., para. 12.

⁹⁶ Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-181 (p. 154).

Barbie doll-like corporeality may illustrate that the body is a cultural construction from the start, but it nevertheless has a cultural history with tangible implications. The following sections address the idea of bodily fiction—and the textuality such fiction implies—in terms of the gendered body. This reading offers a complex interpretation of feminine posthuman subjectivity, conveying an ambivalent attempt by subjects to come to terms with authenticity in light of poststructuralist, postmodern, and posthuman epistemologies.

Poststructuralist theories of the body provide crucial tools for thinking about the potentiality of the hyperreal alongside somatic materiality. Intrinsic to this philosophical framework is that the body is a cultural production created in, and as a result of, language; that is, ‘the body is a citation of the “already written”’.⁹⁷ Understanding the body through a textual lens challenges the natural, originary status it is otherwise allocated in Western, humanist culture, and is a productive way to approach the specifically gendered body. Indeed, if the body is constructed through language and culture, then there is no universal or ‘real’ femininity in which women and girls can be measured. All markers of femininity have been generated through the repetition of specific cultural discourses and practices. The treatise put forth by Judith Butler highlights the compulsive repetition that makes gender (and sex) appear natural, suggesting that the way bodies take on gender is through ‘imitation without an origin’.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Butler reminds her readers that despite their cultural construction, gendered bodies have substantiality: they ‘matter’.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, [1975] 1995), p. 33.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 175.

⁹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

Given this explanation, situating Barbie doll-like corporeality within broader poststructuralist conversations about fiction and materiality does not refute its posthuman potential, but adds cultural significance to it. Donna J. Haraway in her influential work, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', demonstrates precisely how this is possible. She begins with the affirmative 'we are cyborgs'.¹⁰⁰ Always already constructed through scientific and technological interventions of culture, we can never arrive at—or return to—a purely natural, authentic state, as there was never one to begin with. As such, it is Haraway's objective to identify the most productive ways in which to consider these interventions. Acknowledging the operative 'fiction mapping our social and bodily reality',¹⁰¹ she proposes that a cyborg mythology is the best way to understand how gendered bodies mediate technology in contemporary culture in the West. She explains that

a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.¹⁰²

Haraway's vision of the cyborg 'is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities'.¹⁰³ Accordingly, technological, dental, medical, and communicative interventions, including a somatic fusion with materials like collagen, silicone, and Botox, offer a perpetual disruption to a cohesive subjectivity. Aligning feminism with possibilities imbued in technology, the cyborg embraces the fragmentary nature of the postmodern, and destabilises markers of identity, by way of a bodily fiction. This theory provides a useful understanding of feminine Barbie doll-like embodiment and subjectivity. It explicitly opens up more liberatory possibilities for the body, challenging traditional definitions of gender and sexuality.

¹⁰⁰ Haraway, p. 150.

¹⁰¹ Haraway, p. 150.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 154.

Admittedly, Haraway's manifesto ventures into the utopian. It is a cyborg dream, a fantasy for how gendered bodies can negotiate science and technologies in terms that do not immediately write gendered corporeality by way of the same traditional tropes of nature versus technology. At stake in this cyborg vision is the call for a rewriting of bodily technology of textuality. Traditional humanist discourse dictates that women and girls do not have the rational means to describe their own subjectivities, and this is a major hurdle. Writing is the field of the rational, masculine subject, whereas the feminine body is a space upon which meaning is written. In Hélène Cixous's influential essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', she elucidates the links between humanism, language and gendered embodiment. She explains:

Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition.¹⁰⁴

Barred from reason, and relegated to being described—her identity textually inscribed into and onto her flesh—the feminine subject must use her body in order to signify meaning in traditionally humanist ways.¹⁰⁵

This tradition of feminine somatic signification continues to take precedence for contemporary women and girls, as the feminine body remains a 'literal instrument of production and symbolic text'.¹⁰⁶ Given this tradition, women and girls seeking body modifications, such as a Barbie doll-like corporeality, can be read as attempting to 'control meaning by controlling their bodies'.¹⁰⁷ In contemporary Western culture, informed by the postmodern and posthuman, this may be especially

¹⁰⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *Signs*, 1: 4 (1976), 875-893 (p. 879).

¹⁰⁵ Cixous, p. 881.

¹⁰⁶ Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, 'Body as Text: Young Women's Negotiations of Subjectivity', in *Taking a Stand in a Postfeminist World: Toward an Engaged Cultural Criticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 153-166 (p. 158).

¹⁰⁷ Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, p. 163.

the case, as there is a threat to the sense of mastery that has never been readily available to the feminine subject. There is a quest for authenticity in postmodern times ‘among the class of consumers to whom it is most rigorously denied’.¹⁰⁸ In order for the contemporary Western feminine subject to occupy a sense of agency, she continues to articulate it through embodiment. While masculine subjects, always already assured by humanist mastery, may be more confident in their sense of self to negotiate multiple subjectivities, feminine subjects are not in such a privileged position. Rather than embracing the fragmented identity that contemporary culture so often encourages, Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe suggest in ‘Body as Text’ that the Western feminine subject seeks a controlled, unified, and truthful self by manipulating the body as a textual tool. Embedded in the understanding of the body as a fiction, then, is the significance of Montag’s narrative appeal for authenticity. She may be returning to authenticity as an attempt at controlling and expressing a true self that she has been always already been denied within a humanist framework.

Given these conflicting interpretations of the feminine body in postmodern and posthuman times, Montag’s Barbie doll-like corporeality—and Barbie doll-like corporeality in general—can be read as negotiating the potentiality of the ‘cyborg myth’, while being informed by the cultural pull of humanism more explicitly.¹⁰⁹ Acknowledging the cultural history of feminine embodiment and the textual practices therein signals what Badmington describes as crucial to any understanding of the posthuman. Posthumanist readings attempt to distance themselves from humanist models, but the prefix of ‘post’, Badmington suggests, never makes a break

¹⁰⁸ Rose and Wood, p. 286.

¹⁰⁹ Haraway, p. 154.

clean or complete.¹¹⁰ Through a reading of Jacques Derrida, Badmington explains that '[p]recisely because Western philosophy is steeped in humanist assumptions, [...] the end of Man is bound to be written in the language of Man'.¹¹¹ To assume there is a pure outside to which we can leap, or a complete hyperreal abstraction, dismisses the strength with which humanism has been forged.

IVb. 'Fleshly Confessions': The Body as Archive¹¹²

Through endless reference and deferral, language and culture create a schism between the body and the self that cannot be undone. As Steven Connor explains, becoming a subject by entering into language and culture necessitates 'the primary violence that deprives me of my body, the violence of representation, naming, abstraction, the alienation of the body into signification'.¹¹³ The body is a site where subjects, informed by humanist discourse, attempt to renegotiate this schism, this violence of language. Fleshly 'mortification' is an example of such an attempt. Encompassing a vast range of body modification procedures and technologies of the body, bodily 'mortification' can be understood to be 'tattooing, piercing, scarification, suntanning, [and] bondage fashions that appear to cut into or segment the skin' as well as 'the infliction of various kinds of disfiguring marks, actual and cosmetic'.¹¹⁴ Heidi Montag's Barbie doll-like corporeality—from the tanned skin, implants, and assortment of injections to the scars left behind from such procedures—is exemplary

¹¹⁰ Badmington, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Badmington, p. 9.

¹¹² Nikki Sullivan, 'Incisive Bodies: Lolo, Lyotard, and the "Exorbitant Law of Listening to the Inaudible"', in *Gender After Lyotard*, ed. by Margret Grebowicz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 47-66 (p. 47).

¹¹³ Steven Connor, 'Mortification', in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. by Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 36-51 (p. 45).

¹¹⁴ Connor, p. 36.

of body mortification. This reading of Montag, in dialogue with Connor's theory of mortified flesh, suggests an alternative way of thinking about technologies of the body and Barbie doll-like corporeality in the West, as it further complicates ideas of somatic textuality and the posthuman.

As language can only describe the body through the displacement of representation, fleshy 'mortification' functions as a form of nostalgia. Connor argues that '[t]he obscenity of the skin under assault [...] gives us back the scene of suffering and pleasure, gives it somewhere to happen, and someone to happen to'.¹¹⁵ For those who practice mortification, there is an attempt to reclaim, or, indeed, claim, an original meaning of the self—that is, a sense of authenticity—that is expressed on and through the flesh. This reading provides further insight into ideas of Barbie doll-like corporeality as a site that is reinvesting in humanist discourses of a unified subject, attempting to preserve and create concrete memories, histories, and truths in light of contested feminine subjectivity.

In an attempt to reveal 'true' subjectivity, feminine Barbie doll-like somatic reworkings can be understood as processes of writing a cohesive bodily autobiography for the subject. Asserting that 'we show ourselves in and on our skins' and that the skin 'is legendary', Connor makes this autobiographical point plain.¹¹⁶ In order to make sense out of a subjectivity violently displaced by language, mortified bodies operate as 'fleshly confessions'.¹¹⁷ And, according to Michel Foucault, the confession is 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth'.¹¹⁸ The Barbie doll-like body may be an effort to express feminine subjectivity as cohesive

¹¹⁵ Connor, p. 50.

¹¹⁶ Connor, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ Sullivan, p. 47.

¹¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, [1976] 1990) p. 58.

and linear, creating a seemingly accurate narrative account to convey a masterful conceptualisation of the subject's whole self.

In this way, the body operates as an archive, or an authoritative record of the past, and functions to stabilise a narrative, even if the archived material destabilises the fixed notion of femininity through the very act of mortification. Each bodily change can be read as a recorded inscription in a linear autobiography—recalling Montag's evocation of 'a lifelong sentence'.¹¹⁹ While, according to this train of thought, the body as archive appears to be a straightforward correspondence between poststructuralist epistemology and a humanist end, Derrida's *Archive Fever* complicates this logic. He explains that '[t]he archive always works [...] against itself'.¹²⁰ What this means is that while the archive can be seen as a humanist tool to self-preservation through narrative rewriting, it is also always self-destructive. Indeed, the archive is an aporia that works both with and against Freud's death drive, calling attention to why Connor's deployment of the term *mortification* (or, that which signals death) is so appropriate here.

Derrida insists that the archive preserves through hysterical repetition.¹²¹ In traditional psychoanalytic theory, hysterical symptoms are characterised by their compulsive and repetitive nature. Connor, too, suggests that the mortified body's corporeal inscriptions act in alignment with a hysterical model of physicality by way of a somatic (re)writing. While arguing against its idealisation, he explains that 'the

¹¹⁹ 'Heidi Montag on Surviving Reality TV Scandal: Spencer and I Were Never Those People on "The Hills"', para. 2.

¹²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, [1995] 1998), p. 12.

¹²¹ Traditionally, hysteria is a condition affecting white, affluent women, and its legacy has carried on into contemporary Western culture. Thus, these hysterical symptoms may be crucial to understanding how the Western contemporary Barbie doll-like body is written, read, and rewritten for Western cultural production. It is through posthuman bodily reworking, like that of Montag, specifically, which recalls both the psychic and bodily symptoms of hysterical repetition, as well as its pathologisation.

hysteric, [is] the one who speaks through her body and cannot be made to speak otherwise, or not without a mediation that will always manifest itself as a violence'.¹²² From this perspective, the repetitive procedures of becoming Barbie doll-like should not be read simply as acts of maintenance or improvement, nor as the deconstruction of the 'real' and the 'fake'. Rather, these incorporations of technology into the body demand to be read as a process that is always attempting to recreate an act of signification: that of being written into culture as a gendered subject. While such repetitions may be attempts at rewriting an original violence—that of signification—the act of 'repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive.'¹²³ Such repetitions signal the ultimate in destabilisation of the cohesive humanist subject: death.

At its heart, the death drive operates alongside the pleasure principle; yet, Freud insists that there can also be the 'compulsion to repeat which overrides' it.¹²⁴ He explains that in the death drive, where the main motivation is self-destruction,

the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death.¹²⁵

In this way, then, the compulsion to record, or 'archive fever', complements Freud's death drive, as in both there is the desire to defend against a death that is not appropriate to the subject, as well as to establish a record of death itself.

With this understanding of the death drive and the archive, Derrida provides a corporeal example. Circumcision, he says, is a way of writing and archiving the body, as it 'maintains a reference to the *graphic* mark and to repetition' (emphasis in

¹²² Connor, p. 42.

¹²³ Derrida, p. 11-12.

¹²⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others, 24 vols (18) (The Hogarth Press: London, [1955] 1999), pp. 7-64 (p. 22).

¹²⁵ Freud, p. 39.

original).¹²⁶ In a ‘very singular moment’, he explains, ‘it is also the document of the archive’.¹²⁷ Such an inscription ‘leaves the trace of an incision *right on the skin*’ resulting in ‘so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of the body proper’ (emphasis in original).¹²⁸ For Derrida, the body can certainly be a site of inscription, and a way of reading a somatic autobiography as a site of both subjectivity and cultural signification.

While feminine embodiment is absent from Derrida’s work on the corporeal archive, his insights can be applied to the feminine gendered body. Asserting that this drive is always archive-destroying, he contends that it

eludes perception [...] except if it disguises itself, except if it tints itself up or paints itself [...] in some erotic color. This impression of erogenous color draws a mask right on the skin. In other words, the archiviolithic drive is never present in person, neither in itself, nor in its effects. It leaves no monument. It bequeaths no document of its own. As inheritance, it leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting, its sexual idols, its masks of seduction: lovely impressions.¹²⁹

These ‘lovely impressions’ connote the discursive practices of femininity—and their implied erotic nature—and are what get simulated in corporeal posthuman femininity. A Barbie doll-like cosmetic procedure can be read as that which ‘tints itself up’, and ‘paints itself’ into a gendered ‘mask’. Through the hysterical repetition of writing and rewriting the body, the ‘lovely impressions’ of the cosmetic and the technological are the compulsive archival work of the death drive and its attempt to elude perception.

Freud’s own definition of the death drive lends itself to Derrida’s understanding, as he suggests that it functions ‘to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the

¹²⁶ Derrida, p. 20.

¹²⁷ Derrida, p. 20.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

organism itself.¹³⁰ While, on one hand, this reinforces a subject's attempt to master her own most proper, progressive, and, thus, humanist move towards death, it also suggests that the death drive is about the desire to seek out an inorganic state. As Freud seems to understand it, the inorganic state is restricted to mortality, which belies the meaning that 'inorganic' can indicate in the posthuman. When we reconsider the 'inorganic' through a broader lens, however, its definition can be opened up to incorporate such things as are included in technological and cosmetic interventions of the body. Indeed, Montag's dalliances with Botox work doubly to exemplify this meaning.¹³¹ With these transformative tendencies that the wider definition of 'inorganic' has, the feminine posthuman and its physical remaking might actually be signalling death, rather than humanist progress. Indeed, such 'mortification' might indicate, too, an abandoning of the 'belief that there is an instinct towards perfection at work in human beings' that Freud, himself, was trying to disprove.¹³² What if, instead of the desire for perfect embodiment and the perpetual narrative of improvement therein, the feminine posthuman body is a drive towards death? If Barbie doll-like corporeality functions as part of the death drive, even though it is manufactured and informed through humanist means, it still arrives at death, which is certainly the post- to that which is human.

This chapter has primarily concerned itself with examples of how white, middle class, and affluent subjects interpret the markers of Barbie through their bodies, and the potentiality of a posthumanist reading therein. Rogers puts forth a valuable analysis of what she calls the technobody, especially as it concerns postmodern and posthuman engagement with capitalism. While thought-provoking

¹³⁰ Freud, p. 39.

¹³¹ Botox (botulinum toxin) is a fatal neurotoxin, that, when used in small amounts works to paralyse (usually facial) muscles for cosmetic purposes.

¹³² Freud, p. 42.

and keenly aware of a hegemony of improvement at work in understanding Barbie doll-like corporeality, I have argued that this analysis reasserts the feminine subject as essential, and ever at odds with the technological. In this way, feminine bodily intervention can only be understood as moving away from the natural, into a false femininity. However, as Baudrillard suggests, contemporary culture in the West has moved beyond the 'real' and the 'fake', to a place where Barbie and her fleshy counterparts produce a new kind of reality—the hyperreal. This discussion is crucial to disentangling femininity from tired tropes and universalised notions of the subject. Nevertheless, it does not wholly account for a reading of the body. Here, I have found that the feminine body, as text, can be understood productively as inscribed and fictionalised, with a cultural history available for reading and interpretation. Understanding the body as archive also provides a reading of Barbie doll-like corporeality wherein a drive towards death defines its posthuman potential.

Chapter Three

‘Life in Plastic is Fantastic’:

Beauty and the Barbie Doll¹

When the male edits and re-orders the world he is an artist, when the female edits and reorders—principally herself—she is a doll.

—Mary F. Rogers²

I. ‘Ubiquity Made Visible’: An Introduction to Plastic³

In *Mythologies*, his collection of short essays published in 1957, Roland Barthes interprets the significance of a series of cultural objects or practices from the post-war Western world.⁴ In ‘Plastic’, he calls attention to the eponymous substance, which he qualifies as one of the “imitation” materials.⁵ The purpose of plastic, he explains, is to mimic both the ‘luxurious’ and the ‘prosaic’, providing objects for art and everyday life.⁶ Barthes’s ‘Plastic’, which marvels over the many functions of the sleek and synthetic material—from ‘buckets’ to ‘jewels’⁷—concludes with the writer wryly speculating that ‘the whole world *can* be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas’ (emphasis in original).⁸

Indicative in his analysis is that plastic is a slippery substance: both physically and

¹ Aqua, ‘Barbie Girl’, *Aquarium* (Universal Music, 1997).

² Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, 1999), p. 9.

³ Roland Barthes, ‘Plastic’, in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage [1957] 2000), pp. 97–99 (p. 97).

⁴ Many of these are specific to French culture.

⁵ Barthes, p. 98.

⁶ Barthes, p. 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

symbolically. Through imitation, it has the power to slide between materialities as well as between meanings.

Barthes's analysis of plastic's ability to shift and flex was a timely one. Concurrent with the penning of his pithy essay, the substance was undergoing a momentous modification. In *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, Kim Toffoletti explains that: 'As plastics boomed in the post-war period, its reputation as a wonder material was accompanied by its growing status in the vernacular.'⁹ Toffoletti's observation reinforces Barthes's recognition that the substance could mimic both the 'luxurious' and the 'prosaic'. However, it also calls attention to plastic's past as a 'wonder material' and, crucially for this study, its future in the contemporary Western world. From the mid-century onward, the substance edged toward the superfluously quotidian in design and, thus, in meaning. Mass-produced kitchenware, fashion accessories, furniture, and toys even caused Barthes to remark that the substance was becoming 'ubiquity made visible'.¹⁰ As a result of this transition, plastic lost some of its lustre. The move brought about a tension in the material's signification that remains in contemporary cultural discourse. Today, plastic is both a material of endless potential and of artifice, contamination, and excess.

Plastic's simultaneous transformation towards cultural ubiquity and ambiguity prompted it to become 'the definitive symbol of the mid-twentieth century'.¹¹ Significantly, this position is often exemplified by one plastic icon in particular. It was only a few short years after Barthes wrote 'Plastic' that the Barbie doll slipped off Mattel factory conveyor belts and onto department store shelves. Ever since then, the doll has been a mainstay in late twentieth-century 'plastic-

⁹ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 69.

¹⁰ Barthes, p. 97.

¹¹ Toffoletti, p. 69.

fantastic' iconography.¹² Barbie is a shining example of plastic's ubiquity and its ambiguity. Achievable and aspirational, 'real' and 'fake', Barbie's own coded symbolism is, in many ways, synonymous with that of plastic. Moreover, it is Barbie's very plasticity that seems to correspond to the doll's form of ideal Western femininity. Plastic enables the doll to move like a 'real' girl,¹³ have the flawless physical features which produce an 'impossible ideal',¹⁴ and reflect a spectacularly superficial representation of the white American dream. Thus, plastic's meaning and impact upon Western popular culture through the signification of Barbie deserves closer inspection.

A crucial element of plastic's effect on popular culture in the West is its relationship with the (feminine) body and Barbie's role therein. As plastic moved beyond its earlier 'pretension', it made its way toward the everyday, relocating to a more intimate domain. The material navigated the domestic and the corporeal spheres, its power to imitate eventually leading to a commingling of the synthetic and the somatic. Indeed, plastic's ability to replicate enabled it to replace fleshy organs, as Barthes describes in his intentionally extreme example of 'plastic aortas'. Toffoletti elaborates on the specificities of this phenomenon's influence over the years, noting the normalcy with which plastic fuses with the somatic in contemporary practices in the West. She states that 'plastic has penetrated the human body in the form of prosthetics, artificial joints and valves' and 'has seamlessly replaced organic components, both within and outside of the anatomical body'.¹⁵ Through both

¹² Toffoletti, p. 68.

¹³ '1970 Living Barbie Commercial with Maureen McCormick' (21 December 2008) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfLZT24CSOI>> [accessed: 8 May 2012].

¹⁴ Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund, 'The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture', in *Deviant Bodies*, ed. by Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) pp. 277-313 (p. 304).

¹⁵ Toffoletti, p. 69.

medical and cosmetic procedures, plastic's imitation of, and fusion with, the corporeal has become critical to Western understandings of the material.

Significantly, however, while plastic designs have been created to replicate fleshy bodies, now more than ever, fleshy bodies are attempting to replicate plastic. The suggested appeal of a visually plastic corporeality is especially apparent for feminine bodies, and is often culturally tied to the aspirational narrative of becoming Barbie doll-like.

Referential depictions of the Barbie doll in the mass media—from the doll's branded image to unauthorised representations of Barbie doll-like figures in beauty and fashion advertising—market merchandise with the implication that a plastic body is both desirable and achievable. Consumers are promised that they will look like a plastic Barbie doll once they purchase a product off-the-rack or over-the-counter—or even when they are going under the knife.¹⁶ Far-reaching online social networks extend this trend as a plethora of *YouTube* tutorials are dedicated to encouraging a specifically plastic, Barbie doll-like corporeality. One promises its viewers that they will look 'like the perfect plastic Barbie doll' if they follow the video's precise makeup instructions.¹⁷ Another online guide reminds women and girls that 'Barbie may be plastic, but, remember, that that's what makes her perfect: she has even, unblemished skin'.¹⁸ The doll's presence in visual and material popular cultures is used to define plasticity of the flesh as aspirational. Correspondingly, Barbie doll-like plastic attributes are sought after, consumed, and written onto the feminine body.

¹⁶ This is especially apparent with "The Barbie' labiaplasty procedure discussed in further detail in the 'Snip 'n Style Barbie' section of this chapter.

¹⁷ 'Barbie Transformation Tutorial' (7 October 2009) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4-GRH2nDvw>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

¹⁸ 'How to Be Like Barbie' <<http://www.wikihow.com/Be-Like-Barbie>> [accessed: 5 August 2012], (step 5).

Narratives of becoming Barbie doll-like highlight a pivotal moment in traditional understandings of femininity in the West, exposing the limitations and the potentialities of reading this subjectivity in posthuman terms. As feminine somatics and plastic become coupled and sometimes visually indistinguishable, a posthuman analysis can be taken further. Toffoletti insists that the fusion of plastic with the corporeal has the potential to subvert ‘the ideals of autonomy and origins that structure an identity politics of the [fixed] subject.’¹⁹ Her praise for the substance hinges upon what she defines as plastic’s transformative power, its ambiguity, and its connections to the emblematic Barbie doll.²⁰ Yet, representations of the feminine body as plastic, as doll-like, and as the conflation of the two, are steeped in cultural meaning. Indeed, as Elaine L. Graham reminds her readers in

Representations of the post/human:

What is at stake, supremely, in the debate about the implications of digital, genetic, cybernetic and biomedical technologies is precisely what (and who) will define authoritative notions of normative, exemplary, desirable humanity into the twenty-first century.²¹

Tradition and technology determine the shapes Barbie doll-like depictions take, and the discursive practices therein affect corresponding corporeal manifestations.

Crucial to this thesis, then, is an examination of the technology and history necessary to produce visual representations of a plastic corporeality, while also interrogating its relationship with the broader trope of doll-like femininity in the West. This chapter investigates the meanings written onto plastic doll-like corporeality in contemporary popular culture in the West. It inquires into how both visually and fleshy plasticised

¹⁹ Toffoletti, p. 69.

²⁰ Toffoletti, p. 72.

²¹ Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 11.

feminine bodies work to reinforce and/or rupture static binaries of subjectivity—and of the dichotomy of masculine subject/feminine object.

II. 'Doll Parts': Models, Mannequins, and Machines²²

Aglow with a plastic sheen, a fashion model poses in what is staged to be the inside of a high-gloss carton box. This image, a print-media advertisement, spans two pages. Dark-wash denim clothing, shiny shoes, and a pink belt with matching handbag hang neatly on the left side of the spread. Each item appears to be held in place with a familiar type of wire, secure in its position. On the adjacent page, the model's tan, minimally clad figure contrasts against the cobalt blue interior of the box. Her limbs are askew, and she, too, is fastened upright with the same recognisable wire tethered around both wrists, ankles, and at one bent elbow. Her coif is on trend for the year 2000; it is stylishly voluminous, with full curls and just the precise amount of golden highlights. She is wearing sunglasses. Several pink beauty products have been positioned around her, which are pinned in a similar, tidy fashion. At the bottom of the page, 'Moschino Jeans' shines in a metallic typeface that scrolls across the model's extended legs.²³

Without mentioning her by name, Moschino's image of a stiffly posed fashion model alludes to the iconic Barbie doll. For the Italian fashion house, a visual reference to the plastic doll offers a compelling way to retail its high-end merchandise to its middle-class and affluent consumers. In *Barbie Culture*, Mary F. Rogers explains how the fantasy narrative surrounding Barbie makes such a visual

²² Hole, 'Doll Parts', *Live Through This* (Geffen Records, 1994).

²³ Image available at: 'Buying Barbie'
<http://people.southwestern.edu/~bednarb/su_netWorks/projects/henderson/buying.html> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

marketing reference successful. She states that there are certain objects that contribute

to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible or conceivable. Such an icon invites fantasy by taking the as-if or the fictive toward its outer limit. Barbie is such an icon.²⁴

Mattel's well-crafted fantasy narrative surrounding Barbie has developed the doll into an emblem of great cultural worth. Over time, her plastic presence has become so unmistakable that corporate reference and appropriation of her fantastical image is easy. As such, companies like Moschino can write a Barbie doll-like fantasy onto their products, regardless of Mattel's steadfast vigilance. In turn, consumers, acquainted with the doll's broad cultural signification, are able to conceive of a Barbie doll-like fantasy from the various images and products that, through allusion, evoke it.

Moschino's glossy print advertisement is a success because it aligns with a particular element of the Barbie doll iconic fantasy narrative: the tension between Barbie's status as a figure of aspiration and identification. By visually rewriting the model's fleshy body into a plastic, Barbie doll-like figure, the Moschino advertisement promises that the consumer, too, can become Barbie doll-like.²⁵ The

²⁴ Rogers, p. 3.

²⁵ The Moschino advertisement capitalises upon consumers' primed brand recognition of Barbie—and all that the brand signifies—putting to use the doll's narrative of product-centric aspiration and fantasy that reflects glamour, high fashion and fun. Fundamental to the doll's merchandising is that consumers will inevitably require another accessory in order to become Barbie doll-like. Thus, while the model-as-doll calls attention to Barbie's narrative of aspiration and consumers' corresponding desire to be Barbie doll-like, her bound, semi-nude body, positioned to hover in the expectant space in which a new doll occupies, also replicates a fantasy of suspended or deferred fulfilment. The pinned clothing and flimsy accoutrements of traditional femininity—each sold separately—work perfectly to exemplify this narrative further. With each of these artful and artificial details, Moschino is able to write a corresponding Barbie doll fantasy onto its brand. The Moschino advertisement is one in a series, wherein different models highlight different clothing and accessories, which are meant to accentuate their particular look. For example, one spread is dedicated to a black Barbie doll-like model who, troublingly, is clad in

significance of this advertisement is not simply due to its reliance on the narrative themes that determine Barbie as a cultural icon. Its potency also springs from how the image playfully portrays a common—and relational—visual trope of ideal femininity in the West. Dominating popular visual media representations is an image of ideal feminine embodiment in which the woman or girl seems to possess smooth, hairless, pore-less, and racially white skin; slender, elongated, toned limbs; pneumatic breasts; a whittled waist; and shiny, long blonde hair. Often digitally generated, these characteristics have been naturalised in popular culture. Yet, when such a representation is viewed through a critical lens, popular discourse depends upon labels such as ‘plastic’ and ‘Barbie doll’ to describe it. Moschino’s excessively plasticised rendition of these both idealised and normalised attributes interrogates this visual trope. The advertisement knowingly employs popular culture comparisons between Barbie and ideal femininity and stretches them ‘toward’ their ‘outer limits’. The image works as an artful exaggeration of Barbie doll iconography, and of the Western feminine ideal Barbie signals, by both toying with and exposing a culturally constructed fantasy.

Visual hyperbole dominates the Moschino advertisement. Beyond demonstrating that the model is shiny, smooth, and blemish-free, as is the case with the plethora of images to which it refers, the Moschino advertisement overtly embraces plastic. The effect of this seemingly excessive plasticisation of the flesh is that, visually, the model has *become* a Barbie doll. Marking a critical cultural moment in Western media, with its irreverent example of digital editing, the image

animal print fabric. This primitivism in relation to representations of black Barbie will be addressed in further detail in chapter four. Moreover, the advertisement seems to acknowledge a suggestion of bondage play in the way Barbie is usually marketed. This visual innuendo is not lost on artist Mariel Clayton. Bondage Barbie is a running theme in her photographic work, which can be found at: <<http://www.thephotohymarielclayton.com/>> [accessed 5 August 2012].

succeeds at confounding the visual distinctions between feminine subject and plastic Barbie doll object.²⁶ Such a fusion of corporeal and synthetic features was specifically apt for the advertisement's millennial release.²⁷ Yet, just as the visual conflation of the plastic Barbie doll with a fleshy fashion model speaks to a posthuman, cybernetic future, by parodying what has been defined as normal and ideal, the Moschino advertisement also recalls a technological and aesthetic past. This 'overlap between the now and the then, the here and the always', is what Judith (Jack) Halberstam and Ira Livingston claim as the characteristics of the posthuman.²⁸ While this chapter examines visual and corporeal plastic's posthuman qualities, it is necessary first to give an account of the meaning and traditions in which idealised representations of Barbie doll-like corporeal plastic are rooted.

Significantly, the Moschino advertisement highlights the capability of the digital tools used to render believable the appearance of plastic flesh in the visual sphere. The advertisement depends on the same technological processes to create its exaggerated image as are skilfully utilised in more subtle approaches at depicting Barbie doll-like femininity as a cultural ideal in Western media. Photographic retouching—from airbrushing to prevalent forms of digital editing (most prominently in the form of the Adobe Photoshop programme)—is the key technique that enables

²⁶ Manual photographic manipulation, from darkroom processing and painting to airbrushing, was the tool of the advertising trade before digital retouching entered the scene in the 1980s. While these techniques are still used today, with the introduction of Adobe's Photoshop programme in 1990, graphic design was transformed, and along with it so, too, was every landscape or interior, machine or body that came in contact with its magic wand editing tool.

²⁷ This image was divisive. While in circulation, the advertisement garnered consumer praise—for its tongue-in-cheek playfulness and postmodern creativity—as well as condemnation—as an outright example of feminine objectification. For two consumer perspectives, see: 'Buying Barbie' and 'BEST fashion house ad?' <<http://forums.vogue.com.au/archive/index.php/t-141868.html>> [accessed 5 August 2012].

²⁸ Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 3.

the proliferation of this kind of visual corporeal plastic. Indeed, photographic retouching is used in all types of contemporary popular media including art, television advertisements, film, beauty and fashion magazine spreads, gossip websites, celebrity and fashion blogs, music videos, and pornography to seemingly perfect the feminine flesh in a way that recalls the Barbie doll-like plasticity described above.²⁹

In her popular publication *Bodies*, Susie Orbach worries that contemporary photographic editing is 'turning little girls into facsimiles of china dolls'.³⁰ She is concerned that the women and girls who view these doll-like images see them as both normal and natural, a practice that is damaging to their self-esteem.³¹ Orbach's theoretical assessment is especially critical of celebrating this type of doll-like femininity and while her work has the tendency to hark back to an essentialist view of the gendered body her attempt to demystify and deconstruct how popular images are created remains insightful. Offering a fastidious outline of the process that ensures an image is print or internet-ready, she explains:

The photoshoots which produce the raw pictures of the models are carefully lit to exaggerate features prized today and then further perfected by being Photoshopped, airbrushed and stretched. It takes a large team to create the images we see on the billboards or in the magazines or on the pop videos.

²⁹ Another extreme example, meant to pass as a 'natural' Barbie doll-like body can be found in a Ralph Lauren 2009 advertisement. Xeni Jardin, writer for the website BoingBoing.net notes that the digital retouching makes model Filippa Hamilton's head appear 'bigger than her pelvis'. Xeni Jardin, 'Ralph Lauren opens new outlet store in the Uncanny Valley' (29 September 2009) <<http://www.boingboing.net/2009/09/29/ralph-lauren-opens-n.html>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 1).

³⁰ Susie Orbach, *Bodies* (London: Profile Books, 2009), p. 2. (Mattel also makes a porcelain Barbie doll collection. Barbie Collector Website: <<http://www.barbiecollector.com/showcase/category/porcelain>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].)

³¹ It is also suggested that these images present a false ideal for men and boys, who, in a heterosexual context, will have false expectations about feminine bodies.

There is the photographer and his or her team, the make-up artist, the stylist, the dressmaker, the fashion designer, the hairdresser. Behind them are the art directors, the account executives from the advertising side, the corporate sponsors or the magazine editors with their set of art directors, and so on. The finished product is the work of many people, mainly a skilled Photoshopping photographer and art director who stylise the image so that the finished product is far from being the outcome of a simple engagement between a pretty young woman or man whom 'the camera just loves' and a stylish photographer.³²

With this description, Orbach denaturalises images that are presented as truthful accounts of an idealised, doll-like standard of beauty. By providing the specifics, she enables the viewer to see the design and considerable labour that goes into one successfully published photograph. The extent to which this work is executed is quickly realised when editing tools are used to generate entirely new bodies for models and celebrities alike.³³

Orbach's statement sheds light on how the contemporary, plastic, doll-like ideal is standardised through the production and manipulation of images. Corporeal uniformity did not appear with the digitisation of images, however. In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf informs her readers that the idea of reproducing a believably 'natural', yet idealised, feminine beauty standard dates back to the very invention of the modern camera.³⁴ Wolf argues that, even in the earliest days of camera photography, the art was already being used to make visible a set of definitive markers of feminine beauty in the West. Beaming out from the sepia-tone and black and white photographs of the 1840s were the nude figures of prostitutes, while 'advertisements using images of "beautiful" women first appeared in the mid-

³² Orbach, p. 89.

³³ Jenna Sauers, 'H & M Puts Real Model Heads On Fake Bodies' (5 December 2011) <<http://jezebel.com/5865114/hm-puts-real-model-heads-on-fake-bodies>> [accessed: 8 Dec 2011].

³⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 15.

century.’³⁵ Technologically and materially driven (re)production practices arising during the Industrial Revolution created the means to distribute these images, presented by way of artistic prints, postcards, pamphlets, catalogues, and magazines, to an insatiably curious public. This type of widespread circulation provides the background for a similar ‘dissemination of millions of images’ present in contemporary culture in the West.³⁶ Wolf’s analysis of the technology of the photograph, the gaze behind the lens, and how images of beautiful women were distributed in abundance elucidates a hegemony of beauty in the visual field still at work today.

From the articulation, production, and distribution of these grainy images, glimmers can be seen of a contemporary Barbie doll-like beauty standard. Indeed, although ideal bodily proportions have shifted in the last century (and continue to do so) Wolf’s description of the Victorian beautiful woman seems to suggest that she fits—or, perhaps set—this mould. Characteristically read as racially white, with delicate (and increasingly made-up) facial features, slender limbs, a coifed hairstyle, and a narrow waist, she had much in common with Barbie. Like the iconic doll, this woman, who modelled the most up-to-date fashions or was modestly draped in

³⁵ Wolf, p. 15.

³⁶ Wolf, p. 16. Aside from photography, Wolf goes on to state that ‘[c]opies of classical artworks, postcards of society beauties and royal mistresses, Currier and Ives prints, and porcelain figurines flooded the separate sphere to which middle-class women were confined’ (p. 15). Of particular note to this research is that ‘porcelain figurines’ also informed modern beauty. In terms of its material properties, and the signification therein, it seems that porcelain may have been a precursor to plastic. Orbach’s somewhat anachronistic statement that photographic retouching is turning ‘little girls into facsimiles of china dolls’ touches upon this relationship. Historically, both porcelain and plastic are connected to clay, and the modelling of the substance. From smooth and shiny figurines to smooth and shiny Barbie dolls, this material connection deserves acknowledgement. Please see p. 135 off this thesis for further discussion of this and the plastic doll’s porcelain inheritance.

luxurious fabrics or jewels, also signalled a specific lifestyle of leisure and privilege.³⁷ Together, these visual markers illustrate that, while the Western beauty standard certainly has not always referenced Barbie, there existed something within photographic representations of the beautiful woman that—from the start—paralleled a contemporary doll-like ideal.

Wolf's research indicates that the contemporary standardisation of fleshy beauty in the visual field was born with the earliest photographic images. While bearing resemblances to the contemporary Barbie doll-like ideal, the archetypal beautiful woman of these images preceded the invention and manufacture of the Barbie doll by nearly one hundred years. She did not, however, precede the trope of woman-as-doll. The etymology of the word 'doll' clearly links it with womanhood, girlhood, and femininity from its start. Popular usage of the word first came into the English language in the sixteenth century, when 'doll' was used 'as pet name for 'Dorothy'. It very quickly seems to have taken on a looser meaning to describe anything small and pet-like in nature. This evolved into its use as a description for miniature models of human beings—'commonly a child or a lady'—and, from there, its most recognised denotation: a child's 'plaything'. Significantly, during this same period, 'doll' became equated with the word 'mistress'.³⁸ Most striking of all, however, is that as early as the seventeenth century the *OED* explains that 'doll' grew in connotation to signify:

A pretty, but unintelligent or empty person, esp. when dressed up; a pretty, but silly or frivolous woman. Also in more general sense: a woman; a girl; esp. a very beautiful or attractive woman; also *occas.*, a pleasant or attractive man. **A doll's face**, one conventionally pretty, but without life or expression. Now *slang*. (Emphasis in original)³⁹

³⁷ Please see the 'Snip 'n Style Barbie' section of this chapter for further discussion of white feminine subjectivity and issues of modesty and Barbie doll-like plastic.

³⁸ 'Doll', in *OED* <<http://www.oed.com/>> (2013) [accessed: 13 january 2013].

³⁹ 'Doll', in *OED*.

Many of these symbolically rich definitions have avoided obsolescence and become a part of modern-day vernacular. Moreover, these meanings help to inform other popular colloquial descriptions especially prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of particular note, the phrase ‘dolled up’ came into slang usage at the turn of the century to describe one who had undertaken a regime to become ‘pretty’, ‘dressed up’, and ‘attractive’ through the use of makeup, fashion, and cosmetic tools.⁴⁰ This idiom, alongside the etymological roots of ‘doll’, indicates with precision the intimate connection between the word ‘doll’ and discursive practices of beauty in modern Western times. Considering the dates of these linguistic trends, it is fair to say that modernity’s myriad technological advances that gave rise to the world of beauty have worked in conjunction with a longstanding cultural theme.⁴¹

The merging of photographic uniformity with the white Western feminine ideal and specific doll-like colloquialisms comes to the fore in the earliest days of cinema. Visually, cinema has featured embellished representations of femininity from its debut, where rouge and powder were just the beginning of the cosmetic alterations viewed as necessary in the industry. In conversation with the technology of still photography, filmic practices developed many creative ways of enhancing and editing representations of feminine beauty. Indeed, as historian Julie Willett points out, the black and white films of the silent era relied on ‘shadows and radiance [...] to sharpen actors’ features’, while ‘whitewashing’ was a typical practice to eliminate ‘any number of flaws’.⁴² Eventually, the advanced technology of cameras, filters, lighting, and airbrushing were all considered essential tools of the trade. As a result of such technology and the public’s accessibility to images that deployed it, Willett

⁴⁰ ‘Doll’ and ‘dolled up’, in *OED*.

⁴¹ From E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ to Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls*, woman-as-doll occupies a place in literary tradition as well.

⁴² Julie Willett, *The American Beauty Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), p. 115.

asserts that ‘singular models of beauty and aesthetics were becoming more standardized, more uniform, more hegemonic as larger and larger audiences were bombarded with examples of what beauty looked like’.⁴³ With doll-like themes assembling in filmic discourse both on and off the silver screen—from early movie star Mary Pickford’s pet name of ‘Doll Divine’ to films such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Doll Face* (1945)—it is apparent that this uniformity was perpetuating a specific doll-like ideal through both visual and linguistic allusion.⁴⁴

Photography and film were intrinsic to how beauty was represented in the early days of Western modernity, and, indeed, set the stage for how and why image alteration is still utilised today. Moreover, these media seemed to take the popular trope of doll-like femininity and codify it by way of visual signification. However, their influence extends beyond the purely visual. Photography (especially by way of advertising) and film, as Willett notes, ‘transformed’ the ‘world of makeup’.⁴⁵ These media gave momentum to the burgeoning cosmetics industry, which promised real-life, corporeal actualisation of doll-like fantasy images.⁴⁶ Of particular note is the cosmetic giant Max Factor, an international company that got its start on the Hollywood film sets.⁴⁷ An industry staple since 1909, Max Factor promoted a

⁴³ Willett, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Gaylyn Studlar, ‘Oh “Doll Divine”’: Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze’, in *Camera Obscura*, 16: 3 (2001), pp. 196-227 (p. 196).

⁴⁵ Willett, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Before the twentieth century, the doll-like aesthetic seemed to exclusively refer to delicate feminine characteristics represented by wax, clay, plaster, and porcelain miniatures. Max Factor’s earliest makeup formulas seem to align with these materials as his foundations first produced a clay-like, or cakey appearance; yet, very quickly in his career, he developed recipes that became thinner and more translucent, reflecting the subtle drama of porcelain figurines. See: Willett, p. 115.

⁴⁷ Max Factor ‘About’ Website:

<<http://www.maxfactor.co.uk/uk/about/aboutmax.html>> [accessed: 22 November 2012].

'kewpie doll' style lip-shape for starlets to during the silent era.⁴⁸ Striking in its thematic constancy, nearly sixty years later the company explicitly marketed its lipstick by using the doll as an aspirational figure. An exuberant print advertisement endorsed the product by exclaiming: 'The doll faces are here!'⁴⁹

The cosmetics industry was further bolstered by a surge in middle-class women's visibility in the public sphere.⁵⁰ An increase in women-centric office work, and the newly established public space of the department store had some women finding themselves outside the home for the first time. Film theorist and historian Shelley Stamp describes further social reasons for a collective 'dolling up'. She states that for many women in early twentieth century:

Dressing up, or 'putting on style', at leisure venues was an especially important element in working women's fantasies [...]. Purchasing elaborate outfits and cosmetics, then parading themselves at cinemas, dance halls, and amusement parks allowed working women to transform themselves through consumption and exhibitionism.⁵¹

Of particular note, at the dance halls, tunes like the 1911 ragtime classic 'Oh, You Beautiful Doll' and, later, Duke Ellington's 1933 jazz number 'Satin Doll' were the typical accompaniment. Such evidence securely locates cosmetics within the broader scope of the modern, public woman, and further illustrates how the trope of woman-as-doll is intrinsic to ideas of beauty and femininity in the West.

⁴⁸ 'Lip Service' <<http://moviestarmakeover.com/category/max-factor/>> [accessed: 22 November 2012] (para. 8).

⁴⁹ '1967 The Doll Set by Max Factor Retro Ad' <<http://www.atticpaper.com/proddetail.php?prod=1967-max-factor-doll-set-ad>> [accessed 12 December 2012].

⁵⁰ For more on this topic see: Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: First University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 21.

Traditions in language, expedited by modern technology and women's changing roles, promoted the figure of the doll in the visual field. However, the trajectory of this trope still does not account for how plastic slipped into the mix to such an effect that in contemporary culture the substance is inseparable from modern connotations of both 'Barbie' and 'doll'. So, how did the doll-like aesthetic shift from being reproduced on glossy and celluloid prints to resembling such synthetic substances? Certainly, the common materials of the doll—especially wax, porcelain, and plaster—were precursors to plastic, and, as such, perhaps the answer is straightforwardly economic. However, while manufacturing costs and processes allowed for a relatively smooth transition to plastic, there is another essential component to consider when equating plastic with the doll. This figure, representative of the technology of the day, can be found slinking around one public space in particular.

Umberto Eco recalls in *On Beauty* that the 'beginning of the twentieth century' marked the 'heyday of industrial aesthetics'.⁵² What he means by this comment is that, with industrialisation, machines actually became items of beauty and aesthetic value. The quintessential representation of the feminine figure by way of the industrial aesthetic was found in the modern mannequin. The mannequin is etymologically linked to the doll—its origins are in the Dutch for 'little man' or 'little doll'.⁵³ Materially, it also followed a similar path to that of doll. Early versions of the figure, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were made of wood, wax, fabrics and porcelain and were more curvaceous in shape and size. By the 1920s, however, a slender plaster mannequin began to materialise in shops showrooms and department store windows. Debuting in France, this model rapidly gained cultural

⁵² Umberto Eco, *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 394.

⁵³ 'Mannequin', in *OED*.

prominence in Britain and America. Tag Gronberg, in her essay 'Beware the Beautiful Women', explains that not only did it take on a distinctive shape, but the mannequin was also gilt in metallic paint, bent into sharp angles, and displayed with a featureless visage.⁵⁴ By the 1950s, its plaster frame was replaced with plastic. Highlighting Eco's assertion, Gronberg's article suggests that as the modern mannequin was streamlined it aligned with the aesthetically modern, machine-driven tastes of the era.

Gronberg observes that the modern mannequin took its place 'across a whole range of discursive sites; in advertising manuals, fashion journalism, [...] arts magazines', as well as within department store walls.⁵⁵ Minimalist in appearance, this figure was designed to serve in focusing consumers' attention onto the commodity; taking on the signification of a machine, its simple function was to display merchandise.⁵⁶ However, as Toffoletti attests, the modern-day consumer's relationship with the mannequin was, and continues to be, complex. Toffoletti argues that the mannequin worked to 'legitimate women's presence [...] as active consumers and spectators' while simultaneously 'position[ing] them as part of the public spectacle'.⁵⁷ Thus, while the mannequin's purpose was to be a blank signifier, its machine-like features were demonstrative of how to dress, while directing women towards particular products. As such, it very quickly became an aspirational and identifiable figure of feminine beauty in the public sphere. In this way it both took on and redefined the early twentieth-century material manifestation of the doll-like ideal. From this history, Toffoletti argues, the mannequin became located as the 'modern emblem of consumerism, femininity and artifice prior to the advent of

⁵⁴ Tag Gronberg, 'Beware Beautiful Women: The 1920s shopwindow mannequin and a physiognomy of effacement', in *Art History*, 20: 3 (1997), pp. 374-396.

⁵⁵ Gronberg, p. 379.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁵⁷ Toffoletti, p. 65.

Barbie.⁵⁸ Indeed, Barbie's introduction into the marketplace as a plastic fashion model, ultimately, was a very logical material and linguistic continuation of the plastic mannequin.⁵⁹

After being constructed as a symbol of ideal femininity in the West for centuries, in the 1950s the doll collided with plastic technology to produce the mannequin and the Barbie doll. With the emergence and advancement of the technologies of photography, film, and cosmetics—as well as the aptly named *plastic* surgery—this plasticised feminine ideal is recreated in the visual field in print and on the flesh.⁶⁰ These modern-day doll-like manifestations illustrate how the trope of the doll continues to work in insidious ways to standardise and marginalise bodies.

⁵⁸ Toffoletti, p. 64.

⁵⁹ The *OED* defines 'mannequin' as both 'a person employed [...] to model clothes' as well as a 'model of (part of) a human figure, used for the display of clothes, etc.'. The plastic Barbie doll and the corresponding doll-like images in fashion magazines, websites, and film posters are a result of the glittering techno-aesthetic that created the mannequin of the industrial West. However, there is another fashion tradition to consider in the cultural narrative of doll-like femininity. As Juliette Peers details in her exhaustive study *The Fashion Doll*, the fashion industry had been relying on other doll-like figures that were distinct from both the dress form and the mannequin. Made of wax, paper, porcelain and ceramics, these fashion dolls distributed fashion information to consumers prior to—and concurrently with—the modern mannequin. The French bébé doll was one such example, which Juliette Peers explains: 'illuminates the rapid consolidation of fashion in Anglo-European culture into industrial practice, the commodification and mass marketing of an image of high fashion luxury and the development of a quasi-industrial system of selling high fashion' (p. 71). The mannequin functioned as a way to bring industrialisation and mass production into the world of early twentieth-century consumption; however, as Peers asserts, the fashion doll existed as a similar, albeit more localised, phenomenon. Peers contends that Barbie is an extension of the fashion doll's legacy as well. She states that: 'Especially from the 1950s onward, dolls have been a key means of engagement with elite styling for spectators who cannot access the world of high fashion so frequently celebrated in various forms of media' (p. 36). Further, Peers contends that since the 1950s—the decade Barbie was introduced into the marketplace as both miniature mannequin and fashion doll—the fashion doll has continued this tradition. Moving from porcelain to plastic, and from paper cut-outs to glossy print media images, the fashion doll continues to inform (particularly middle class) consumers of the world of high fashion and beauty. See: Juliette Peers, *The Fashion Doll: from Bébé Jumeau to Barbie* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

⁶⁰ Please see the 'Snip 'n Style Barbie' section of this chapter for how this is taken into the realm of plastic surgery.

Moreover, its ubiquitous presence—from its inception through to its contemporary plastic forms—seems to promote what Tony Davies calls the ‘humanist commitment to classical beauty’.⁶¹ This contention, rather than simply reasserting an aesthetic ideal, raises troubling ontological questions for how feminine subjectivity is defined and negotiated in a Western context.

What Davies refers to as Western ‘classical beauty’ has been constructed within the doll-like ideal to secure ‘successful’ femininity to a static place. Christine Battersby describes the physical components of what makes a classically beautiful object in specifically humanist terms. She states that, in traditional Western philosophy, ‘beauty’ is understood as the ‘mental state of relaxation produced by the physical encounter with objects that are small, smooth, without sharp contrasts or angles, and with delicacy of form or colour’.⁶² Small, smooth, and delicate, not only is a beautiful object invariable, but, most significantly, it is also contained and easily mastered. The ‘mental state of relaxation’ is traditionally produced to affirm the (masculine) authoritative subject, while defining traditionally feminine qualities in opposition; indeed, the beautiful relegates the feminine to the position of object. Thus, through the traditional ideas of beauty in Western thought, binaries of the masculine subject and feminine object are reaffirmed and compounded. Doll-like characteristics—the small, smooth, and delicate—appear to perfectly exemplify this traditional definition of Western beauty.

The introduction of both material and visual plastic enables the appearance of smooth edges and angles all the more. Barbie, and representations of Barbie doll-like corporeality, seems to affix precisely to the tenets of the beautiful. However, as Barthes insinuates in ‘Plastic’, cited in the introduction of this chapter, the

⁶¹ Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 110.

⁶² Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007), p. 7-8.

smoothness that defines plastic also makes it a slippery substance. Thus, while plastic can be read as another factor in the promotion of the Western doll-like beauty ideal, it is not so easily contained. Plastic slips away from such mastery. Drawing upon plastic's 'transmutation', Barthes offers one compelling interpretation of the substance.⁶³ Plastic, he notes, is 'in essence the stuff of alchemy'.⁶⁴ Such a comparison is crucial to understanding the power of plastic as a cultural object. Its potentials and limitations for a Barbie doll-like corporeality and subjectivity, and its corresponding relationship to conventional notions of beauty, can be re-defined through this concept.

Understood to be magical in its invention, alchemy was also the scientific precursor to modern day chemistry. Based in the medieval era, alchemy's transformative symbolism has persisted into modern times. Unfortunately, however, as Battersby notes, so too has its 'distaste' for the feminine.⁶⁵ She explains that the 'alchemical process' is 'an attempt to turn material that is "cold", "wet", "sterile" and "female" into a perfection of form (gold and androgynous) by first rendering it hot and dry (male)'.⁶⁶ She goes on to elucidate that in alchemical symbolism femininity 'is explicitly linked to matter; and to the imperfect: to blackness, coldness, wetness, inertness and the unformed'.⁶⁷ It is a study and practice in which predetermined unruly feminine (and racialised) qualities are removed in the transition or 'transmutation' from base materials into a 'gold and androgynous' ideal.

Significantly, the characteristics that communicate the alchemical process align with what Gronberg discusses in regards to the modern mannequin. Noting

⁶³ Barthes, p. 97.

⁶⁴ Barthes, p. 97.

⁶⁵ Battersby, p. 105.

⁶⁶ Battersby, p. 106.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

that the mannequin often had “skin” that was “gilt” or silvered over’,⁶⁸ she identifies the physical markers that allude to alchemy’s metallic signification. Gronberg suggests that these qualities work in conjunction with what she calls the ‘eradication of the “naturalistic” female body’, which, she believes, was a typical consequence of the redesign of the industrialised figures.⁶⁹ This reading of the mannequin implies that Battersby’s assessment of alchemy is at work in the twentieth-century Western trope of woman-as-doll. If interpreted in this way, plastic, doll-like representations do not have to be demarcated as static objects, but, rather, can be active machines. However, the problem with this reading is that in order to be dynamic, the plastic doll-like figure must disavow all feminine symbolism.

Outlining the traditions of the trope of woman-as-doll sheds light upon the constructedness of this figure in both historical and contemporary representations in the West. Attempting to define its cultural meaning suggests an aporia. ‘Doll-like’ in its signification conjures beauty in the most classical sense, but a plastic ‘doll-like’ representation challenges this simple reading through additional ideas of movement. One way to account for this newfound flexibility is to define these representations by way of the magic of alchemy. However, a symbolic reading of the alchemical process swiftly returns discussions of doll-like corporeality to a falsely gendered binary. Barbie and her referential representations may present an alternative to this dichotomy. Indeed, Barbie’s plasticity produces a glitch in this oppositional thinking.

Barbie’s plastic does not allow for the complete erasure of femininity on which the alchemical process seems to insist. Rather, the ‘eradication of the “naturalistic” female body’ is complicated through Barbie’s plasticity. Possessing the exaggerated shape of a hyperfeminine figure without the significant gendered markers of nipples

⁶⁸ Gronberg, p. 379.

⁶⁹ Gronberg, p. 379.

or defined genitalia, the doll occupies an in-between state, suggesting that her signification may work to disrupt conventional ideas of gendered subjectivity. Thus, a Barbie doll-like visually corporeal plastic can be a site both of discursive tradition and gendered ambiguity of feminine object and masculine subject. This state of dissolution is exemplified the Moschino advertisement. Here, what is edited, elongated, or smoothed over both calls attention to the tradition of ideal beauty in the West, and also pinpoints the tensions of these traditional gendered markers. Crucially, the key to expressing this tension is excess. Before exploring the implications of this concept, the following section examines how doll-like corporeal plastic, as a marker of the beautiful, is negotiated in contemporary popular culture.

III. 'We're Plastic But We Still Have Fun':

A Popular Culture Reading of Plastic Corporeality⁷⁰

During the initial decade of the twenty-first century, an adult living in the West was audience to an average of over six hundred digitally retouched images a day.⁷¹ A large percentage of these images were devoted to stereotypically beautiful women and girls. Like their edited frames, variety among them was slight. In the previous section of this chapter, the exaggerated physical form depicted in the Moschino advertisement is used to interrogate how photographic retouching emerged to construct uniformity, and the plastic and doll-like narratives intrinsic to it. The analysis confirmed that doll-like imagery is rooted in the codified traditions of beauty and technology in the modern Western world. In what follows, I examine how these traditions have manifested in the contemporary mainstream media. Through the use

⁷⁰ Lady Gaga, 'Paparazzi', *The Fame* (Interscope Records, 2009).

⁷¹ Orbach, p. 155.

of several examples from the feminist blog, *Jezebel*, critical responses to the contemporary, digitally retouched, doll-like representation are shown to be located within a discourse of humanism and objectification.⁷² The significance of this theorisation is investigated alongside the ambiguous materiality of plastic.

In 2007, the editors of the then burgeoning American feminist website *Jezebel* hosted an unprecedented contest. The guidelines began by stating that women's magazine covers are 'essentially female forgeries, what with all the computer-artistry involving airbrushing, contouring, and, sometimes, outright body-part swapping'.⁷³ Soliciting for 'unretouched' covers that were 'unaltered in any way', the aim of the contest was to expose this 'forgery'.⁷⁴ Calling specifically upon those who were involved in the field of women's magazines, the editors encouraged submissions with the cloak of anonymity and a monetary prize of ten thousand dollars. The images that *Jezebel* received were judged based upon how they withstood a side-by-side comparison with their published counterparts. The extent to which newsstand versions had been edited determined the winner.

On 16 July 2007, the American women's magazine *Redbook*, featuring musician Faith Hill on its cover, was awarded the dubious distinction. *Jezebel* showcased the 'unretouched' image alongside the edited Barbie doll-like version.⁷⁵

⁷² Jezebel.com is an American, English-language website with an international readership. While its focal point is the United States, it also features global news stories about mainstream (primarily white, middle-class) feminism and popular culture. Its popularity has been groundbreaking, and after five years, it now receives tens of millions of page views per month.

⁷³ Anna Holmes, 'Unretouched Cover Photos Wanted: \$10,000 Reward' (21 May 2007) <<http://jezebel.com/262013/unretouched-cover-photos-wanted-10000-reward>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 1).

⁷⁴ Holmes, para. 1.

⁷⁵ The blog *After Ellen* contrasts the digital retouching of Faith Hill to the unrealistic proportions of the Barbie doll. See: Anna Wahrman, "'Redbook' caught red-handed retouching Faith Hill' (19 July 2007) <<http://www.afterellen.com/blog/annawahrman/redbook-retouches-faith-hill?comment=378085>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

Moe Tkacik provided readers with an annotated guide to all of the digital alterations; in total, eleven changes were noted.⁷⁶ These modifications ranged from the digital addition of silky blonde hair, to the slimming and elongating of Hill's arm, waist, and back, to the reshaping of her earlobe. Hill's skin tone was also smoothed, and every blemish, including every pore, was effaced. Following the reveal, the website's editor, Anna Holmes, explained her reasons for the contest, stating that 'the image we obtained and displayed was meant to show' that women's magazines continue to promote 'lies and half-truths' about the bodies of women and girls.⁷⁷ Returning to the humanist conventions of bodily truth to make her argument, Holmes nevertheless informs her growing readership of the constructedness of standardised feminine bodies in print and digital media.⁷⁸

The general tone of *Jezebel's* articles is consistent with the writing of Holmes, who, when addressing the *Redbook* cover, asks whether it is 'really necessary to shave 10-15 pounds off a woman and erase exactly what it is (the freckles, the moles, the laugh lines) about her that makes her human'.⁷⁹ In this analysis of bodily erasure, Holmes's query reiterates her earlier contention that magazine covers are 'essentially female forgeries'. While simultaneously echoing Gronberg's assessment of corporeal eradication, Holmes diverges from the academic writer to suggest that photographic retouching does not remove femininity, but *humanity* from the subject in the image. Her question also speaks to the tensions that arise in a humanist approach to

⁷⁶ Moe Tkacik, 'The Annotated Guide to Making Faith Hill Hot' (16 July 2007) <<http://jezebel.com/gossip/distort-by-numbers/the-annotated-guide-to-making-faith-hill-hot-278978.php>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

⁷⁷ Anna Holmes, 'Faith Hill's "Redbook" Photoshop Chop: Why We're Pissed' (17 July 2007) <<http://jezebel.com/279203/faith-hills-redbook-photoshop-chop-why-were-pissed>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 3).

⁷⁸ Holmes's adherence to a narrative of bodily truth while calling attention to the constructedness of the feminine body in visual media echoes Orbach. See: p. 128 of this thesis.

⁷⁹ Holmes, 'Faith Hill's "Redbook" Photoshop Chop: Why We're Pissed', para. 3.

representations of embodiment, in general; issues of the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’, the subject and the object, and the human and the non-human, are all present in her interrogation, and are all repeated topics on the website. Indeed, with its tagline of ‘Celebrity. Sex. Fashion. Without Airbrushing.’, *Jezebel* provides popular feminist criticism that consistently emblemises these thematic juxtapositions. Its writers enthusiastically investigate contemporary trends and assumptions about plastic corporeality, and deconstruct them, rhetorically wiping away the Barbie doll-like sheen that is indicative of representations of uniform femininity of the West. However, within this analysis there is also a quest for truth—a persistent push to disentangle the artificial from what ‘makes’ us ‘human’.

Anxiety over how popular culture imagery moulds representations like that of Faith Hill into doll-like and seemingly artificial or non-human entities comes to the fore with *Jezebel*’s recurring commentary on the ‘increasing plasticization of women’ and girls in the Western media.⁸⁰ In 2010, contributing writer Katy Kelleher outlines the precedent for this observation. She states that ‘the [Western] standard of beauty has become more plastic than ever before, streamlined and falsified, more rigid and unforgiving’.⁸¹ She narrows down how ‘plasticization’ is exemplified in the ‘big, fake breasts, plump, fake lips, acres of fake blonde hair and skin that has been buffed,

⁸⁰ Jessica Coen, ‘The Labiaplasty You Never Knew You Wanted’ (10 May 2010) <[http://jezebel.com/5535356/the-labiaplasty-you-never-knew-you-wanted-\[nsfw\]](http://jezebel.com/5535356/the-labiaplasty-you-never-knew-you-wanted-[nsfw])> [accessed: 20 February 2012] (para. 8). *Jezebel* writer Doug Barry overtly makes the connection between visual corporeal plastic and the doll, with his awkwardly termed ‘dollification’. See: Doug Barry, ‘Comment of the Day: And a New Roller Derby Team is Born’ (28 August 2012) <<http://jezebel.com/5938701/comment-of-the-day-and-a-new-roller-derby-team-is-born>> [accessed: 10 Dec 2012] (para. 1).

⁸¹ Katy Kelleher, ‘Don’t Blame Porn For The Plastic Female’ (20 April 2010) <<http://jezebel.com/5520598/dont-blame-porn-for-the-plastic-female>> [accessed: 5 August 2012] (para. 4). Kelleher refers to this physicality as ‘fembot’ drawing further association with its mechanical resemblance (para. 2). This term is in reference to: Rebecca Dana, ‘Rise of the Fembots’ (18 April 2010) <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/04/19/rise-of-the-fembots.html>> [accessed: 5 August 2012].

polished, and waxed' that are all common to the Barbie doll-like aesthetic.⁸² This 'plasticisation', she argues, is both confusing and dehumanising for women and girls.

Demarcating plastic corporeality as 'falsified' is a way for Kelleher to assure her readers that there is a more 'real' feminine subjectivity—a more 'true' humanity—that is safe, secure and within their grasp. Yet, in her attempts to control visually corporeal plastic meaning and effects, Kelleher sets up oppositions which expose the flaws in her argument. Her analysis of a 'streamlined' body confirms Gronberg's idea of the mannequin, the machine, and the corresponding associations of a transformative alchemy therein. In fact, she goes so far as to state that retouched, plasticised images are produced 'with the same rigor that goes into the upkeep of a brand new Ferrari'.⁸³ This potentially transformative reading of plastic, albeit limited to gendered binaries, tinkers with posthuman possibility. However, plastic's machine-like associations are quickly shut down. The description of 'rigid' is an attempt to render plastic's slipperiness inert. With it, the Barbie doll-like feminine ideal reverts back to Battersby's characterisation of the traditionally beautiful object. Significantly, together these descriptions result in an amalgamation that reinforces corporeal plastic's ambiguity, despite the author's efforts to contain it safely outside the realms of subjectivity.

The uncertainty that plastic seems to bring about recurs in the language of many of the website's articles on the subject of doll-like corporeality. Lindy West demonstrates that uncertainty in her discussion of hair extensions. She asks: '[W]hen you teach women that they need to be objects to *even qualify as women*, then why are you surprised when they start to literally integrate with objects?'

⁸² Kelleher, para. 5.

⁸³ Kelleher, para. 5.

(emphasis in original).⁸⁴ Rather than focussing upon the significance of a narrative of bodily and material integration, and the mobility therein, this type of discussion consistently returns to emphasise the static object that woman or girl has become. According to the logic of the *Jezebel* writers, plastic corporeality is always already complete. And, it is completely devoid of the human.

Crucially, the visually plastic doll-like qualities that Kelleher outlines above—from ‘fake’ breasts, lips, and hair to ‘buffed’ and ‘polished’ skin—seem to reinforce plastic’s dehumanising, object-like elements in a very particular way. What has been defined in popular culture as the feminine, Barbie doll-like ideal has, in recent years, been attributed to the increased influence of the bleached, tanned, and pneumatic stars of the pornography industry.⁸⁵ Popular critical parlance describes the assimilation of pornography’s plastic aesthetic into the mainstream as the “‘pornification” of [visual] culture’.⁸⁶ With this latest association between pornography and the contemporary Barbie doll-like ideal, theorising this type of representation and corporeality as adhering to the tenets of the beautiful object

⁸⁴ Lindy West, ‘Listen Up Ladies: Here’s Everything Real Men Think Is Wrong With You’ (21 August 2012) <<http://jezebel.com/5936323/listen-up-ladies-heres-everything-real-men-think-is-wrong-with-you>> [accessed: 21 August 2012] (para. 16).

⁸⁵ Contrary to many popular culture critics, Kelleher rightly points out that pornography is not directly responsible for the ‘streamlining’ of a plastic and Barbie doll-like ‘beauty aesthetic’ (para. 12). She acknowledges that these two visual tropes are both ‘only points in the web, not the entire picture’ (para. 12). Adhering to Kelleher’s critical distinction, my assessment contends that mainstream representations of Barbie doll-like corporeality are in conversation with the pornographic, while investigating an analysis that insists otherwise. Moreover, it is of crucial importance to note that ‘pornification’ establishes a false binary between those involved in the pornography industry who are understood to be distributing specific Barbie doll-like ideals, and those who are recognised as receiving such images without input. In reality, pornography works to circulate a specific beauty ideal that both informs and is informed by dominant popular culture. Further, the idea of the industry as cloistered is inaccurate. Sex workers and porn stars are equally consumers, and many consumers have engaged in both amateur and professional sex work; this divide cannot be strictly delineated.

⁸⁶ Kelleher, para. 6.

appears to be no longer adequate. Instead, Barbie doll-like corporeality is consistently being associated with the status of the sexual object.

Popular readings of the plastic Barbie doll-like aesthetic and its constructed pornographic origins owe much to the writer Ariel Levy. Levy's popular feminist publication, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, has been extremely influential in establishing how Barbie doll-like corporeality is perceived in Western media and feminist analysis, especially in the United States. Determining that visually plastic somatics are the result of pornography, Levy asserts that in contemporary culture in the West, there is a discourse that perpetuates the idea that '*everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars' (emphasis in original).⁸⁷ She goes on:

Instead of hairy legs, we have waxed vaginas [sic]; the free-flying natural woman boobs of yore have been hoisted with push-up bras or 'enhanced' into taut plastic orbs that stand perpetually at attention.⁸⁸

Remembering both the days and the 'boobs of yore' with a mythical fondness, Levy's assessment reproduces many of the same arguments about pornography that have been articulated by many (radical) feminists for decades. By adding the concept of cultural, visual, and somatic plastic to the debate, she revives its relevance and becomes an authoritative voice, especially in contemporary American feminist discourse on femininity and the body.

Upon affixing plasticised flesh to the pornographic, Levy takes the next step by condemning all such representations as 'objectification'.⁸⁹ Her assessment stresses that the fashion and fashioning of representations of Barbie doll-like bodies in visual and popular cultures can only convey that such bodies are sexual objects. Wrapped up as shiny plastic packages, these representations, Levy insists, adhere to

⁸⁷ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p. 27.

⁸⁸ Levy, p. 87.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the tenets of patriarchy, reinforcing the narrative of feminine object and masculine subject. Outraged, she concludes:

The proposition that having the most simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality constantly reiterated throughout our culture somehow proves that we are sexually liberated and personally empowered has been offered to us, and we have accepted it.⁹⁰

Levy's aim, then, is to expose what is her understanding of a false femininity and what she views as the inherent objectification it engenders. Within her criticism is the hope that such fakery will be rejected once it has been revealed, and in many ways she has been successful. Though in no way a single-handed achievement for Levy, contemporary discussions of 'real' versus 'fake' femininity alongside discussions of objectification and pornography are tremendously commonplace in both popular and academic feminist analysis of Barbie doll-like corporeality. This analysis has even gone so far as to produce the phrase and coinciding cultural phenomenon 'new prudishness', which, in fact, adopts and intensifies Levy's opinions into a way of life.⁹¹

Significantly, the popular readings that locate visually plastic corporeality within a broader scope of sexual objectification parallel Jean François Lyotard's theoretical criticisms of pornography, and its effect on the viewing subject. In 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' Lyotard champions practices and ways of thinking which embrace the postmodern destabilisation of the subject. He makes it clear, however, that pornography is not one of these practices, as it has 'not met' what he defines as 'the challenge of the mass media' to embrace alternative

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 197.

⁹¹ Ada Calhoun, 'The New Prudishness: A resolution for 2007: no more punditry about our "oversexed" culture' (9 January 2007) <<http://www.nerve.com/personalessays/calhoun/newprudishness>> [accessed: 10 August 2012].

and fragmentary ways of thinking and being.⁹² In associating it with the problematically “correct rules” of realism, Lyotard insists that pornography reproduces static and cohesive conceptualisations of subjectivity.⁹³

Examining the philosopher’s criticisms of pornography, Catherine Belsey explains that for Lyotard:

Photography, film, television show us the world we think we know, generally from our accustomed point of view, and thus, at least in their mode of address, do not challenge us to re-examine our assumptions. The ‘degree zero’ of realism is pornography, which puts the object of the gaze—as object—just where the viewer wants it.⁹⁴

As Belsey argues, Lyotard’s approach suggests that pornography confirms the Western unified subject because the medium enables viewing from an ‘accustomed’ position, and this position is never challenged.⁹⁵ The stable gaze of the subject is

⁹² Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1979] 1984) pp. 71-84 (p. 75).

⁹³ Lyotard, p. 75.

⁹⁴ Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 131.

⁹⁵ The view that pornography perpetuates the idea that women and girls are sexual objects is complicated by its nuanced and contradictory etymology. According to the *OED*, ‘pornography’ is defined as ‘the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity’ in various media, with the intention ‘to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings’. Devoid of ‘aesthetic feelings’, pornography is denotatively at odds with the philosophical concept of beauty, and its corresponding classification of the beautiful (woman as) object. Nevertheless, the *OED* goes on to state that pornography’s etymology is connected to textual expression that is ‘about prostitutes’. Certainly, prostitution and pornography are distinct areas of the sex industry, and prostitution does not inherently confine the feminine to the realm of the object. However, as Wolf contends above, early images of prostitutes directly influenced modern ideas of Western beauty (p. 129). Thus, the linguistic and historical foundations of the term ‘pornography’ offer conflicting meanings: it is both the antithesis and the purveyor of beauty. Despite these divergent definitions, pornographic representations of the feminine seem to be popularly understood as aligning with beauty’s traditional markers. Significantly, this adherence to objectification can be seen in feminist debate surrounding the issue as well. Contemporary feminist critics—and proponents—of sex work often return to issues of objectification when exploring the myriad issues of both prostitution and pornography. While certainly important, discussions of objectification may limit,

supported by the object, which, in this framework, is always already mastered. This interpretation of pornography asserts that the medium works within a humanist (or realist) paradigm to maintain the distinct divisions between subject and object, self and other.⁹⁶

Lyotard is looking for the postmodern in culture. He does not find it in pornography, which he understands to be a medium for mastery and control over both the subject and the object. In deconstructing Barbie doll-like ‘pornified’ bodies, Levy, Kelleher, and Holmes would agree that pornography presents mastery over the subject and the object—qualifying it precisely as a medium that objectifies feminine bodies. Thus, these two viewpoints converge when they acknowledge that pornography presents something as ‘truth’ when it is not. Lyotard’s theories of the postmodern promote cultural practices that do not ‘supply reality but [...] invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented’.⁹⁷ In contrast, these popular feminist critics see pornography as false representation; they are seeking out a truthfulness in human embodiment that pornography is not getting correct. Crucially, it is where these ideas diverge that Lyotard’s postmodern might be found.

A reading of objectification is at the crux of feminist debates surrounding issues of corporeality. This is especially the case in interrogating the broader trope of woman-as-doll (as beautiful object), and the Barbie doll-like ideal in contemporary culture in the West. Such analysis is important for understanding how feminine bodies are written and read in popular culture. Criticisms of pornography, and its influence on the Barbie doll-like aesthetic, inform these ideas of (sexual)

rather than expand upon, the complicated political issues of exploitation, empowerment, and agency that pornography and prostitution engender.

⁹⁶ In terms of what it signifies for subjectivity, the sexual object can be understood to occupy a similar position to that of the beautiful object. Catherine Belsey states that the sexual object of pornography ‘affirms the identity and confirms the knowledge of viewing subject’, while it remains positioned the static place of other (p. 131).

⁹⁷ Lyotard, p. 81.

objectification. Significantly, much of the blame for Barbie doll-like objectification—from pornography to digital editing to the doll herself—is cast onto plastic. As Kelleher avers, visually plastic bodies are generally interpreted as demonstrating a false or dehumanised appearance in opposition to what ‘real’ femininity ought to look like.

Despite insistence to the contrary, plastic cannot simply be read as a static and objectifying force. In fact, there has been an element of this alternative reading of plastic latent in the above analysis all along. The material’s unruly qualities continuously unsettle its appraisal. It is plastic’s ability to ‘integrate’, as West describes above (p. 145), that contributes to the cultural anxiety around ‘pornification’ and ‘plasticisation’. Rather than a fixed and complete plastic object, integration of the material with the somatic implies process and transformation. Indeed, even the suffixes of ‘pornification’ and ‘plasticisation’ suggest action and transition. As such, this thematic undercurrent reveals that plastic, and those it seemingly objectifies, are not so easily contained. In these terms, plastic can be read as conflating the subject and the object. Understood in this way, discussions that focus upon the material as a signal of the completed object might be read as attempting to reinforce traditional humanist ideals by aiming to keep the subject and object separate. However, by engaging with plastic as a material that denaturalises humanist practices and representations of the subject/object divide, and by recognising the ‘moments at which things start to drift’,⁹⁸ it may allow for movement toward Lyotard’s postmodern demand, while engaging with Barbie’s posthuman potential along the way.

⁹⁸ Neil Badmington, *Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 118.

From Faith Hill's slenderised limbs to the blonde hair extensions of porn stars, contemporary representations of the Western trope of woman-as-doll are written in terms of Barbie doll-like corporeal plastic. In conversation with pornography, representations of plastic bodies in popular culture commentary are widely understood to be perpetuating traditional (and dangerous) ideas about the feminine body as a sexual object. However, plastic has the ability to reshape these conceptualisations. With plastic, they can be viewed to 'impl[y] instability and process'.⁹⁹ Toffoletti insists that 'Barbie's plastic form may be interpreted as an unstable referent that functions to disable, rather than determine meaning'.¹⁰⁰ For Toffoletti, then, plastic's ambiguity and its transformative nature determine the potential for a more flexible idea of the feminine subject. As such, Barbie's plasticity, and representations therein, enables the feminine to be no longer so easily relegated to the beautiful, the static, or that which is not human.

Thus far, this chapter has explored the traditional ideals of Western femininity in terms of a doll-like aesthetic. Approaching these representations with a critical lens suggests that when plastic is introduced, it has the potential to reinforce these conventions by smoothing over, erasing, and rewriting the body to arrive at a uniform and beautiful Barbie doll-like ideal. This action of smoothing over has been interpreted as a way to represent women and girls as objects—both beautiful and sexual—or as machines—at the cost of losing femininity, but gaining subjectivity. However, upon contemplation, plastic offers alternatives to this oppositional view of doll-like femininity. It seems that plastic's slipperiness and its ability to contaminate may provide nuanced options for the posthuman feminine subject. This being said,

⁹⁹ Toffoletti, p. 68.

¹⁰⁰ Toffoletti, p. 68.

what, precisely, plastic is smoothing over, and the material excess it implies, both require further exploration.

IV. ‘Too Much Makeup, Too Much Hair’:

Barbie Doll-like Corporeality and the Feminine Object¹⁰¹

In 2007, British television network Channel Four debuted a reality programme entitled *Embarrassing Bodies*. Titillating and educational, every episode featured several members of the public who each revealed an awkward medical concern to the programme’s doctors and viewers alike. Upon consultation for their ‘excess facial hair’, psoriasis, or ‘asymmetrical breasts’, guests were assigned a relevant form of treatment, which was occasionally surgical in nature. By the conclusion of each episode, the ‘embarrassing body’ was transformed, with the guest leaving the programme newly self-actualised.¹⁰² The format for *Embarrassing Bodies* became such a huge success that, in series two, the producers developed a theme specifically involving teenage bodies. Many of these episodes addressed inquiries about puberty and sexual health.

Lindsay was a memorable guest on *Embarrassing Teenage Bodies*. She sought medical advice for what she considered to be her embarrassingly large labia. The voiceover empathised with Lindsay’s concern, stating that: ‘Even a tiny bit of extra skin can be embarrassing... especially if it’s below the belt’.¹⁰³ ‘It makes me cringe’, Lindsay confided to Dr Pixie McKenna, an *Embarrassing Bodies* regular consultant, who assured her that there was nothing medically unusual about her

¹⁰¹ Dolly Parton, ‘Backwoods Barbie’, *Backwoods Barbie* (Dolly Records, 2008).

¹⁰² While this is the general format of the programme, some guests required more intensive treatment, and the conclusion was not met by the air-by date.

¹⁰³ ‘Teens Below the Belt: Episode Four’, *Embarrassing Bodies* (Channel 4, 2008).

vulva. Dr Pixie then referred Lindsay to a cosmetic surgeon.¹⁰⁴ The episode followed Lindsay's surgical procedure, depicted the removal of what was termed 'excess skin', and highlighted her subsequent recovery.¹⁰⁵ Once she had healed, she met with Dr Pixie, who seemed as pleased as Lindsay with the final results.

Embarrassing Bodies is a franchise that is equal parts television series and interactive website; it is where 'reality' entertainment and self-help meet in the visual sphere. Both forums, while primarily arenas of exhibition, also seem genuinely dedicated to de-stigmatising discussions of sexual health and anatomy for both women and girls. The programme has followed several of its guests, like Lindsay, into the world of vulva and vaginal surgery, presenting itself as a no-nonsense guide to an often awkward and mysterious topic. In fact, the *Embarrassing Bodies* website hosts an image gallery featuring a vast array of what is described as 'normal and healthy' vulva 'variations'.¹⁰⁶ However, upon the airing of episodes chronicling this topic—especially the episode featuring Lindsay—discussions on the website's message boards circulated around body insecurity rather than acceptance.¹⁰⁷ In *Living Dolls*, feminist writer Natasha Walter calls attention to this occurrence, observing that '[t]he comments [...] showed how this decision to carry out plastic surgery to fit a young woman's body to a so-called norm made other young women feel intensely anxious.'¹⁰⁸ Her proof is in a comment shared on the forum:

I'm 15 and I thought I was fine, but since I've watched the programme I've become worried, as [my labia] seem larger than the girl who had hers made surgically smaller!¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ The programme refers to guests and consultants by their first names.

¹⁰⁵ 'Teens Below the Belt: Episode Four'.

¹⁰⁶ Embarrassing Bodies Gallery Website: <<http://www.channel4embarrassingillnesses.com/galleries/>> [accessed: 20 February 2012].

¹⁰⁷ Embarrassing Bodies Gallery Website.

¹⁰⁸ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010) p. 108.

¹⁰⁹ Walter, p. 109.

For Walter, this statement demonstrates that, despite the programme's intent, its visual and narrative content works to normalise a specific corporeality, which is linked to the narrative of Barbie doll-like somatics, and its popular connections with pornography.¹¹⁰ As such, the author believes that *Embarrassing Bodies* is creating further demand for a procedure that she believes works to both universalise and objectify feminine bodies and subjects.

Elective vulva and vaginal surgeries are among the fastest growing cosmetic procedures in the United Kingdom and in the United States.¹¹¹ Women's health expert Leonore Tiefer classifies these procedures to include 'labia reduction, vaginal tightening, clitoral unhooding, [and] "G-Spot" collagen injections'.¹¹² Labia reduction, also known as labiaplasty, is the procedure that Lindsay underwent, and is the focus of my discussion. It is generally characterised as a surgical operation that alters or removes the folds of the vulva for functional and/or cosmetic purposes.¹¹³ In recent years, patient requests for labiaplasty, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States, have grown exponentially.¹¹⁴ Crucially, there is a particular kind of labiaplasty that is receiving consumer interest and media exposure, and it seems to exemplify both the broader scope of this thesis, and the main themes of this chapter, as well as Walter's above assertions.

Operating a gynaecology practice in Orange County, California, Red Alinsod is

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

¹¹¹ *The Perfect Vagina*, dir. by Heather Leach (Channel 4, 2008).

¹¹² Leonore Tiefer, 'Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery: Freakish or Inevitable? Analysis from Medical Marketing, Bioethics and Feminist Theory', in *Feminism and Psychology*, 18 (2008), pp. 466-479 (p. 467).

¹¹³ This thesis deals primarily, with the cosmetic side of labiaplasty, focusing on one procedure in particular. For an assessment of the functional aspects of labiaplasty, see: John R. Miklos MD and Robert D. Moore DO, 'Labiaplasty of the Labia Minora: Patients' Indications for Pursuing Surgery', in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 5:6 (2008), pp.1492-1495.

¹¹⁴ *The Perfect Vagina*.

the surgeon who has devised a procedure that he has named The Barbie. The Barbie is a type of labiaplasty that promises the ‘aggressive reduction of the labia minora to the point of complete excision’.¹¹⁵ As a result of this operation, the post-surgery vulva resembles the smooth plastic genital region of the Barbie doll. Alinsod’s website boasts that The Barbie ‘is the most requested technique of labia surgery’ performed at the office, as well as ‘the most popular appearance wanted [on] the West Coast’ of the United States.¹¹⁶ Alinsod is a champion marketer of his surgery, and has taught the technique at professional conferences over the last several years. Consequently, The Barbie has been adopted as a recognisable procedure in cosmetic and gynaecology clinics throughout the West, with clients requesting it by name.¹¹⁷

While the *Embarrassing Bodies* team did not name Lindsay’s labiaplasty procedure as The Barbie, her fleshy alterations correspond in appearance to that of Alinsod’s particular cosmetic model. Implicit and explicit in their Barbie doll-like significations, together these examples of feminine corporeal modification signal how the cultural trend of Barbie doll-like plastic corporeality in media representations of women and girls is also reflected in and onto fleshy bodies. As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, media images of women and girls are edited over, oftentimes erasing away body parts in order to create the smooth appearance of plastic. In the visual field, these body parts are specific and meaningful. Blemishes, pores, hair, fat, cellulite, extensive muscle mass, tendons, veins, sweat, and especially nipples and genitalia are the target of photographic editors’ magic wand tools. Significantly, these somatic sites of corporeal plastic are culturally defined as feminine excesses. Labiaplasty, such as The Barbie, as a practice

¹¹⁵ South Coast Urogynecology Labiaplasty Photo Gallery: <http://urogyn.org/gallery_labiaplasty.html> [accessed: 20 February 2012].

¹¹⁶ South Coast Urogynecology Labiaplasty Photo Gallery.

¹¹⁷ See also: Swiss Women’s Clinic Website:

<http://drmartinek.com/labiaplasty_photos.php> [accessed: 20 February 2012].

that removes ‘extra’ skin from the gendered body for cosmetic purposes, exemplifies the extent to which such excesses are managed—or plasticised—in the corporeal realm. Considering the conversation between visual media representations of a Barbie doll-like ideal and the material practice of labiaplasty, the following sections investigate the broader cultural narrative of feminine excess, attempts at its removal—both visually and corporeally—and how plastic confounds meaning alongside discussions of doll-like feminine subjectivity.

IVa. Snip ‘n Style Barbie:

Labiaplasty and Idealised Femininity in the West¹¹⁸

Speculation, especially within feminist communities, surrounds the recent increase in demand for labiaplasty in the West. According to Marie Myung-Ok Lee:

Interest in cosmetic-gyn[aecology] has been explained by such cultural shifts as the trickle-up effect of porn aesthetics, and, relatedly, the popularity of the ‘Brazilian’ wax, which leaves the genital area bare and thus subject to closer scrutiny.¹¹⁹

This writer’s suggestion reiterates both Walter and Levy’s above concerns. She, too, is calling attention to pornography as the key component of a representational shift in ideal femininity, and with it, normative corporeality. As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, this theory of causation leads to a limited understanding of plastic Barbie doll-like corporeality as functioning merely as an objectifying force. However, pornography does work to circulate a specific doll-like beauty ideal that both informs and is informed by dominant popular culture. At this time, an

¹¹⁸ Snip n’ Style is also the name of Barbie hair salon. See:

<<http://www.barbie.com/activities/fashion/hair/>> [accessed 20 February 2012].

¹¹⁹ Marie Myung-Ok Lee, ‘Perverse Incentives: gynecologists cash in on intimate new market’ (June 2011)

<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/06/perverse-incentives/8489/>> [accessed: 20 February 2012] (para. 3).

exploration of what precisely is being circulated is pertinent.

An example of censorship, reported on the Australian news programme *Hungry Beast*, sheds particular light on how Lee might have decided to hold pornography culpable for an increase in labiaplasty. In Australia, softcore pornographic magazines are permitted to display full-frontal female nudity, but ‘only discreet genital detail’.¹²⁰ What this vaguely classifies as is ‘no genital emphasis’.¹²¹ A former pornographic magazine editor explains that

[t]he only acceptable vagina as far as the [Australian] Classification Board is concerned is one that is ‘neat and tidy’ [...]. They basically consider labia minora too offensive for soft porn.¹²²

In practical terms, this means that only models who have ‘discreet labia’ are hired, or, that photo editors retouch images to ensure that labia are, in industry jargon, ‘healed to a single crease’.¹²³ Either way, this type of media censorship constructs and normalises the feminine genitalia in a very specific way.

Industry standards concerning censorship vary, but it seems that the ‘single crease’ rule is the aesthetic norm for mainstream pornography in the West. Feminist researcher Karen Roberts McNamara states that ‘digital retouching of an image is routinely used to standardize “asymmetrical or wrinkled labia”’.¹²⁴ Confirming her statement, a photographic editor for the US-based pornographic company Flynt Publications explains the deftness with which digital technicians achieve the look: ‘The easiest thing to do is to replace genital shots. You take one you prefer and paste

¹²⁰ ‘Labiaplasty, Episode 14’, *Hungry Beast* (2010). See: <[http://jezebel.com/5535356/the-labiaplasty-you-never-knew-you-wanted-\[nsfw\]](http://jezebel.com/5535356/the-labiaplasty-you-never-knew-you-wanted-[nsfw])> [accessed: 20 February 2012].

¹²¹ ‘Labiaplasty, Episode 14’.

¹²² ‘Labiaplasty, Episode 14’.

¹²³ ‘Labiaplasty, Episode 14’.

¹²⁴ Karen Roberts McNamara, ‘Pretty Woman: Genital Plastic Surgery and the Production of the Sexed Female Subject’, in *Gnovis* <<http://gnovisjournal.org/files/Karen-Roberts-McNamara-Pretty-Woman.pdf>> [accessed: 20 February 2012] (p. 6).

it over the one you don't.¹²⁵ In this way, representations of ideal feminine bodies are codified beyond the blonde, tan, slender, and pneumatic Barbie doll-like corporeality to include the standardisation of Barbie doll-like genital aesthetics as well.

The censorship and photographic editing of pornographic images seems to be having an impact on perceptions of normalcy, body confidence, and cosmetic surgery requests for many women and girls. A cosmetic surgeon interviewed for the *Hungry Beast* story explains why this may be the case. He states that 'most women don't really have an idea of [the] normal range' of labia appearances.¹²⁶ Because those seeking labiaplasty interpret retouched images as 'normal', there is a subsequent desire to 'correct' what they perceive to be their own abnormalities. Based upon this information, it makes sense that Lee would join Walter and Levy in thinking that pornography is determining the way in which women and girls approach and modify their bodies. However, once this topic is considered more broadly, it becomes clear that pornography, popular visual and material discourses of the doll, and the corresponding cosmetic procedure of Barbie doll-like labiaplasty are all symptomatic of the hegemony of beauty and feminine corporeal uniformity.

Pathologisation of labia shape and size is not without historical precedent in the West. Sexologist and feminist scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling locates its roots, and its cultural significance. She observes that:

[B]y the middle of the nineteenth century elongated labia had taken their place in medical textbooks alongside accounts of enlarged clitorises, both described as genital abnormalities, rather than as part of a wide range of 'normal' human variation.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ McNamara, p. 6.

¹²⁶ 'Labiaplasty, Episode 14'.

¹²⁷ Anne Fausto-Sterling, 'Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of "Hottentot" Women in Europe, 1815-17', in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, ed. by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002), pp. 66-98 (p. 85).

Nineteenth-century scientific specificities of female ‘genital abnormalities’ had the effect of producing a medicalised standard of the normal/ideal labia shape: it was small, discreet, and unseen. Significantly, Fausto-Sterling suggests the reasons behind this oppositional medical framework. Discreet labia were considered modest, while visible labia demarcated an excessively ‘aggressive sexual appetite’.¹²⁸ As illustrated in the contemporary narratives above, this ideal, and its cultural implications, remain in place in contemporary Western visual discourse.

Fausto-Sterling traces the development of this oppositional scientific narrative to a larger matrix of racial and sexual oppression designed to control bodies, and reassert binaries of otherness. She asserts that ‘[f]rom the start of the scientific revolution, scientists viewed the earth or nature as female, a territory to be explored, exploited, and controlled’.¹²⁹ This humanist perspective, coupled with the European colonialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, created a broader cultural narrative of feminine embodiment in the West. She explains:

Identifying foreign lands as female helped to naturalize their rape and exploitation, but the appearance on the scene of ‘wild women’ raised troubling questions about the status of European women. Hence, it also became important to differentiate the ‘savage’ land/women from the civilized female of Europe.¹³⁰

Fallacious scientific research—often based upon travel literature—was written to suggest a difference between the ‘jaws, buttocks, and labia’ of the European woman and the non-European woman.¹³¹ This distinction, in which the racialised body

¹²⁸ Fausto-Sterling, p. 81 (This discretion is even invoked in the title of the programme, *Embarrassing Bodies*.)

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82. Significantly, Fausto-Sterling notes that scientific research based on ‘unscientific’ literature took place up until the 1960s. She states that: ‘Sexologists William Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, for example, in their scientifically dispassionate work *Human Sexual Response*, include a claim that African women elongate their vaginal labia by physical manipulation’. She explains that this

signalled various excesses, located non-European and especially African women as immodest or hypersexual, 'animal-like', and, thus, non-human.¹³² In the process, it secured European women as civilised, while simultaneously legitimising systematic violence against and exploitation of African women.

Of significant influence to the discourse of feminine somatic othering in the West is the narrative construction of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman. Though most of Baartman's biography is uncertain, it is known that she was a woman from the southern region of Africa, who, when brought to Europe in 1810, became 'a theatre attraction' known as the Hottentot Venus. Over the course of five years, her body was the subject of oddity exhibitions, where she was visually and physically examined for both scientific and entertainment purposes. Fausto-Sterling explains that these exhibitions 'linked the notion of the wild or savage female with one of dangerous or uncontrollable sexuality.'¹³³ In part, this was the result of the exhibitions' focus upon what was deemed to be Baartman's curious physical characteristics, especially her 'steatopygous backside',¹³⁴ and her 'elongated labia'.¹³⁵

Crucially, as Fausto-Sterling notes, in Victorian times the posterior began to take on a specific sexual significance. She explains that 'by the middle of the nineteenth century' it 'had become a clear symbol of female sexuality', with 'the intense interest in the backside a displacement for the fascination with the genitalia'.¹³⁶ This displacement is evident in scientific narratives that focus upon Baartman's sexual characteristics, and further determines the pathologisation of

assertion was retrieved from a 'compendium of female physical oddities that dates from the 1930s but draws on nineteenth-century literature', which was attempting to uphold the narrative of difference she outlines in her chapter (p. 83).

¹³² Ibid., p. 84.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 78.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 78.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

racialised bodies.¹³⁷ Indeed, during (and after) her lifetime, Baartman's buttocks were the focus of much Victorian preoccupation, its 'steatopygia' signalling a pathological hypersexuality. However, despite their reliance upon this constructed emblem, European scientists also continued to fixate on Baartman's labia shape and size. The significance of the young woman's genitals was returned to over and over again in order to establish, once and for all, her status as an iconic representation of a racialised and sexualised other.

Narrative accounts written during her time as the Hottentot Venus claim that Baartman's 'modesty' prevented the direct examination of her labia. As such, it was not until shortly after her death in 1815 that assumptions about Baartman's body were confirmed in the minds of the European scientific community. French naturalist Georges Cuvier dissected her body, publishing an account of the autopsy. In it, he categorised his descriptions of Baartman's genitalia. Fausto-Sterling recounts his report:

For a page and a half the reader learns of the appearance, folded and unfolded, of the vaginal lips, of their angle of joining, the measurements of their length [...] and thickness, and the manner in which they cover the vulval opening. These he compared to analogous parts of European women, pointing out the considerable variation and stating that in general the inner vaginal lips are more developed in women from warmer climates.¹³⁸

Relying on a narrative of concealment, Cuvier's documentation of Baartman was an

¹³⁷ The emphasis on Baartman's posterior carried on after her death in 1815, with the term 'steatopygous' employed by Victorian doctors and scientists to describe their impression of a physiological malformation. The *OED*'s definition of 'steatopyga' remains in this clinically pathologising vein: 'A protuberance of the buttocks, due to an abnormal accumulation of fat in and behind the hips and thighs, found (more markedly in women than in men) as a characteristic of certain peoples, esp. the Khoekhoe and San of South Africa.' Fausto-Sterling comments that: 'what had been essentially a curiosity [in the nineteenth century] found its way into medical textbooks as an abnormality' (p. 78).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

attempt to 'bring [...] unknown elements under scientific control'.¹³⁹ He chronicled Baartman's labia as furtive in their excesses, and symbolically aligned this fiction with an equally fantastical narrative of a mysterious and primitive Africa.¹⁴⁰ With these two discursive constructions firmly in place, Fausto-Sterling contends that a broader discourse of the 'scarcely hidden savage libido' was reinforced.¹⁴¹ From a 'mysterious' land, with 'excessive' physical characteristics, Baartman's identity was read to be enigmatic, uncivilised and dangerous. By discovering what was deemed barely concealed, and labelling it as less than human, Cuvier's account seemed to offer proof of the wider nineteenth-century European culture that African women (and the land they symbolised) were meant to be mastered and controlled.

Cuvier's prurient description of Baartman's autopsy seemed to confirm the postulations of popular Western travelogues and oddity show observations: the nineteenth-century vision of the African feminine subject was that she needed a civilising force. McNamara provides further insight into this conclusion. Echoing Fausto-Sterling, she notes that dominant Western culture considered 'black women's sexual organs' to be "primitive" and excessive.¹⁴² This belief was used to bolster 'evidence of a corresponding "primitive" sexuality', which was out of—and in need of—control.¹⁴³ However, Cuvier's account did not simply affirm a narrative of primitivism, or its corresponding discourse of mastery for nineteenth-century onlookers. The naturalist also helped codify invented racial and sexual excess in the worlds of science and medicine. Cuvier's descriptions served as evidence of pathology—placing African women outside of, and beyond, acceptable feminine embodiment in the West.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁴² McNamara, p. 9-10.

¹⁴³ McNamara, p. 9-10.

Cuvier reached his conclusions by comparing Baartman's sexual organs to 'analogous parts of European women, pointing out the considerable variation'. His scientific fascination with locating and cataloguing perceived labia disparities between African and European women led to an inventory that defined abnormal markers of female genitalia in both medical and scientific literature as well as popular cultural discourse in the West. Crucially, however, since such flawed analysis was oppositional in its nature, it also worked to interpret what was medically, scientifically, and culturally normal in terms of white Western feminine embodiment. This false binary established that white Western women, too, were subject to hegemonic forces based upon a fabricated ideal. White Western women's labia were written at an institutional level as small, discreet, and concealed. Accordingly, this meant that the white feminine subject was viewed as clean and proper, modest, and civilised. White feminine bodies were required to maintain these fictional distinctions—both in anatomy and in behaviour. If they exceeded such parameters, then they were othered for crossing over into the realm of non-normative race and sexuality, which called their already tenuous subjectivity further into question.

The consequences of this dualistic and duplicitous hegemony of feminine embodiment reverberate in contemporary culture. Black women continue to be pathologised as primitive and hypersexual, while, as shown in the episode of *Embarrassing Bodies*, the fiction of the white, Western discreet labia continues to align with the ideal standard of beauty and normalcy.¹⁴⁴ McNamara explains the

¹⁴⁴ A contemporary example of this type of racial othering can be found in the parodying of tennis athlete Serena Williams's body by her rival, Caroline Wozniaki: 'Stuffing both her chest and shorts with padding, Wozniaki pranced out onto the court mid-game to the guffaws of the crowd.' Lucette Jefferson, 'Serena Williams Impersonation: Is Caroline Wozniaki's Imitation of the Tennis Star Racist?' (10 December 2012) <<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/10/serena-williams->

effects of this institutionalised narrative on contemporary women and girls in the West. Crucially, she posits that the white normalised beauty ideal significantly informs types of labiaplasty and cosmetic surgery. Arguing that it ‘functions on a social level’, McNamara also suggests that cosmetic labiaplasty reinforces ‘social norms that forbid a variety of excesses among women’.¹⁴⁵ She goes on to contend that this type of procedure ‘civilises’ feminine corporeality as it agrees with ‘society’s insistence on female restraint and discretion’.¹⁴⁶ Thus, as the constructed narrative of Sarah Baartman suggests, centuries of feminine genital policing has resulted in an insidious standard of beauty. As such, pornography is not the cause of the Barbie doll-like ideal and its correlative labiaplasty, but rather a purveyor informed by the traditional ‘humanist commitment to classical beauty’ addressed above (p. 138). Moreover, this tradition, in which the small, smooth, and delicate are elevated, is bolstered by the racist and misogynist underpinnings of much of nineteenth-century science in the West.

IVb. ‘Fill the Void Up with Celluloid’:

Corporeal Plastic and the Feminine Object¹⁴⁷

The story of Sarah Baartman suggests another layer of meaning when considering Western beauty ideals, in terms of what is written onto, and erased from, the body. In Baartman’s narrative construction through the nineteenth-century oddity exhibition, as well as through scientific and medical discourse, excess was invented and pathologised. From Baartman’s narrative, it becomes clear how racist and

[impersonation-caroline-wozniacki-racist_n_2272395.html](#)> [accessed: 15 December 2012].

¹⁴⁵ McNamara, p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ McNamara, p. 9.

¹⁴⁷ Marina and the Diamonds, ‘Primadonna’, *Electra Heart* (Atlantic Records, 2012).

misogynistic stereotypes influence Western standards of beauty. Significantly, culturally appropriate and inappropriate femininities continue to be defined in terms of the somatics that are, respectively, either concealed or that reveal an overabundance of sexuality in the form of large breasts, hips, backsides, and labia—as well as facial features. Examples of this hegemony can be found in the dubious censorship laws described above (p. 158) which ensure that labia are ‘healed to a single crease’, and in the ubiquitous representations and corresponding cosmetic procedures that promise beauty through smooth and delicate uniformity.

The visual trope of the doll—from her smooth and porcelain white skin, to the ‘eradication of the “naturalistic” female body’ the mannequin is noted to exhibit—can be viewed as a manual for how to master seemingly every instance of superfluity. Barbie, however, and the Barbie doll-like feminine ideal, exists on both sides of this narrative of containment and excess. Visual and corporeal plastic does, indeed, signal somatic uniformity that complies with a doll-like ideal. And Barbie—smooth, and squeaky clean—corresponds, in some ways, with rules of ‘classical beauty’ in the West. However, as this thesis shows, Barbie has been repeatedly lambasted as a symbol of ‘too much’. Her plastic smooths, but it never sanitises. As much as she is a beauty, her plastic defines her as an emblem of exaggeration, artificiality, and excess. The following research examines the cultural significance of this unsettled representation of ideal femininity, by way of its connections to the cultural construction of excess.

French feminist and psychoanalytic theorist, Julia Kristeva, provides a keen articulation of the Western significance of excess. In *Powers of Horror*, she begins her theorisation of the topic by stating that excess or what she defines as the ‘abject’, is derived from ‘a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate’, but that

produces a feeling of disgust in the subject.¹⁴⁸ Elizabeth Grosz concisely explains Kristeva's opening thoughts in one provocative line of text: '[a]bjection is a sickness at one's own body'.¹⁴⁹ This revulsion manifests when the subject comes in contact with what is perceived to be bodily excessive, or ambiguous. Body fluids and wastes such as saliva, faeces, blood, semen, and urine are frequent offenders. The organs and orifices from which these corporeal by-products precipitate are also contaminated with abjection. These 'rims'—the 'mouth, anus, eyes, ears, genitals'—are polluted as abject materials pass through them, from inside to outside the body.¹⁵⁰ Nick Mansfield goes so far as to argue that 'even the invisibly porous surface of the skin' can bear traces of the abject.¹⁵¹ Indeed, the skin operates as the ultimate border for hair, sweat, pus, and blood. The skin, in all of its flexibility, can even display indicators of the abject within, or underneath, it; cellulite, tendons, and veins are several examples of this phenomenon. '[U]napproachable and intimate', the abject is of the body. As such, as much as it is repellent, it is also unavoidable. What is demarcated as abject is culturally constructed, adhering to strict Western ideas of subject and object, masculine and feminine.

Part and property of the body, but also separate in their expulsion, abject waste materials become 'impossible objects', which contaminate the subject's desired wholeness, sickening her in the process.¹⁵² Grosz thoughtfully examines the implications of the impossible object upon the Western subject. She confirms that, in general, in order for "'proper" subjectivity' to manifest, there must be an

¹⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 77.

¹⁵⁰ Grosz, p. 72.

¹⁵¹ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 88.

¹⁵² Kristeva, p. 154.

‘expulsion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly.’¹⁵³ A subject cannot be whole if it is contaminated by objects of its own making. While the task of disavowing the body’s impossible objects may seem untenable, in general, for women and girls it becomes an aporia. In fact, impossible objects are culturally constructed as feminine, while the ideal subject is constructed as masculine. Indeed, as Kristeva specifies, the abject is a ‘*confrontation with the feminine*’ (emphasis in original).¹⁵⁴ Labelled in this way, ‘articulated within symbolic representations by those (who happen to be men)’, it becomes clear that the abject, the impossible object, the feminine, is what requires digital smoothing over and cosmetic erasure from standardised representations and corporealities of ideal doll-like feminine figures in the West.¹⁵⁵

The feminine subject learns to control her body in its functions and in its appearance. Smoothing over her unruliness, she writes a seemingly cohesive narrative of her subjectivity—or at least attempts it, insofar as her femininity presupposes negation. Kristeva explains that ‘fear, disgust, and abjection crying out, they quiet down, [when they are] concatenated into a story’.¹⁵⁶ By containing and ordering the abject in this way, the feminine subject is writing her own narrative of repression. Just as with the discursive practice of the body as archive (p. 112),

¹⁵³ Grosz, p. 71.

¹⁵⁴ Kristeva, p. 58.

¹⁵⁵ Grosz, p. 78. The expulsion of the abject presents a conundrum for the feminine subject. If the impossible (feminine) objects are removed, in strict gendered terms this suggests that masculinity replaces them. Yet, if this were the case, it would have to be a ‘complete’ transmutation of gender, for as McNamara stresses, any “‘in-between-ness’ [...] is threatening because it complicates the strict gender binary’ (p. 8). Rather than taking on this task and its implications, the discursive practices that remove the abject seem to create something all together sexless. This process, via digital editing or cosmetic procedures, confirms that the body has been sanitised; it is clean and proper. Once the abject is expelled, and the feminine subject is smooth, shiny, and ready for cultural reception, she—though still recognizably feminine—is automatically relegated to the position of beautiful object. Perhaps this is why Kristeva describes abjection as a type of ‘alchemy’ (p. 15).

¹⁵⁶ Kristeva, p. 145.

wherein attempts at cohesive subjectivity are written onto the body to form a kind of autobiography, here, too, the repression of the abject undoes itself in a similar way.

In *Amending the Abject Body*, Deborah Caslav Covino reminds her readers that the body is ‘an articulate organ’.¹⁵⁷ As much as abjection is rewritten through discursive practices that attempt to excise the ‘extras’ that our bodies produce, the abject always resurfaces. Grosz explains: ‘It is *impossible* to exclude these psychically and socially threatening elements [of the abject] with any finality. [...] [W]hat is excluded can never be fully obliterated’ (emphasis in original).¹⁵⁸ She goes on to state that, instead, the abject ‘hovers at the borders of our existence, threatening the apparently settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution’.¹⁵⁹ The impossible objects and the fragmentary self are repressed, but they are never completely eliminated. Like the ‘rims’ of a porous body, the border between repression and consciousness, and the abject and the ‘proper’, is also permeable. Thus, while it is upon the body that a narrative of the cohesive subject is performed, it is also the body that gives way to the overflow and fragmentation of the abject.

One result of the abject resurfacing is that it creates a sense of ambiguity for the ostensibly cohesive subject. Kristeva explains this as such:

For when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside is uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first.¹⁶⁰

By collapsing the distinct lines between the subject and the object, and between the inside and the outside of the body, the abject has the power to reveal the fiction of the cohesive subject. Despite its opposition to the masculine, the abject may open up possibilities and alternatives for understanding identity outside of traditional

¹⁵⁷ Deborah Caslav Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 27.

¹⁵⁸ Grosz, p. 71.

¹⁵⁹ Grosz, p. 71.

¹⁶⁰ Kristeva, p. 141.

humanist constructs. This potential may be especially useful in terms of deconstructing gendered identity in the West.

While it has become apparent that digital editing and cosmetic procedures attempt to expel the abject from the feminine body, excesses continue to emerge. Perhaps this persistent incompleteness is the result of the feminine's inseparability from the abject. When one element of the feminine body is ruled to be under control—such as through the Photoshopping or exfoliating of large pores—another culturally repugnant element—such as cankles—meanders in.¹⁶¹ As trends dictate a need for sustained containment, it becomes obvious that the abject will always win out. One feminist approach is to quash this cycle, embracing the abject in all of its supposed vulgarity.¹⁶² Certainly, this method is appealing, though, at times, it may border on essentialist ideas of the feminine body. However, relying on Kristeva's interpretation of the abject as a destabilising force may work for a posthuman application, especially if we revisit a reading of plastic.

A curious thing happens when the abject is smoothed over. Not only does it re-emerge somewhere else on the body, but, also, if a certain body part becomes too smooth, too glossy, or too plastic, the abject reappears in the same place from which it was eradicated. As noted in the introduction of this chapter, plastic's propensity to fuse with the body, both visually and corporeally, causes ambiguity. Plastic complicates what is inside or outside, subject or object. In dealing with the somatic,

¹⁶¹ See: Angela Epstein, 'As Cheryl Cole reveals hers, a fellow sufferer bemoans the curse of the cankles' (25 May 2011) <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1390592/Cheryl-Cole-Miley-Cyrus-Helen-Mirren-suffer-curse-cankles.html>> [accessed: 10 December 2012] and Eva Wiseman, 'Wobbly arms: the latest on our list of body image worries' (9 December 2012) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/dec/09/wobbly-arms-women-body-image>> [accessed 9 December 2012].

¹⁶² See: Mary Russo *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Taylor and Francis, 1995).

plastic is slippery and contaminating. Operating in a ‘confused cultural space’,¹⁶³ plastic corporeality occupies the same imprecise periphery to that of the abject. While it may perpetuate ideal femininity through replicating the beautiful object, plastic also parodies the impossible object. Thus, if the feminine subject takes on the overall plastic appearance of the Barbie doll, she can become culturally catalogued as ‘gross’, and ‘disgusting’.¹⁶⁴

Plastic’s ability to fuse with the corporeal is not the only telltale sign of its abjection. Drawing upon Barbie’s abject qualities, or what she calls her ‘sad grotesquerie’, writer Kamy Cunningham describes Barbie as a ‘twilight zone creature’.¹⁶⁵ Like her ‘life-sized counterpart—the department store mannequin’, Cunningham notes that Barbie, too, has a ‘sterility’ about her, and that there is an impression of the ‘cadaverous’ written upon her plastic flesh.¹⁶⁶ This observation fuses the corporeal with the inorganic features of plastic, but it also acknowledges the type of contamination at the very heart of the abject. Indeed, it is the corpse, with its ‘concretisation of the subject’s inevitable future’,¹⁶⁷ that ultimately defines abjection. The wastes and fluids that designate the abject remind the subject of its inevitable end, threatening cohesive subjectivity in the utmost.

In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Georges Bataille tackles the topic of the abject and death, concluding that: ‘Two things are inevitable; we cannot avoid dying

¹⁶³ Tofoletti, p. 68.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Heidi Montag walks first post-surgery red carpet, say she likes her chin best’ (15 February 2010)
<http://www.celebitchy.com/91445/heidi_montag_walks_first_post-surgery_red_carpet_says_she_likes_her_chin_best/> [accessed: 9 December 2012] (see comments).

¹⁶⁵ Kamy Cunningham, ‘Barbie Doll Culture and the American Wasteland’, in *Symbolic Interaction*, 16: 1 (1993), pp. 79-83 (p. 81).

¹⁶⁶ Cunningham, p. 81.

¹⁶⁷ Grosz, p. 75.

nor can we avoid bursting through our barriers, and they are one and the same.¹⁶⁸ With this statement, Bataille solidifies the importance of death to questions of the abject. The ruptures and leakages, wastes and fluids, above all else, signal the subject's mortality. As such, the statement also elucidates the abject's connection to the posthuman. Death annihilates any chance of cohesive subjectivity. Considering this statement, perhaps the smoothing over of bodies and body parts for a Barbie doll-like plastic ideal does not work to preserve a static, beautiful object and a secure, viewing subject, but, rather, it is a process of the ultimate disassembly by way of the death drive. Thus, despite the label of 'impossible object', the plastic abject implies fluidity and 'trace of movement'.¹⁶⁹

Barbie doll-like corporeality is part of a narrative of proper bodies and ideal beauty. Yet, when this fiction is taken 'toward its outer limit' Barbie doll-like imagery and cosmetic modifications can be seen to interrogate the classical notion of the feminine body as a beautiful (and sexual) object.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, as a signifier of the abject, Barbie's plasticity contaminates the feminine ideal, destabilising its position. Toffoletti explains the implications for the subject, when this is the case. She states:

Conceiving of the subject in terms of transformation can help us decode the mindset that writes the plastic body as a technology of control and containment, or as fixed in the real. It can serve as a strategy to hack into the phallogocentric codes that structure ideals of femininity, and scramble interpretations of embodiment that reinscribe an unchanging and essentialised myth of woman as tied to nature.¹⁷¹

As such, for Toffoletti, Barbie's invasive plasticity broadens subjectivities when containment and borders are visually and physically replaced by the transgressive material. Here, masculinity is no longer tied to the machine and femininity no

¹⁶⁸ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. by M. Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, [1957] 1986), p. 140.

¹⁶⁹ Barthes, p. 97.

¹⁷⁰ Rogers, p. 3.

¹⁷¹ Toffoletti, p. 79.

longer relies on a humanist origin story of nature and the object. Thus, for Toffoletti, Barbie, plastic and corresponding representations of feminine somatics of excess work to liberate the feminine subject from the confines of a humanist construction of self.

Plastic, as a marker of the abject, provides a compelling model in which to understand Barbie doll-like embodiment in terms of the posthuman. Indeed, if celebrated as Toffoletti has done, plastic Barbie doll-like femininity, as an extension of the abject, can challenge conventions of gender and subjectivity in the West. However, while excess certainly destabilises the unified Western subject, revelling in it also presents certain dangers. As race and gender determine what is considered abject—with the signifiers of Sarah Baartman's narrative still circulating in popular discourse—such a reclamation may work to perpetuate certain identities as other, marginalising, essentialising, or romanticising them in the process. These issues are taken up in the following chapter, with an investigation into the celebrity construction of Nicki Minaj and the black Barbie doll.

Chapter Four

'It's Barbie, Bitch!':

Nicki Minaj, Black Barbie, and the Posthuman Subject¹

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. 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 child treasured.

—Toni Morrison²

I. 'Where My Bad Bitches At?': Contextualising The Fame of Nicki Minaj³

Vibrant and brash, hip hop sensation Nicki Minaj is at the pinnacle of fame in the contemporary world of American celebrity culture. Active in the music industry since 2004, the performer made her debut in the underground New York rap scene. Over the course of five years, she pioneered a unique style of performance and verse, creating a niche for herself with fast-paced styling, pastiche popular culture references, alter egos, and assorted accents. Using the social networking website *Myspace* as a platform, Minaj accrued a fan-base and garnered industry attention, which enabled her to break into the mainstream in 2009. For the last three years, the rapper's stardom has continued to accelerate, with a career that the *New York Times* calls 'sparkling'.⁴ Much of her commercial success can be attributed to her debut album, *Pink Friday*, which went platinum in 2011. By 2012, not only had she

¹ Caryn Ganz, 'The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj' (2010) <<http://www.out.com/detail.asp?page=2&id=27391>> [accessed 30 January 2013] (p. 2).

² Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 18.

³ Ganz, p. 1.

released her second studio album (with a third purportedly underway) and embarked upon a second global tour, but also she had become an *American Idol* panel judge, and a Hollywood film voice actor. With a fragrance, a clothing line, high profile charity work, brand endorsements from Adidas to Pepsi, and a contract with MAC makeup's Viva Glam 2013, Minaj is basking in the limelight.

In many ways Minaj is an example of the ideal twenty-first-century celebrity. She relishes each of her roles, embracing with verve the multiplicitous demands of the Western celebrity industry. As much as she follows the rules, she also sets trends, striking a balance between mainstream convention and eccentric originality, which keeps her interesting, relevant, and popular to both critics and consumers. This balance comes across in all areas of her performance. Her appearance—and how it alters through customised wigs, makeup, and fashion ensembles—makes allusion to an array of famous artists and cultural artefacts while pushing the limits of style and glamour. Her lyrics and vocalisation are mixtures of homage and parody to hip hop's past superstars, and celebrity culture in general. She weaves reference to television, sports, popular fiction, film, fashion, and brand names throughout her rhymes in a way that is simultaneously admiring and irreverent. Minaj's cultural fluency establishes her as a fan within the industry, while her inventiveness keeps her audience guessing, generating constant media interest, and adding to her own celebrity power. Minaj's calculated flirtation with both the mainstream and the avant-garde has positioned her as a force in hip hop, and a lucrative earner in the entertainment industry. Considering the heights of her celebrity, it is almost justifiable that journalist Brent Staples makes the extraordinary claim that Minaj is

⁴ Jon Caramanica, 'A Singular Influence', *The New York Times* (30 March 2012) <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/arts/music/nicki-minaj-is-the-influential-leader-of-hip-hop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> [accessed 30 January 2013] (para. 1).

poised to be the ‘most influential rapper of all time’.⁵ Her influence beyond hip hop and into the mainstream is certainly far-reaching and diverse.

Minaj’s ability to simultaneously work within and contest cultural norms is evident beyond the professional demands of the business. Her performance of feminine subjectivity at the intersection of gender and race is complex, adding another dimension to her overall celebrity construction. Not merely comprising of attempts to reproduce the standards of idealised white femininity in the West, the star’s crafted image confronts its rules, limitations, and contradictions in a spirited and dynamic manner. Trinidad-born, and African American-identified, Minaj has co-opted an emblem of idealised white femininity—the Barbie doll—into her self-branding and performance with potentially subversive results. As a woman of colour, Minaj’s bold appropriation challenges both the doll’s perpetuation of white feminine uniformity in the West and how the status of black women is conceptualised in hip hop and Western celebrity culture. Further, with this prominent brand name added to her roster, Minaj takes the celebrity narrative that she can ‘be it all’ to its outer limit; not only can she be a rapper, panel judge, actor, entrepreneur, and spokesmodel, but she can even be Barbie. This act of incorporating Barbie into her multiple, and oftentimes referential, pastiche, and parodic identities invites a reading of Minaj’s celebrity as postmodern and posthuman. Before interrogating how Minaj negotiates becoming Barbie as a representation of feminine subject formation in nonlinear, flexible, and fragmented ways, it is crucial to contextualise her role in terms of gender and race in hip hop and the mainstream media. Only then

⁵ Brent Staples, ‘Nicki Minaj Crashes Hip-Hop’s Boys Club’, *The New York Times* (7 July 2012) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/opinion/sunday/nicki-minaj-crashes-hip-hops-boys-club.html?n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fS%2fStaples%2c%20Brent>> [accessed 30 January 2013] (para. 7).

can we understand her approach to Barbie, and the overarching implications such an appropriation may have on feminine subjectivity in the West.

Minaj's presence in hip hop is exceptional. Women emcees have been involved in the scene since its start, yet the commercial success enjoyed by their male counterparts continues to be elusive. *Bitch Media* blogger, Alyx Vesey, explains the difficulties women face in the industry. She contends that in a contemporary context, artists such as 'Lil Mama, Estelle, Ke\$ha, and Kid Sister get some recognition, but not on the level that kingpins Jay-Z, Kanye West, T.I., and Lil Wayne receive'.⁶ Not only is there less recognition on the whole for Minaj's female contemporaries who produce work at the same level as their male counterparts, but women who were once hip hop superstars no longer sell records. Vesey states that:

Older female rappers have either become less culturally relevant, like Missy Elliott, or have branched into a variety of creative and merchandising opportunities outside of hip hop, as Queen Latifah has done.⁷

This observation confirms that when women artists do acquire mainstream recognition, their time in the spotlight is short-lived. Indeed, as Latoya Peterson indicates on the website *Jezebel*, female rappers' commercial viability, on average, lasts 'less than two years'.⁸ In contrast, male performers such as Snoop Dogg continue to tour and release albums on major labels twenty years into their careers.⁹ In such a climate of gender inequality, it is no wonder that when Minaj's *Pink Friday* went platinum it had been preceded by an eight-year drought for women in the business. (Lil' Kim previously achieved this accolade in 2003, with her album *La*

⁶ Alyx Vesey, 'Tuning In: Nicki Minaj' (2010) <<http://bitchmagazine.org/post/tuning-in-nicki-minaj>> [accessed: 7 July 2012] (para. 9).

⁷ Vesey, para. 9.

⁸ Peterson, Latoya, 'Nicki Minaj and the Issue of Female MCs' (2010) <<http://jezebel.com/5478800/nicki-minaj-and-the-issue-of-female-mcs>> [accessed 30 January 2012] (para. 1).

⁹ Snoop Dogg changed his stage name to Snoop Lion in 2012, but he is still commonly referred to as the former.

Bella Mafia.) Considering this history, the rapper's response to her mainstream triumph was understandably exuberant. At the news that *Pink Friday's* sales had surpassed Kanye West's *My Dark Beautiful Twisted Fantasy*, she exclaimed, 'Girl Power! I deserve it this time'.¹⁰ Rather than demonstrating an overhaul in the industry, however, *Pink Friday's* critical and commercial success signals that Minaj is an aberration. The artist's triumphs call attention to a dearth of highly influential women in the medium, and the misogyny that motivates it.

Misogyny in hip hop is a driving force behind many rappers' mainstream success, and is typically emphasised by traditional media outlets. Headlines sensationalise a small fraction of hip hop culture's themes of obscenity, feminine objectification, homophobia, and gendered violence, and, as such, incite controversy and curiosity. Rappers who court this controversy gain the most fame and commercial recognition.¹¹ Conversely, the potential for progressive lyrics and celebrity personas that promote diversity and feminist themes are diminished and dispelled when the genre is co-opted by white mainstream culture. In the documentary film, *Cultural Criticism and Transformation*, bell hooks criticises this phenomenon. She argues that:

Rap music is so diverse in its themes, its style, its content, but when it becomes a vehicle to be talked about in mainstream news, the rap that gets in national news is always the rap music that perpetuates misogyny, that is most obscene in its lyrics, and then this comes to stand for what rap is.¹²

The music most prominently featured on MTV, promoted on popular culture websites, and played and re-played on mainstream radio stations fits this bill. Such an emphasis on misogyny in the hip hop industry—that, too, is marginalised in the

¹⁰ Goddessjaz, 'Nicki Minaj: 1st Female Platinum Rapper in 8 Years' (2010) <<http://feministing.com/2011/01/06/nicki-minaj-1st-female-platinum-rapper-in-8-years/>> [accessed: 30 January 2013] (para. 3).

¹¹ A contemporary example of this is the celebrity of Chris Brown.

¹² bell hooks, *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* (Media Education Foundation, 1997).

broader entertainment industry due to the effects of institutionalised racism—begins to explain why there are so few women in major positions of stardom in the world of hip hop. Moreover, it is indicative of how and why commercially successful women rappers market their images and music to consumers in very specific ways.

In order to be successful, most women rappers follow a very limited cultural script.¹³ Tricia Rose contends that the women artists who have met the ‘commercial demands’ of the industry have had to rely ‘on the product reserved especially for black women: sexual excess’.¹⁴ Exploiting one’s feminine (hyper)sexuality through performance is a ubiquitous practice for black women in the medium. Kelis, whose breasts ‘bring all the boys to the yard’,¹⁵ Beyoncé (by way of Destiny’s Child), whose backside is particularly ‘bootylicious’,¹⁶ and Lil’ Kim, whose ‘pussy [...] can break up happy homes’,¹⁷ are all chart-toppers who demonstrate the popularity and profitability of sexually explicit lyrics in the world of hip hop. Minaj’s performance of celebrity exhibits the signs of this type of overt sexual expression as well, and illustrates how it is not confined to the lyrical. Like the above artists, Minaj asserts her hypersexuality in song, stating that she has ‘the fattest pussy in the business’,¹⁸ while her frequent ‘twerking’ style of dance and uninhibited fashion ensembles prove that she brings her sexuality to the fore in her stage and video performances, and in her public appearances as well.

Despite the obvious alignment with overt sexuality, Minaj is aware of the problems generated by relying on one’s sexuality for commercial success, especially

¹³ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 114.

¹⁴ Rose, p. 124.

¹⁵ Kelis, ‘Milkshake’, *Tasty* (Star Trak and Artista Records, 2003).

¹⁶ Destiny’s Child, ‘Bootylicious’, *Survivor* (Columbia Records, 2001).

¹⁷ Lil’ Kim, ‘Pussy Callin’”, *Black Friday* (Queen Bee Productions, 2011).

¹⁸ Nicki Minaj (featuring Lil Wayne), ‘Lollipop [Remix]’, *Sucka Free* (Young Money Entertainment, 2008)

as it applies to the hip hop industry. Explaining her position on the topic, she begins by citing her own influences:

When I grew up I saw females doing certain things, and I thought I had to do that exactly. The female rappers of my day spoke about sex a lot [...] and I thought that to have the success they got, I would have to represent the same thing. When in fact I didn't have to represent the same thing.¹⁹

She goes on to state that she 'made a conscious decision to try to tone down the sexiness' because she wants her fans, especially 'young girls' to know that '[y]ou got to have something else to go with [sex appeal]'.²⁰ Rather than simply embracing the standards of hypersexual representation in the industry like many artists before her, Minaj is not complacent. In her attempts to 'tone down the sexiness', she seems to be striving to promote a more than one-dimensional representation of black femininity. In this version, sexuality is still incorporated—and even highlighted—but it also must be accompanied by 'something else' such as musical innovation, business acumen, and/or stylistic creativity. Far from blindly perpetuating a narrative that limits black women in hip hop to the sexually excessive, Minaj attempts to represent an image of her celebrity that is sexually in control, taking her engagement with feminist discourse beyond the refrain of 'girl power'.

Minaj's vision confronts a legacy that is much more substantial than the hackneyed entertainment industry jargon that 'sex sells'. The sexualisation of feminine bodies in order to sell products is laden with a history of gender inequality, which is informed by patriarchal economic structures dependent upon sexual

¹⁹ 'Nicki Minaj and Friends Cover Vibe Magazine' (2 June 2010) <<http://www.vibe.com/article/nicki-minaj-friends-cover-vibe-magazine>> [accessed 30 January 2013] (para. 3).

²⁰ 'Music: Nicki Minaj', *Interview* (April 2010) <<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/nicki-minaj/#>> [accessed 30 January 2013] (para. 1).

exchange.²¹ Such structures are further complicated at the junction of gender, sexuality, and race. Indeed, when Rose states that sexual excess is a ‘product reserved especially for black women’, she is referring to hundreds of years of sustained hegemony. In Western discursive practice, the confluence of racism and misogyny has worked to codify sexual excess into a dehumanising marker of black feminine bodies for purposes of violence and commerce. Because Minaj is up against such an aggressive, yet insidious system, how her embodiment and sexuality are interpreted often conforms to an enduring narrative that is beyond her control.

One example of how sexual excess is inscribed onto Minaj’s body comes from tabloid-based online media. The star has been the focus of incessant blogger speculation regarding whether or not she has undergone cosmetic surgery for ‘butt implants’.²² Before and after photographs, the legitimacy of which is highly suspect, are in constant circulation on various gossip websites. This scandal calls attention to how excess works to signal racial othering by way of exotification and pathology. Images of Minaj’s posterior—an anatomical marker of racialised excess that is discussed in chapter three—are viewed through a lens of deviance and then consumed to confirm the supremacy of the white mainstream audience.

This phenomenon is taken further with Minaj’s experience on the American morning television programme *Live with Regis and Kelly* in 2010. Zenzile, a writer for the lifestyle blog *LoveJonesLifestyle*, reports Minaj’s guest appearance as follows:

While Regis examines the construction of Nicki’s dress, a veiled lead into his groping/slapping/grasping of her posterior, Kelly [...] leads into a discussion of Nicki’s waist measurements. In its entirety, Nicki became a museum[-]like

²¹ See: Gayle S. Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’, in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. by Linda Nicholson (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 27-62.

²² ‘Nicki Minaj Before Butt Implants (PHOTOS)’ (18 September 2012) <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/18/nicki-minaj-before-butt-implants_n_1892922.html> [accessed: 2 January 2013].

display of physical wonder. [In this context], [s]he is no longer an artist, emcee, singer or performer, but a body.²³

From Regis's voyeurism and groping, to Kelly's evaluative inquiries, Minaj was, indeed, presented to the viewers at home as an exotic spectacle of sexual excess. Zenzile concludes by stating that the rapper was 'transformed from artist into modern day Hottentot Venus'.²⁴ This evaluation is an accurate one. Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman (known as the 'Hottentot Venus', see p. 161) represents the Western narrative construction of black women as exotic, hypersexual, deviant, and nonhuman. The way in which those in the media (literally) handle Minaj's body demonstrates how this narrative reverberates in contemporary culture; her physicality is written as an exhibition for discursive analysis, sexual perusal, and pathologisation.

Minaj is frustrated by the way her embodied representation is sexualised by the media and by consumers. In a profile piece with *Out* magazine, Caryn Ganz writes that the rapper decided to respond to her experiences of racism and misogyny 'by playing to her female fans'.²⁵ In the article, Minaj explains that she 'started making it [her] business to say things that would empower women, like, "Where my bad bitches at?" to let them know, "I'm here for you"'.²⁶ She takes this approach further on the track 'I'm the Best' from *Pink Friday*. Here she raps, 'I'm fighting for the girls that never thought they could win'.²⁷ These examples convey Minaj's alignment with a philosophy of gender and race solidarity, which seems to have arisen out of her personal experiences, and the wider problems black women

²³ Zenzile, 'Nicki Minaj: Modern Day Hottentot...' (3 December 2010) <<http://lovejoneslifestyle.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/nicki-minaj-modern-day-hottentot.html>> [accessed: 30 January 2013] (para. 2).

²⁴ Zenzile, para. 1.

²⁵ Ganz, p. 1.

²⁶ Ganz, p. 1.

²⁷ Nicki Minaj, 'I'm the Best', *Pink Friday* (Young Money Entertainment, 2010).

encounter, within the hip hop industry and the mainstream media. Despite, and because of, such adversity, Minaj refuses to actively comply with the traditional cultural script of sexual excess that is written for black women in the business. Her alternative is to present herself as a positive role model to girls and young women. With her traction as a trendsetter who engages with cultural norms, but then undoes them, this ambition is a compelling one. Her decision to take on these norms by way of Barbie makes her approach all the more provocative.

The remainder of this chapter examines Minaj's negotiation of an alternative and hybridised representation of feminine subjectivity. Minaj's construction of her Barbie doll-like celebrity image is analysed through a reading of black femininity in mainstream media and hip hop cultures and how it negotiates a feminist conceptualisation of embodiment. Her appropriation of Barbie alongside the doll's racial, economic, and historical underpinnings is also interrogated in the context of her celebrity image, which, it is argued, troublingly erases the hegemonic narratives that surround the doll. Minaj-as-Barbie, I suggest, may signal liberatory, pluralistic, and feminist possibilities of a postmodern and posthuman feminine subjectivity.

II. Some Assembly Required: The Making of Harajuku Barbie

Wide-eyed and voluptuous, Nicki Minaj poses on the cover of her 2010 debut studio album, *Pink Friday*.²⁸ Donned in a super-sleek pink wig, hot pink lipstick, shiny pink lace-up platform boots, and a shimmering corseted dress winged in tulle, the songstress sits propped, pouting for the camera. Showcased by a bubblegum pink backdrop, Minaj is surrounded by an overabundance of visual cues signalling a

²⁸ The album cover art is available on the Nicki Minaj Website: <www.mypinkfriday.com> [accessed: 2 January 2013].

girlishly sexy femininity. To accentuate this indulgent spectacle, the photograph has been noticeably modified. Minaj's legs are elongated into caricature, while her skin reflects a plastic sheen. Strikingly, her arms are erased in their entirety. The crowned princess of hip hop gazes out at her fans as a hyperfeminine and hyperreal dismembered black Barbie doll.²⁹

With the promotion of her record label, Young Money Entertainment, Minaj has developed this Barbie doll-like image beyond photoshoots and album covers, and into visual and lyrical allusion, playful appropriation, biographical half-truths, fragmentary details, and ostentatious posturing. The artist's public performance of Barbie is described as 'imaginative' and 'fun'; she is the *Pink Friday* image come to life in the form of a 'coquettish girly girl-fashionista'.³⁰ Manifesting in all aspects of the artist's public performance of her celebrity, this Barbie doll-like character announces her presence accessorised with multi-coloured wigs, pink lipstick, a cute and fantastical wardrobe, and whimsically affected voices. In many publicity photos, Minaj flashes a sparkly necklace with the word 'Barbie' appearing in its familiar cursive script. She explains the motivation behind co-opting the signification of this cultural phenomenon, stating simply that, 'all girls are Barbies'.³¹ She claims that '[w]e all want to play dress-up' as well as be 'icons and moguls'.³² With this assertion, Minaj identifies the narrative of accessible aspiration that is inseparable from the Barbie brand.

The rapper mediates the aspirational language of becoming Barbie into her public persona by combining the doll's signatory characteristics with another set of

²⁹ Minaj has self-identified as black in interviews and song lyrics. In popular media, she is repeatedly labelled as the 'Black Barbie'.

³⁰ 'Wiki Minaj' (2012) <http://nickiminaj.wikia.com/wiki/The_Harajuku_Barbie> [accessed 2 January 2013] (para. 1).

³¹ 'Nicki Minaj Explains "Harajuku Barbie"' (2009) <<http://vimeo.com/6019791>> [accessed 2 January 2013].

³² 'Nicki Minaj Explains "Harajuku Barbie"'.

cultural markers. Harajuku Barbie—the official title of her alter ego—makes reference to Tokyo street culture. Minaj recalls that she named her Barbie persona after the subculture Harajuku because of her appreciation for its ‘free-spirited, girls just wanna have fun, kick ass’ attitude.³³ Based upon Minaj’s description, it seems that her (cursory) understanding of the tenets of Harajuku already align with much of the Barbie doll brand narrative. Perhaps what appeals to the rapper, then, is her interpretation of a slightly tougher, more ‘kick ass’ femininity. Or, perhaps incorporating Harajuku into Minaj’s Barbie performance provides the artist with a more flexible understanding of what Barbie means. Redefining the doll with the grammatical modifier of ‘Harajuku’ draws attention to Minaj’s performance of Barbie as racially specific. Unlike (the original and most recognisable) Barbie doll, Harajuku Barbie is not white or even normatively Western. As such, while claiming many of the conventions of Barbie—the hyperfeminine markers of glamour, high fashion, and fun—Minaj takes the narrative that becoming Barbie is an aspirational practice reserved for white women and girls and turns it on its blonde head.³⁴

While Harajuku Barbie appears as a vibrant and inventive persona on the popular culture stage, taking cues from both mainstream Western iconography and Japanese street culture, her creation also owes much to a tradition of women in hip hop. Despite her wariness in terms of her musical predecessors’ expressions of sexuality, Minaj’s persona is in direct conversation with the well-established, and potentially subversive, models of black femininity therein. In ‘Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance’, Cheryl L. Keyes explains how black women rappers’ celebrity is often defined by way of four distinctive identities. She names these as ‘Queen Mother’, ‘Fly

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Convincing arguments have been established that the rapper is perpetuating Orientalism with her appropriation of Harajuku. See: Vesey.

Girl’, ‘Sista with Attitude’, and ‘Lesbian’.³⁵ Emcees who are inclined toward the ‘Queen Mother’ role ‘view themselves as African-centered icons’.³⁶ ‘Fly Girls’, she explains, are women who dress ‘in chic clothing and fashionable hairstyles, jewelry and cosmetics’.³⁷ Keyes qualifies the ‘Sista with Attitude’ as rappers who ‘value attitude as a means of empowerment’.³⁸ The final category of ‘Lesbian’ is for women rappers who are out both lyrically and publicly. Like many women in the industry, Minaj’s hip hop celebrity construction, and her alter ego of Harajuku Barbie, can be understood to alternate and embody many qualities from each of these roles—barring the characteristics of the ‘Queen Mother’. Becoming Barbie by way of these categories adds further nuance to Minaj’s stardom, while potentially dismantling or, as the cover of *Pink Friday* suggests, dis-arming, the traditional narrative of idealised, white Barbie doll-like femininity.

The importance of Keyes’s categories of women in hip hop, and Minaj’s engagement with them through Harajuku Barbie, cannot be understated. These models, which have contested and negotiated the representational and commercial disenfranchisement of women in the genre, provide a distinctive attempt to undermine the racist and misogynistic narrative of black women in the West. At first glance, the ‘Fly Girl’ may seem superficial, but her performance might also be read as “flippin da script” (deconstructing dominant ideology).³⁹ By wearing ‘clothes that accent’ parts of the anatomy ‘considered beauty markers of Black women by Black culture’, the ‘Fly Girl’ celebrates ‘aspects of black women’s bodies considered

³⁵ Cheryl L. Keyes, ‘Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance’, in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, ed. by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 305-319 (p. 306).

³⁶ Keyes, p. 306.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

undesirable', unattractive, or excessive by mainstream Western culture.⁴⁰

Considering the 'Fly Girl' alongside Harajuku Barbie's fashionista status suggests that her participation in elaborate and flamboyant fashion choices is an act of resistance.

The 'Sista' and 'Lesbian' roles expand upon this cultural reworking, as they can be read as empowering black women through confidence, self-expression, and the reclaiming of desire. The attitude of many 'Sistas' is punctuated with the word 'bitch', as a way to 'subvert patriarchal rule'.⁴¹ Minaj's lyrics and overall attitude indicate a provocative swagger in line with the 'Sista'. As Harajuku Barbie, she often ends 'phone calls with an enthusiastic "It's Barbie, *bitch!*"⁴² Minaj/Harajuku Barbie's relationship to the role of 'Lesbian' is contested at best. Minaj embraces feminine desire, but she seems to capriciously move into and out of a queer or bicurious identity as she shifts alter egos.⁴³ Reading Harajuku Barbie in terms of these roles situates the performance within a framework that has been contending with the race, gender, and sexual politics of hip hop since its earliest days. Crucially, this conversation equips Minaj with the tools necessary to challenge the racist and misogynistic structure of the industry, withstanding attacks from critics.

Despite Harajuku Barbie's layered construction, popular feminist critics are quick to denounce the spirited enthusiasm of Minaj and her alter ego as a misdirected attempt at feminism-lite.⁴⁴ When Minaj performed alongside Mariah Carey in a remixed rendition of the song 'Up Out My Face', both appearing as Barbie dolls in the video, such criticism was acute. Nevertheless, Minaj is always ready to

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 310.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 312.

⁴² Ganz, p. 2.

⁴³ Many of Minaj's lyrics suggest that her (fictional?) sexual conquests are often women. Troublingly, however, her verses are also peppered with the heterosexist shorthand 'no homo' (Ganz, p. 3).

⁴⁴ See: Vesey.

defend Harajuku Barbie. She contends: 'It's interesting that people have more negative things to say about me saying "I'm Barbie" than me saying "I'm a bad bitch."' ⁴⁵ Elaborating further, Minaj explains: 'So you can call yourself a female dog because that's cool in our community. But if you call yourself a Barbie, that's fake'. ⁴⁶ With this statement Minaj reveals the hypocrisy at work in the industry as well as several unexamined criticisms of the women within it. She pinpoints the Western acceptability of equating black feminine bodies to the nonhuman and animalistic, while suggesting that when black women align themselves with an icon of idealised white femininity it is always an untenable comparison.

Consolidating and reclaiming both terms, as Minaj does with her expression 'It's Barbie, *bitch!*', undermines the power of these terms as epithets of abuse. This style of appropriation, made popular by the 'Sista with Attitude', builds upon Minaj's reputation as Harajuku Barbie, especially with her fans. Keen followers happily brandish the Barbie moniker, inspired by the star to interpret being Barbie doll-like in new and inventive ways. Significantly, these fans have even organised a 'Barbie Movement'. With it, online communities document both Minaj's Harajuku Barbie persona as well as the interpretations of it by her fans. Fan-created blogs display discussions about beauty and fashion, and provide helpful tips to achieve the Harajuku Barbie aesthetic, while an endless stream of inspirational images of Minaj circulate. ⁴⁷ MyPinkFriday.com, the rapper's official website, also hosts forums where fans can communicate. In a thread offering support and friendship, one fan expresses her enthusiasm in being a 'diva'. Conversely, another bemoans being called

⁴⁵ Ganz, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Ganz, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Such fansites include: <<http://bee-leed-dat-bitch.tumblr.com/>>, <<http://www.facebook.com/nickiminaj>>, <<http://fuckyeahharajukubarbie.tumblr.com/>>, <<http://hellyeahnickiminaj.tumblr.com/>> and <<http://nickiminajbarbies.com/>>. [accessed 2 January 2013].

'fake'.⁴⁸ Like Minaj, these fans—often women and girls of colour—seem to be constructing their own amalgamated interpretations of Barbie. Collectively referring to themselves as the 'Barbz', their re-reading and appropriation, by way of Minaj, is a sharp and pointed corruption of the Barbie doll's most troublingly signification.

From the outset, Harajuku Barbie works as a pastiched amalgamation of cultural markers. For her alter ego, Minaj blends the traditional conceptualisations of the Barbie doll brand of aspirational white femininity with references and themes from Japanese street culture and African American hip hop traditions. Critics and fans contribute further to this formation, which goes on to produce a powerfully hybridised and fragmented representation of feminine subjectivity. Harajuku Barbie has the potential to both redefine the Barbie doll's cultural signification and challenge how feminine subjectivity is understood in the West. The following section situates Harajuku Barbie in terms of the Barbie brand's relationship to race and authenticity, before examining how Minaj and her alter ego then deconstruct its oppositional framework by way of a posthuman reading.

III. 'Bitch, You Ain't No Barbie':

Race, Authenticity, and the Commodification of Difference

In her article on Minaj, the 'Barbz', and their relationship to the Barbie doll, Alyx Vesey ponders whether 'the aspiration [to imitate Harajuku Barbie] results from some black girls wanting to find dolls with whom they can identify'.⁴⁹ This speculation highlights not only the importance of Harajuku Barbie to Minaj's

⁴⁸ The Nicki Minaj Website Forum is interactive and fluid: <<http://mypinkfriday.com/forum>>. These examples were listed from 2011 and accessed 12 January 2012.

⁴⁹ Vesey, para. 4.

fanbase, but also elucidates the reasons why she is seen as so influential. Mattel delivers a scarcity of convincingly diverse Barbie doll options to which girls and young women can identify. Media and visual texts that contain representations of the doll, and allusions to her image as a site of aspiration, 'convey the message *not* that any girl can be like Barbie', but that becoming Barbie is an enterprise especially allocated to young, affluent, white women and girls.⁵⁰ Not only does such a subtext present a dilemma of identification for women and girls of colour if they choose to appropriate the attributes of the Barbie doll, but it also creates an environment for inequality, where animosity and accusations of inauthenticity are exponential.

Minaj's Harajuku Barbie and the 'Barbie Movement' have been met with vitriolic judgement and contempt in popular culture circles. Pop music sensation Lady Gaga provides an instance of this type of reaction. During the performer's The Monster Ball Tour, she took to decapitating a Barbie doll during her live stage performances. Upon removing the doll's head—oftentimes with her teeth—the singer would express her disdain for the plaything, informing her devoted fans, much to their delight, that Barbie perpetuates an impossible feminine beauty ideal.⁵¹ Such an act and accompanying message is a demonstration of feminist defiance in regards to the doll. Yet, Lady Gaga's beheading of Barbie ought to be read as symbolising more than this typical brand of protest. Lady Gaga is certainly aware of Minaj's presence in the entertainment industry. The two performers are frequently compared as outrageous, larger-than-life figures, while their albums compete at the top of the music charts.⁵² As such, Lady Gaga's mischievous exercise in Barbie doll decapitation can also be contextualised as a response to Minaj, Harajuku Barbie, and the 'Barbie

⁵⁰ Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications), p. 56.

⁵¹ 'Lady Gaga Decapitates Barbie' (2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acvIuOeKH5w>> [accessed 30 January 2013].

⁵² See: Ganz.

Movement'. Moreover, Lady Gaga's stunt can be read as a colonising move by a white feminist. By disparaging the doll as universally inauthentic, she specifically alienates and others Minaj and her fans.

Recent white pop/rap phenomenon and internet it-girl, Kreayshawn provides another troubling, and more overt, example of the popular culture backlash against Harajuku Barbie. In her self-produced track, 'Gucci, Gucci', she spits the lyrics 'Bitch, you ain't no Barbie', purportedly accusing Minaj and her fans of failing to achieve doll-like perfection.⁵³ When asked to address her charge against Minaj for Complex.com, Kreayshawn justified her lyrics in this way:

Honestly man, this is no disrespect to [Minaj] because she's got talent. She's got an image. But when it comes to inspiring young women, her message is to be a Barbie—to be plastic, to be fake, to all have blonde hair.⁵⁴

The rapper condemns Minaj for a lack of authenticity, but she, too, can be identified for her inauthentic hip hop persona. A member of the controversially named White Girl Mob, Kreayshawn has been accused of appropriating a more 'ethnic-sounding' stage name in order to connect with a larger hip hop audience.⁵⁵

Kreayshawn's claim that Minaj is 'fake', as well as the objections surrounding her own authenticity, both reside within a larger context. This style of feuding in hip hop has a long and notorious history. Popular culture blogger, Goddessjaz, explains in hip hop vernacular that 'Public "beef" is a hugely powerful promotional tool and can make or break careers'.⁵⁶ Indeed, while Kreayshawn may have provoked a rivalry

⁵³ Kreayshawn, 'Gucci, Gucci' (Sony Music Entertainment, 2011).

⁵⁴ Insanul Ahmed, 'Who Is Kreayshawn?' (2011)

<<http://www.complex.com/music/2011/05/who-is-kreayshawn/influences#gallery>> [accessed: 3 January 2013] (para. 3).

⁵⁵ 'On Kreayshawn and the Utility of Black Women', *The Crunk Feminist Collective* (2011) <<http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2011/06/06/on-kreayshawn-and-the-utility-of-black-women/?like=1>> [accessed 3 January 2013].

⁵⁶ Goddessjaz, 'Nicki Minaj: 1st Female Platinum Rapper in 8 Years' (2011) <<http://feministing.com/2011/01/06/nicki-minaj-1st-female-platinum-rapper-in-8-years/>> [accessed 30 January 2013] (para. 5).

with Minaj, the latter was already embroiled in another authenticity-based feud with Lil' Kim.⁵⁷ Critics have much to say about this longstanding trend of vying for dominance in the world of hip hop music, especially when it occurs between women. Goddessjaz pointedly queries: 'But what does it mean when the few women on the mainstream scene are bickering?'⁵⁸ Her question reveals another dimension of the effects of misogyny within the mainstream industry. If women rappers are in constant competition with each other, it may be stirring up media attention, but it is also actively working to eliminate the credibility of women in the medium.

While Kreayshawn's charges against Minaj align with the tenets of hip hop convention, issues of race situate the feud more closely to Lady Gaga's display of hostility. It is doubtful as to whether Kreayshawn would have thought it necessary to criticise Minaj's Barbie doll-like qualities—or, crucially, what she understands as a lack thereof—if Minaj were not a woman of colour. As such, while the performer's posturing is certainly about publicity and fame, her comments should not be read merely as part of the business. Both Lady Gaga and Kreayshawn's actions and remarks elucidate a wider cultural narrative that repeatedly insists that black girls cannot be Barbie doll-like.

When Harajuku Barbie and the 'Barbz' communicate a hyperfeminine doll-like embodiment, their efforts are dismissed as inauthentic and/or excessive expressions of an aspirational, white ideal. On the surface, this response to Barbie doll-like signification is a common one, regardless of race or ethnicity. The Barbie doll is often described as unrealistic and 'fake', and, by extension, so are her throngs

⁵⁷ In 2000, Lil' Kim released the video for her single 'How Many Licks?' wherein she played the role of a factory-assembled living doll. Considering that Harajuku Barbie appears to have been formed on the same assembly line as Kim's video persona, comparisons are frequent. As such, a rivalry between the rappers has developed, with Lil' Kim contesting Minaj's black Barbie status. See: Lil' Kim. 'How Many Licks?' (video). *The Notorious K.I.M.*. Atlantic and Queen Bee Entertainment. 2000.

⁵⁸ Goddessjaz, para. 5.

of devotees. However, as the 'Barbie Movement' is an articulation by and for young women of colour, race complicates ideas of authenticity further. Along with Lady Gaga and Kreayshawn's condemnations, scores of social networking sites—some dedicated solely to hating Minaj and the 'Barbz'—rumble with explicitly racist attacks against the Harajuku Barbie aesthetic.⁵⁹ Claims that women of colour cannot be Barbie simply due to their race illustrate another motivation behind many reiterations that the 'Barbie Movement' consists of women and girls who are 'fake'. Like the black Barbie dolls to which they are equated, Minaj and her fans are read as counterfeit imitations of a white original doll.

The whiteness of Barbie is pervasive, running through the entire narrative of the brand. Mattel's main marketing strategy for the doll is that she must remain as blank as possible. This symbolic blankness enables an interpretive versatility, inspiring open-ended fantasy, imaginative play, and diverse aspirational options in terms of how Barbie's career—and ethnicity—are represented. While suggesting an opening up of possibilities, this blankness can also be read as an uncritical reproduction of whiteness as the cultural norm. When Mattel defers to a slight variation of the original, white Barbie doll for each and every marketing campaign, the corporation may be sustaining an image of blankness, but this image can also be interpreted as a shining emblem of whiteness.

Understood to be perpetuating whiteness in this way, when Mattel does create racialised dolls, each incarnation becomes a fun option for Barbie, rather than a representation of a viable subjectivity. Ann duCille dissects Mattel's marketing strategy in her essay 'Dyes and Dolls'. Addressing Mattel's handling of specifically black dolls, she states that they are simply 'dye-dipped versions of archetypal white

⁵⁹ For example, see: <<http://nickiminajsucks.tumblr.com/>> [accessed 3 January 2013].

American beauty'.⁶⁰ When Mattel markets its black Barbie dolls in this way, not only does the corporation reaffirm the singular supremacy of Barbie's originary whiteness, but it also suggests that difference is simply something to dress up in; it is a fashion statement that the original Barbie can put on or take off with very little consequence.

The historical context in which these racially 'different' dolls were manufactured and named is significant to their othering. A dark-skinned doll joined Barbie's group in 1967. The following year, the Christie doll was introduced into the range as the first black friend of Barbie. Both were made from moulds already in existence. As such, they were indeed 'dye-dipped' variations of Barbie's white sidekicks. Erica Rand explains that '[i]n the 1960s, there were nonethnic Barbie and her sometimes ethnic friends'.⁶¹ It was not until 1980 that a black doll was officially named Barbie. Since the 1990s Mattel has been making head and face moulds representative of the ethnicity each doll is designed to embody. Yet, the company's attempts to be progressively more diverse remain problematic at best. More recent designs by Mattel, such as the So-In-Style dolls released in the summer of 2009, again make an effort to encompass black identity.⁶² Dodai Stewart observes that

Courtney, the cheerleader doll, has a fuller nose and fuller lips than regular Barbie. Trichelle, the doll 'into art and journalism', has curly hair; Kara who loves math and music, has a 'darker' skin tone.⁶³

With these latest versions of Barbie's black friends, the white, blonde and busty Barbie continues to be enforced as the authentic, true, and original doll. In the

⁶⁰ Ann duCille, 'Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference', in *Differences*, 6: 1 (1994), pp. 46-68 (p. 49).

⁶¹ Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 83.

⁶² An image of the So-In-Style dolls is available at: <<http://www.barbie.com/activities/friends/soinstyle/>> [accessed: 3 January 2013].

⁶³ Dodai Stewart, 'Mattel's New Black Barbie a Step in the Right Direction' (15 July 2009) <<http://jezebel.com/5315415/mattels-new-black-barbie-a-step-in-the-right-direction>> [accessed: 30 January 2013] (para. 2).

corporation's advertisements and visual narratives, if 'there can only be one' Barbie 'she's white and blond'.⁶⁴ The original Barbie thus exemplifies the all-American norm to which all other dolls must measure up.

As demonstrated by a perceived need for a 'Barbie Movement', as well as by the attacks against Harajuku Barbie and the 'Barbz', this type of normalisation has tangible effects. Richard Dyer, in *White*, describes the perpetuation of racial hegemony by way of invisibility or blankness:

As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. [...] This assumption, that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture.⁶⁵

Thus, when, in a fictive interview with *Forbes*, the original white Barbie proclaims that 'I am a big believer in dreaming big and inspiring girls that they can do anything they set their minds to', it seems like a contradiction; Barbie's ethnic doll counterparts are always a high-heeled step behind.⁶⁶ As Mattel persists with presenting Barbie's twenty-first-century image as progressive, feminist and multicultural, so long as there is one Barbie to which all other dolls must refer, such attempts will continue to gloss over issues of whiteness as a non-race, and, in turn, sustain white as the humanist norm, leaving women and girls of colour outside of Barbie doll culture.

Even as Mattel attempts to perfect its multicultural Barbie doll line, the manufacture and production of ethnic-looking dolls alongside the original, white Barbie creates additional issues. Marketing representations of black feminine bodies

⁶⁴ Rand, p. 84.

⁶⁵ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge 1997) p. 1-2.

⁶⁶ Anna Vander Broek, 'The Forbes Fictional Interview: Barbie' (2009) <http://www.forbes.com/2009/03/05/barbie-doll-interview-business_speaks.html?fd=rss_business> [accessed: 10 January 2012] (para. 2).

in a way that appears to celebrate difference can rely upon a nostalgia for racial authenticity. In the process, the 'acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms'.⁶⁷ Such forms often take shape in the primitive. duCille reflects upon this phenomenon in terms of the Shani doll released by Mattel in the 1990s:

The notion that fuller lips, broader noses, wider hips, and higher derrières somehow make the Shani dolls more realistically African American raises many difficult questions about authenticity, truth, and the ever-problematic categories of the real and the symbolic, the typical and the stereotypical. Just what are we saying when we claim that a doll does or does not 'look black?'⁶⁸

Complete with African print clothing and 'higher derrières', the Shani dolls signal tropes of sexual excess, and limit black bodies in mass culture to the atavistic.⁶⁹

These problems of representation and embodiment persist with the latest instalment of the So-In-Style line. As such, it seems that it may not be possible for Mattel to ever successfully envision a black Barbie doll. A crucial component that continuously undermines the possibility of an unproblematic black Barbie is that Mattel presents a culturally specific, single moment of identity. Minaj's pastiche Barbie doll-like performance challenges such essentialism, yet attempts by Mattel to present an authentic racial accuracy cannot take account of shifting definitions of identities in culture. As Mattel's approach prevents the possibility of fluidity of difference, 'difference is often fabricated in the interests of social control as well as of commodity innovation'.⁷⁰ In the words of bell hooks:

The commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated *via* exchange by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization.⁷¹

⁶⁷ bell hooks, 'Eating the Other', in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround, 1992), pp. 21-41 (p. 26).

⁶⁸ duCille, p. 56.

⁶⁹ For further analysis on this subject, and the dubious redesign dimensions, see: Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001).

⁷⁰ hooks, p. 25.

⁷¹ hooks, p. 31.

As this applies to Barbie, Mattel has situated itself within a dilemma where, in its efforts to make the doll more diverse, accessible, and therefore, more marketable, it has also become more locked into stereotypes and static representations. These, in turn, work to heighten and reinforce difference in one sense, while decontextualising it in another. Thus, Mattel's efforts to transform the doll into an ethnic body may be doing multiple disservices to the children for whom it is a play and fantasy object.⁷²

If Mattel can never appropriately represent ethnic and racial identity in its dolls, then this suggests that Barbie may continue to operate as a seemingly blank signifier that proliferates the notion that whiteness is invisible. However, the issue of Barbie's influence should not be understood as simply universalising. As Catherine Driscoll attests:

It may be useful to argue that Barbie imposes undesirable models of femininity on girls, but it is also the dominant public discourse on girls who like to play Barbie. It is not radical to imply that Barbie enthusiasts are co-opted or stupid or to see Barbie as an ideological template, because these criticisms of girl culture are proper to positioning girls as definitively malleable gullible consumers.⁷³

While it is certainly worthwhile to critique the production and marketing of Barbie especially in terms of race, it would be a mistake to assume that consumers are limited to interactions with Barbie dolls based simply on appearance, or the incomplete fantasies Mattel manufactures. When Kreyashawn insists that Minaj is perpetuating the message that 'all' girls should 'have blonde hair' like Barbie, she is reiterating the universalising consequences of a singular Barbie doll fantasy.

⁷² Mattel ought to consider the work of artist Loanne Hizo Ostlie, whose modified Barbie dolls reflect a range of race and gender identities. Images are available here: <<http://feministing.com/2009/10/26/a-barbie-that-really-represents-black-women/>> [accessed: 3 January 2013].

⁷³ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 98.

However, when Minaj and the 'Barbz' interpret Barbie in new ways, they highlight how such impositions can be subverted and redefined.

Harajuku Barbie offers an alternative reading of the classic Barbie doll, in terms of race and fantasy play. As a 'real life' figure, Minaj has appropriated the markers of the iconic figure, and merged them with her own interpretations of ideal and excessive femininity. The result is a black Barbie doll-like representation that is an accessory to no one. In this way, Harajuku Barbie is so meaningful to Minaj's fans because she counters the othering that seems to be ubiquitous in Mattel's manufacture and production of dolls of colour. Indeed, it seems that Minaj promises her fans an option for identification that may have seemed out of reach prior to her appearance in popular culture. In response to her example, the 'Barbz' mobilised. In December 2010, they began to agitate for Minaj and Mattel to collaborate in order to create an official Nicki Minaj Barbie doll. In December 2011, their wish was granted with a doll modelled after Minaj's *Pink Friday* album cover.⁷⁴ Thus, rather than girls being 'gullible consumers', they have consumer power to get exactly what they want. And in this case, what they wanted and what they received was a doll modelled after an icon.

Playtime Has Just Begun: The Possibilities of Harajuku Barbie⁷⁵

Harajuku Barbie and the Barbie Movement's relationship with, and co-optation of, the Barbie brand of femininity complicates traditional feminist readings of the doll and her far-reaching influence. These interpretations define the doll as an example of

⁷⁴ 'Nicki Minaj Barbie Doll, Made By Mattel, To Be...' (2011)

<<http://mypinkfriday.com/news/53381>> [accessed: 30 January 2013].

⁷⁵ Nicki Minaj, 'Playtime is Over', *Playtime is Over* (Young Money Entertainment, 2007).

false femininity. This marker, alongside Barbie's narrative of aspiration, tends to be read as a toxic concoction for women and girls. The feminist journalist Natasha Walter adopts such a perspective in *Living Dolls*. She writes that '[i]t often seems that now the dolls are escaping from the toy shop and taking over girls' lives'.⁷⁶ Her concern is that many young women and girls have the desire and the resources to attempt to become Barbie doll-like, and that this can have a dangerous effect on their self-esteem and body image.

Critiques of Harajuku Barbie and the 'Barbie Movement' support this analysis. The Barbie doll-like personas defined by Minaj and the 'Barbz' are regarded as abhorrent or dangerous because they are 'plastic' and 'fake'. However, Minaj and her fans have decisively embraced these labels. In the process, rather than exemplifying Walter's concerns, these women and girls exude confidence and empowerment. As a result, try as she might, Kreayshawn is not disrespecting Minaj when she calls her 'fake', but re-articulating what the rapper has already made (over)abundantly clear. Minaj fully indulges in the inauthenticity of her hyperfeminine and hyperreal Harajuku Barbie alter ego. She plays up its hybridised fabrication lyrically, aurally, and visually. Further, Minaj appears to take pleasure in how technology is used to reshape and redefine her embodiment; she confronts preconceived perceptions of her physicality by stretching its limits both visually and orally.

Significantly, Harajuku Barbie, though Minaj's most prominent persona, is not her only one. She shifts between several others including 'Roman', 'Rosa', and 'Martha'. Each of these personalities materialises in interviews, or while Minaj is rapping, and can be detected as she changes her accent and body language to accommodate the character. What is also noteworthy here is that Minaj's biography

⁷⁶ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010), p. 2.

is inconsistent, at best. While her lyrics are sometimes bicultural, Minaj insists in interviews that she does not date women or men.⁷⁷ There are also discrepancies involving her age, as well as her upbringing. Most befittingly, Minaj's legal surname is Maraj (reminiscent of mirage).⁷⁸ There is so much evidence to support Kreayshawn's claim that Minaj is 'fake', that instead of it being an accusation, it is simply a statement of the obvious.

Pushing the boundaries of linear representation in this way, Minaj reveals an alternative to traditional conceptualisations of the subject in the West. Rather than attempting to present the unified subjectivity of humanism, Minaj's representation, by way of Harajuku Barbie, delights in the multifaceted and the fragmented. Going beyond straightforward identification, the performer's brand of Barbie doll-like femininity exaggerates the oppositional narrative of (white) femininity, challenging any and all possibilities of an essentialist reading that marks it as 'true' or 'real'. Crucially, by reclaiming her sexuality in her terms, and simultaneously parading in the material excess and hyper-femininity akin to the white Barbie doll, Minaj also confronts the false binaries that relegate black femininity to a position of sexual excess as well as gendered and racialised othering.

Minaj's pastiched and hybridised performance of Harajuku Barbie, and the hyperbolic revelry therein, deconstructs oppositional ways of thinking and being. As such, her Barbie doll-like representation can be situated within poststructuralist and postmodern feminist analyses that challenge essentialist ideas about gender and subjectivity. A critical reading of Minaj's display of hyper-femininity, by way of this epistemology, is necessary in order to understand precisely how the performer negotiates an alternative, nonessentialist feminine subjectivity. Echoed throughout

⁷⁷ Ganz, p. 1.

⁷⁸ In line with how hip hop sexualizes female rappers, 'Maraj' purportedly was changed to 'Minaj' to hint at *ménage a trios*.

French feminisms of the twentieth century, the fluid nature of femininity is most vocally explained by Simone de Beauvoir as ‘[o]ne is not born, but rather, becomes a woman’.⁷⁹ Minaj exemplifies the process of this assertion, and exceeds it, taking the poststructuralist into the realm of the posthuman.

Embodying the naturalised markers of idealised white femininity—the blonde hair, the feminine makeup, the soft and delicate skin, the sweet voice, and coy personality, Minaj becomes Harajuku Barbie. Taking on each of these markers, the rapper calls attention to how white femininity is constructed: it is a display of culturally prescribed attributes that must be enacted and re-enacted repeatedly to be believed. Joan Riviere defines this enactment as the masquerade of femininity, and asserts that all gender is such a performance.⁸⁰ She announces:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.⁸¹

Riviere makes the bold statement that there is no inherent, biological femininity. Instead, it is scripted by culture and performed upon and through bodies by way of the demands of compulsive repetition. Minaj’s Harajuku Barbie performance calls attention to the particularities of these demands for white femininity.

Significantly, Minaj disrupts this performance of idealised white femininity by playing up its close ties to excess. Heightening each characteristic into something that is artificial and exaggerated, Harajuku Barbie begins to resemble a costume or a disguise. The blonde hair becomes tinged with streaks of yellow and pink, the delicate feminine lipstick turns to a fuchsia shock and the eyelashes grow into two

⁷⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1949] 1997), p. 295.

⁸⁰ See: Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

⁸¹ Joan Riviere, ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’, in *Psychoanalysis and Women: A Reader*, ed. by Shelley Saguro (London: Macmillan 2000), pp. 70-78 (p. 75.)

inches of feathers. Minaj's dewy soft skin warps into a shimmering plastic gloss, and her sweet voice and coy personality interject with loud, disjointed gestures and asides. Rejoicing in the visually odd and the vocally strange, while simultaneously exemplifying an overabundance of traditionally feminine markers, Minaj, as Harajuku Barbie, destabilises the conventions of traditional femininity, making the masquerade visible.

Minaj's inclusion of Harajuku Barbie within her range of multiple personas indicates her myriad visual and audio qualities and postures, from the conventionally pretty to the grotesque. Edith Zimmerman writes in the feminist blog, *The Hairpin*, that 'somewhere along the line [Minaj] clearly stopped caring whether or not she sounds "pretty"'.⁸² This approach to feminine subjectivity exposes 'womanliness' as a construction all the more visibly. In *Yes Means Yes*, Kath Albury's analysis of what she calls 'female female-impersonators', the author extends Riviere's argument in new and exciting directions. She observes the cliché that '[t]he ideal Western woman is pretty, witty, charming, sexy and blonde'.⁸³ While this assertion should come as no surprise, she suggests that 'female female-impersonators' seek to disrupt the ideal through a distorted presentation of overtly feminine markers. She explains that when women take on the role of the 'female female-impersonator' 'they rub their audiences' noses in the messy fake that lies beneath the accepted myth of "natural" femininity', taking it to a place of excess.⁸⁴

Through a display of excess, the 'female female-impersonator' calls into question how idealised white femininity has been naturalised in the West. Minaj's jubilation in pastiche and excess takes on many forms that affirm an alternative and

⁸² Edith Zimmerman, 'Who is Nicki Minaj?' (2010) <<http://thehairpin.com/2010/11/who-is-nicki-minaj>> [accessed: 30 January 2013].

⁸³ Kath Albury, *Yes Means Yes: Getting Explicit About Heterosex* (Crow's Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2002) p. 86.

⁸⁴ Albury, p. 86.

productive feminine subjectivity. Her negotiation of her racialised body demonstrates Albury's theory of the constructedness of femininity. The narrative of black feminine bodies as sites of sexual excess objectifies and dehumanises the black feminine subject by way of racial and gendered othering. In opposition, white feminine bodies are read as delicate, contained, and doll-like, though still relegated to the position of object. Through Harajuku Barbie, Minaj conflates both of these tropes—putting them on and exaggerating them to become a sexy black Barbie doll. Despite its playfulness, however, Minaj's performance has serious implications. By claiming two identities that are written in opposition to each other, Minaj confounds the false binaries of ideal femininity in the West.

In flaunting the effects of a messy feminine overflow, Minaj as Harajuku Barbie exposes how racial categories of feminine identity are non-essential. Rather than bringing about objectification, this messy excess can be understood in terms of 'becoming, process and change'.⁸⁵ As Mary Russo argues, the excessively feminine body, like that of Harajuku Barbie, 'is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek', or that which corresponds to the a traditional reading of the feminine body as object.⁸⁶ Ironically, then, by becoming an iconic object of white femininity, Minaj deconstructs racially defined oppositions. Through movement, fluidity, and change Minaj is able to challenge how these oppositions write different bodies as (beautiful and/or sexual) objects within humanist discourse.

By 'explod[ing] any possibility of articulating the "truth"' of both the racialised and gendered body in the West, Minaj, through Harajuku Barbie, provides

⁸⁵ Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 318-336 (p. 325.)

⁸⁶ Russo, p. 325.

alternative ways of thinking about feminine subjectivity.⁸⁷ Indeed, Minaj's example of Barbie doll-like femininity 'embodies the potential for identity to be mutable and unfixed'.⁸⁸ Once these constructed borders are permeated, or collapse under the weight of such excess, new, posthuman ways of thinking about 'the fragmented nature of female identities' emerge.⁸⁹ Harajuku Barbie—as doll and as persona—provides women and girls of colour with an alternative example of subjectivity that is not othered by Western conceptualisations of race, nor objectified at the intersections of race and sexuality.

The hip hop sensation's indulgent fakery, her fragmented and contradictory (auto)biography, and her impish alter egos all give new possibility to how we construct Barbie stories onto and through out bodies. In fact, Minaj, Harajuku Barbie, and the 'Barbz' provide an example of posthuman subjectivity, wherein there is a collapse and an excess of 'boundaries that once differentiated fact from fiction and illusion from reality'.⁹⁰ 'Posthuman bodies', as Neil Badmington argues,

are not slaves to masterdiscourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context.⁹¹

In an adaptation of Badmington's formulation, instead of the feminine subject attempting to write a cohesive narrative of self through the signification of the Barbie doll, Minaj's body becomes engaged in excesses that threaten unity by pluralising ideas about Barbie, race, and idealised femininity in the West.

⁸⁷ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 67.

⁸⁸ Toffoletti, p. 59.

⁸⁹ Vesey, para. 11.

⁹⁰ Toffoletti, p. 32.

⁹¹ Neil Badmington, 'Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism', in *Posthumanism*, ed. by Neil Badmington (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 1-10 (p. 2).

Arguments against Minaj's Barbie doll-like femininity, especially those that interrogate her authenticity, reinforce an essentialist paradigm. The implication of such arguments is that femininity is static, and ought to follow specific, well-prescribed rules. Such articulations insist that there is a natural, or more 'true' state of femininity. However, these readings are flawed and potentially very problematic, as oppositional thinking about subjectivity more often than not aligns specific marginalised groups with the position of other and object. With her persona of Harajuku Barbie, Minaj liberates subjectivity from its humanist constraints, offering a postmodern and posthuman reading of ideal femininity in the West. Minaj's performance of Harajuku Barbie takes pleasure in the fragmentation and hyperbole of postmodern culture, and in the excess of the posthuman as it is envisioned through her elongated limbs and plastic sheen on the cover of *Pink Friday*. She takes on the serious task of offering a critical conceptualisation of the excesses that are inherent in consumer-based hip hop and celebrity culture. Simultaneously, she puts forth a playful alternative to the static black Barbie doll representations imagined by Mattel. While the traditional Barbie doll assumes a model of aspiration to a specific Western demographic, Minaj mischievously subverts the standard. The Barbie doll is refracted by Minaj's performance into an ever-changing plethora of behaviours and possibilities. In this sense, what is 'fake' and 'plastic' about Minaj, and what is 'fake' and 'plastic' about Barbie, become their greatest attributes.

Conclusion

My Luxuria 10 is an artistic recreation of Barbie doll-like femininity. It is a photograph—one in a series—where a young woman stands, head tilted to one side, gazing up at her audience. Her hands are clasped to what appears to be a stripper pole positioned directly behind her. Her legs are spread. She is wearing clear plastic high-heeled shoes, but nothing else. A vibrant red background offsets her small, centred frame. *My Luxuria 10* is the photographic work of Saatchi Gallery-featured artist Alex Sandwell Kliszynski. Like each image in the series, this photograph features a young, white, thin, and conventionally beautiful woman posing in a pornographic/glamour photoshoot-style position.¹ The photograph has been digitally edited. The model's skin is glossy, plastic, and pore-less, her curves and features smooth and delicate. In *My Luxuria 10* and several other images in the series, the model's Barbie doll-like crafted features are taken beyond tacit allusion.

Kliszynski has digitally manipulated the breasts and pubic area of the model featured in *My Luxuria 10*. Her nipples and genitalia appear to be erased or softened over, suggesting smooth plastic mounds. The artist also has applied visual limb-joints at the model's hips and shoulders, carving out her inner thighs in order to emulate the Barbie doll's inset and articulated limbs. As a result, the artist's digital composite accurately mimics a naked, suggestively posed Barbie doll.² *Jezebel* contributor Sadie Stein critiques Kliszynski's work as sensationalistic: it is 'creepy

¹ There are several images of male—GI Joe and Ken doll-like—figures as well.

² In 2012, Argentina's highest advertising prize, the Lapiz de Oro (or, the Golden Pencil), went to nearly identical images. See: Dodai Stewart, 'Trick Crotch Shots Sell Unseen Products' (28 August 2012) <<http://jezebel.com/5938564/crotch-shots-shill-unseen-products>> [accessed 28 August 2012].

human Barbie porn star art', she says.³ Significantly, Kliszynski insists that his art intentionally aims for this aesthetic. He explains that his work is a commentary on contemporary Western culture's obsession with feminine sexuality and its 'objectification of the body'.⁴ Thus, his digital alterations of feminine corporeality into plastic Barbie doll-like figures are deliberately shocking, potentially feminist, and, certainly, offer up a provocative reading of contemporary representations of femininity in the West.

Despite their divergence on the effectiveness of his art, both Stein and Kliszynski's statements reflect a specific concern regarding Barbie doll-like femininity. Stein, acting as feminist art critic, suggests that Kliszynski's image is adding to a dominant cultural discourse wherein the human and the Barbie doll are melding into one 'creepy' human-doll amalgamation. In contrast, Kliszynski asserts that his work for *My Luxuria 10* is a response to such a synthesis, and the 'objectification' he sees as concomitant. Yet, while they differ in their views of the role this art is taking in Western culture, both critic and artist agree that there is a cultural trend in the representations of femininity, where subject and object, or body and doll, merge into a disturbing entity. It is this cultural trend, and this type of popular feminist analysis, to which my thesis responds.

In *Living Dolls*, feminist critic Natasha Walter provides a conventional reading of the human-doll phenomenon, and the popular criticism of it. She argues that in the contemporary West 'brilliant marketing strategies [...] are managing to fuse the doll and the real girl in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation

³ Sadie Stein, 'Black Mark!' (17 July 2008) <<http://jezebel.com/creepy-doll-art/>> [accessed 3 January 2013] (para. 1).

⁴ 'Alex Sandwell Kliszynski', Saatchi Gallery Website: <<http://www.saatchionline.com/ask1975>> [accessed 5 August 2012].

ago'.⁵ At the crux of her assertion lies a philosophical tenet to which Stein and Kliszynski seem to adhere (along with analyses from Ariel Levy to Susie Orbach, amongst many others taken to task in the pages of this thesis). Walter's salient point is that in the fusion of human and doll, there is a 'real girl'. It is a significant objective of this doctoral thesis to come to terms with the assumptions written into this description of the 'real girl', exploring how it has been used to condemn Barbie doll-like femininity. While thinking critically about how Barbie and Barbie doll-like femininity operate in conversation with cultural norms and ideals, this thesis has attempted to deconstruct the signification of the 'real girl' and its binary opposite as a distinctive cultural narrative. *Playing with Barbie* establishes that the trope of the 'real girl' is the result of specific assumptions that are problematic and troublingly anti-feminist in nature. Moreover, by grappling with historical, cultural, and epistemological implications of both Barbie and the 'real girl', this project not only challenges what Walter argues is 'unthinkable', but, indeed, provides analysis that undoes the static relationship between the two.

Playing with Barbie alleges that assumptions, such as Stein and Kliszynski's, which rely upon an idea of 'real' femininity, align with post-Enlightenment humanist interpretations of the subject. In this mode of thought, the subject is understood as 'the source and origin of meaning, of action and of history'.⁶ Informed, in this way, by such 'a discipline of mastery', the subject embodies a fixed position of authority, control, and containment, all of which is meant to bolster its authenticity.⁷ By displaying what can be perceived as passive, out of control and hypersexual Barbie

⁵ Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago Press, 2010) p. 2.

⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.

⁷ Tony Davies, *Humanism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 93.

doll-like femininity, *My Luxuria 10* highlights the oppositional nature of the doll and the 'real' girl.

The assumptions that inform the unified humanist subject can be destabilised and denaturalised by critical theoretical readings. As the feminine, in humanist thought, has never been understood to fit within the humanist framework of subjectivity, holding fast to ideas of a fixed and authentic or 'real' femininity can result in contradictions, ambiguities, and misogynistic oppositions. While *My Luxuria 10* can be read as a humanist endeavour to reclaim a displaced, but 'real', feminine subject, then, it also calls into question whether such a reality ever existed, or whether the premise of humanist subjectivity relies upon false oppositions. Indeed, the image can also be read as an ironic exaggeration of Walter's statement.

In this way, *My Luxuria 10* functions as a parody of contemporary white, Barbie doll-like femininity that is idealised in the West. The woman represented in the image takes on the markers of this type of beauty, exaggerating the extent to which a feminine subject seemingly can become Barbie doll-like in her corporeality. Such a representation works to dismantle an ideal, by playing out, and playing up, how it is constructed. From her presence in art and advertising, reality television, popular music, fashion, and cosmetic surgery, this thesis attempts to do the same to the Barbie doll-like ideal. Locating this type of femininity within a broader cultural narrative that aligns humanist ideas of femininity with the characteristics of the doll, this thesis has established Barbie doll-like femininity's signification in the West. However, while *My Luxuria 10* can be read as adhering to humanist notions of the subject with its quest for truth, *Playing with Barbie* attempts to denaturalise this truth as well, and it seems that *My Luxuria 10* can elucidate the path.

Through the fusion of skin and plastic, mechanical joints and limbs, the representation of a feminine subject in *My Luxuria 10* is transitioning into a doll-like

object. As Kim Toffoletti explains, ‘images’ such as these ‘provoke questions about how reality is experienced and understood’.⁸ Redefining reality in this way challenges humanist conventions. Despite the stated purpose of the image, Kliszynski’s art, in blurring the line between subject and object, opens it up for a posthuman reading. Such a reading of the subject, as Elaine L. Graham explains, suggests that the ‘contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin.’⁹

My Luxuria 10 does the work of elucidating cultural norms and trends in Barbie doll-like femininity, identifying their limitations, calling attention to their constructedness, and opening them up for a posthuman reading. Through cultural examples like Kliszynski’s *My Luxuria 10, Playing with Barbie* illustrates that Barbie and Barbie doll-like femininity reinforce specific humanist tropes such as authority and authenticity, corporeal uniformity and linear narrativity of the cohesive subject, while simultaneously exposing the limitations of this epistemology. The Barbie doll, and her contradictions, ambiguities, and plastic slipperiness, reveals that ideal femininity and notions of a ‘real’ or ‘natural’ femininity are humanist fabrications.

⁸ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 31.

⁹ Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 4.

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