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Race and Toys: The Barbie Doll

After fifty years of being present in the industry, Barbie doll had been one of the most successful invention for kids over the years. It became the “must have toy” in every girl’s room. Created by Ruth Handler in 1959, who designed a girl’s best friend and the role more for the future. Barbie doll the ideal image of a women according to sources, but does ideal image of a women only mean skinny, white skinned, long blond hair, and blue eyes? It doesn’t and that is how Barbie doll technology have impacted non-white girls. Is the Barbie doll portrayed with stereotype of a white doll? And, does it cause any racial related issues? Let’s collaborate on those point and find out more about the controversy related to the Barbie doll, by analyzing some of the technological and industrial issues associated with Barbie and its company, Mattel Corporation.

Children tend to look at their toys as an inspiration for the future. According to Ann Ducille, “Dolls in particular invite children to replicate them, to imagine themselves in their dolls’ images. What does it mean, then, when little girls are given dolls to play with that in no way resembles them?” (Ducille 3) Creating a Barbie doll was a wonderful technological invention and idea, but Ruth Handler did not think it through about the racial discrimination by only creating a white skin color doll at that time, even after the civil right movement, and the transition to stop segregation. In that manner, “Barbie is not simply a child’s toy or just a teenage

fashion doll; she is an icon – perhaps the icon – of true white womanhood and femininity, a symbol of the far from innocent ideological stuff of which the (Miss) American dream and other mystiques of race and gender are made of.” (Ducille 4) In comparison a Barbie doll occupied by a little Caucasian girl is totally different, as this little girl is actually seeing herself with in the doll in many ways. So, how is another ethnicity child supposed to look at the doll and see themselves within it? Simple answer is: it cannot.

It took around twenty years longer since the first official dark skinned Barbie to show up on the market. Unfortunately, creating a black Barbie doll was not very successful, as the only difference that it made was the dye put in to the plastic so the doll appears African-American. In reality, it was the same Barbie doll, with the same appearance just different color, which is not the same in relation to other nationality if looked at both dolls. Elizabeth Chin argues that, “The signature aspects of ethnically correct dolls are re-sculpted faces, skin tones, hair types, and ethnic fashions...companies like Shindana and Olmes jump-started the mass production and marketing of ethnically correct toys, mass-produced black dolls were basically made by pouring brown plastic into the same molds used to make white dolls.” (Chin 311) In addition, Barbie’s hair is mostly known to many girls as long, silky-smooth and blond which is also compared to stereotypical white woman hair. Collaborating on the hair issue in reference to African-American and Caucasian hair difference Chin said, “There is a debate over whether black women and girls should do things to their hair that make it approximate the straight, silky, flowing hair associated with whiteness have been especially heated. At an extreme, curly, nappy hair has been judged “bad” hair, while flowing, silky hair is “good” hair.” (Chin 315) Given the image of a “good” hair that Barbie possess, girls that are African-American could not relate to it, as their hair type is different. In addition, girls who don’t have Barbie hair may become upset or sad, or even try to

make their hair be like the Barbie's hair. Mattel did not want to produce the "bad" hair for the Barbie, so even though there were black skin Barbie's available they did not have ethnically correct hair type. So, why didn't Mattel Corporation make ethnically correct hair type for a black doll? Guess, the Barbie doll just always had the Barbie doll hair, and according to the corporation it would be alright to keep it. Once again it was just the regular stereotypical Barbie hair also known as "Barbie Doll Hair" (Chin 315).

By creating a reflection of a Barbie doll but in a different plastic color, the industry isn't really changing much. The controversy behind it is, "...making the white dolls live in black worlds, they (corporations) similarly reconfigure the boundaries of race, which minority toy makers portray as being immutable. In so doing, there girls challenge the social construction not only of their own blackness, but of race itself as well." (Chin 318) In relation to social construction of technology, the Barbie doll has become a phenomenon. Every child wanted one, even if the dolls were not produced in darker skin colors, that did not stop people from buying these dolls. All races and nationalities of people went out to get Barbie. Ann Ducille writes in her journal that, "Newsweek noted that nearly 500 million Barbie's had been sold... Those figures have increased dramatically in the past five years, bringing the current world-wide Barbie population to 800 million. In 1992 alone, \$1 billion worth of Barbies and accessories were sold." (Ducille 3) This proves that people still bought the doll no matter what skin color it was, the industry made a whole bunch of money. Society socially constructed this technology and it choose that it will be worth of buying. At the end, every child wants to have a new toy that comes out, even if the Barbie doll was stereotype of a white women, it didn't stop other ethnic groups to purchase the doll, as it was something new.

Furthermore, Barbies image is a social problem of racial discrimination. Peter Honigsberg had witnessed the hurtful experience that African-American girls went through when they did not see themselves within the doll they owned. After the Brown Vs. Board of Education movement which happened, “On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court handed down its ruling in the landmark case of Brown- Vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas..., which had allowed for “separate but equal” public facilities, including public schools in United States. Declaring that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” (History.com Staff) Honigsberg has a chance to teach at the Berkley High School and got to meet a variety of different ethnically and nationally students. One that inspired him the most was a Mexican girl of a name, Carmina. She barely spoke in class, she wasn’t the one to always participate. One day the class was held about dolls and different toys, Carmina then raised her hand and said, “When I grew up had a Barbie doll. I loved my Barbie. But she was white. I never had a chance to choose a Mexican Barbie.” (Honigsberg 254) What does that say about our society, it said that we have created this perfect image of a blue eyed, blond hair, skinny, long legs doll, but she is the white stereotypical doll. This won’t necessarily be the best for African-American girls or other ethnicity girls. Later that day, Honigsberg asked Carmina to write a letter to Mattel Corporation to create the Mexican Barbie. Carmina angrily refused doing that and told the professor to write the letter instead. When he asked her why she responded, “Because you’re white, they’ll listen to you!” (Honsberg 254) How should a girl like Carmina look at the future with a Barbie doll unrelated to her? Many years would pass after Honigsberg held the class, but he certainly did not forget what she answered him to why she will not write the letter. It showed Carmina’s anger and unsatisfied girl who just wished there was a doll she could love and play with, but only if it looked like her.

Industries created Barbie, and along with that Barbie created a social problem. According to Best, “Barbie promotes or discourages traditional gender roles, fosters or inhibits sexuality, discourages or encourages girls’ independence, established or subverts racism and heterosexualism, diminished the importance of religion, celebrates capitalism and consumerism, causes anorexia, and fosters resistance.” (Best 204) Many issues associated with Barbie sounds like the doll should be just completely banned from the public and not made in the industries. Yet, social construction of technology will not let that happen. Because society, wants the doll despite all the racial and social issues it brings along with it.

Social inequality in relation to toys, and not only Barbie dolls is literally everywhere, even today when one wants to go shopping to buy something for their child, there are sections girls and boys. Girls will usually have toys like ponies and dolls or doll houses, and boys would have super heroes or some race cars. One thing is sure, you won’t find dresses and cute ponies on the boys’ sections and vice versa. Now, looking at who is really making all of the toys in the industries could also be an example of racial inequality. Christine Williams have seen it herself as she, “noticed the connections between shopping and social inequality while working as a clerk at the toys Warehouse and Diamond Toys for three months in 2001...At the warehouse store she was only one of three white women on the staff; most were African-American, Hispanic, or second-generation Asian American.” (Williams 28) In addition to this racial issue she has also observed “...only three African-American worked at the upscale toy store; most clerks were white. Most of the customers were also white and middle to upper class. This experience taught her to notice racial diversity (or its absence) wherever she would shop.” (Williams 28) Racial diversity is not only among the Barbie doll but also who buys the doll or other toys or who makes them in the warehouse.

Not to mention, the production of Barbie, "...has never been manufactures in the United States. The first dolls were made in Japan and they have come rolling off foreign assembly lines ever since. These days Barbie and her friends mostly come from China – where many of them will stay." (Lord 2) This is even more controversial. Since it isn't the white workers making these Barbie dolls why aren't they making ethnically different dolls as well? Who is standing behind it all? Is it all Ruth Handler's fault that Barbie caused racial diversity and issues when she first made the Barbie doll? She wanted only to do good for the sake of the young girls, as she watched her own daughter Barbara. As whom the Barbie was named after. Ruth, "...watched her daughter Barbara and friends playing with paper dolls. The children used them to lay make-believe, imagining roles as college students, cheerleaders and adults with careers. Handler invent a doll that would better facilitate the way young girls were playing with their dolls." (Bellis 1) This being said Handler never wanted to create any racial discrimination or diversity, it looked like she just wanted to create something new and fresh to better the play time for her daughter Barbara and other girls in the world. Furthermore, it became a racial problem, because once again Barbie doll is nothing but a white stereotype.

At the end, it can be clearly seen that Barbie dolls are portrayed with one ethnicity, which is a white, no other. It is also seen that Barbie doll might become a bad influence on non-white girls that have the doll. As those girls that are other ethnicity would like to keep their dolls and find themselves within them, they can't because industry will only add a different color dye in irony. Maybe, if the industries did not make the Barbie doll that way then it wouldn't cause such a controversy. Maybe, creation of ethnically correct black dolls or other nationality Barbie dolls wouldn't cause the racial issues. Lastly, producing a real African American Barbie could change the standards of beauty for African –American girls. Having a doll that is a mirror

reflection of themselves they will build a bigger self confidence and self-esteem. Lastly, this essay proved that Barbie doll is a racial issue as it is portrayed with stereotypical white women, not other.

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