UnBarbie: Queering the Image of the 11-inch Doll

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Abstract

With a reported 98% global recognition rate, Barbie is perhaps the world's most well-known icon. She is not without her share of controversy, but there is no doubt that her existence represents "girlhood" to a large group of the world's population. However, Barbie's heteronormative and cisnormative ideals have been challenged recently by another Mattel brand toy line: Creatable World dolls. Where Barbie consistently represents femininity, Creatable World is supposed to represent inclusion, designed to "Keep labels out," to quote Mattel's promotional materials for the line.

This photographic research project points a critical lens at the popular image of the 11-inch fashion doll and subverts it through the use of Creatable World dolls and 1/6 scale dioramas. Reminiscent of the photography of David Levinthal and the miniature crime scene models of Frances Glessner Lee, *UnBarbie* seeks to represent the queer gaze and objectification using gender-neutral dolls and the nearly unlimited character creation options that such toys allow.

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Chapter 1 - A World of Queer Play

The story of a queer doll line begins with Mattel, societal ideals, and, of course, Barbie. While Barbie has dominated the market, constantly recreated and reimagined over slightly more than six decades, Creatable World dolls present a potential challenge to the dominant vision that Barbie represents.

The toy giant we know today as Mattel, Inc. was founded in a Los Angeles garage in 1945 by Harold Matson, Elliot Handler, and Ruth Handler (Mattel). Through the 1940s and 1950s, the company produced a few hit toys, including the Uke-A-Doodle, a child-sized ukulele, and the Magic 8 Ball, a million of which are sold each year. However, it was not until the late 1950s that Mattel had its real hit. Inspired by her daughter playing with paper dolls, Ruth Handler proposed the company design a three-dimensional paper doll of sorts that would inspire girls to become independent, forward-thinking, and (of course) fashionable women. Prior to then, the doll market was dominated by baby dolls, which were designed to teach girls to become future mothers, but Ruth wanted to create a doll that girls could identify with on a personal level.

From the very beginning, cisgender and heterosexual expectations were ingrained in the creation of Barbie and her plastic empire. Mattel tends not to advertise Barbie's design origins in their official statements, an understandable decision considering the market audience her predecessor was intended for (Rand 32). Barbie was based on a doll called Lilli, who was modeled after a character from a cartoon in the German tabloid magazine *Bild*. Bild Lilli, as she is called, was intended to be bought not by children but by adult men. Her mature, idealized, hourglass figure graced barber shop counters and the cockpits of airplanes as novelty items, but

Ruth Handler had a bigger plan for the doll's likeness. Handler bought the rights to the German doll and referenced Bild Lilli's features to create a new doll, one marketed at children.

Barbie, the iconic eleven-inch fashion doll, was an instant hit upon her release in 1959. She was launched with "the intention of being progressive" (*Tiny Shoulders*). At a time when women often occupied the role of stay-at-home mother, 1963's Career Girl Barbie dressed in a well-accessorized two-piece suit and sported a sensible bob that wouldn't get in the way at whatever gender-appropriate workplace she might inhabit. Times changed, as did expectations for women. In 1965, Astronaut Barbie went to the moon, and eventually, in 1992, Barbie ran for president for her first time, dressed in a red, silver, and blue ball gown.

Barbie is often accused of being consistently anti-feminist, but in reality, her reputation has always been in flux (*Tiny Shoulders*). During the women's rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barbie was notoriously unpopular for displaying and allegedly encouraging feminine beauty standards, yet she still tried to show a liberated woman dressed in the fashions of the time. Mattel responded rather spectacularly to these ideals of feminine beauty with the production of the Twiggy doll in 1967, inspired by the British model, complete with false eyelashes, a fashionably thin figure, and a brightly-colored mini dress.

Mattel has experimented with different dolls, but it is Barbie that has endured. During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Barbie became popular again as the "have-it-all woman" ideal spread across North America. Barbie reflected the brains, beauty, and career power that women were expected to display as they went to work by day and cooked and cleaned for their husbands and children by night. In the 1990s, a new type of feminism that combated the idea that women had to be anything in particular, resulted in speculation that Barbie would be taken off the market, relegated to the trash heap of history for pushing any ideals at all onto girls and

women. Yet the reimagining of Barbie in many careers has continued to the present, sometimes targeting areas with significant gender gaps, such as the 2021 music producer Barbie, equipped with her own sound board. The 2019 National Geographic Barbie, 2018 Robotics Barbie, and the 2016 game developer continue the decades of Barbies as astronauts, pilots, and the perennial presidential candidate, (Sills 123). Unfortunately, Barbie has yet to win the presidency.

For the world's most popular doll, Barbie's wide variety of careers and new, less exaggerated body shape brought the doll back into the public's good graces in the early 2000s. Then, in 2016, Mattel released a line of Barbies featuring four different body types, including a "curvy" body type which reflected the body-positive movement and the rallying cry that "all bodies are good bodies" (*Tiny Shoulders*). The line was met with positive reviews, and the curvy Barbie remains on store shelves. However, in spite of the ever-changing face and features of Barbie, one ideal has remained: Barbie is always presented as straight and cisgender.

Barbie dolls can be Black, Asian, Latina, Indigenous, or any other race or ethnicity. They can have any skin tone and any hair type, in both natural and unnatural hues, and doll lines are becoming more diverse racially, allowing Barbie (the main character and star of the Barbie universe) a wide variety of marginalized friends to drive around in her tiny sports cars or relax with under her pink gazebos. Still, it would be inappropriate not to point out the impact of the decisions that Mattel has made in most Barbie lines to make Black Barbies secondary to their white counterparts. This has been subverted in recent years with the introduction of "Malibu" and "Brooklyn" Barbies, two characters who are both called Barbie, with the latter Barbie being both Black and equal in the storyline to the White doll that hails from California. However, throughout history, Black Barbies were often shown in contrast to the ideal "default" of White

dolls. Progress has been made, but non-White Barbies are still just that, non-White Barbies. They are Barbies, but most of them are not meant to represent the classic character of Barbie.

More recently, Barbie can also be disabled. Barbie has come with wheelchair accessories, most notably a 2019 launch of Barbies that included ramp accessories to be used for entering and exiting dream houses (Karin). This marks an improvement from the Barbie's universe's first visibly disabled doll, Becky, who was released in 1997 and had a wheelchair that did not fit through dream house doors, raising some questions around accessibility to go with that representation. It does not end in wheelchairs, either, as the Barbie brand has been taking more steps to include more types of disabled bodies in playtime. Around the same time as the release of the new wheelchair-using dolls, Mattel also released a doll with a prosthetic leg. Then, one of Barbie's younger siblings, Chelsea, was released with a brace and a body mold with a curved spine to represent children with scoliosis. Recently, in 2023, Mattel partnered with the National Down Syndrome Society to release the first Barbie intended to represent women and girls with Down Syndrome (Goodyear). The doll is part of the "Fashionistas" line, the collection of Barbie dolls which includes the aforementioned different body types and wheelchair accessories and is intended to represent a diverse range of people for more diverse kinds of play. With disability added to the representation lineup, it would seem that Barbie is going in the right direction where inclusion is concerned.

That representation has not yet extended to queer individuals in Barbie's fictional world. Whenever Barbie has a romantic partner, it is always Ken at her side as she walks around her pink dream houses in her half-inch stiletto heels. While Ken is frequently an accessory rather than a developed character in Barbie media, he still represents the ideal boyfriend or husband for the ideal woman. He is neither too masculine nor too feminine, not overpowering, but

supportive, and dressed in gender-affirming, male-coded clothing to match the ever-stylish Barbie. Prior to 2019, Mattel as a whole never purposefully released character dolls that represented anything other than heterosexual and cisgender norms. They did release a Ken doll in 1993 that was coded as gay, seemingly by accident, but never outright declared Ken's sexual orientation. The "Earring Magic Ken" doll included earrings and a cock ring necklace, accessories frequently used in the gay nightclub scene at the time to indicate the wearer's homosexuality, but aside from that incident Mattel has never strayed far from binary cisgender representations and straight identities among their created characters (Rand 87).

In 2019, Mattel finally broke their own mold. The company introduced their Creatable World doll brand, advertised as a toy line designed to "Keep labels out and invite everyone in" (*Time*). The doll line shared a similar height and a similar penchant for dressing fashionably to Barbie, but the dolls were not part of the Barbie brand and were meant to be an even blanker slate when compared to Barbie's "we girls can do anything" marketing. Barbie is a girl who can reportedly do anything, but what are Creatable World dolls? Is the doll a boy? A girl? Non-binary? Yes, yes, and yes. The doll was designed to be whatever the end user wanted it to be, and Mattel conducted focus group research with gender non-conforming and transgender children and their parents in order to find the perfect balance between gender representation and creative play (*Time*). Unique features of the dolls included removable wigs to give the doll long hair or a haircut, a small selection of male- and female-coded clothing options, and a diverse range of skin tones and hairstyles to offer more customizable options, leaving the door open for the doll's end users to create and recreate different characters in play or display.

A Creatable Thesis

UnBarbie has three goals. The first is to analyze the Creatable World dolls and how they represent queer identities. In an age when representation is a hot topic and the rights of the queer community are being fought for around the world, queer representation is needed more than ever in children's educational and recreational spaces. With play being a key activity in a child's development, it makes sense that playtime would represent the world children inhabit. How do these dolls, in particular, represent queerness and gender presentations?

The second goal of this thesis imagines what directions the line could have gone had it had more energy put into it on the part of Mattel. As will be discussed in future chapters, some decisions that Mattel made surrounding Creatable World resulted in successes for the line while others were less successful. The less successful decisions likely contributed to the apparent ending of the doll line in 2020. This thesis draws from research on representation and play to construct one possible plastic world for Creatable World, containing potential directions for the line had Mattel drawn more from both established research and their own market research when releasing the dolls. In addition to drawing from research, this thesis also draws from my own experiences as a queer person and from the experiences of other people who identify as not straight and not cisgender.

The third goal of the thesis is to locate the dolls in broader queer culture. What do dolls that carry the label "queer" mean in the broader context of a cisheteronormative society? Can a doll really be "queer" inherently? I argue that, yes, Creatable World dolls are designed to represent all people, and therefore they are inherently queer in these representations. They are also invaluable in terms of the fluidity of representing queer humans and queer identities.

The goals of this thesis have been accomplished by literally visualizing and building the miniature worlds the dolls inhabit, not merely by describing doll features and functions. This multimodal thesis includes a visual component, photographs of the dolls in constructed miniature environments meant to contextualize the dolls and expand their world in such a way that invites an audience to engage with them as queer representation. If Barbie is never far from her pink, feminine-coded dream house, Creatable World dolls also deserve their own gender- and sexuality-affirming spaces as well.

To accomplish the goals of this thesis, the background of its subjects must be established. Chapter 2 builds a timeline of Creatable World's story, gathering together the history of the line, its development, and its release. The chapter discusses the concepts behind the line, its soft launch to the internet, its wider release to store shelves, and its critical reception. In drawing from podcast interviews with the designers, media articles about the meaning and messaging of the dolls, and comments from the public, a fuller picture of Creatable World's history is assembled. In official media publications, Mattel designers give insight into the thought processes behind the dolls and their release, but that insight must fit on a magazine page or keep to a specific time limit in the case of time-based media. Much of the story must be left out in such publications. This chapter seeks to fill in gaps in Creatable World's narrative and to package it neatly in one, mostly complete history.

From there, this thesis locates queer dolls in existing academic literature. Chapter 3 discusses scholarly foundations of research into dolls, queer identities in youth, and diversity in children's toys. Fashion dolls are critically examined as symbols, characters, and queer icons, drawing heavily from Erica Rand's work on Barbie and the potential queerness of the doll. Then the discussion turns to research involving gender roles and toys, including both the results of

studies, and also public opinion of gendered dolls and doll play. Finally, queer youth studies and queer education is foundational to *UnBarbie*, including how children might identify as queer, express queerness, and learn about queerness in age-appropriate ways.

Chapter 4 looks at methods for this research and introduces the characters of *UnBarbie* with intent to examine questions about visual representations of queerness. What does a "gay" doll look like? How does one document characters and environments? What do the subjects of *UnBarbie*'s photographs mean in their contexts? Similar questions are tackled in Chapter 5 where gender and pride in one's expression of gender, sexual orientation, and romantic orientation is discussed. What does a "boy" doll look like? A "girl" doll? Creatable World's marketing included the categories of "both" and "neither" as well, and those identities will be examined and critically engaged with. How does an environment, both physical and social, shape how we think about gender? How can Creatable World dolls be used to express gender, and what does the gender of a doll say about the genders and gender presentations of real humans?

Chapter 6 is a celebration of the everyday, the ordinary things that impact queer individuals and communities in positive ways. Representation is amplified through the photographs that correspond with this chapter, expressing queer joy and queer achievement. For all the queer joy, however, there exists queer pain. Chapter 7 discusses Creatable World dolls as both art objects and potential learning tools for showing the more painful aspects of being queer in a cisheteronormative society. Toys do not exist in a vacuum, and while the expression of oppression is not a joyous thing, it is important to discuss and otherwise engage with difficult topics.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with the question "Is Barbie queer?" What does it mean for a toy to be inherently queer? What is the legacy of Creatable World dolls? What might the

future hold where queer studies and doll studies intersect? It would be an oversight not to start and end with Barbie, the most prominent figure in the realm of fashion dolls, but Creatable World dolls are distinctly un-Barbie, almost an antithesis while still drawing from her influence.

Chapter 2 - Toys, Times, and Transgender Identities: The Story of Creatable World

Creatable World dolls came to fruition under lead designer Linda Jiang. Before they became the creator of the first "gender-neutral" doll, Jiang was already a seasoned toy designer. They had already worked for Mattel on other doll lines, such as Mattel's WWE Superstars line and a number of dolls for the Walt Disney Company, but Creatable World was a new kind of doll, one that would require a lot of thought and careful planning before it was ready to reach store shelves ("Linda Jiang | Toy Designer"). As always, Jiang started with research, a concept, and some sketches. Jiang worked closely with a full team of people who specialized in different toy features to build the dolls (Wakabayashi). Once the sketches and ideas were green-lit, the team included toy designers that specialized in doll hair, who researched and tested the proper colors and textures for a diverse line of dolls. They worked with face designers and sculptors to capture features that fit the design of the project and would appropriately and authentically capture the likenesses of different races and ethnicities. Details such as matching lip colors to skin tones were not forgotten.

As a guest on the podcast *Yellow Glitter*, hosted by Steven Wakabayashi, Jiang described the role of ethnicity and race in the research of the Creatable World line (Wakabayashi). Emphasis was placed on respectful representation, with designers working to realistically represent eye color, skin color, and hair color and texture. In Jiang's words, it was intended to be "a celebration of beauty", and the team was careful to avoid amplifying stereotypes, to listen to lived experiences of marginalized groups, and to create work that allowed others to feel seen. These were challenges of which the team was conscious and capable of handling.

Some tasks were easier than others. The goal of the project was to create dolls that children could relate to, so the design of the face sculpt and the body were kept youthful, meant to represent a child rather than an older person, as Barbie does. Other challenges were perhaps more difficult to overcome. The clothing included in each doll kit especially was problematic due to assumptions that the target audience of Creatable World might make. Humans make plenty of binary assumptions about other people and their genders based on clothing, so the dolls' clothing was kept purposefully neutral, with only one skirt in each kit and minimal amounts of pink (*"A Doll For Everyone"*). Early prototypes were more feminine with more pink, but in later designs the feminine details were swapped for clothes that conjured up less gendered ideas. Every detail was carefully considered, including the waistbands of pants and pocket placements, in order to keep the cuts of the clothes neutral. Pinks in Creatable World's design are a salmon color or a pastel shade, balanced by being mixed with other colors, instead of Barbie's signature hot pink.

There were other societal issues that produced creative thinking in the team. Even the term "Gender-neutral fashion doll" was a conscious decision. The word "doll" was chosen over "action figure" to market the Creatable World line, but Jiang noted that there are many people out there who think dolls are only for girls, so that language might automatically turn people off buying the doll for a boy. They recognized and appreciated shifts in the toy industry away from gendering toys. Toys are now often called "dolls" and "action figures," instead of "boys' toys" and "girls' toys," calling the toys what they are rather than making an assumption about what kind of child should be its end user. An action figure is just a doll anyway, as Jiang sees it. The word choices are a marketing decision because, at the end of the day, both dolls and action figures are just representations of people. Molded clothes, more common with action figures, or

fabric clothes more common with fashion dolls do not fundamentally change the function of the toy. Nonetheless, binary gendered toys are a present reality of doing business as a toy company. As Jiang put it, there is a fear of "the other," a fear of learning about the other, and a fear of crossing arbitrary lines to play with the other, whether that other has a different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other distinctions. Western society has not yet moved past gendering toys.

Kim Culmone, the head of design for Mattel's fashion dolls, had more to say about gender and doll play within the framework of Creatable World specifically. "Dolls are a really ancient and intimate plaything that it's important to have in the lives of girls," Culmone said for the podcast *Good is the New Cool* (Aziz and Jones). "The kids that we serve deserve to see themselves in the toys that they play with." While she uses the word "girls" in this quote, she uses a variety of gendered and non-gendered terms throughout the podcast to communicate the intended audience of Creatable World. Culmone identifies Creatable World as the first "gender-inclusive" doll kit. "It allows all kids to see themselves in this product, and they can create characters that they want to create."

The team at Mattel observed children playing in focus and test groups and found that children don't want rules or labels placed on how they play or what they play with. Additionally, a growing number of parents were found to be concerned about gendered toys, which led to the creation of Creatable World. Mattel tested the doll with two hundred and fifty families, including fifteen children that identified as transgender, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming (*"A Doll For Everyone"*). In these tests, kids reacted well to Creatable World without needing explanations. They did not need a preamble speech about gender-neutral dolls. They just played with the dolls without question. Mattel's slogan "All welcome" was a driving force for the line.

All were welcome to play, facilitating a “broader conversation around doll play” and its benefits. Such benefits include creativity, self-expression, storytelling skills, and other benefits that help all people, not just one type of child, especially not just one child of one particular gender (Aziz and Jones).

The First Release

Fall 2019 Creatable World Releases

DC-619 - Doll with light skin, straight red hair, green eyes

DC-073 - Doll with light skin, straight black hair, brown eyes

DC-725 - Doll with dark skin, black hair and a micro braided wig, brown eyes

DC-220 - Doll with medium tan skin, honey blonde curls, green eyes

DC-414 - Doll with light skin, blonde waves, blue eyes

DC-826 - Doll with medium brown skin, brown waves, brown eyes

Branding and packaging for the dolls were done by Kristen Levesque (kristinlevesque.com). The packaging and design of the first release offered a remarkably muted color palette less often seen in children’s toy packaging. The bright yellow and rich orange (Pantone 3935C and 1375C respectively) drew in the eye, but the mint green (Pantone 7478C) was more subtle, inviting a consumer’s eye to look more at the subject of the packaging photography (the dolls themselves) than at bright, eye-catching graphics and patterns. Upon removing the outer sleeve of the box, a consumer would be greeted with a printed picture card

showing some of the different doll looks and character styles they could create with the contents of the packaging. The items were packaged neatly in a tray design without anything tied or tagged down, requiring minimal adult supervision to open and no scissors required. Accessibility was considered, with independence given to end users with tiny hands, those who might wish to tear open a box without waiting for parental help.

Fourteen accessories were included with each doll kit, ready for children to use in building and rebuilding characters. The doll quality was, overall, excellent by both doll play enthusiast standards and doll collector standards, with multiple points of articulation, smooth joints, and well-painted facial features. The public generally praised the quality of the dolls, but they also noticed some issues with the wigs the dolls came with early on ("Creatable World by Mattel"). Some of the wigs make the dolls look like they are wearing headbands to hold back their hair. While some dolls have curly bangs that can hide the headband appearance, other dolls are not designed as well. Also, the shaved sides on the hair of dolls DC-725 and DC-414 result in difficulty keeping the wigs from falling off. The wigs of the Creatable World dolls might be difficult to get on in the first place and may require adult help to position the longer hair properly. In theory, a young child might not care about whether or not a "headband" look is positioned correctly, or they might care. Certainly, the adults buying the dolls had opinions on the wigs.

Creatable World's challenges did not end at the design of the toys. The next challenge was how to sell the dolls (*Time* 47). In which aisle would the dolls be placed in stores? If the team wanted the intended audience to be all children of all genders, there was a high probability that placing Creatable World with other dolls on store shelves would prevent them from reaching the desired audience. Target stores had eliminated gendered toy sections from their signage in

2015 (*Time* 44). Disney stopped labeling whether their costumes were for boys or girls, promoting the idea that girls could dress as Captain America and boys could dress as Cinderella. Mattel also transformed their "boys'" and "girls'" toy divisions in 2018, now working on non-gendered sections simply called "dolls" or "cars." However, not all stores had caught up with these changes. Removing signage did not negate the fact that colors, logos, and the addition or absence of glitter signify something to a society. Hot pink toy aisles might put boys off playing with the dolls, while placing them next to action figures might result in girls assuming the dolls were not intended for them. Depending in which aisle the dolls were placed, half of the intended audience might never even see the product. For this reason, as well as the controversy that the dolls might cause by representing boys *and* girls (and neither and both), Mattel opted for the initial release on September 25, 2019, to be online only. Each doll kit cost $29.99 in the United States.

In order to promote the dolls, as well as to provide Mattel with the opportunity to share context for some of the decisions behind the design and manufacture, *Time Magazine* ran an article introducing and explaining the dolls and their meaning in the culture that *Time*'s readership belongs to. The article discussed the challenges of the Creatable World line, including the store aisle locations and the topic of parental pushback to dolls that some of them referred to as "transgender," saying:

> "Mattel sees an even broader potential for Creatable World beyond gender-creative kids. In testing, the company found that Generation Alpha children chafed at labels and mandates no matter their gender identity: they didn't want to be told whom a toy was designed for or how to play with it. They were delighted with a doll that had no name and could transform and adapt according to their whims.

> But it's parents who are making the purchasing decisions, and no adult is going to have a neutral reaction to this doll. In testing groups, several parents felt the "gender-neutral" branding of the toy pushed a political agenda, and some adults objected to the notion of their sons ever playing with dolls (*Time* 44)."

However, in spite of the concerns, the article generally painted the dolls in a positive light, describing the dolls as being made with great care.

> "Carefully manicured features betray no obvious gender: the lips are not too full, the eyelashes not too long and fluttery, the jaw not too wide. There are no Barbie-like breasts or broad, Ken-like shoulders. Each doll in the Creatable World series looks like a slender 7-year-old with short hair, but each comes with a wig of long, lustrous locks and a wardrobe befitting any fashion-conscious kid: hoodies, sneakers, graphic T-shirts in soothing greens and yellows, along with tutus and camo pants (*Time* 42)."

Given the fact that many parents have objected to Barbie's figure over the decades, this description, as well as others of its kind, likely resonated with liberal parents who did not want their children to grow up too quickly.

The *Time* article was only the beginning of the promotion of Creatable World. Advertising spots with bold colors, shiny tinsel backdrops, and an excited and diverse group of children were uploaded to YouTube in September of 2019. The videos featured upbeat music and big smiles, as most toy advertisements include, and the brand also produced a short lyric video for the jingle, emphasizing the message, "I gotta be me!" A later release that same quarter was the lyric video for another short song titled "All are Welcome!" further emphasizing the inclusivity of the line. This, however, produced some problems. By attempting to appeal to everyone, Mattel caused concern among the very people they were seeking to make feel seen. On

the one hand, the critical reception of the dolls seemed to be a full success. The dolls were awarded the title of *Time Magazine*'s Best Inventions of 2019 ("Linda Jiang | Toy Designer"). The line was a Toy of The Year Finalist, and it also won a Play For Change Award in Empowerment and a Power of Purpose: Diversity & Inclusion Award from Campaign Magazine. *Time* magazine especially has written favorably about Mattel's toys in the past, working with Mattel on articles that might be called collaborative, and, while their feature article on Creatable World dolls shared both the benefits and concerns surrounding the line, their positive description of a delighted child who sees a doll that looks just like him is hardly a neutral stance (*Time* 42).

On the other hand, not everyone was so excited about the Creatable World line, including some members of the transgender community that the dolls sought to represent. The doll certainly has queer roots. Jiang has not specified their sexual orientation gender identity, but they appeared on *Yellow Glitter*, a podcast amplifying queer Asian voices specifically, so one can infer that they are included somewhere under the umbrella term of queer. Despite them being part of the community, no one queer person can speak for an entire community, so with the target audience of all children, regardless of gender identity, it is expected that transgender individuals would have opinions, whether positive or negative. Alex Meyers, an openly transgender speaker and advocate for transgender rights had some criticisms (*Slate*). He pointed out in a *Slate* magazine article he wrote that, "Gender is not a line between two endpoints—to be nonbinary is not to be androgynous. These dolls only further entrench that misunderstanding and simultaneously reinforce the idea that gender is 'playful' and easy to switch around, accusations that are often leveled at trans youths when they come out." He also stated that "On a basic level, the doll falls far short of actually embodying or even representing a nonbinary identity. 'Gender-neutral,' the term Mattel uses in its marketing of the doll, is not, in fact, a term that many—

any?—people use to describe themselves. They use 'gender-fluid,' or genderqueer, or nonbinary, or nonconforming."

Criticism against the doll line from those who expressed hate against the queer community was difficult to ignore. A quick scroll through the comments section of any Creatable World doll review video on YouTube shows a number of people decrying the doll line as being too "politically correct" or "too woke" to be acceptable for children. Mattel had anticipated this. So had the transgender community, as hateful rhetoric is all too common. However, it is important to remember that Creatable World dolls are not labeled as transgender. While they were intended to represent a wide variety of children, the character creation purposefully lies with the end user. The doll is "a boy, a girl, neither, or both," not explicitly transgender as far as Mattel is concerned (*Time* 42). In other words, if one's doll is transgender, that's the choice of the end user, not Mattel or its marketing team. At the end of the day, the doll was designed to be a blank slate, so projecting a transgender identity on whatever character one might create would have to be a purposeful addition to a doll's traits. The inherent queerness of objects will be discussed in the next chapter, but Creatable World dolls have never been marketed as "transgender" or as characters possessing transgender identities.

The Second Release

Spring 2020 Creatable World Releases

DC-965 - Doll with light skin, brown hair, blue eyes

DC-319 - Doll with dark skin, black hair and a curly wig, brown eyes

RD-065 - Rainy Day Style Kit

AW-348 - Athletic Style Kit

SS-255 - Summer Style Kit

ES-619 - Assorted clothes, including a yellow flannel and blue snakeskin pants

ES-725 - Assorted clothes, including camouflage pants and a blue varsity jacket

ES-826 - Assorted clothes, including rainbow platform sandals and a white, paint-splattered jacket

ES-220 - Assorted clothes, including dark overalls and black combat boots

H-208 - Purple curly wig and straight blue wig set

H-294 - Pink curly wig and wavy green wig set

H-231 - Teal micro braid wig and straight pink wig set

Despite a mixed response from the public, the doll line persisted, and Mattel moved forward with more launches. The second wave of Creatable World dolls (fig. 1) saw the dolls arrive in stores, specifically Target stores in the United States. The displays were mostly positioned on end caps of Target aisles to avoid making decisions about whether to put the dolls next to their pink-clad counterparts in the "girls'" aisles or to situate them next to superhero action figures in the "boys'" aisles. Anecdotally, this made them difficult to find in the stores, as they were often tucked away at the back of an aisle where one might have to actively look for them, rather than stumbling upon their display by chance and making an impromptu purchase.

In addition to the releases listed above, Mattel also released the original six dolls separately from their kits (fig. 2). The "CS" Character Starter Packs offered gray, light purple, and mustard yellow tank tops for the characters to wear until they could be dressed in a style

pack, each sold separately. These characters were still available in full kits with clothes, but their clothing choices no longer included bags like those that were available in the kits in the first release of the same dolls.

Figure 1. An example of second wave Creatable World doll kit packaging

Figure 2. An example of Creatable World individual doll packaging

Packaging design was changed to be brighter, featuring more blue (Pantone 3115C) than mint green and adding more elements to create texture on a previously minimalist box design. Hand drawings of clothing and accessories now framed the edges of boxes and added more visual interest to the blank, white void the dolls previously inhabited on store shelves. Another change was made, too, one that could result in children needing help removing dolls and clothes from the packaging. The trays in which the products were packaged secured the doll in the plastic tightly, and some, but not all, of the clothes were held in place with very small plastic tags.

New to the Creatable World line were extra outfits and hair options. Taste is, of course, subjective, but some of the original outfit sets could be considered mismatched, with many of the pieces in the kits lacking a consistent color scheme. The new Style Packs added more clothes to choose from, though primarily the style packs were intended to complement the dolls sold

without kits (fig. 3). The colors of the kits did not always match each other, but they often matched other clothes in other kits and sets. Extra wigs were also offered in a variety of bright colors and textures. Versatility was the ultimate goal.

Figure 3. An example of a Creatable World style pack

In examining the clothing and the dolls of the second release and comparing them to the first release, it is easy enough to see that the quality of the second release of the dolls is the same. The clothes are sewn with as much care, the joints of the dolls are just as good, and the hair is rooted just as well. The problem of the "headband" look of the wigs (fig. 4), however, was certainly not solved. With the release of the colorful wig sets, the problem only became more apparent, as the wig cap edge could not be masked by bangs. It became even more difficult to cover the dolls' hair completely, especially for dolls with curly hair. For dolls with very short hair and shaved sides, such as DC-725, the wigs work fine but are a little loose. For any doll with

bangs, it is difficult to shove the extra hair up under the colorful wigs (fig. 5). In such a case, the hats included with the doll kits come in very handy for covering up the band at the front of the wigs, assuming a chosen hat could fit over a chosen doll's big curls and thick wigs.

Figure 4. An example of packaging for wigs, sold separately from Creatable World dolls

Figure 5. Creatable World dolls wearing colorful wigs

The End?

Fall 2020 Creatable World Releases

DC-557 - Doll with medium light skin, brown hair, brown eyes

According to Jiang's portfolio website, the final Creatable World doll kit was released alone in Fall of 2020. The kit, DC-557, featured a doll with wavy brown hair, brown eyes, and medium light skin. Since then, there have been no new Creatable World releases. It is unknown if the line has been retired permanently, but one might speculate about the reasons for the line's possible retirement. The most likely explanation would involve the COVID-19 pandemic, backed up manufacturing times, and Mattel's decisions to focus more on their "power brands" described in their annual reports: Barbie, Fisher Price, and Hot Wheels (*Mattel - Financial Information*). The Creatable World brand is not mentioned in any Mattel annual report from any year. The dolls quietly disappeared from store shelves and are now increasingly hard to find through online retailers. It is also possible that, due to the dolls being launched in a time when gendered norms form the structure of modern society, the dolls may not have performed as well as Mattel had hoped.

The list provided in this chapter is likely the complete list of all the Creatable World items that were released for purchase, but an assortment of uncommon or unreleased items floats around on social media without any clear sources for the images. Another wig pack featuring a blue, curly wig and a short, rose gold wig is available to see on one toy retailer's website, but not

to buy, and it is not included in Jiang's portfolio. On the back of the Everyday Style Pack packaging, a few clothing items that do not seem to have ever been available to purchase can be seen, such as a white cardigan jacket and a black recolor of another t-shirt that originally came packaged with the DC-073 kit. Recolors of existing Creatable World clothes are a trend across the official product packaging and advertising done by Mattel, though most of them are not available to purchase, waved away instead by a footnote on the packaging that says, "Colors and decorations may vary." Perhaps most enticing to doll fans is a doll closet and storage unit that allegedly appeared on Target's website as a product listing but was never for sale. According to product photos posted to Twitter, the small, trunk-like carrying case with colorful plastic drawers would have come with stickers, so the end user could customize their doll's closet just as much as they could customize their doll. The images of these unavailable products still circulate among toy fans online, but at this point there is likely little chance of them being released.

The story of Creatable World is one filled with challenges, some overcome, others still outstanding. However, the apparent ending of the line is not the end of the discussions it has raised. Representation in toys is still a hot-button issue that needs to be addressed, as is the gendering of toys. If "toys will be toys" like the Creatable World advertisements say, what are their cultural meanings and significance when examining them through the lens of queer studies? What role might these toys play in introducing inclusivity within the framework of queerness? The next chapter looks at gender, sexual orientation, and other queer identities as represented through toys, as well as the broader field of queer studies and how it shapes our understanding of what "queer" means.

Chapter 3 - Gays and Dolls: A Literature Review

Queer Spaces

In her groundbreaking book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed gives special attention to the spaces that queer people inhabit. How does one orientate oneself in those spaces, referring to the second word of the term "sexual orientation"? She states that "In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation (Ahmed 5)." Would that mean that disorientation in a heterosexually-coded space would result in a queer-coded space? Yes, perhaps, on a phenomenological level. In the conclusion of the text, Ahmed states that "To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things (Ahmed 161)." Queerness, by its very definition, is a disruptive force, so queering an object involves disturbing the order of what surrounds its narrative and what it represents. This is the guiding concept of *UnBarbie*, expanded upon later in this text.

Environment, queer or otherwise, then shapes the body and perceptions of it. Ahmed says,

> "Orientations, then, are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places…The body provides us with a perspective: the body is "here" as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there. The "here" of the body does not simply refer to the body, but to "where" the body dwells. The "here" of bodily dwelling is thus what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings: the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression; just think of goose bumps, textures on the skin surface, as body

> traces of the coldness of the air. Bodies may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected. In turn, given the history of such responses, which accumulate as impressions on the skin, bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling" (Ahmed 8).

Environments, physical or created, shape a person. They also shape perspectives of others about a person, providing a context within which one might at least attempt to understand them.

While Ahmed talks about queer spaces from a phenomenological perspective, Natalie Oswin brings in a perspective that considers queer geography. In "Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality," Oswin says, "Sexual identity politics is frequently about recognizing or accepting the 'other'. This line of thinking is "about extending the norm, not transgressing or challenging it. A recent turn towards assimilationist politics amongst many mainstream gay and lesbian organizations has caused many to critique not just heteronormativity but homonormativity as well" (Oswin 92). While not all members of the queer community agree that extending norms is the best response to queerphobic rhetoric that keeps queer people out of heteronormative spaces, this viewpoint highlights the variety of spaces that people label as being queer. Queer spaces are ordinary spaces, disorienting spaces, extended spaces, challenging spaces, and any other type of space that disturbs the order of heteronormative and cisnormative ideals.

Queer Dolls

There is little research on Creatable World dolls. However, there is plenty of research about fashion dolls to draw from. Barbie and her friends reign supreme as the most talked about fashion dolls, with a reported global recognition rate of 98%. Her mere existence offers plenty of room for research and theoretical considerations (*Tiny Shoulders*). From feminist theory to material culture, Barbie has been analyzed by scholar after scholar. However, a less-tapped topic is Barbie's relationship to queer studies.

Barbie's sexual orientation and gender role were solidified in 1961 with the release of the first Ken doll. In 1963, Barbie got her first named best friend, Midge. These dolls rounded out the world of Barbie and seemingly deviated from the "blank slate" label that Mattel had always insisted Barbie carried. Barbie can be anything, according to Mattel, but over the years Mattel has gone back and forth between Barbie and the other dolls being characters and the dolls being blank slates for children on which to project their hopes and dreams (Rand 40). Even in the early years, children wanted to know more about Barbie and her world, and Mattel has sometimes answered these questions through Barbie media, other times pretending this media never existed. Mattel has published a few Q&A sections on their website over the years, occasionally changing the messaging to include more about Barbie the character or to insist that Barbie is just a doll and can be whatever children want her to be (Rand 24).

Barbie users have been encouraged to play in unique ways, playing with different careers and different fashions, but they are still expected to maintain the classic Barbie design as the center of her own plastic world. Most importantly, Barbie fans are never encouraged to reconsider Barbie's sexuality (Rand 87). There have been releases of official imagery by Mattel where Barbie and Midge seem close in queer ways, but Ken is never far from the picture.

Barbie, over the years, has been represented in a wide variety of official media. If a consumer likes Barbie dolls, they might also like Mattel's official Barbie animated movies or the classic novels, which feature Barbie, the human character, having a variety of adventures. Some of these narratives include characters of color, but they are generally side characters. Even in recent years with the introduction of more Black characters in Mattel's media, the main characters of these stories are represented by the classic blonde Barbie design. Barbie can be anything, but she is supposed to be a White girl, a cisgender female, and a straight person. As stated best in *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, "What remains consistent is that, no matter how many consumers Mattel expands its infinite possibility line to bring in, Mattel, and Barbie, always remains faithful to those who buy into the prevailing idea that the best thing to be is White, skinny, blonde, glamourous, rich, largely apolitical, and heterosexual, although it caters to some of these values more subtly than before" (Rand 92).

The second chapter of *Barbie's Queer Accessories* discusses the numerous alternative play scenarios that queer-identifying adults remember from their childhoods of playing with Barbies. Barbie dolls stood in for male characters when a child did not have a Ken doll. Barbie and Ken shared clothes for fun and character development. This type of play was seemingly common, both among LGBTQ+ children and cisgender and heterosexual children. Even one Mattel employee states in the *Tiny Shoulders* documentary that Barbie was just as likely to end up in Ken's clothes as Ken himself. She cited the reason as being a way to "protect" her Barbie from femininity and having breasts as a response to the pain of losing her mother to breast cancer. If the breasts were hidden, breast cancer couldn't find Barbie. However, even when the motives were not queer, Barbie dressed in Ken's clothes further solidifies any statements of Barbie as a hegemonic spokesperson for femininity. Barbie is supposed to dress one way, and

subversions of such point to inner turmoil in those that would play with her in other ways. It also points to the idea that the queerness of Barbie lies in friend characters and the rest of the world built up around her. Barbie herself is straight and cis, but when she has a female character like Midge to interact with and an official boyfriend, who generally lacks a personality in most Barbie media, playtime might become looser with gender roles, whether children understand the queer narratives they play out or not. Barbie officially occupies a heterosexual space, but with enough imagination (and a little less Ken), she could populate a queer space.

A literature review for a research project such as *UnBarbie* would be incomplete without mentioning the artistic literature available which critically examines Mattel's most iconic 11-inch fashion doll. Since Barbie's inception, many artists and activists have reimagined the doll, both highlighting her positives and emphasizing her negatives. One particularly notable instance of activists getting ahold of the doll was the project of the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), a collective which swapped voice boxes between Barbie and G.I. Joe toys before returning them to stores for unsuspecting buyers to give to children (*Tiny Shoulders*). This resulted in several hundred Barbie dolls emitting sounds of gunfire and exclaiming "vengeance is mine," BLO's commentary on gender roles and toy messaging.

Artists have also used Barbie in perhaps less aggressive ways to project critiques of gender roles. *Mother-Son Talk* by Gail Rebhan (1996) (fig. 6) is but one example of this out of countless artworks that could be mentioned here, and her work is perhaps particularly relevant to *UnBarbie* (Rebhan). Rebhan's artist's book is set up as a dialogue between a son who believes in gender roles, such as men always being physically stronger than women, and his mother, who works to set the record straight. One of the most striking images in the book shows Barbie

standing over a male action figure, insisting that *some* men are stronger than *some* women, contradicting the son's declaration that *all* men are stronger than *all* women.

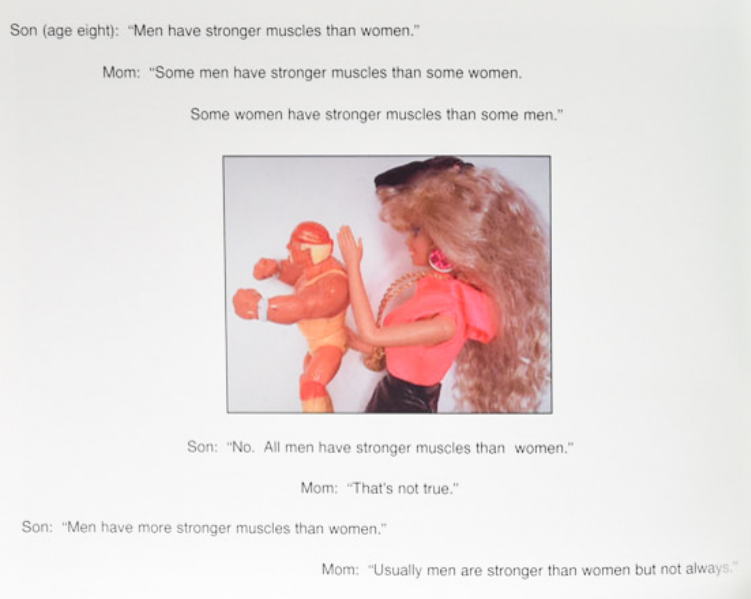

Figure 6. Image from Gail Rebhan's Mother-Son Talk

A very notable example of fashion dolls in visual media is David Levinthal's photographs of Barbie dolls (fig. 7). In Levinthal's constructed world, which exists in his photographs, Barbie is her own person, an icon, and a desirable symbol of high fashion. She is not photographed with her end user, the owners of Barbie dolls, but rather on her own, posing perfectly every time in her timeless fashions. She does not look human, and her proportions are certainly not humanlike, but she is treated as a person, nonetheless, given her own agency as she looks to the side of the image through painted eyes, gazing off at something that has caught her attention. In each of Levinthal's Barbie images, Barbie's expressiveness shines through.

Figure 7. Image from David Levinthal's Barbie series

Perhaps the key visual references that lead to a better understanding of 11-inch fashion dolls are the Barbie advertisements themselves. Early Barbie advertisements emphasized pretty dresses and a wide variety of style options (*1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial*). Although, as previously discussed, Barbie was intended to be progressive and has changed a lot over the decades, her emphasis has always been on women's fashion, with very little deviation from mainstream styles outside of special edition collectible and designer dolls. The message from Barbie branding in the early years was clear: Barbie, and her human female counterparts she represented, were expected to adhere to some gender roles, even if the doll was always slightly ahead of her time. Women are (cisgender) women, men are (cisgender) men, and any deviation is not marketable in Barbie World.

Creatable World dolls have not gained as much notoriety in toy photography spaces, leaving a gap in art spaces that has yet to be filled by the flexibility in character creation and queer representations that Creatable World has to offer. If Barbie is and always was intended to express cisgender womanhood, even as the doll changed with the times, how might one represent queerness through 11-inch fashion dolls?

Gendered Toys

In advertising toys to children, a company decides what kind of children a toy is intended for, and frequently toys are divided along gender lines. Does it matter that girls are pushed towards pink and boys are pushed towards blue? Does it matter if a child plays with dolls *or* trucks, or do they need both? Boe and Woods have an answer to that. In their 2018 study titled "Parents' Influence on Infants' Gender-Typed Toy Preferences," the researchers looked at the toy preferences of the youngest age group of children and how their parents influenced or did not influence that. They found that, despite children not having a sense of their own gender until around the age of two years old, infants already were influenced by their parents' biases around sex and gender (Boe and Woods 370). Many masculine-coded toys are associated with movement, spatial skills, construction, and science, such as trucks or science kits. Conversely, many feminine-coded toys are associated with nurturance, such as dolls and kitchen sets. Boe and Woods found that "having access to [certain] toys at very early ages has the potential to influence toy preferences and therefore toy choices. These choices direct children's behavior, and over time, limit or enhance the development of skills associated with these behaviors" (Boe and Woods 369).

One study on gendered toys and roles asked specific questions about Creatable World dolls. Martiushenko and Palovchyk sought to investigate parents' behaviors around gendered toys and the purchase of such products. According to survey data, the authors found that children primarily choose their own toys that the parents then buy for them, but other times parents might choose toys for children based on their own preferences as adults (Martiushenko and Palovchyk 28). Parents also decide what toys to buy for children based on the age of the child recipient, the preferences of the child, and the educational value of the toys. These three factors, Martiushenko and Palovchyk found, were the primary reasons a parent might approve of a Creatable World doll, though they noted that Creatable World dolls may not be perceived as being as educational when compared to other toys, according to the surveyed parents (Martiushenko and Palovchyk 29). Parents did not frequently admit that they choose toys based on the child's gender or the preferences and opinions of the parent, but the authors hypothesized that there may be some response bias involved, as the researchers asked the parents about those potential reasons for toy choice directly (Martiushenko and Palovchyk 28).

Disorienting Miniatures

Figure 8. Image of Frances Glessner Lee's diorama, titled "Parsonage Parlor"

One perhaps less obvious visual reference for *UnBarbie* comes from a woman who committed a number of murders, and yet detectives and police officers love her to this day. This woman is famous among miniature enthusiasts, as the only murders she committed were in 1/12th scale. The detailed miniatures she produced serve both the field of aesthetics and the field of forensic science.

Frances Glessner Lee was, by all standards of the time, on the perfect path to become the ideal woman and wife. Born in 1878 to a wealthy family, Lee was educated at home in domestic arts and was discouraged from pursuing more masculine interests, such as medicine, which she had an interest in as a young child (Botz and Lee 22). Her ambition was apparent to anyone who

met her, and even in her later years she regretted not being allowed to pursue higher education. Nonetheless, she pursued her own hobbies, including miniatures. In 1913, Lee made her first miniature model, a scale model of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Her attention to detail was so great that she included ninety musician dolls ready for performance, instruments, and even some instrument cases (Botz and Lee 24). Thus began the path to create the perfect crime scene.

In 1936, upon the death of her father, Lee came into her inheritance, and she finally could shake off the gender roles that tied her down. She became friends with one of her brother's classmates from Harvard University, who introduced her to her new interest, the field of forensic science (Botz and Lee 26). Her lifelong interest in medicine and her talent in miniatures came together in 1936 when she created the first model in the body of work she would call the "Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death" after a well-known police saying: "Convict the guilty, clear the innocent, and find the truth in a nutshell" (Botz and Lee 27).

To produce her most famous miniature works, Lee referenced real cases, carefully working from photographs, measurements, and police reports (Botz and Lee 32). From these cases, she produced a series of miniature scenes with the goal of training forensic scientists, both practicing and studying, in attention to detail. There are no publicly available answers to the cases that Lee referenced for her models. The details of the referenced cases are sealed, as the models are still used to train police officers and detectives today. Eighteen of Lee's models reside in the Baltimore Medical Examiner's Office where people, criminal investigators and the public alike, view them regularly. When viewed from an artistic perspective, Lee's models convey, through deaths, a sense of life and its realities. Many items in her models work as they would in their usual standard scales, from lighting to curtains to window shades to pencils (Botz and Lee 33). Although most miniatures valued among collectors are not as harsh in their

messaging and do not include as much blood and rigor mortis, Lee is admired for her attention to detail and for pulling people into the world of the miniature, guiding one's eye around the rooms. One might search for reality in her miniatures as they enter the constructed world of the cases she referenced. Lee's work explores themes of gender, mystery, and the strangeness of things that are out of place. Ahmed might consider this disorientation to be inherently queer.

Chapter 4 - Orientating a Created World: Methods, Dolls, and Characters

Autoethnography

UnBarbie is, in part, autoethnographic research creation, drawing from personal engagements with the subjects of this thesis. In *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Adams et al. set out five goals that autoethnographic methods may accomplish (Adams et al. 3). Autoethnography foregrounds particular and subjective knowledge, illustrates sensemaking processes, makes contributions to existing research, challenges norms of research practice and representation, and engages and compels responses from audiences. Autoethnography was chosen as a method for *UnBarbie* for all of these reasons. The primary purpose for its inclusion in this research is the first point above, to share and document subjective knowledge that queer communities often know but which is not always spoken about. For example, the concept of "queer joy" is understood by many queer individuals who experience it, but it is not often brought up in writing, as the focus of writings is often on queer pain and the downsides of being queer and sharing one's queer identity within a queerphobic culture. Queer joy should be included in literature just as much as queer pain. Autoethnography also importantly challenges what kind of knowledge can be shared. The goal of generating knowledge is to build what can be known by those who do not have every lived experience available to humanity. Some things must be experienced to be understood fully, but the next best method of knowing relies on the "graphy" part of the word "autoethnography," the generation of texts based on life experiences. Although autoethnography is commonly documented in writing, texts can take on any documentary form, including creative visual forms such as photographs. In the case of *UnBarbie*, physical objects

and photographs illustrate and convey meanings of queer joy, queer pain, and the neutral experiences of queerness by those who identify with the label.

Research Creation

Research-creation is defined by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) as

> "An approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms). Research-creation cannot be limited to the interpretation or analysis of a creator's work, conventional works of technological development, or work that focuses on the creation of curricula" (Government of Canada). Research-creation is not an art project. Research-creation is a research practice that combines a pursuit of knowledge with an answer that can only be provided through artistic means. The very definition of research emphasizes the process rather than the outcome, hence research-creation must emphasize the process and balance both the creative and the educational."

"Creation" is often associated with visual art, but research-creation is not necessarily visual in nature, as SSHRC describes in their definitions. Research-creation can include audio, writing, performance, and any other form of creative expression. The outcomes of *UnBarbie* are indeed visual, but that is not what makes this thesis research-creation. In order to show and document

the doll characters for this research, I have photographed them. However, the process is what fits it into the definition (Loveless 240). Research-creation is not about artistic rigor and pretty photographs. Although it is important that the creation be of a high enough quality to fully support the research, the creation depends on the research, just as the research questions must be answered by the creation.

There are many ways of examining and understanding Creatable World dolls. One of the most common ways to do this is to interact with the dolls in the way they were designed to be interacted with: through character creation and play. Research through experience is a key method of doing research-creation. Therefore, the element of playfulness that is inherent in toys is a key element of *UnBarbie*. Toy photography is generally regarded as an art form by its practitioners, rather than being playtime with a camera, but there is an element of creative play that goes into the creation of serious commentary on toys, including into *UnBarbie*.

It is important to mention the limitations of UnBarbie, primarily where inclusion of different racial and ethnic identities is concerned. There are many ways for queer people to experience and express queerness, and UnBarbie only shows a few snapshots of possible representations. The Creatable World dolls do not have explicitly stated races or ethnicities, but several dolls are very obviously not meant to represent Whiteness. Despite this inclusion, the photographs in UnBarbie leave out a focus on the experiences of queer individuals who identify as being part of ethnic and racial minority groups. The absence of such a discussion is due to the researcher not having the lived experience to properly discuss such topics. Further research could, of course, center around Creatable World dolls and the aforementioned subjects, especially showing narrative and lived experiences in collaboration with queer-identifying Black and Brown individuals. In the case of research that discusses identity, researchers with certain

privileges should not speak over marginalized groups who do not experience those same privileges, and White researchers should always defer to Black and Brown individuals to tell their narratives if, when, or where those individuals choose to do so.

Constructing Queer Spaces

In order to imagine a queer doll, it is also important to consider a queer environment. After all, Barbie is never far from her dream house, however pink, pristine, feminine, and gender-affirming it may be. Additionally, short of wearing clothes with pride flags or announcements of the wearer's queerness printed on them, queer people generally look no more queer than cisgender and heterosexual people would. A skirt does not automatically make a short-haired person or doll queer any more than pants make a long-haired person or doll queer. There is no one way to present as queer, and nobody, doll or human, really "looks" queer without social markers of queerness added onto the human body. Therefore, it was important to consider orientation, identity, and gender roles as represented by the environment rather than relying on the dolls and their clothing and hair choices. A doll with short hair in a skirt bears less of a relationship to queerness than a doll with short hair, a skirt, and an overly pink and feminine environment that asks the audience to question gender roles.

To accomplish the goal of showcasing queer identities through spaces, individual rooms of a queer "dream house" were constructed. The first step in constructing the rooms was a planning stage, which included drawing layouts of rooms and researching the language and meanings of interior design. Even after drawing the layouts of the rooms, changes were made in

the crafting stage, with furniture being added and subtracted from the space depending on what fit in each room aesthetically and physically. Planning was important, but so was exploration and experimentation. The space of each room box measures 13” x 18.5” x 11.5” when unfolded and set up, and 13” x 7” x 11.5” when folded for storage. The diorama room boxes are built primarily of foam board and scrapbook paper, and many of the furnishings and accessories are crafted from a variety of recycled and new materials. Branded miniatures, such as the toys featured in the shop scene and the board games on Logan’s bedroom shelf, were acquired from 5 Surprise Mini Brands capsules and advent calendars from the toy company Zuru, grounding the images in a reality that the audience might recognize from products and logos. This helps to suspend disbelief and allows better immersion in the images. Inspiration for the construction of the folding room boxes was taken from LaToya Moore-Broyles’ YouTube channel, where she has posted over two thousand craft video tutorials for Barbie and similarly-sized dolls (MyFroggyStuff). Extra focus was given to realistic details, in keeping with the style of Frances Glessner Lee’s miniatures. The pillows have pillowcases on them. The guitars in Ocean’s room are strung with thread. The windows look out onto photographs of cityscapes, just slightly visible in the background.

Photographing Dolls

Creatable World dolls are the subjects of *UnBarbie* and the models for representing queer identities through toys. The dolls are roughly ten inches tall, just under the classic Barbie’s eleven inches, which puts them at just under one-sixth scale. They have thirteen points of

articulation, giving them excellent mobility and pose options. These dolls cannot reliably stand alone. Their ability to stand freely depends on the surface they are posed on, what shoes they are wearing, and how tight a particular doll's ankle joints happen to be, so doll stands are a more dependable tool for posing a Creatable World doll upright when there is nothing to prop them up against.

Doll stands are not the only tool in a toy photographer's arsenal. When photographing dolls, there are many ways to make the dolls look more lifelike and give them more personality, bringing them beyond being mere objects and into being representations of human life. Over many years of trial and error in photographing dolls, I have found that having the camera on the doll's level, around eye or chest level on the doll, scales them up visually and draws more attention to their features rather than their size. Varying head and body poses is also an excellent way of making a doll appear more humanlike. Simple tilts of a head and an arm posed away from the body bring motion to a static object and its static image. When photographing dolls across multiple images and scenes, the best way to make it appear that time has passed is by changing the doll's clothing and hair. With Creatable World dolls, changing hair does not do much to progress time, as the dolls are designed to have their hair swapped out from long to short in seconds. However, the large number of clothing choices available for dolls in the range of one-sixth scale provides easy opportunities to create a passage of time between scenes. Of course, these methods in toy photography are guidelines rather than rules, and sometimes even strict rules are meant to be broken.

This chapter presents the dolls alone or together against a backdrop that was created from the doll packaging, a yellow background with blue line art of clothing and accessories, representing the wide variety of characters one might create with the dolls. The focus here is on

the dolls themselves. The following three chapters contextualize the dolls in the crafted room diorama environments. Each room photograph will be presented, described, and linked to existing literature. The interpretations follow Terry Barrett's methods for describing, interpreting, and contextualizing photographic images. Barrett, a scholar/art photographer and Professor Emeritus at Ohio State University, authored the book *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Image*s. In his book he sets out excellent guidelines for describing, interpreting, contextualizing, judging, and discussing photographic images, which will be used to interpret *UnBarbie* images in the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of this thesis. "Criticizing" here does not mean an automatically negative judgement as the term is understood in popular vernacular, but rather it means a close engagement with a text (in this case, an image) to increase understanding and appreciation, and to make both objective and subjective judgments of the work (Barrett 3).

The photographs that make up *UnBarbie* are works on their own, but they are also documentary. This project is exploratory in nature, and the discussions of the images are about both the photographic documentation and also the physical objects produced as sets for the dolls to exist within. These sets, however, will not last forever. Nothing lasts forever, but there is a built-in time-based element to *UnBarbie*. The contact paper used for some of the flooring, as well as some types of glue and tape used in the construction of the dioramas, are not acid-free, and therefore will age and crumble over time. One day, all that will be left of *UnBarbie* is the photographs.

Creating the Characters: "Looking" Queer

Creatable World dolls, like all dolls and the real people they represent, do not inherently appear any more queer than their straight-coded counterparts when considered outside of queer spaces and queer symbols, even in spite of inherent or created queer identities. They were designed with gender non-conforming and queer children in mind, and, as a result, they are excellent for representing gender non-conforming and queer identities. However, while Creatable World dolls are inherently queer, they only step into queer roles with an extension of the doll's body, just like real humans. The addition of clothing and pride flags make their roles clearer and queerer in a visual medium like photography.

In Mattel's marketing world, Creatable World dolls are intended to be interacted with by all children, with "all welcome" as a slogan. It is therefore subversive for an adult researcher to use these dolls in research creation. The constructed environments describe the characters, which is in keeping with the intentions of the original designers rather than Mattel's marketing strategies. Mattel intended for only one type of person, a child, to engage with the dolls, and only dolls and clothing packs were released. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Creatable World line was almost certainly going to be expanded to include accessories that help round out characters, as more wigs and a doll closet carrying case were designed and prototyped but never released to the public. Therefore, it is up to the public (including the academic public), to fill in the imaginary world around the dolls and create unofficial accessories, therefore engaging with the designers rather than with Mattel as a corporation with specific target audiences for each toy line they create and promote.

The Dolls

Each doll was assigned a name and pronouns to create a character in their environments. They were also given a distinct clothing style, personality traits, hobbies, and interests. The clothing choices for these dolls drew from different gender roles and societal norms of what kind of person wears what style of dress, following expectations for some characters and subverting or ignoring them for others. Angel's clothing (a blue button-down and a skirt) leans more feminine while Skye's outfit (jeans and a snapback hat) is intended to be more masculine. These doll characters do not have assigned ages. They are dolls, not real people, merely representing a distilled idea of a human rather than representing a specific, human individual in this research. However, as characters, they do represent individuals through character details shown in the imagery.

Figure 9. Angel

Angel (she/they) (fig. 9), a DC-965 doll, wears a pink and blue, striped, tie-dyed skirt reminiscent of the colors of the transgender pride flag. The skirt is an official Creatable World skirt that came with her character creation kit, and its inclusion informed her character creation. Angel has light skin, brown hair, and blue eyes. She enjoys listening to pop music, and photography is her main hobby.

Figure 10. Micah

Micah (they/them) (fig. 10), a DC-073 doll with straight black hair, brown eyes, and light skin with warm undertones, is dressed up and ready to create. Their paint-splattered overalls give indications about this doll's character, as they are a painter who dabbles in other kinds of visual

art as well. Micah is comfortable in their identity, but they are often afraid to speak up and ask others to refer to them by they/them pronouns.

Figure 11. Gemma and Skye

Skye (he/him) and Gemma (she/her) are both DC-619 dolls (fig. 11). They have light skin, straight red hair, and green eyes. Gemma identifies as a cisgender girl, and her feminine style and long hair reflects this. She is very shy, but she likes dance and performance. Skye, on the other hand, is the opposite of his twin sister. He is a transgender and only wants to be perceived as masculine, so he tries to present in a way that makes people assume he is cisgender. He is very outgoing and loves acting and musical theater.

Figure 12. Juniper

Juniper (she/her), a DC-319 doll with dark skin, a black, curly wig, and brown eyes (fig. 12). She maintains a feminine style of dress, but she is sure to dress sensibly and be ready for everything. She is level-headed and academically gifted. Juniper is quiet in her lesbian identity in public but comfortable with it in private, identifying with both the lesbian pride flag and the Progress Pride flag.

Figure 13. Ocean

Ocean (he/they) is a DC-826 doll with medium brown skin, brown curls, and brown eyes (fig. 13). He identifies as a boy, but he wears skirts and often comes across as very feminine. People assume he is a girl, and sometimes they criticize him for it, but he ignores what other people think and is comfortable in his expression of gender. He is panromantic, and he is constantly listening to music. He plays guitar in a band, and while he seems quiet offstage, he is confident in his performances.

Figure 14. Logan

Logan (he/she/they) is a DC-220 doll with medium tan skin, honey blonde curls, and green eyes (fig. 14). He is uncertain of how he would define himself, so he eschews labels entirely while leaning more towards a feminine expression of gender. He likes science fiction and fantasy stories, and most people are happy to welcome him in counter-cultural and speculative fiction spaces. He is especially interested in and relates to allegories of "the other," and created heroes, including both robots and superheroes.

Figure 15. Phoenix

Phoenix (they/them) is a DC-414 doll with blonde hair, light skin, and blue eyes (fig. 15). They identify with the words queer and genderqueer and prefer to be represented by the six-bar rainbow pride flag. They are interested in fashion and sewing, and are a big fan of bold prints and bright colors.

Figure 16. Logan and Zahra

Zahra (she/they) is a DC-319 doll with dark skin and brown eyes wearing a braided wig that came with a DC-725 doll set (fig. 16). She is an outgoing and friendly doll that is always there to support friends. She is active in queer spaces and is always encouraging others to be themselves. She likes cinema and is proud of her identity as a queer doll.

Figure 17. Iris

Iris (she/they) is a DC-725 doll with dark skin and brown eyes wearing a bright purple wig from one of the extra wig packs (fig. 17). She is aromantic and asexual. She is also active in queer spaces, though she is much quieter than Zahra and is very shy. In spite of her shyness, she likes people and is interested in political discussions and mass media.

Figure 18. Basil

Figure 19. "Boys Will Be Boys"

Basil (they/he) is a DC-725 doll with dark skin, black hair, and brown eyes (fig. 18). They sometimes present as feminine and sometimes as masculine. They have only just started

learning about themselves and their identity, but they feel comfortable in the queer community and they enjoy being among other queer dolls (fig. 19).

Chapter 5 - Miniature Markers of Gender: Gender Identity and a Creatable World

This chapter of the thesis project describes the spaces of the photographs and orientates audiences of the images. It also provides context and background on some of the themes of the rooms. The creation of the rooms is reminiscent of the concept of Henri Lefebvre's production of social space. Christian Fuchs explains that

> "Lefebvre's key idea in *The Production of Space* is that humans not only produce social relations and use-values, but in doing so also produce social space. In more general terms, extending beyond social space to all physical spaces, one can say that "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (170, as cited by Fuchs 135).

The social space and physical space produced by bodies is portrayed in research creation through the rooms with clothing and dolls designed by Mattel and furniture and objects produced through careful crafting methods. The images in this chapter draw from Lefebvre and the disturbed order of Sara Ahmed's queer space in order to represent expressions of queer identity.

The images in this chapter are celebrations of queer identities and culture, but it would be remiss not to acknowledge the privilege represented by the rooms. It is a sign of middle-class privilege to have a space of one's own that one does not have to share with siblings or roommates. It is a privilege to have one's own space to decorate how one wants, free of prejudices that keep queer people from expressing their identity. These rooms depict queer joys and queer freedoms in a sort of utopia. There is plenty of focus on queer pain in research and in mass media. *UnBarbie* shows queer joys, an ideal that is achievable in reality but is not achievable for everyone as long as class divides exist in contemporary societies.

Logan’s Room

Figure 20. "Boy's Room?"

Figure 21. "Logan's Room"

Figure 22. "Golden Days"

At first glance, Logan's room may appear to belong to a young boy with masculine-coded interests (fig. 20). The room features dinosaurs, *Star Wars* and *Action Comics* posters in bright colors that contrast the blue walls, and a few masculine- and neutral-coded toys on the shelves, such as Spider Man and a droid from the *Star Wars* franchise. The items on the walls and shelves denote action, as boys are supposed to be miniature men of action. Perhaps some of

the items, such as a Spider-Man action figure or the dinosaur figures conjure up images of aggression even, defending one's territory. The room is relatively tidy, with things arranged neatly on the shelves but still slightly out of alignment, and one might make some assumptions about what kind of boy occupies this room. Perhaps this is a room that belongs to an active young boy, or perhaps a youthful teenaged boy.

Upon the addition of Logan (fig. 21), the meaning and understanding of the room changes to one of subverting masculinity. The juxtaposition of long hair (often associated with femininity and feminine gender roles) takes up space in an environment that is primarily not feminine in meaning. The stereotypical items of a boy are not exclusive to boys, as is shown in the images, but it is not always easy for those who do not identify as men to navigate those masculine-coded spaces. Nerdy interests and comics are so frequently associated with boys' and men's spaces that there are entire guidebooks targeted at women and femme-presenting people on how to navigate science fiction and fantasy fan bases and nerd culture, such as *The Fangirl's Guide to the Galaxy: A Handbook for Girl Geeks*, published by Quirk Books in 2015 (Maggs).

Nerd cultures and science fiction and fantasy fandoms are regularly in conversation over gender roles and the presence of women and femme-presenting people in these groups. Specifically, some male fans do not appreciate women (and other genders) in these spaces. In the book *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, the authors say "For women within geekdom, the only available spaces are contested and marginalized: fake geek or fan girl? Sex object or feminist bitch? For women, there's often no answer that doesn't lead to further pigeonholing and silencing, and either extreme can be used as an insult or excuse for marginalization" (Salter and Blodgett 12). While the book makes only a brief mention of queer and transgender identities, queer women are especially looked down upon in nerd communities, often getting stuffed into a

specific stereotype of the "fan girl," the girl who gushes over attractive (cisgender) men in media and writes a lot of gay fan fiction (Salter and Blodgett 159).

In the image titled *Golden Days* (fig. 22), Logan sits on the ottoman seats in their room, sunlight coming through the window and casting a warm glow on Logan's face. Whereas in the previous images the focus is on the image, in this image the focus is on the viewer. The image is more engaging, confronting the viewer directly. The image connects the figure to the objects in the room through lighting and color.

The lighting in the bedroom scenes was a purposeful choice. The rooms all exist at the same time of day with an eternal golden hour, a beloved time of day for photographers who shoot in natural lighting. When photographing humans, the diffused lighting that arrives just before sunset often erases blemishes and reduces harsh shadows on a subject's face. Although dolls generally do not have blemishes, there are other benefits of the lighting in photographing Creatable World characters. The spaces the dolls inhabit are suspended in a dreamlike, photographic fantasy because sometimes photographers can dream of always having perfect lighting in which to capture their subjects. In make-believe doll land, anything is possible, especially moody lighting with a warm, golden tint that conjures up nostalgic emotions. Dolls and other toys are inextricably linked to childhood and nostalgia, and Logan sits by their window, ageless and unchanging. Even with Creatable World dolls' advertising suggesting that the end users of the dolls can create characters again and again, the doll is fundamentally the same through wig swapping and clothing changes. Their faces and bodies do not change.

Angel's Room

Figure 23. "Girl's Room?"

Figure 24. "Angel's Room"

Figure 25. "Feminine Space"

Everything in Angel's room is carefully coordinated in ways that might cause one to assume the room belongs to a girl or a young woman (fig. 23). The feminine colors and matching furniture are often associated with feminine interests and careful home decor. The colors are soft and muted, the rug is plush, the knitted pillow and blanket contribute to a feeling of femininity in the space. The home and its activities, domestic arts, are a woman's space, according to gender

roles in Western society. The room itself is laid out to be the opposite of Logan's room: pink instead of blue, perfume bottles instead of action figures, and mirrors that conjure up ideas about women caring more about their appearances than men, as well as invoking the beauty standards placed upon women. Barbie, Angel's idol, is ever present through David Levinthal's photographs as posters on the wall, watching over the room and the supposedly feminine occupant.

Upon adding the doll, however, tradition is broken (fig. 24). For as soft and feminine as the space is, Angel presents as being more masculine. In this space, angel has short hair. She wears a skirt, but skirts do not decide a doll's gender, and Angel is still gender fluid however she is dressed. The masculine button-down and a short haircut defy her gender roles. The angle of the camera creates a more casual feeling in the space, further striking down gendered expectations that women maintain a certain neatness and tidiness. Angel is reflected in the mirror behind her, but she looks away from her reflection and any concern for her appearance. Instead, she looks directly at the viewer with her head tilted down, her face in shadow, making her seem almost aggressive in the space. When she looks away in the next image (fig. 25), Angel still takes up space. Women are often discouraged from taking up space (Bowles Eagle 350). Angel leans forward as if she is about to get up and take action towards something off camera. Whereas Logan appeared more passive sitting by his window, Angel appears active. She is not concerned with the viewer or the viewer's opinions. She has things to do. This image is included in *UnBarbie* for the strong sense of character that it shows. Femininity is not automatically passive, and Angel's pose points to a rejection of the trope.

Micah's Room

Figure 26. "Respect Existence or Expect Resistance"

Figure 27. "Artist's Room"

Figure 28. "Micah's Room"

The title of "Respect Existence or Expect Resistance" (fig. 26) references a rallying cry that is popular in queer communities. Micah stands (carefully balanced without a doll stand or a prop, held vertical primarily by luck), relaxed but alert, presenting themselves to the viewer in paint-stained clothes that indicate their self-expression through art. The scale in this image makes

Micah appear larger than life, more powerful as they confront the viewer, at ease in their space. The addition of the tiger on their shirt implies strength. Despite their relaxed stance, they are still in motion, one arm slightly raised, ready to take a breath and move away right after the photograph is taken, to claim their independence from the image and its viewers. Perhaps Micah is about to flop on the floor, as they are in the image titled "Micah's Room" (fig. 28).

Micah's bedroom (fig. 27) has a consistent color palette that matches the transgender pride flag on the wall: pink, blue, and white, representing feminine identities, masculine identities, and other identities respectively. The pride flag matches the bedspread, the wall color, the rug, Micah's paintings, and even the dollhouse that is tucked behind the easel, a remnant of a past that has been set aside in favor of Micah's more current interests. Throughout all the *UnBarbie* rooms, there is an emphasis on creative expression and hobbies. Not only are the arts often a haven for creative expression of queer identities, but the name "Creatable World" almost demands that the dolls be just as expressive. Micah is comfortable in their room, which reflects that they are comfortable in their identity.

The transgender pride flag is not the only indication of Micah being in transition. Sketches on the left wall imply an artistic thought process and brainstorming. The image of Walter Wick's toy cityscape on the righthand wall shows motion and action around Micah, as do other objects in the room. Art supplies stand at hand, ready for use. The cutting mat and the empty canvas, the latter of which is primed and ready for painting, further show action. The painting on the easel might be complete, but it may not yet be. It is unclear what state it is in, and it certainly will take some time to dry properly before it can be considered finished.

Skye's Room

Figure 29. "Actor's Room"

Figure 30. "Skye's Room"

Figure 31. "The Dreamer"

The space in “Actor’s Room” (fig. 29) is minimalistic but chaotic, industrial in aesthetic but still welcoming enough. A couch bed suggests a room that is ready at a moment’s notice to change from a bedroom to a space for guests, leaving room for change and growth as different uses appear over time, as well as different methods of self-expression exhibited by the room’s

inhabitant. Posters on the walls from theatrical performances hint at a change of identity. Clothes are piled on the floor next to the mirror, suggesting that Skye has been trying on different outfits.

In Chapter 2, a *Slate* article by Alex Myers featuring criticisms of the Creatable World line was quoted, saying, "These dolls only further entrench that misunderstanding and simultaneously reinforce the idea that gender is 'playful' and easy to switch around, accusations that are often leveled at trans youths when they come out." This criticism presents a valid concern, but it does not reflect the experiences of every transgender individual. It is common for transgender people to try on different gender identities before discovering how they feel most comfortable identifying and presenting. In her video essay titled "Food, Beauty, Mind," Abigail Thorn discusses her experience of finding herself and her gender identity. She describes how she, prior to accepting her womanhood, made efforts to work out at a gym more and become some sort of ideal image of masculinity. She was "determined to make manhood work" out of a desire to change herself without changing the parts of herself that needed to change before she could accept herself, specifically how she presented herself socially. Perhaps "playful" is the wrong word to describe the human transgender experience, but a "switch around" may occur. The room is messy, life is complicated, and gender identities can be messy and complicated, too.

In "Skye's Room" (fig. 30), Skye himself matches the décor of the room, with the red of his shirt matching the red of the walls and the sole of the stray shoe on the ground. Because Creatable World dolls are fashion dolls, care was taken in dressing the dolls to match their identities and the outward expression of those identities – their spaces. The doll poses for the photograph, engaging with the viewer in a way that invites them in rather than confronting them, as other dolls in *UnBarbie* have done. In the next image, Skye looks away, appearing more introspective as the downtime in "The Dreamer" (fig. 31) shows Skye contemplating his future.

Dolls' eyes often appear unfixed, and in this image the blank expression on this doll's face is used to the image's advantage. The viewer is a spectator to a character's inner life as Skye gazes off into an imagined distance.

Juniper's Room

Figure 32. "Plant Room"

Figure 33. "Juniper's Room"

Figure 34. "Growing and Changing"

"Plant Room" (fig. 32) is a neat and tidy space with emphasis on clean lines and clean nature. It is bright and airy and leans more feminine because of this conscious attention to the décor. Although the mint green of the walls is not especially feminine, the softness of the room is. The pride flag featured prominently on the wall draws in the eye, as the boldness contrasts the

more muted colors and representational objects around it. The economical use of space lends visual balance to the room.

The addition of Juniper (fig. 33) to her room brings a different kind of balance to the space: the balance between visual cohesion and visual tension. Juniper's outfit matches, but it breaks some fashion rules that say one should never mix stripes with plaid patterns. The outfit is a little chaotic, but that only adds to the character, and the outfit still matches because of the matching yellow on the shirt and on the skirt. Rules can be broken, both in fashion and in toy photography.

"Creatable" worlds do not always have to be explicitly about artistic creation. Juniper's room focuses on another form of creation: life. A pride flag is prominently displayed, similar to how it is displayed in Micah's room. The flag is in the background. An identity is only a part of a person, so while the flag is prominently featured, Juniper blocks it by sitting on her bed. The person (represented by a doll), comes first before labels. On her shelf, shown in "Growing and Changing" (fig. 34), Juniper has more signs of growth, change, and life. Books sit on the shelves for personal growth, plants grow around her, and the golden hour light hits her face. Were she alive in a real-world environment, the city outside would be active and changing, just like her own life.

Ocean's Room

Figure 35. "Rocker Room"

Figure 36. "Ocean's Room"

Ocean's room (fig. 35) pays homage to gender and queerness in rock music. For starters, there is explicit representation on the walls, as both Echo Black and Phantom High's singers openly express their queer identities onstage and offstage. The posters on the walls are placed casually, as the bands that Ocean listens to come and go, growing and changing as Ocean does. The sheet music on the bed is also placed casually, ready for the consideration of the room's inhabitant. The furniture and color scheme are simple, with all the focus left on the posters and the musical instruments in the corner by the window, peeking out from behind the bed. Adding Ocean adds a dominating figure (fig. 36). Ocean is poised to take charge in a way that is not reflected by the soothing blues of the room's walls and the clean, minimalist environment.

Rock music, especially the emo music that Ocean's style of dress draws inspiration from, is famously welcoming to queer identities and unique gender expressions. Emo music began to develop in the 1980s, but the emo scene as we know it today found its heroes in the early 2000s, coinciding with the growth of internet culture and online fan communities. The emo music scene of the early 2000s had its "stage-gay" moment, and the topic of musicians' sexualities and genders took over Myspace photo albums and forum discussions, as well as fan fiction websites and other online content creation communities (Fathallah 127). Gerard Way of the emo band My Chemical Romance has worn skirts onstage on several occasions. Ocean himself likes wearing skirts.

Of course, not everything is perfect in the rock scene. Rock music is often associated with sexism by mainstream culture, an association that rightfully brings up the domination of the music scene by cisgender, white men. However, as Rosemary Lucy Hill brings up in "Metal and Sexism", women that were interviewed for her research expressed that they had experienced more instances of sexism in "mainstream" society at "mainstream" music events (Hill 274). Hill notes in the article that rock music, while not considered mainstream, still exists within the frameworks of the broader culture. "Everyday sexism is the background noise for *all* [of the participants'] experiences," and is therefore no more surprising in rock music spaces when compared to mainstream music spaces (Hill 275).

Phoenix's Room

Figure 37. "Sewing Room"

Figure 38. "Phoenix's Room"

"Sewing Room" (fig. 37) presents a stance on a series of opposites. This room, which belongs to Phoenix, stands for personal expression instead of violence, creation instead of destruction, and expression instead of hiding. Their ideas grow with some brainstorming sketches on the walls, and when they decide what style to create they have several choices of what fabric to use waiting on their shelves. For going places, they can grab the bright orange bag from their shelf. The use of a pride flag as a curtain bathes the whole room in colorful light, extending the flag's reach beyond the window and warming up an otherwise cool-toned space. Joy in finding one's identity is never the whole of a person, nor is the flag the whole of the room, but it is a significant part of one's identity, especially when experiences related to aspects of one's identity may indeed shape the whole of a person.

Pulling the camera back and opening the image to show Phoenix in their room (fig. 38) tells more about the room and its inhabitant. The room is not an expensively-decorated living space, featuring a folding chair and a cheap, IKEA-style worktable. The mirror above the desk and behind the sewing machine bounces a small but additional light to fill the space, further bouncing colors around the room. The mannequin by the window has fabric draped over it, possibly showing action with regards to the sketches on the wall on the other side of the window. Tucked behind the sewing machine is a half-finished project, ready to be started again.

The Living Room

Figure 39. "The Living Room"

Figure 40. "The Gender Couch"

The living room (fig. 39) is decorated in a clean, modernist style, a style that points towards urban growth and more concern with the future rather than the past. This is contrasted by the couch, which at first glance seems more experimental and unique, divided between pink and blue. In 2021, IKEA unveiled a limited line of couches designed and inspired by the queer community, with each couch representing a different pride flag. However, the “gender couch” is

the opposite of that messaging, with rigid color boundaries, save for the cushions being on the opposite color sides of the couch. There is a yin and yang effect created by the cushions' positions, but primarily the couch comes with a built-in dividing line that one should not cross.

When the dolls, Gemma and Skye, are placed in the scene (fig. 40), the room becomes a clearer commentary on gender roles. Skye stands ready for action, while Gemma sits more passively on the couch. The roles could just as easily have been reversed, with Gemma standing and waiting for instructions on how to be a good, respectful sister. This image highlights the cultural meanings of gender roles and how arbitrary they can be in a society. Regardless, the twins sit on their corresponding pink and blue sides, looking directly at the viewer.

The Shop

Figure 41. "Market Segmentation"

Figure 42. "Creatable Displays"

Figure 43. "Creatable Choices"

In recent years, as Target did by removing signs that made reference to what kind of children should shop in what toy aisles, many companies have done away with gendering toys, or so they say. Companies may benefit from segmenting the market more rather than less (Azmi et al. 3). In examining gendered toys, it is important to remember that the goal of corporate

businesses is to maximize profits. By engaging in market segmentation by gender (fig. 41), companies can sell more products, as consumers may feel a need to purchase a product twice. For example, a household with an adult man and an adult woman may purchase the same bar of soap twice because one came in blue packaging and the other in pink, causing the consumers to associate the packaging color with other qualities, such as smell in the case of a hygiene product. The same segmentation happens with children and toys. A parent may purchase both dolls and action figures, which serve essentially the same function, for different children based on gender. Market segmentation by gender often plays on an individual's desire to "fit in" with a gendered society, causing a consumer to voluntarily uphold assigned gender roles.

Fighting against gendered marketing is not always easy. In "Creatable Displays" (fig. 42), Gemma has had to look at a separate section of the toy department for truly gender-neutral toys and gender-neutral marketing. This mimics real life, where Creatable World dolls were often sold from end caps of aisles rather than next to other dolls. Nonetheless, in the final image in this scene, Gemma has made her choice on what toy to support (fig. 43). The verdict is that Creatable World dolls are expressive and can be made to represent humanity and gender and other identities. Even in the photographs, the images of the dolls used as part of the display appear to look at the viewer expressively.

Since the invention of photography, most viewers of images have considered that photographs are reflections of reality. Photographs actually interpret reality rather than mirror it. However, in this thesis project the photographs perform both functions. The photographs for this research mirror the constructed world created for the dolls as well as interpret it for viewers. The dolls are performers on the stage sets created for them. Like in a stage play, the sets define the kind of action that can take place on that stage and to a certain extent the meaning the action may

have. In *UnBarbie*, the staged play has no verbal dialogue, so the photographs take the place of the dialogue. There are layers to that expression, some of which are specifically explained by the images and some of which must be created by viewers in the process of examining the meanings of the images. The Creatable World dolls do exactly as their name suggests on multiple levels and meanings.

Chapter 6 - Creatable Joy: The Joys of Queer Dolls

"Queer joy" is a popular term used to denote the happiness of being oneself and being comfortable in one's identity. It is loosely defined, but there are many signs that can point one towards a working definition. For starters, queer joy necessitates a certain level of comfort in one's identity. It is different from pride, leaning more towards a more introspective expression rather than towards an outward expression of being "here and queer," as the rallying cry goes. Queer joy is also confident and self-assured. As Jessica Scalzo, a program coordinator for the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at MacEwen University, put it, "Queer joy is an act of resistance and of rebellion in a society that wants to tell your story for you instead of allowing you to tell it yourself" ("Celebrating Queer Joy").

It was important to this research to show queer joy. The next chapter will discuss queer pain, which is also important to recognize and address. However, there is a grave lack of discussion, both in academics and in popular media, over the joys of self-expression and the joyful elements of the queer experience. We are not merely our pain. We are whole people whose parts are made up of a range of human experiences and emotions.

Queer Joy, Photographed

Figure 44. "Extending the Self"

In “Extending the Self” (fig. 44), Phoenix is slightly out of focus. Instead of seeing the doll in sharp focus, we see Phoenix’s work more clearly than we see them. The contrast between the sketches on the wall and the wild-haired troll doll depicts two sides of creative expression: orderly expression and chaotic expression. Color plays a key role in the image, creating further contrast. An example of the balance between warm and cool colors is seen through the orange-haired troll doll against the purple walls of the room. It is an image of activity, but purposeful activity, as Phoenix works on a fashion design project. Phoenix is backlit by the pride flag over their window. On the shelf rest some fashion-oriented magazines, and the camera angles give a

viewer a more intimate picture of the doll. This image shows more details compared to the other *UnBarbie* images of Phoenix's room, but not a broader view of the whole space.

Queer involvement in the fashion industry and other creative industries conjures up stereotypes, but the LGBTQ+ community tells a different story:

> "Fashion and the other style trades gave us a space to exercise a skill we have had to be very good at, namely, presentation. Surviving as a queer meant mastering appearances, knowing how to manipulate clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight and also to signal that we weren't" (Dyer 63).

There is more to be said about the downsides of queer fashion expression in the next chapter of *UnBarbie*, with focus specifically on how one is *supposed* to dress in a gendered society where straight and cisgender is seen as the default. However, "Extending the Self" is an image that celebrates freedom of expression when one is comfortable and safe doing so.

Figure 45. "All Welcome"

"Safe space" is a popular buzzword among progressive communities and organizations, but having a space, literal or metaphorical, that inspires feelings of safety and acceptance among marginalized groups has been shown to increase positive identity development (Wolowic et al. 568). Like the previous image (fig. 44), "All Welcome" (fig. 45) is a close-up shot with a focus on the detail of the poster on the door, which verbally encourages both equality for queer people and also racial equality. The gaze of the doll, Iris, is directed intensely at the viewer. The colors in her hair and the lighting on it mimic the colors of the rainbow heart on the poster. Contrasting the bright colors and Iris' clean, white shirt is the old, worn, wooden door. The door is worn and, metaphorically speaking, tired. The fight for equality is tiring. Queer history is exhausting to experience, but one can welcome the good things through difficult times.

Figure 46. "The Wall"

The bright colors of the Progress Pride flag mural (or almost the colors, as dark gray was chosen when making the background instead of black, so the colors would not blend into the hair of darker-haired dolls when photographed) behind Zahra mirrors the bright colors of her outfit, but the angles contrast the organic shape of those very clothes (fig. 46). Zahra's head is tilted just

slightly in curiosity, questioning the gaze of the viewer, but it is a positive kind of curiosity. She pushes back against the wall, almost bouncing off of it as a base off of which to form her identity.

The symbol of the six-bar rainbow pride flag can be found seemingly everywhere in politically and socially progressive areas, especially during the month of June, displayed in shop windows and in advertisements. The inclusion of pride flags by businesses is designed to inspire purchasing decisions among the LGBTQ+ community and its allies, and it is taken for granted that someone from the community would be glad to see the flag. Research backs this assumption up. When Wolowic et al. interviewed young people between the ages of fourteen and nineteen who identified as LGBTQ+, they found that the participants expressed positive feelings towards rainbow pride flags as symbols of inclusion and acceptance (Wolowic et al. 564). Rainbow flags also helped youth navigate towards spaces and people they felt safe associating with, such as crisis center workers, classroom instructors, and even worship leaders. However, rainbow flags have limits, and some participants noted that a flag displayed in a window means nothing if the actions of those who operate in that space are not encouraging.

Figure 47. "The First Pride Was a Riot"

In “The First Pride Was a Riot” (fig. 47), bricks are piled beside Juniper, symbolizing self-defense and fighting back. The way her blank, painted expression gazes off camera comes across as intense and defensive, perhaps even fearful when coupled with the body language and the subject matter of the image. The image is tense. Juniper’s hand hovers on the ground with bricks at the ready, and the graphic lines of the background mural converge on Juniper, a

collision in the way that Stonewall was a collision between the police, systemic bigotry, and the queer community.

It is not known exactly who threw the first brick at the Stonewall uprising in 1969, and the question has reached meme status among the queer community on the internet. It is not known exactly whether bricks were thrown at all (The New York Times). If no bricks were thrown, it is possible that the event is associated with bricks due to the Stonewall Inn having a brick building front, and if anything was thrown it might have been stones from the street. However the story goes, bricks are a provocative symbol of resistance in radical spaces, queer or otherwise.

The internet's account of Stonewall is sold as a way to honor voices that are often marginalized within the queer community, especially Black and Brown female and feminine voices. Whether it was Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, or nobody at all who threw bricks, the inclusion of Stonewall's history in a chapter on queer joy is not out of place. Although a riot is hardly a sign that history is joyful and going well for a significant part of the world's population, fighting against one's oppressors fits under the working definition in this chapter of queer joy being an act of resistance and rebellion. Stonewall did not start the fight for queer liberation, but it fueled it, and that fuel should be regarded as a key element in the path towards freedom of expression.

Chapter 7 - Creatable Pain: Miniaturizing Representations of the Tragic

Queer pain is, for the most part, the opposite of queer joy. While queer joy expresses the love of being oneself, queer pain understands that it is not always easy "disturbing the order of things," as Sara Ahmed describes the queering of things (Ahmed 161). Resistance and resilience are still a part of a variety of narratives about queer pain, but rather than celebrating overcoming these challenges, the expression of queer pain laments that one must go through experiences that challenge one's safety and security at all. Being shamed for being true to one's identity is not part of joy, even while resilience is an admirable trait.

The Ethics of Miniaturizing Queer Pain

The contents of this particular chapter could benefit from some disclaimers. One unique feature of Creatable World dolls is their youthfulness, with them being referred to specifically as having features of the average 7-year-old child (*Time* 43). These dolls were designed to represent different types of children rather than following the more common trend of representing adults in fashion doll form. However, this does not mean that one cannot tackle more challenging topics, or even more "adult" topics, with Creatable World dolls.

On the topic of character ages, it is worth noting that the first Barbie was initially released as a "teenaged fashion model," and the original version of her character was around eighteen or nineteen years old. Although, especially at the time Barbie was released, it was once more common for young adults to be treated as full adults and given more responsibilities than

their modern counterparts, eighteen or nineteen was still considered young for Barbie to be wearing her first wedding dress, which was released in 1959, shortly after Barbie hit store shelves (census.gov). Mattel even advertised the dress as being a dream of Barbie's rather than her actual wedding dress, a bit of make believe that represented Barbie's aspirations (Rand 90). Later, the supposedly teenaged Barbie would leave behind her fashion model career to become a doctor, an astronaut, and a presidential candidate, meaning Barbie was either a child prodigy or older than her originally-assigned nineteen years. Ages in doll worlds are fluid and can even be set aside entirely when playtime happens.

In addition to the freedom allowed by the genre of art with dolls, Mattel itself has also not shied away from difficult topics and creating characters who face them. In 2009, American Girl, a brand owned by Mattel, released a doll named Gwen Thompson, a best friend doll to the Girl of the Year doll, Chrissa Maxwell. All named American Girl doll characters have canonical backstories and companion books, and Chrissa's two books tackled the issue of bullying and self-esteem, important issues for American Girl's target audience of ages six and up to learn about. There was one especially difficult topic, however, that produced critical articles against Gwen's existence in Chrissa's story: homelessness. In the Chrissa books, Gwen and her mother are homeless, and real-world reactions to this side of the narrative varied. On the one hand, homelessness is a serious topic that children should learn about in order to develop empathy and perhaps even to take action to solve as they get older, in line with American Girl's messaging encouraging girls to make the world a better place. On the other hand, is dressing up homelessness in a cute sundress and flip flops a good idea? And what does a doll costing over one hundred dollars say about commercializing painful situations? The cost of the doll was the most debated aspect of Gwen's release, and in my opinion, the most problematic aspect of the

doll's release, certainly more problematic than the discussion of homelessness itself in the stories.

While a major toy company charging well over a hundred dollars for a doll who canonically sleeps in her car certainly warrants an eyebrow raise and a question of what stage of capitalism modern society has reached, Gwen's character's mere presence should not be seen as problematic. Gwen is given a generally respectful treatment in Chrissa's books. While the bullies at school pick on her, she is shown as a whole child with her own interests and character traits. Gwen is a child in a difficult situation, but she still gets to experience positive friendships and life experiences in spite of the financial hardship she and her mother face. There are certainly aspects of Gwen's doll's release that could have been done better, but even American Girl's choice to give Gwen a pretty, fashionable, white sundress as her official doll outfit has its benefits. She is not "the homeless doll" but rather a doll representing a demographic of children who deserve respect, a step away from the stereotypes conjured up by stained and ripped clothing.

Mattel's history with tackling difficult topics in their American Girl doll line could be its own thesis. Since Mattel's purchase of American Girl in 1999, the company has had a complicated relationship with topics of diversity and representation. Is Addy's Blackness handled respectfully when showing Black pain during the American Civil War to a modern audience (Zaslow 27)? How is Rebecca's Jewishness used as a plot device intended to generate patriotism in young readers of her stories (Forman-Brunell 18)? Mattel's commitment to difficult topics comes and goes with each new American Girl doll release, with some dolls being more progressive than others in terms of accompanying book themes. Still, difficult discussions and teachable moments remain core to Mattel's branding for American Girl dolls. With this much to

explore in only one popular doll line, is it so much of a stretch to tackle difficult topics with a doll line explicitly intended to be used in the creation of a wide variety of characters?

Angel is a recurring figure in this chapter's images, featured in three out of the five photographs presented here. This was done deliberately to increase connection to a character, even if their character is not consistent. Anyone can become homeless. Anyone can suffer at the hands of societal expectations for "correct" gender and expression. Angel here represents the challenging experiences that some members of the queer community face, even if it is not in keeping with their character as I have created them.

Shooting Pain

Figure 48. "Men's Health"

The image titled “Men’s Health” (fig. 48) tells a story through two boxes, lined up on a bathroom counter and ready for use. They belong to someone in transition performing their regular routine, and the connection is simple and direct. Testosterone injections and menstrual pads are all too familiar to transmasculine individuals who have chosen to undergo hormone replacement therapy and are in an earlier stage of this transition. The inclusion of cosmetics shows putting on a performative identity as one waits for the effects of testosterone to work. Medical transition can be faster or slower depending on what one is prescribed, but it is certainly not a short-term fix.

It is far too common that transgender people get reduced to genitalia and other sexed characteristics. Talia Mae Bettcher discusses at length the “wrong-body” model of theorizing about transgender people, wherein medical intervention is expected and one’s “real” identity is formed based on what one’s body “should” look like (Bettcher 385). A transgender person is not merely a body, and while the transgender relationship between a self and a body may be more complicated than that experienced by cisgender people, wrong-body models reinforce a binary that is harmful to transgender communities (Bettcher 403).

The tendency to reduce transgender people to a “body and mind disconnect” is generally unwelcome, but the points it raises are not incorrect as long as one also can present the other elements of the transgender experience. I cannot speak to the experiences of every transgender person, as dysphoria is a very personal life experience. However, I can speak to my own struggles with it and relate to the narratives of others who also experience it and talk about it. I, like many others who struggle with gender dysphoria, do not find joy in it. Not every transgender

experience is joyful, just like not every cisgender experience is joyful. Dysphoria is painful, confusing, and uncertain, without detracting from the joy one can take in discovering and accepting elements of a personal identity.

Figure 49. "In Her Shadow"

In terms of form, the photograph "In Her Shadow" (fig 49) is out of balance as the doll engages with the viewer. The angles of Angel's head, their shadow, and the poster all conflict, leading to an unstable sense of identity shown in the photograph. Barbie, photographed by David Levinthal as the teenage model she was originally supposed to be, looms over Angel, given agency while Angel is expected to follow in her footsteps as a fashion doll. Barbie and Angel have many opposite qualities, shown by the contrast between the red Levinthal image and Angel's blue shirt. Angel stands in their own literal shadow, which exists in the metaphorical shadow of Barbie. Barbie is femininity and power, and Angel must live up to that standard.

Appearances and performative identity are a reality of interacting with people both within and outside of LGBTQ+ communities. In one study that examined queer women's gender presentations in preparing for job interviews, the participants expressed that they often made an effort to appear more feminine to a potential employer (Reddy-Best 227). In another study, all women interviewed for the research said that they might present as more or less feminine depending on who they might encounter on any given day (Reddy-Best and Pedersen 60). Queer people understand that societal expectations govern how people will treat them.

In 2021, I had long hair that reached past my waist. In 2022, I cut it shorter, and in early 2023, I buzzed my hair short to fall more in line with how I wanted to present myself to the world as a queer person. The reactions from strangers over my dramatic hair transformation were just as dramatic as the haircut itself, and they only solidified my understanding that gendered expectations govern many social interactions in everyday life. The people who already knew me were supportive or even neutral towards my decision to remove a marker of femininity from my appearance, something I had wanted to do for a while, but immediately after the haircut, I noticed that people in the service industry were warier of me. I had been told by friends that

short hair made me look “tougher,” and “more masculine,” and the usual, friendly “Can I help you, miss?” from store clerks and restaurant hosts had turned into a stiff nod and perhaps a neutral “Hello. Table for two?” This is anecdotal information that does not account for other factors, such as an employee simply having a bad day, but it is worth considering when such reactions have happened on more than a few occasions. My long hair could have been a signal that I fell in line with rules, including gender rules, and was less likely to cause trouble in a public space.

Figure 50. "Kicked Out"

In another scene (fig. 50), Angel sits at the end of the rainbow, but there is no golden lining for them. They represent the queer children and young people who do not get to celebrate their coming out and do not receive love and acceptance from family and guardians. The image is heavier, both in subject and in visual weight, with the image heavily weighted by the elements pulled to the bottom of the frame. The collision of forces in the background, the lines of the pride

flag, converge on Angel, who is alone with their sign and their coffee cup, hoping for change. The sign does not directly ask for help but rather qualifies the situation. Angel has likely not been homeless for long, as their clothing is still clean, but they represent a crisis among queer youth.

One tragic reality of the current Western political climate is the lack of acceptance and understanding of many queer children by their parents and guardians. The percentage of homeless youth who identify as LGBTQ+ is between 8% and 37% of that population (Ecker 325). In addition to facing homelessness at a rate higher than their straight and cisgender peers, LGBTQ+ youth often experience shelters as being unfriendly towards their identity and their needs. Solutions would include reducing youth homelessness as a whole, but other solutions for improving shelter services include "increasing staff training about LGBTQ (and particularly transgender) experiences, employing LGBTQ-identified staff, and having an LGBTQ-specific shelter space" (Coolhart and Brown 237).

Figure 51. "The Choice"

In “The Choice” (fig. 51), Logan considers their options of what bathroom to use. The doll is out of focus, leaving questions about the doll’s gender presentation and lending a sense of ambiguity to the scene. The doll is a little off-center, tending towards the women’s room, making a decision, but not quite deciding fully. This image speaks loudly in today’s times.

Popular estimates say that transgender people make up less than one percent of the adult population. In spite of this being such a small number, hundreds of anti-trans bills have been proposed in the United States alone, including legislation that intends to dictate what public restrooms people can use. This, and other factors, result in transgender people often avoiding the use of gendered public restrooms entirely (Lerner 261). According to one study, two-thirds of the sample of 27,715 participants had avoided using public restrooms out of fear of experiencing a

range of difficulties, including being perceived as transgender when they do not wish to be, being harassed or questioned about their bathroom usage, and encountering painful memories of previous negative experiences with bathrooms, both public and private, involving psychological distress.

Figure 52. "A Woman's Place"

The disengaged body language of Angel in the image “A Woman’s Place” (fig. 52) implies that it is not the cake that is about to be cut. The wild animal on their shirt implies a wild and untamable character trait to the doll, who stands in a nice kitchen with marble countertops. The colors in the image are warm, but there is no security or centeredness in the image, so it is not warm in tone. Angel’s hands hover over the knife and the countertop, as if they are considering taking violent action. The image’s lighting is between day and night, and the visual movement of the image stands between action and passiveness. In this image, Angel, tired of the expectations placed on them based on their gender presentation, fights back.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion: Is Barbie Queer?

As stated in the second chapter, there have been no new Creatable World releases since fall of 2020. The doll line's end was never officially announced, but a long hiatus stretching three years so far does not bode well for fans of these gender-neutral dolls. It is possible that Mattel could bring Creatable World dolls back into production, but the likelihood of that happening decreases further with each passing sales quarter. The official Creatable World Instagram page has not been updated since May of 2020, and a few commenters under the final post that Mattel shared begged Mattel to bring the line back, only to be met with radio silence.

It is possible that the doll line was ahead of its time and will gain a following later. An example of this being the case with another doll line would be the Novi Stars dolls created by MGA Entertainment, one of Mattel's competitors. Each Novi Stars doll release had a different gimmick. One doll had transparent legs that were filled with liquid to mimic a lava lamp. Another glowed in the dark. Another had soft, rubbery limbs that stretched and flexed. The dolls were seen as being "weird" at the time they were available from 2012 to 2014, but now, as the toy industry has grown and changed and welcomed more creative doll types, the Novi Stars dolls have earned a cult following among serious fashion doll collectors, with the most sought-after Novi Stars dolls selling for over six hundred American dollars on eBay. Even MGA Entertainment has acknowledged this cult following. In a release for their Rainbow High doll line, a green-skinned, outer space-themed doll named Zooey Electra wears a graphic t-shirt featuring an image of the Novi Stars doll Mimi Merize. This has sparked speculation that Novi Stars could make a comeback, but for now MGA Entertainment has merely acknowledged the fanbase and paid tribute to the dolls.

It is also possible that Creatable World's main selling points, the fluid gender markers, especially the wigs, were also "too weird" for consumers to understand and appreciate on a broader scale, much like the Novi Stars dolls' gimmicks. There are some doll collectors who actively collect Creatable World dolls, but perhaps Creatable World will find an audience among more collectors in a decade's time. Certainly, the dolls have found an audience among doll crafters and customizers. Many artists and customizers appreciate the joint articulation and neutrality of the Creatable World doll bodies, as evidenced by both the YouTube videos showing customization processes and the decently large number of Creatable World doll heads that are available on eBay separate from their bodies. Doll customizers will often take the body of one doll, add a head from another doll, and sell the extra parts in the hopes that other customizers find them useful.

On top of the general "weirdness," the most likely reason that Creatable World did not take off was the political climate and the state of LGBTQ+ rights around the world. The dolls, in spite of being mere molded plastic, did cause controversy for their attempt at inclusion and representation, as detailed earlier in the history of the doll line, which must have impacted sales. There is no available data on how Creatable World performed profit-wise, but for every person who buys a doll because of controversy, there is someone who refuses to buy that doll for those very same reasons. Mattel, however, has not completely backed down from their inclusion of queer communities in their toy designs, however subtle it may be now. Mattel released Kira Bailey, American Girl's limited edition Girl of the Year doll, in 2021. Her story was, on the surface, friendly to all political affiliations. After all, who would oppose an animal-loving ten-year-old visiting her extended family in Australia to help rescue koalas? Upon reading the doll's accompanying book, however, conservative customers were upset to find that Kira's story

includes details of queer representation. It is revealed in the book that the wildlife sanctuary that Kira's family runs is headed by Kira's lesbian great-aunts. This fact, which is mentioned casually and is not a central theme of Kira's story, prompted backlash and review bombing from upset parents, both on and off of American Girl's official website. American Girl, and, by default, Mattel did not change the doll's story or remove her from store shelves or their website. Negative reviews of the Kira doll on the American Girl website that mentioned the great-aunts in a negative way, or which tipped outright into homophobia, were replied to by American Girl's customer service representatives with an empty "." As a response, showing that Mattel had read and acknowledged the reviews but had declined to comment on any of the backlash.

The representation does not stop at named side characters in a doll's story. Mattel released their first explicitly non-binary doll in 2022. The Frankie Stein doll, part of the Monster High doll collection, is non-binary and announces that they use they/them pronouns in the doll line's animated web series music video (Sparked To Life (Music Video) Ft. Frankie Stein | Monster High). This is the most explicit mention of Frankie's identity in official Mattel media, but since the doll's packaging does not mention their gender or pronouns, it would be difficult to claim proper representation on the doll's part. If people cannot readily find information about a doll being queer, is it really representing an identity to an audience of consumers? The doll could be called inherently queer in the ways that Creatable World dolls are queer, and the actor playing Frankie in an upcoming Monster High live-action movie is both non-binary and vocal about their character being non-binary (Shatto). Therefore, it is worth considering the doll through the lens of casual representation. A doll and character like Frankie could serve to normalize queer gender identities for children who watch Monster High media, even if one has to search YouTube and listen closely to find that normalization in the first place.

Mattel has represented real people's queer identities as well. Frankie is the first character doll to represent a queer gender identity under the transgender umbrella, but they are not the first Mattel doll to represent a transgender person. In 2022, the transgender actress and LGBTQ+ advocate Laverne Cox was immortalized in plastic as a Barbie doll from Mattel's Tribute Collection, which honors real people that Mattel considers notable and important to contemporary culture. Other Tribute Collection dolls include Lucille Ball and Vera Wang. As part of other collections, the Barbie brand has also released dolls of David Bowie and Frida Kahlo, both bisexual, both iconic figures of the queer community.

Realities and Representations

In photographing Creatable World dolls in queer-coded environments, some major themes emerged, including themes of pride, self-expression, gender, and orientation. Pride flags appear across the images of this research eighteen times, shown in such a way that both queer people and people who are not queer can understand some of the meanings in the images. Different people bring different experiences to the table in understanding images, but care was taken to ensure that at least parts of the core messages of the images were immediately recognizable to any viewer. There should be no doubt that the images were made by a queer person with queer messaging in mind. This multimodal thesis contributes to research on the queer experience and queer creative expressions, with core messages relating to phenomenology, transitioning, creating oneself, and pride in one's identity or identities.

Being and other phenomenological considerations play a key part in *UnBarbie*. The field of phenomenology seeks to understand how humans perceive and experience the world, so a queer phenomenology is key to understanding queerness. Ahmed forms queer phenomenology by "rethinking the spatiality of sexual orientation" (Ahmed 68). Orientation requires someone being directed one way or another, which boils down to the concept of being. The dolls exist, and they are actively being queer by existing.

Transitioning and transformation take center stage in all of the images from chapters four, five, and six. The crafted environments show past identities, express the present reality of the characters, and point towards future directions, showcasing existing hobbies and future growth and creation through the objects presented in miniature. These dolls are not just queer. They also represent queer people, who grow and change like all people, including those who are not queer. This transition may be literal in the case of transgender identities, but it may also be metaphorical as the characters in the play narrative react to a society that expects them to move in one direction or another within the bounds of societal norms.

Creating oneself and shaping one's own identity through self-discovery is a key element that most queer people can understand without much explanation. The act of discovery goes back to Sara Ahmed's description of orientation and disorientation. Where is one identity situated relative to another? As she describes disorientation as the "out of place" and the "out of line," it is a path to discovery to be facing "at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home" (Ahmed 10). Orientation, then, is about "making the strange familiar," even when "some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others." (Ahmed 11). In these instances, one must create one's own spaces.

Upon discovering one's identity, one can begin to take pride in that discovery. Pride and joy are feelings that often come up in personal expressions of queerness, and these stretch beyond pride parades and celebratory events. Queer people are everywhere, even as minorities. These dolls can be anywhere, even as they represent a minority group. Some dolls represent more than one minority identity in these images, such as racial and ethnic minorities. The people they represent, whoever each doll represents, deserve to have feelings of pride in who they are. For this reason, the act of creating queer art is a celebration of all kinds of personal pride and joy.

As a person who identifies with some labels under the transgender umbrella, I have brought my experiences to this research as well as the experiences and literature of other academics. Autoethnographic techniques are valuable, and the sharing of personal experiences and firsthand knowledge is a crucial element in creating accessible knowledge. Still, there are many things I cannot know or fully write about because I have not experienced them. The word "ignorant" is often used as an insult, but philosophical scholarship in the fields of epistemology and agnotology (the philosophical field concerning ignorance and a lack of knowledge) often considers it to be a neutral word (Proctor and Schiebinger). There may be a certain willful lack of knowledge involved, but often it is simply a matter of not knowing certain things or not knowing that one should know those things. Charles Mills discusses the concept of "white ignorance," the state of not knowing about another race's experience because of one's whiteness (Mills 51). After Mills' coining of the term for white ignorance, video essayist and philosopher Abigail Thorn proposes the similar concepts of "straight ignorance" and "cisgender ignorance," with ignorance once again not being an automatically negative term (Ignorance & Censorship | Philosophy Tube). The terms for these types of ignorance simply denote that someone does not know certain things and that they cannot understand them. For example, I can read about people

of other races, classes, and, of course, orientations. I can talk to people who are part of these groups and learn about their experiences. However, there are some details I can never fully grasp without experiencing them firsthand and having a personal understanding of what the experience means to me. Everyone has such gaps in their knowledge, and that is perfectly reasonable. No human can know everything about everyone. My research is important to expanding an understanding of what it is like to be one type of queer person, and I hope other queer people with other experiences can use my research to increase scholarly knowledge of what it is like to be another type of queer person with other experiences.

What Makes a Doll Queer?

As shown in this research, there are many ways to create a queer doll. Environment and context are the most visible methods. A most important way to make a doll queer falls on both the designers and the end users, who may place certain identities and labels on the dolls they create, play with, or collect. In other words, Creatable World dolls are queer if someone says they are. A user could create a character that is straight and cisgender, but the designers created the dolls with queer children and queer ideals in mind. Topics considered in the creation of Creatable World dolls include transformation, discovery, creativity, and countercultural expressions.

Transformation is a message at the very core of Creatable World dolls. A doll, especially a Creatable World doll, can transform to be whatever the end user wants it to be, mirroring the message that a child can become whoever they want to be with time, hard work, and

perseverance. The themes of transformation in the photographed crafted environments of *UnBarbie* was not an accident, and those themes mirror the themes surrounding the dolls and their designs. Another key topic, discovery, is encouraged by Creatable World. There are no instructions on how to create characters packaged in the boxes with the dolls. As discussed earlier, an end user must learn their own wants and desires and then project them onto the dolls. Creativity is the central theme of any play activity.

Then there is the matter of the counterculture as represented by the subjects of *UnBarbie*. In spite of being designed and produced by a major company, Creatable World dolls express countercultural ideals. Dolls marketed to all children, not just girls, is a radical, countercultural idea in today's times. Dolls with no character, story, or even gender are also uncommon, perhaps even unheard of, as most fashion dolls on the market come with indicators of who they are meant to represent, or at least they are packaged with a name. Instead, inclusivity is built into Creatable World dolls, and the idea of freedom to create is a queer and unique notion in the world of children's toys. Dolls cannot self-identify. They are dolls. Instead, humans extend themselves into the dolls and project queerness onto them, both through their intended play purposes and through creative, artistic expression. To quote Ahmed again, "To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things" (Ahmed 161). Creatable World dolls disturbed the order of gendered toys and invited everyone in to play, however they may identify and relate to the dolls.

This research normalizes and shows one type of minority experience, conveying the experience to those who cannot understand it and resonating with those who already do. It solidifies Creatable World dolls in queer culture. It imagines a world where people are allowed to be themselves, free of outside resistance. In visualizing that world, one can better understand

how it can be possible in reality.

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