Introduction

Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls

Recent Innovations and New Directions in Doll Studies

Miriam Forman-Brunell

Introduction

Understanding how dolls, as ubiquitous cultural forms, function in the lives of girls and in constructions of girlhoods is a scholarly endeavor that dates to the dawn of modernity in the U.S. In 1896, G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the child-study movement, a professor of psychology, and president of Clark University, co-authored, "A Study of Dolls." Informed by a recent appreciation of childhood and play but uninformed about changing notions of girlhood, "A Study of Dolls" narrowly concluded that doll play taught girls key lessons in femininity and maternity. Focusing more on race than gender more than forty year later, Mamie Phipps Clark, then a Master's student in

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

psychology, utilized both Black and white dolls to study the effect of racial discrimination on the identities of African American children. The subsequent doll studies she conducted with her husband, Kenneth Clark, played a prominent role in the 1954 landmark desegregation decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Regardless of the insights of these trail-blazing studies, dolls' legitimacy as sources of documentary evidence remained mired in long-standing beliefs about the trivialization of girls and the devaluation of children's cultures. Further doll scholarship awaited the convergence of historical forces, theoretical frameworks, and disciplinary developments still decades in the making.

Nearly a century after G. Stanley Hall's "Study of Dolls," a new generation of scholars influenced by the emergence of girl-centered research, American Studies' interdisciplinarity, and the re-evaluation of mass culture by British cultural studies theorists, began to question the patriarchal imperative of dolls and the presumed passivity of girl players. New interpretive frameworks, historical contexts, and methods of analysis revealed that dolls were not uniform, static artifacts of a single dominant culture. *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (Formanek-Brunell: 1993), demonstrated that businessmen, women doll makers, and girls who were frequently at odds over the meanings of dolls, struggled to define the place and purpose of dolls in girls's lives and girlhoods. In addition to historians, dolls became the subject of scrutiny by psychologists, sociologists, educators and other academics all interested in what dolls had to say about girls' identities and grown-ups' ideals.

What accelerated doll research toward the end of the twentieth century was the rise of Girl Power, girls' studies, cultural studies, multiculturalism, the commercial success of the American Girl Doll (AGD) line, and the proliferation of the Barbie brand. Paying closer attention to the intersection of gender, age, race, class, and sexuality than previous researchers, Ann duCille (1994), Elizabeth Chin (1999), Mary Rogers (1998), Erica Rand (1994), Sherrie A. Inness (1998), and others in departments of English, anthropology, sociology, and Women's and Gender Studies examined Barbie dolls along with the beliefs and behaviors of doll players. While emphasizing the ways in which dolls reinforced normative notions and racial and gendered "otherness," their studies pointed to the ways in which dolls and the girls who play with them negotiate, revise, and disrupt the cultural categories of girlhood.

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

In the new millennium, scholars across the academy, cultural critics, and feminist activists continued to critically examine the role of mass-produced and mass-marketed dolls in the socialization, sexualization, commodification, exoticization, commercialization, racialization, and essentialization of girlhood. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, doll research pointed to new directions. Robin Bernstein devised an entirely new methodology for interrogating dolls in her path-breaking work, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) The scholarship first printed in the *Girlhood Studies* journal and republished here is novel for its use of a variety of critical practices in order to analyze the textuality of dolls and to interpret the embodied ambivalences, ambiguities and agency. Different understandings of dolls' meanings draw upon discursive backgrounds as well as overlapping interpretive frameworks: hip hop; Jewish history; fashion; and architecture, among others.

The varied meanings of dolls to different generations is readily apparent among the largely GenX and Generation Y (Millennials) scholars and their young research subjects whose viewpoints and voices are represented herein. Along with others, Janet Seow amplifies the embryonic critiques of girls "who do not yet have the vocabulary and skills to challenge the racial hierarchies of neoliberal consumption and playground racism." The contributors to this collection upend notions of scholarly objectivity by privileging subjectivities and professionalizing subcultural principles and practices—like DIY (Do-It-Yourself). Before discussing their research results, it is worth considering in some detail how the scholarly conversation about dolls is being furthered by researchers who intermingle disciplinary specializations; blend post-structuralist theoretical perspectives with feminist epistemologies and critical race theory; employ innovative sources of evidence; devise novel methodologies and research designs; revise what counts as a doll and who counts as a doll player, and consequently, explore new themes in doll studies—from cultural work to historical memory, reception practices to (sub)-cultural production, and the construction of identities (and buildings) to the functions of fandom.

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

New Disciplinary Approaches to Doll Research

The new approaches to the study of dolls have much to do with the training of these twenty-first century scholars. There are those schooled in literature with its deep roots in girlhood research and others who hail from communications which has generated the remarkable growth of cultural theory-informed girls' media studies. Doll researchers are also rising from more unexpected academic domains, such as architecture: one of the authors in this volume deconstructs Barbie's Dream House. The educational backgrounds of other doll scholars are even more multi-, inter-, and post-disciplinary. For example, cultural heritage studies incorporates elements of museum studies, cultural studies, memory studies, material culture, object studies, and anthropology. The relatively new field of book history that broadly examines the creation, dissemination, and reception of script and print, provides unprecedented opportunities to read paper doll publications in a new light. Combined, the changing academic landscape is complicating understandings of the artifacts of girlhood in ways that move beyond established approaches, dominant interpretations, and familiar critiques.

Theoretical Applications

Scholarly application of theories—from contemporary feminist to poststructuralist—is providing critical doll studies research with new frameworks for understanding how dolls and related texts like books about dolls function culturally, socially, politically, racially, and psychologically. Based on the understanding that narratives appear in a variety of literary and non-literary forms of expression, one contributor draws upon narrative theory in order to analyze the characters and stories in nineteenth-century paper doll books and to speculate on the meaning-making of children who read and played with them. In order to interrogate homemade dolls rather than store bought objects, another scholar turns to DIY theorist Henry Jenkins and his theory of "participatory culture."

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

Methodological Approaches

New doll scholarship is based on a variety of methodologies often creatively combined. Cross-disciplinary investigations link traditional methods (even ancient literary techniques like reverse chronology) with overlapping categories of analysis, and other scholarly methods including the more recent approach of off centering. By utilizing textuality—a methodological approach that examines the relationship between material culture and social meaning—memory work, and other methods, new light is shed on the dynamic gendered, racial, and socio-cultural meanings of dolls.

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

Bodies of Evidence

These doll research scholars see dolls as dynamic texts that represent layered versions of realities that are mediated by often contradictory ideologies, values, or worldviews of doll creators, producers, consumers, and players. Consequently, their work engages the complexities and contending elements embedded in the cultures that produce and play with dolls and the conflicts embodied in dolls. "Placing the epitomes of girl culture and architectural culture, Barbie, and Modulor, in conversation,"

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

Frederika Eilers' "theoretical reflection probes the relationship between these idealized bodies, buildings, and typical users." Bodies function as critical sites whether the focus is on objects, images, or characters, dolls that are commercially-produced or home-made, paper or plastic, representations of girls who are Jewish, Latina, African-American, disabled or white. In addition to dolls' bodies, the authors consider those of girls and young women who use their bodies as doll players, producers, or performers. Collectively, the authors' investigations of multiple audiences demonstrate dolls' flexible (rather than fixed) meanings.

Just as the authors construct girlhood more broadly, they also have expanded understandings of what constitutes a doll and sites where they might be found. Fiction remains one of the most accessible documentary sources—especially so since the publication of American Girl Doll books. Yet, scholars like Hannah Field are also reexamining paper dolls, standing as they do at the intersection of material culture and print culture, mass produced and homemade creations. By examining the methods and analyzing the meanings of the goods girls make, investigators can mine a largely untapped source of information about girlhoods. Consequently, some of the doll-based research goes beyond childhood and even outside the proverbial nursery. Looking in less obvious locales has increased the variety of sources and sites of play and performance, and extended the study of dolls to include female adolescents and young women.

Doll Research Design

Despite the variety of methods and materials, the size and scope of the new doll research is often relatively small. Although not all, many of the studies are as diminuative as dolls. Janet Senow studied 10 girls and young women between the ages of 7 and 18 from Afro-Caribbean migrant communities in their homes in urban Toronto. Hains' study is based on an "afternoon's observation" of a handful of girls. During their "show-and-tell playtime," the girls made meanings that clearly diverged from the intentions of the dolls' producers and the interpretations of scholars. Molly Brookfield's study that provides insight into a generational cohort of doll players is based on scarcely more than a dozen research subjects. And then there is April Mandrona who examines one especially smallscale site of doll production—her own.

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

New Themes in Doll Studies

The methodological, theoretical, and evidentiary innovations currently employed in doll studies make possible the exploration of new themes, such as the cultural work of dolls and their role in the construction of historical memory. In her essay, Lisa Marcus examines the broader cultural purposes of iconic Jewish girls in the twentieth century. American Girl Doll, Rebecca Rubin, and the books bundled with her, extend and expand the cultural work of Anne Frank whose transformation into "Hollywood Anne" played an important role in the reconstruction of historical memory. While lauded for introducing millions of girls to American history, romanticized representations of girls create a past that is acceptable and affirming, but not authentic. How girls renegotiate the past in light of present circumstances is evident in Rebecca Hains' essay about the ways in which Bratz dolls' racial diversity provided African-American girls with "an avenue to explore race, racism, and U.S. history."

Frederika Eilers considers the significance of girls being able to modify the designs of the early folded cardboard Barbie Dream House before the plastic model, requiring adult assembly, turned Barbie into a homemaker with a refrigerator and a stove. Hains' study of how Black girls receive Bratz dolls exemplifies the exploration of reception practices and (sub)cultural production. Enabling the preteens to videotape their own doll play narratives provides a unique lens into youthful productions of meanings. Hains shows that the girls' appropriation of the dolls with various skin tones act out scenarios relevant to their everyday lives. Whether in the twenty-first century or the nineteenth, girls often play with dolls in ways that are contrary to commercial interests. Hannah Field finds that paper dolls show evidence of greater use than the commercially-printed books with which they were paired. April Mandrona's homemade creations reveal another way in which girls circumvent mainstream children's culture. She privileges the handmade artifacts of girlhood found in attics more so than in museums for the insights they provide into girls who also creatively construct dolls and girlhood identities.

Commercially-produced dolls are also sites of identity formation understood as shifting, performative, and prescriptive. The assimilationist identity of American Girl Doll, Rebecca Rubin, for example, draws upon a century of "fictions of Jewish American girlhood" similarly embodying broader cultural anxieties about difference and ideologies about

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

belonging. The Fuller paper dolls designed to illustrate accompanying moral tales had surprisingly more mutable identities outside of their narrative context and content. Other authors show how the relational aspects of doll-related identities persist as girls grow into young women. How young women construct adult identities by building on girlhood memories is revealed by the first generation of American Girl Doll players. Molly Brookfield's self-presentation as an American Girl Doll "fan" is an identity she shared with her young adult research subjects. In her study, Janet Seow demonstrates the ways in which doll play with Black as well as white Barbies reinforced the racialized identities and marginalization of Afro-Caribbean girls in Toronto while at the same time providing opportunities to demonstrate their resistance to racial inequalities. Jennifer Whitney's study of Nicki Minaj demonstrates why her puckish reappropriation of Barbie's identity appeals to her fan base.

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

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

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

the wear patterns of the paper dolls and their clothing suggests that girls' literary and play practices may have departed from the gendered expectations of publishers and parents.

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

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

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

Rebecca C. Hains' essay, "An Afternoon of Productive Play with Problematic Dolls: The Importance of Foregrounding Children's Voices

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

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

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

Janet Seow's chapter, reprinted from a later issue of the *Girlhood Studies* journal, is informed by the qualitative research of Elizabeth Chin (1999) and Rebecca Hains (2012) that examined the effects of doll culture, race, representation, and consumption on the social world and agency of inner-city black girls. In "Black Girls and Dolls Navigating Race, Class, and Gender in Toronto," Seow examines how racist and classist representations of dolls impact Black girls who convey through their play an understanding of "positionality and self-identity in a biased world." She argues that Afro-Caribbean girls' play with Black Barbies and Bratz dolls shapes racialized identities and marginalization. But that's not all. Their doll play also demonstrates girls' agency in circumventing their exclusion from dominant Western

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing

notions of girlhood. With the dolls they repurpose and the narratives they enrich, the players revealed their ability to navigate the "barriers that reinforce racial inequalities and social hierarchies in girls' material culture in a multicultural Toronto." The girl players also subversively rejected dominant identities and social characteristics embodied and inscribed in dolls. And by becoming "discerning consumers of a doll culture coded with values of the dominant patriarchal white society, these Afro-Carribean girls were able to generate alternatives in a racially hierarchal space.

By historicizing, theorizing, contextualizing, and analyzing dolls of all sorts, the authors reveal the complex meanings of dolls to girls and grownups across time, space, cultures, and disciplines. By exploring the dynamics among representations and reception, productions and performances, genders and generations, races and rights, the essays forge new avenues in the interrogation of dolls as artifacts of culturally constructed and lived experiences of girls and young women.

References

Bernstein, Robin. 2011. Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights. New York: NY University Press.

Chin, Elizabeth. 1999. "Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying with the Race Industry." American Anthropologist 101, No. 2: 305–321.

Clark, Mamie Phipps. 1939. "The Development of Consciousness of Self in Negro Pre-School Children." MA thesis, Howard University.

duCille, Ann. 1994. "Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference." differences 6, no.1: 46–68. Ellis, A. C. and G. Stanley Hall. 1896. "A Study of Dolls." Pedagogical Seminary 4: 129–175.

Formanek-Brunell, Miriam. 1993. Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Inness, Sherrie A. 1998. "'Anti-Barbies': The American Girls' Collection and Political Ideologies." Pp. 164–183 in Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures, ed. S. Inness. New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, Henry, Ravi Puroshotma, Katherine Clinton, Margaret Weigel, and Alice J. Robison. 2005. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf (accessed 6 April 2012).

Kuhn, Annette. 1995. Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination. London and New York: Verso Books.

Rand, Erica. 1995. Barbie's Queer Accessories. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rogers, Mary F. 1998. Barbie Culture. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Deconstructing Dolls
Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play
Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell
https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/Forman-BrunellDeconstructing