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Abstract

This essay examines Reddit commentary of the new *Barbie* film that gave a space for some audience members to connect themselves to the film through queering its plot and characters. Through Reddit commentary, users explored the character design and how characters perform identity within this film and how it relates to their own experiences of gender and identity. This essay excavates how gender identity is communicated within popular culture and the need to queer a film to create one's own representation. Through the importance of understanding the harm of a binary lens and how the binary gaze creates a stereotypical perception within their representation of identity, users posting on Reddit expanded the movie to give representation and heal a part of themselves by interacting with reflective and restorative nostalgic experiences. In doing my analysis, I highlight the importance of representation in media to create representation, the communication of acceptance, and normalization of diverse gender expression through a non-cisnormative lens that is explored through queering of *Barbie* (2023).

Keywords: Fan Studies, World Building, Queer Studies, Fanfiction, Performance Studies

Building a Cinematic World for Queer: Ways of Winking Back at Barbie (2023)

by

D L. Durk

B.S., Appalachian State University, 2022

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Syracuse University

May 2024

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Acknowledgements

Before this thesis begins, I would like to take a moment to thank those who have shaped the path of this project and supported me along the way. First and foremost, I am grateful to my advisor Lyndsay E.M. Gratch, who has supported me like no other. Dr. Gratch's encouragement, guidance, and creativity have always helped inspire me to challenge myself to take this project further. By always pushing me to go further with my ideas, my experience creating this thesis, and to my graduate experience at Syracuse University as a whole, changed for the better. I would also like to thank my committee members—Erin J. Rand, Chuck Morris III, and PJ Diepetro—whose support for the project has been much appreciated. My committee's humor, curiosity, and boundless and expansive brainstorming have all strengthened this project in ways I cannot express. From diving deeper into what it means to build a world to wondering where these characters are hiding in the RealWorld.

I also want to acknowledge and thank those who have listened to me rant about this project from the very first moment I began to imagine it: my parents and brother, Rachel, Sean T. and Sean M. Durk; my long-distance friends, Leanne Kearns, Lou Goodtree, Meghan McAnarney, and Emilia Cardona; my nearby friends, Hannah Sparks, Emily Iknayan, Xinyue Tao, and Aevyn Barnett, all of whom have joined me for numerous conversations over the course of several months. My best friend Leanne Kearns, who in particular, has been by my side through this entire journey of my self-discovery—from when I first came out to now being there for the completion of this Thesis. I am eternally grateful for her support, humor, and willingness to listen to all of my least-developed thoughts to my most dramatic rambling. Leanne Kearns is truly a friend like no other that has been there for me for it all. There are countless others to thank, who I will not name but who nonetheless are held close to my heart, have likewise provided inspiration and ideation throughout this process, whether they know it or not. This project centers so much on my identity and personal experiences, but my care and value of this project comes from a deep love that I have for my Queer community. I am indebted to the many people in my life who have sustained me throughout this journey and continue to do so for whatever choices I make in life. No one ever truly writes in isolation, and this has felt especially true the past two years, while I may be a poor college student, I am forever rich in love and support

I will finally acknowledge all of the people, myself included, who have had a messy, incomplete, chaotic, abundant, proliferate, misguided, and still-evolving discovery of their identity and sexuality as it is a linear endeavor. As you will read, my queer journey was far from easy, and it is far from over - thus, I want to recognize that same path for others who everyday fight to be seen and treated equally. I am deeply indebted to those who create, and complicate, the rhetoric I analyze over the course of this project and beyond, hopefully continuously challenging these systems of looking in place. The queer people whose pain and perseverance have strengthened my own drive to make our experiences legible. The friends who have allowed their vulnerability to create space for my own. I am deeply grateful to us all and my work is for you.

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Preface: Growing up Barbie



Figure One. Childhood Me (Mooresville, NC, 2005, Photograph Courtesy of Rachel Durk)

I watched them for a while. It felt serene, calming even, to just watch them. She, the little girl, was meticulous in her actions. From brushing the doll's hair to putting on the doll's clothes, all before showing her mother.

Our mother.

I watched our mom smile back and then show the little girl the doll she was dressing. Her method seemed more rehearsed and habitual; she had done this many times before.

“Mommy.”

“Mmm.”

“What’s your doll's name?”

“Hmmmmmm hmmm hmmm.” She smiled down and wiggled the doll in front of the girl’s face, the little girl giggled. “I think I’ll be keeping it as Barbie . . . or maybe Rebecca! What do you think?”

The little girl smiled, the grip on her own doll’s legs a little tighter. “Rebecca!”

“Rebecca it is. And what about yours, Little Miss Candy Barbie?”

“Probably Candy Barbie. Just like me!.”

“Okay then.”

I watched them play and giggle together. It was Christmas. It was the first white Christmas Candy Barbie ever experienced. She was five. Her brother was downstairs playing video games, it was most likely Lego Star Wars. This Christmas, Candy Barbie got a special wooden doll house and an American Girl doll, she often switched between the two when playing. Almost always the same routine of setting it all up to then clean it all back up. It was her favorite part of playtime, the setting up of it all, it was her way to control and set the scene for her story. It was her world.

When I try to think back to my childhood, I don’t remember what age I stopped playing. For years, I played every day with my dolls. But watching them play, I can’t even remember the last time I did or how old I was. God, did I wish I could go back to this time though. There was so much joy and wistfulness. To just spend my time playing with toys one last time. To being my

mom's best friend and her mine before it all changed when I came out. I missed it. I missed the time before I was any other. The days of me playing with my mom were long over now and instead filled with a daily phone call about our day or what my future was going to be.

"I'm gonna go make lunch, Piñata, have fun."

At least the nickname stuck past my youth.

"Okay, Mommy!" She beamed, already too consumed in her playtime.

She moved the dolls through the house, humming the words of the dialogue between them. Her teddy bear next to her, she was careful to always keep it close, it was her second-best friend, after all. She was content playing like that, entertaining herself for hours by acting out various stories in which she would set up and take down the house only to rearrange it for the next story. Her hands bopped around as she moved the dolls all over. Her most played with Barbie, a doll that looked *deeply* loved, would always have to be a main character. It was her tallest Barbie, a special ballerina one, with brown hair and slightly tan skin. Instead of skin-colored legs, they were blue with permanent ballerina shoes and had the special trademark of Candy Barbie's teeth marks. This Barbie had a waist smaller than the usual Barbie, emphasizing the hourglass figure more. Her hair was always in a ponytail. Candy Barbie's Barbie did it all. She went to school, she was a mother, she was the bully, she was bullied, she had dates, she had friends, she was the teacher.....the list went on and on. One thing she never was though: A Ballerina.

She seemed to be happy, blissful even, but I - I couldn't describe it. It was a mix of both a pain that I couldn't label other than it feeling adjacent to missing something you knew was gone forever, a longing really. I longed to go back there, to be this kid, but I knew I never could. It would be a temporary escape at best, but how great would it be to be in the ignorant past of some

of my favorite years. To be Candy Barbie again and play with my Barbies and have days filled with no responsibilities.

Introduction

When I was younger, I used to love having collections. I think it's something I developed from my mother and father, two people who love to collect things from their favorite franchises. My mom gave me my first Barbie when I was around four. I had a collection of American Girl Dolls. I had a collection of stuffed animals. I had a collection of Bratz dolls. I had so many different types of collections, all played with differently. My Barbies, though? I played with them the most, but the collection didn't just end with dolls. I had movies, books, clothes, and so many other trinkets from the franchise. I was a fan just like my mother was and hoped I would be. These dolls were more than just toys to fill my free time; they were my introduction to imagination. I can't possibly tell you how many marriages and divorces my dolls had, or how many makeovers and "redo's" of a doll's identity. But I can certainly tell you how vital they were to my growing up. These dolls played a part in the rite of passage of exploring my identity through creating and allowing the dolls to act it out first. My Barbie dolls taught me what beauty standards were, what relationships could be, and what friendships could be - which I know sounds crazy, but we are talking about a child here.

Growing up, I lived in a small town and in a neighborhood with not that many kids my age. Heteronormativity and the ostracization of anyone who wasn't cis, hetero, or white was all I knew. I was always confused and wondered why it felt so much harder to be like my peers, and why I had to overly compensate and calculate my actions so that I would fit in. I knew I wasn't straight from a young age, but I didn't know why I always felt lost within my feminine identity. I think that's why I played so heavily with my dolls. In my imagined stories, anything was possible. There could be gay weddings and couples. There was no ostracization. I could just play and be a doll and live in my Barbie Mansion doing whatever I wanted.

Like many girls, I grew up with femininity shoved down my throat, but I suppose it only felt that way because it wasn't natural for me. From Barbies to Bratz to playing dress up, I (and many other girls like me) were nurtured to not understand feelings about my gender identity and to conform to what society understood to be my gender. There are a plethora of memories that I reflect on when I think about how I could have known about my queer identity at a young age. Most of my younger years were spent carefully constructing the closet I so desperately needed in fear of what it meant to be out. If I stayed in the closet, I could be straight and cis. I wouldn't be different. When I was a child, there was nothing I feared more than being different.

Playing with dolls and creating imaginary scenarios with them was a way to build a world where I could exist. As long as I can recall, my life has been a world of fiction. My father, a lover of all things sci-fi, instilled the value of this genre in my brother and me from a very young age. He showed us the world of Doctor Who, Star Trek, Star Wars, FireFly, and many more shows that taught us about worlds where anything was possible. My brother and I grew up playing fantasy games together, creating our characters and worlds, adding ourselves to fictional worlds that already existed. But we were always playing characters that were idealized versions of us. When we played together, my brother's character never mentioned the diabetes he had in real life. I never had to play a "princess" or "queen," and I certainly never needed a man to save me. We got to be the heroes we couldn't be in everyday life, play the gender roles we wanted, and be whoever we wanted to be without worrying about acceptance within the worlds we created. Fiction gave us a chance to exist as more than outcasts. Additionally, I always loved reading and playing imagination-based games, especially as a child growing up aware that I existed outside the "norm." It was a way to escape the fact that I wasn't like my peers. Instead, I could focus on a story where anything was possible, where I didn't have to fill a certain gender

role, where I could focus on a story about friendship and acceptance. During these moments my everyday reality didn't exist. I wasn't forced to play with dolls or playhouse.

A Blend of Worlds

I was too young to recognize that at the time I was world-building, creating stories to fit into the different realities I wished I could live in. Samutina (2016) describes world-building as an invention of new and imaginary worlds with no limits. World-building is the part of the writing process that sets up a story by constructing a world—one that is usually imaginary and is often associated with a fictional universe. Usually, two types of worldbuilding take place: a primary world, which is a world similar to the real world, and a secondary world, which is less traditional in its setup. Primary world worldbuilding is necessary for stories that are set in a slightly different version of the Earth we know, similar to an alternate reality. Wolf (2012) explains that world-building is a sub-creation of our world, the primary world, alluding that it is an alternative to the reality it is based on. When one is world-building, it doesn't always have to be a world based on magic or science fiction. It can be a realistic world in which a character or person lives out plotlines that differ from their everyday life. That's the beauty of worldbuilding: there aren't many limits. When building a world, you include the landscape that your characters will inhabit, the tone of your story, its major preoccupations and themes, and the nature of the world's morality (Wolf, 2012). It is a place without the usual notion of what is factual; any truth can exist. The world doesn't need to be realistic. It can serve as a world for characters to live and act out stories, including stories the author can write themselves into.

World-building is the act of imagining, designing, and implementing the world of a story. As a child, I often did this through game play with myself or with my toys. My mother loved to

buy me dolls—Bratz, Barbies, American Girls—if it was a doll, she would buy it for me. Maybe she was overcompensating for my tom-boy ways, or maybe it was a projection of her younger self onto me. Maybe it was simply because girls were supposed to like dolls. I don’t know. What I do know is that I tried to play with them, and I remember creating stories and plotlines for these dolls as a reflection of my own life and the various changes I went through. I was creating a world where I (or others) could exist in ways I didn’t think were possible in my everyday life. In my stories, I could be queer without fear of social ostracization. I didn’t have to be the princess and could be the prince. I never had to worry about acceptance and what others thought because the stories were my own. I would spend hours writing stories and dreaming of a world where my existence was the center of the story, where I could be gay, where I could be the hero, but most importantly a storyline where I was accepted and didn’t fear a social death from my peers.

As I got older, I stopped playing with the dolls and started world-building through daydreaming, storytelling, and writing. I looked back fondly on my childhood and the “girl” I was. When the *Barbie* movie came out, I knew I had to see it as an ode to my childhood self. I didn’t know, however, that it would speak to the experiences I had as a child (which I had hidden away) and make me feel seen and heard—most importantly for my trans-nonbinary self who had to live as someone I wasn’t for years. In this thesis, I use the term “hidden self” to describe part of a person’s gender identity that has been hidden. This hidden aspect is characterized by emotions that are joyful and imaginative like a child and feelings of anger, hurt, and fear (attributable to their experiences before coming out or recognizing their gender) (Goldstein, 2023). Barbie not only taught me how to hide, but it gave me a way to hide the part of myself I couldn’t be. I was never taught what my confusing feelings were and meant, but I was taught that they were wrong, and I needed to hide them.

When I watched the *Barbie* movie (Gerwig, 2023) in July 2023, it felt cathartic, like everything I had experienced at the cost of my queer identity was recognized. An underlying theme I saw in the film was that you could be anyone or anything that you wanted to be. The film explored this by showing Barbie's various careers and "Stereotypical Barbie's" journey to self-acceptance. As a 23-year-old audience member, it felt like a part of me was being healed through acceptance, I felt as though I was being told I could be who I wanted and that I was enough. I felt as though I was not non-binary and queer enough, despite always being put to the test under the white cisheteronormative gaze. The film was filled with moments for audiences to feel a sense of connection to the characters and plotlines. The film mirrors experiences in the real world with the inclusion of a monologue about the hardships of womanhood and constantly being told how to act and exist within a heteronormative society. It also includes an apology to the Barbies that were shunned and outcast for being too different from the accepted cisheteronormative Barbies. This movie functions as a way for viewers to discuss a shared experience that speaks to the struggles of our patriarchal world, including how these struggles are experienced by those who don't benefit. As I watched, it felt as though the message of the film, the addressing of hardships caused by being "different" and having "flawed" feelings, was meant for me. That experience allowed me to truly feel what I will call "nostalgic healing" and acknowledge the internal pain I had carried for so long. Like many others in that theater, I played with Barbies and dolls for most of my youth. My playing was a social survival so that my parents and friends would never suspect anything, but that didn't limit the effects of this film on me.

Barbie is meant to be a comedy that tackles sociocultural issues related to gender and power in today's world. The movie pokes fun at heterosexual patriarchy (within the "Real World" in the movie), using the lens of BarbieLand as the norm—where feminism and female

empowerment thrive. In BarbieLand, everything is pink. Men are oppressed and feel lost without women, while women are powerful. This movie explores the concept of these two different worlds that are interconnected yet collide in terms of ideology and truth. *Barbie* allowed some audiences to interact with their “hidden self” that they had buried away for years. Through watching *Barbie*, some audience members felt they could emotionally heal through confronting these feelings of turmoil about not getting to discuss and acknowledge oneself brought on by the film. I, like some audience members, felt as though my “hidden self” was able to heal and that I could come face-to-face with the child I could not help and protect as I was too scared to ask for it. Growing up in the South in a small town meant that being queer wasn’t talked about. You were a “he” or a “she.” there was no “they,” and I was not equipped to be a pioneer. Watching *Barbie* (2023), which centers on a “real life” Stereotypical Barbie navigating her identity within the world of BarbieLand, allowed me (and many others), to acknowledge the identity journey we took and relate our “hidden self” narratives to the plot.

When compared to the Real World, Stereotypical Barbie demonstrates the relationship between world-building and self-identity created from one’s imagination. Stereotypical Barbie (played by Margot Robbie) deals with emotions passed on to her by the human who is playing with her, which mirrors the act of someone playing with and creating stories for their dolls, as I did. As the plot unfolds, Stereotypical Barbie ventures from BarbieLand into the Real World to find the human that has triggered her malfunctions, so she can return to her normal, “perfect” doll state. As Stereotypical Barbie’s journey continues, she learns who made her, the implications that come with making decisions, the entanglement of gender and patriarchy. This journey allows the audience to see how the Barbie doll, on its own, is a plastic paradox.

A character named Sasha, a middle school teenager who is not a lover of Barbie, explains to Stereotypical Barbie that Barbie is a narrow vision of womanhood and represents how women are supposed to look and act. She is meant to be an “everywoman,” but her whiteness, thinness, good looks, and youth are not dissimilar from the standard women are held to in the West (Puckett-Pope, 2023). Barbie has hundreds of careers and is the best at everything she does but has never worked a day in her life. She is more than 60 years old, but also forever 20ish (Puckett-Pope, 2023). She is a symbol of what it means to look sexy and be skinny while still having curves, but she is also sexless. She is ultimately a distorted reflection of a privileged white woman. She’s a child’s plaything, though her influence continues to be felt by some children as they grow up into adulthood. Barbie is an idea that created widespread influence. Whether Barbie’s fans wanted to be Barbie or be with Barbie, they were influenced by Barbie as an entity and an ideology. Barbie reinforced sexist standards that women are held to and insinuated what women should strive for.

With all of this in mind, my thesis centers on the world-building aspects of the *Barbie* movie, along with the trans-nonbinary experience of healing a hidden self (as described above) that certain audience members have written about in online forums after watching the film. Specifically, I explore how character choices and identity performance in *Barbie* can provide a sense of visibility and closure for those who identify as trans-nonbinary and trans-binary. I argue this is accomplished through the act of “winking back” at the film by these audience members, queering the movie more than it was likely intended to be. Morris (2002) argues that the textual wink performs as a subtext and only those who know what it means will find meaning within it and understand the underlying message. This is due to a person having a deeper emotional tie or background knowledge of the text’s reference(s), context(s), or author(s). I expand upon this

notion. Instead of the writer or film creating the textual wink, it is instead specific audiences doing so based on how they interpret and relate to the plot and characters and develop their wink through sharing on online platforms. Therefore, it is not the author winking at some audiences that are in the know, but audiences are winking at each other to queer the film.

My research on *Barbie* commentary through audience responses began on Reddit, as the site allows users to publish personal thoughts and feelings on comment threads called subreddits. This lets users engage with and respond to each other on the site. Originally, I found 40 Reddit comments that discuss *Barbie*. I narrowed this down for my analysis due to time constraints, and also decided that looking at additional platforms was beyond the scope of this project. I narrowed Reddit comments down by focusing on the ones that included narrative about personal experiences, detail, and discussion of personal identity. Ultimately, I chose 14 comments to work with. While this is not a large enough sample for generalizability, personal experience and community building still matter on a small scale. This research is a start to the analysis how social media comments create community and form an archive based on the discussion of *Barbie*. The 14 Reddit responses I analyze are divided between the two chapters in this thesis. Further, most of the comments I chose were responses to other comments I analyze within each chapter. This develops additional details about the worlds these specific audience members are creating online. Finally, my emotional reactions to *Barbie* were similar to those that Reddit users described,. By analyzing Reddit users' writings about their experiences, I was inspired to think through my own experiences and reimagine the film in new and different ways.

As someone who was assigned female at birth (AFAB for short), I found that the movie resonated for me. I was performing this “winking” at scenes that I know are most likely not meant to explore non-binary identity, but I felt as though they were. I felt visible through the

movie's messages and felt that my experiences were seen. I never had a choice in being raised female, something I do not fault my parents for as they only knew the binary, but I was not afforded the luxury of knowing and understanding who I really was. My experiences growing up as a girl in the western part of the world, being objectified throughout my life, and knowing that I'd never have the same opportunities as men—themes the movie touches on—all resonated with me. Just like Stereotypical Barbie, my life had been chosen for me and I could see it all unfold without my control. Of course, this is all despite the fact that if it had been my choice, I wouldn't have been born female. *Barbie* was not a movie made explicitly for people outside the gender binary, yet I—like many others outside the binary—still felt the film spoke deeply to me.

In this thesis, I thus explore how gender and identity are crafted within the movie via plot devices, which often use humor to tackle heteronormative ideology while still maintaining gender-binary character roles. I examine the coding of different characters and how they are embodied to allude to different gender and sexual orientations that speak to the queer community. Finally, I focus on audience interpretations of this film and the impact it had on the trans community and individuals' trans identities. To analyze trans audiences' perception of the film, I apply Igartua's (2010) theories about identification and explore what it means to “wink back” at media and find visibility using media not meant for them and creating additional visibility in online communities. I borrow from bell hooks's theory of the oppositional gaze and Morris's theory on textual wink to discuss the notion of audiences being able to “wink back” at film and media. I do this to explore how some audience members queered the *Barbie* film, despite it not being a film about queer identity. By “winking back,” some audience members observed and crafted understandings of characters and relationships that were not designed for them. Specifically, I analyze audience responses concerning how queer identifying people felt

the movie connected to their identity including Reddit responses about the film and its various public reviews. A lot of fans, specifically AFAB or AMAB (assigned male at birth) fans, found themselves identifying with hidden (and some not-so-hidden) messages in the film. Whether it's because they felt recognized as a person anew or felt like they could relate to both the film and characters on a personal level, *Barbie* spoke to trans audiences through world-building, character portrayals, and plotlines while also tackling real-world sociocultural issues surrounding gender, discrimination, and society.

Crafting our Worlds

When I first tried my hand at world-building, I didn't know what I was doing. I thought I was just using my imagination to fill my time as I would make up stories about what I thought should have happened in my favorite series--whether it be film, fiction novels, and comics. Yet, I was developing a fan-made story, even if it was not one I shared widely. Wolf (2012) similarly mentions experiencing and understanding experiences of their youth related to what world-building was for them and how they performed it. From playing LEGOs to picking out particular games and literature, Wolf talks about how world-building was essential to their life and the lives of many others. Wolf (2012) states that "by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the importance of worlds as an advertising and marketing tool became more apparent, and greater efforts were made in the franchising and merchandising of worlds" (1). Fans enjoyed submerging themselves within the culture that came from fiction. It was the development of the media, technology, and one's own creative drive that allowed patrons to exercise their need to build and share their own worlds. Additionally, Wolf (2012) ties the development of "how-to" books to world-building activities. Through this, Wolf demonstrates how one is able to interpret and do

something themselves after reading about it and expand their world. With the age of information we live in, there is a plethora of content about established imaginary worlds that aids in the further development of world-building tools to help speed up, automate, and track the process of world-building. Thus, there is more world-building activity and discussion than ever before.

World-building is the invention of new imaginary worlds and is often associated with fiction. While the discussion of what it means to have multiple texts across multiple media that expand fictional worlds is complex, all fiction has the basic elements of narrative, including a possible world distinct from contemporary or historical “reality.” In other words, the world within fiction needs to have elements of reality in order for audiences to identify and apply what they are reading to something they already know. While Wolf calls this a *subcreation* (2012), another way we might explain this phenomenon which pays tribute to those who do the creation is the term *fanfiction*. Fanfiction is often defined primarily by its opposition to originality: Instead of coming up with one’s own story/world, a fanfiction writer takes someone else’s worlds and characters and creates their own story that is centered on the world that inspired it. Fanfiction includes stories based on other stories. While it is hard to define the precise limits of what qualifies as fanfiction (nor would I want to do this), I consider the *Barbie* movie and online commentary about various audience interpretations through trans experiences to be works of fanfiction that are rooted in the imaginations, memories, and desires of various audiences.

Wolf expands on what constitutes fanfiction, stating that it is simply another way to create a different version of the world already created within stories or even our own. Fanfiction allows creators to interpret and engage in world-building. Fanfiction also allows creators a chance to rewrite characters or scenes differently and post them online for others to engage with. Jenkins (1992) refers to those who write fanfiction as “textual poachers” and “nomads.” The

term “textual poachers” refers to how sharing content can contribute to the subversive appropriation of popular-media texts and characters, as fans create new material from popular media for their own visibility and pleasure. Jenkins argues that creators of fanfiction are not “taking” from others, but instead are building interpretations onto the world they enjoy and love. It is an art of flattery, an art of dedication. When I played with my Barbies or read fanfiction online, for example, it was because I wanted to dive deeper into the world of this franchise and there was not enough official content available for me. Further, fanfiction and the online communities that support it allow fans to explore their pop culture passions on a deeper level with other people who share similar interests and feelings. Fans are created through their love and devotion to what they admire. They also wish to build upon the fictional world they love and, occasionally, even exist within it. While textual poachers may not build cities and fans may not build worlds, they fill in the gaps in existing fictional worlds. As Wolf (2012) notes, fans “elaborate upon and extend the narratives and characters of a world” (279). Therefore, fans can develop characters deeper and differently than an author or filmmaker might. I examine a similar phenomenon in this thesis in which fans build and create alternative identities for characters that align with their own identity and are based within the story they are derived from.

A popular term in the fanfiction community is “Alternative Universe” (AU), which is a key concept related to reading and writing fanfiction. Samutina (2016) explains that the “alternativeness” of fanfiction universes can vary from slight shifts in a series of related events, as fans alter events, characters, or plot lines, to the complete “plowing” of the whole fictional world. Similar to Wolf’s notion of subcreations, AUs are born from other fictional worlds. An AU, typically created by fans, embraces almost any distortion of the confirmed narrative and/or world. These acronyms can often be found together when a fan is exploring how to create within

a world and/or create or change characters within a world. The flexible treatment of fictional universes allows fanfiction writers to play with an infinite number of imaginary scenarios for their stories. Whether they choose to develop or completely change the characters and the worlds they live in, they can do so without losing connection to the fan community. Samutina (2016) describes this as being one of the beautiful acts of being in a fandom. Fans are united by their love of a franchise, enjoy reading others' fanfiction, and accept fanfiction as a legitimate genre of literature that generates a way to interact further with their favorite popular media (Samutina, 2016).

Narrative is used to develop the story and further character development. Transmedia storytelling is the interactive art of using both words and actions to develop elements and images of a story. Henry Jenkins, while discussing transmedia storytelling, notes that narrative simply represents one kind of transmedia logic that shapes contemporary entertainment. One might identify with a range of different aspects of storytelling – including branding, spectacle, performance, games, and so on – which can operate independently or may be combined within an entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2009). For example, media about the Barbie doll abounds in many forms: narratives about playing with Barbies, the *Barbie* movie, older Barbie movies and television shows, written fan experiences about the *Barbie* movie on Reddit. All of this media consumption, creative activity, and sharing is a means of exploring both the Barbie franchise and individual interpretations of the franchise.

Jenkins describes how transmedia storytelling uses narrative within each and every story in a franchise. There are various types of Barbie narratives, but it is the narrative of each movie that sets the stage for what is being told about Barbie. Marie-Laure Ryan states that a written narrative “brings a world to mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters).

These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes to the narrative world” (Ryan 2004, 337). Within this point, Ryan identifies two of the three major world-building components: setting (the world built within the story), and character (those who are defined and created within the world). Fictional worlds that exceed the confines of its original medium, i.e. film or text, can be narratively linked by world-building, character, and author, all of which serve as signs guiding the consumer from one story to the next. Barbie on its own was a toy franchise that developed into books and films with multiple characters and plotlines – all designed to tell a story and create a world for that story.

Parody (2011) states that world-building involves creating “narrative spaces vast in their scope and minute in their detail, wholesale envisionings of millennia of fictional history, and continents of imaginary geography” (214). Each detail audiences and creators explore allows them to dive deeper into a world as it unfolds before them--and thus imagine it in their way. Just like our own world, imaginary worlds have history, geography, laws, and other rich content audiences latch onto as they interact with it. But no matter how expansive the world, the multiple texts composing it are all linked together through the recurrence of the invariant features and the recollection of the variant features that develop our familiarity. Thus, audiences interpreted the story based on the exploration of characters and plot devices that allow them to understand its importance to themselves and others. Ryan further argues that an expanded world, an “Alternative Universe” as Samutina calls it, created within these stories must include multiple texts and must meet requirements in order to be recognized as belonging to a certain franchise (Ryan, 2013). In other words, an AU must possess characteristics and a setting that audiences recognize from the story as a world in which these characters are developed. But, as Samutina explains, these expanded worlds all belong to the same fandom, despite any differences in

construction. Ryan (2013) describes invariant features that help interpret the worlds. These invariant features are what is consistent in the world, and are:

1. An inventory of existences comprising (a) species, objects, and social institutions [...] and (b) the cast of individual characters [...];
2. A folklore relating to the existents;
3. A space with certain topographic features;
4. A set of natural laws; and
5. A set of social rules and values

Ryan (2013) also describes several variant features, features that differ from world to world, including:

1. Physical events that bring changes to the existents; and
2. Mental events that give significance to the physical events.

These features specify and expand fictional worlds and help audiences interpret the worlds.

In this thesis, I describe both invariant and variant features (as dubbed by Ryan) as they surface and are repeated by Reddit users, who use these features to develop and expand the world in which they are consuming through their online commentary. From this, fans are able to engage with these stories that come from crafting their own fanfiction of a story as they reinterpret it. As Wolf (2012) argues, these are the features that communicate the creation of a world and allow audiences to interact with it, features that fans can latch onto, expand, and explore. With a more detailed inventory of invariant and variant features, a world offers greater capacity for expansion.

Another intricate part of world-building is the creation and exploration of how to build characters for fans to interact with. Samutina (2016) explains that character building is largely

tied to the narrative ability one possesses. Characters are constructed by text and semiotic codes yet can achieve an almost independent existence as a sentient being in a reader or viewer's mind (Samutina, 2016). Textual descriptions of characters allow readers to build the story themselves as they see it unfold before them. Regardless of whether the narrative is written or audiovisual, textual codes within it will, of course, be understood differently by different audiences.

Regardless of the format, fans may attach themselves to characters more than the world at times due to character building, often by identifying with personality traits. Seymour Chatman (1978) states that we often "recall fictional characters vividly, yet not a single word of the text in which they came alive" (118-119). This dual nature of fictional characters does not absolve fans from trying to identify the semiotic codes that aid in the construction of them, rather, it becomes a blended mix in which characters are connected based on our interpretation.

Boni (2017), meanwhile, argues that television characters are constituted from the following components:

1. psychological traits/habitual behaviors;
2. physical traits/appearance;
3. speech patterns;
4. biography;
5. interactions with other characters; and
6. environment or setting.

Although these components are based on television characters, Samutina explains that they still can serve to identify characters in any medium and texts of any length. As is the case with world-building, the presence, absence, or modification of these six components can lead to debates between fans concerning narrative coherence, consistency, and canonicity in the creation

of each fan's world. This means that worlds built by creators influence the separate worlds that are then built by fans, as fans interpret and develop their own worlds based on these six varying components.

Further, Samutina (2016) argues that contemporary communities of fans not only receive and experience these stories, but rather, they actively transform and co-create imaginary worlds and live their lives in these worlds with great intensity. Fans can create and adapt worlds that have had a great influence on them, to expand them into their own personal worlds and create within them. As Samutina states, "this development is realized in the process of the study of texts and materials, in writing itself as intellectual activity, in ongoing discussions of values and norms in online communities, in the practices of 'fictional anthropology' that presuppose understanding, interpretation and multiple experiments with human behavior in fictional form" (Samutina 2016, 448). In other words, when one creates and shares their own fictional worlds online, which they develop through personal interpretations, they also create an emotional bond with a larger fan community by sharing feelings about and responses to what they are fans of.

Characters of fanfiction are saturated with the personal experiences, affections, and identity constructions of their sub-creators. The same can be seen within the worlds that these characters (and new characters created by fanfiction writers) inhabit, as these are influenced by the experiences, imagination, and logical perceptions that writers and readers have about said worlds as they appear in various mediums. Samutina (2016) explains that active, transformative reception occurs through fans crafting and adding to the world already created, facilitates the creative process for the participants, and allows for the involvement of more people. It allows fans to experiment with pre-existing characters, build worlds for these characters with

ready-made blocks of material of very high quality (that is already loved by many), and rely on the support of the reading and writing fan communities.

Queering the Space: Performances of Winking Back

Many films strongly move audiences, which makes the films memorable to viewers. Plantinga (2009) suggests that strong emotions tend to make a mark on audience members, leaving them with a lasting impression that transforms their psyches and imprints memories. It is this imprint that also creates a way for audiences to identify with characters and recognize the struggles of others through these characters. In some way, movies mimic the human consciousness, and provide a way for us to understand the emotions and experiences of others. With *Barbie*, some audience members felt they could relate to the characters' struggles with identity under "the patriarchy"—which required them to perform a false identity and uphold gendered societal expectations. By feeling like these characters are relatable, audiences created bonds and relationships to them.

Identification is a process where audience members perceive a scene or character within that elicits a feeling or emotion due to personally aligning with said character (Igartua, 2010). Identification occurs when an audience member may relate to or empathize with a character or plotline and try to understand the character more. Characters are written to have characteristics recognized by audiences that are familiar to audiences. These characteristics might be hopes and dreams for a specific career or a connection to family. Many fans, for example, on Reddit expressed how they saw themselves reflected in the array of characters in *Barbie* (2023). Filmgoers find joy and comfort in being able to relate to characters and align themselves with the emotions that characters express. In line with this, some fans wrote about how they found

themselves empathizing and engaging with *Barbie's* plot and characters, as character developments resembled their lived experiences. Others discussed relating to—or identifying with—the themes and messages they found in *Barbie*.

Through storytelling and worldbuilding, filmmakers attract the emotions and thoughts audience members experience while building relationships with characters. These viewer-character relationships are developed further as viewers find pleasure in strongly desiring certain outcomes for the film's characters. As social beings, we gain a lot from imaginative interactions and rehearsal of the predicaments or plotlines a fictional character might encounter. Often, these imagined interactions reflect something that has happened or are based on a wish that certain things would happen within the world of a film. Halberstam (1998) argues that the personality and what a character goes through is what we identify with. Experiencing feelings of pleasure and sympathy creates a bond for audience members to explore, and in turn create a relationship in which they can continue to watch and support the character(s) they love and understand. Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) similarly argue that when we see characters in the media that we identify with, it directly impacts our feelings toward the character. Theories of identification, as described above, would explain how audience members identify with a film character, as they feel they can experience something akin to what the character does. It is through how we see a character perform and interact with their world that audiences created a bond with a character.

Meanwhile, scholars have long considered performance in an everyday life context. Performance is also a metaphor that helps us understand how we maintain and change culture (see, for example, Goffman [1959], Butler [2006], and Taylor [2016]). Performance is a key component of all human communication, as we are always performing ourselves and interacting

with the performances of others. Goffman (1959) explains that through everyday performances, we create impressions and fronts for ourselves that act as a site of interaction with the performances of others. We are performing ourselves and interpreting the performances of others based on what we have learned, along with our values, beliefs, and experiences. It is how we observe and create a sense of understanding of others we interact with in everyday life.

Langellier and Peterson (2004) add to this theory, stating that everyday life performances start with storytelling. Storytelling is one of the most common ways in which people make sense of their experiences and where they develop their identity performance on a deeper level. Langellier and Peterson (2004) add that much of our daily life consists of how we write or tell our stories, and also how we listen to or read the stories of others. This becomes a cycle of creating and interpreting identity performances through storytelling.

The body is also a site of performance (Taylor, 2016), as one's body is understood and identified through its identity performances, experiences, and interpretations of these by both the self and others. Butler (2006) further explains that embodied performances can unknowingly transmit socially constructed knowledge as fact, via memory, and understandings of identity are reiterated through repeated cultural performances. Repeated gendered performances, in this way, can create an ongoing sociocultural pattern she terms performativity (Butler, 2006). We are continuously sharing our performances with others as it is a continuous act. As a child, for example, I transmitted my own social knowledge and recognized my gender identity by "acting like a girl." I was performing what I was taught would be socially accepted. Even now, I am trapped in the cycle of performing my gender in certain spaces, code-switching between "girl" and "non-binary" based on context.

Gratch and Gratch (2021) similarly note that all performances begin with a human body doing something. How we speak, move, dress, and adorn ourselves informs how our body is socially or culturally understood. Our bodies are also the medium between a *thought or idea* a person has about doing something and the actual *doing* of the thing (Gratch & Gratch, 2021). In conjunction with Plantinga's argument, if we are always performing and experiencing performances in everyday life, the performances must be intertwined with how we perceive the world and identify ourselves and others. Gratch and Gratch (2021) further explain digital identity performance and maintenance as the performance of one's self and self-identity in everyday life through digital media and in virtual spaces. Additionally, one way that digital self-identity is created and performed involves sharing narratives about one's life with others (Gratch and Gratch, 2021). These narratives help people navigate and make sense of the world, their relation to it, and their relationships with other people. Gratch and Gratch (2021) further state that these narratives about everyday life experiences help individuals shape the world, themselves, and others into intelligible and understandable forms. We can create self-identities and understand our identities in part by creating and sharing narratives. In *Barbie*, for example, the dolls are always performing the identities they were created to perform. They know how a Barbie acts, and that when they act differently it is shamed or corrected. Audience members see these performances and may sympathize and/or relate to the Barbies' experiences. Audience members may also relate what they see on the screen to their own lives and begin to identify with the character's experiences and identity performances. Therefore, I want to expand my research to include analyzing performance from Reddit users. I analyze the online construction and performance of gender identities based on how Reddit users self-identify, and also how they describe their experiences of gender experiences in relation to the *Barbie* film. Reddit users are

crafting a digital performance through sharing and crafting their interpretation of *Barbie* through their own gaze.

To explain how creative performances of interpretation and adaptation in online spaces might be best analyzed, I want to pull from Gratch (2017) and Fiske (1989) on their previous research on the importance of analyzing adaptations. Fiske (1989) states that “the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience” (1). What we are processing comes directly from popular culture and our interpretations of it. Following Fiske, Gratch suggests that we turn our critical attention away from the media source and toward the “moments of [its] reading” (Fiske, 2011). Gratch (2017) suggests, for example, that studying a large number of adaptations of a single source media artifact--while also attending to the specific sociocultural and historical constructs these adaptations were created within--is a promising analytical method on multiple levels (138). Following this, attempts to determine the meaning of *Barbie* (2023) alone are not likely to lead anywhere useful. Therefore, in order to analyze the meaning of *Barbie*, I analyze the writing and interactions of *Barbie* viewers who shared their experiences on Reddit. This method allows us to see how multiple users articulate their opinions, connections, beliefs, perspectives, and/or ideas in their moments of reading *Barbie*. By analyzing these comments about *Barbie*, I can interpret how and why multiple viewers connected with the film, and the meanings a specific demographic took away from the film (Gratch and Gratch, 2021). Further, Butler’s notion of performativity is also useful here, in terms of analyzing the identification processes queer viewers describe or allude to as they write about how they believed characters in the film relate to their personal experiences.

Nostalgic Healing for Audiences

Much of my research on *Barbie* focuses on how audiences describe their interpretations and analyses of the movie in digital spaces. Gratch and Gratch (2021) explain that in these digital spaces, we can develop and explore our identities and craft our interpretation of others and the world. With this in mind, I apply their understanding of how digital identity is developed to the ways in which some Reddit users (in threads about *Barbie*) develop their digital identity—often by sharing stories of emotional experiences and sharing their interpretation of specific scenes and moments from the film.

Specifically, I focus on queer and trans audience interpretations of the film via their self-identification in Reddit responses. Barbie (the doll franchise) was something many such audience members grew up with, and thus it might trigger memories from childhood experiences. I, like many other transbodies, recall feelings and memories of childhood, including the painful experiences related to not living up to gendered expectations or being enough of a gender we were never meant to be. From a young age, I learned what it meant to “act my gender” and knew that I was supposed to perform this way as it has always been done. I was never meant to be a woman but was raised to play with dolls and act feminine. Thus, watching this film felt nostalgic and cathartic as I saw the bridged moments of BarbieLand and the RealWorld, a connection of the doll and those who love it. I recognized a part of my childhood that was painful, while also experiencing a sense of healing by acknowledging the sentiment of my youth—despite the painful experiences of not understanding my gender identity growing up. Watching this film allowed me to appreciate my childhood as I was able to visualize the experiences I had with these dolls and acting out stories I wished I got to live. This film allowed me to take back a part of my identity I was denied for so long and feelings I stored away. My “hidden self” felt seen and acknowledged as I watched this film, and I left the movie theater

recognizing how I get to choose my existence and what my life is, just like Stereotypical Barbie did in the movie.

van der Viles (2017) explains that nostalgia is a longing (*algia*) for a time and place in the past (literally a lost home, *nostos*). van der Viles furthers their description of nostalgia as being a part of any attempt to arm the sense of belonging to a place that home implies, while also finding a place for the past to exist within the present. This feeling, as van der Viles details, can be both empowering and debilitating. They believe nostalgia is reflexive and beneficial due to the empowering feeling that the self-experiences. For my analysis, I expand on this and define “nostalgic healing” as a way of experiencing nostalgia by reflecting on memories that may reduce the severity of the pain the memories caused. In this thesis, I also analyze Reddit threads online and how interpretations of the film impacted trans audience members. Multiple trans people shared their experiences of watching the film on Reddit, acknowledging that they felt the movie spoke to them about their trans experiences. As I share a lot of these experiences, I am personally invested in analyzing comments made by trans viewers, many of whom describe having a collective or individual experience in which they felt the film connected to their identity during and after watching *Barbie*. This connection is heavily linked between a viewer’s experiences of their identity, past and present. On Reddit, for example, audience members wrote about their experiences of nostalgic healing (generally related to their hidden selves), because of the way *Barbie* addresses contemporary issues related to gender and identity.

Muller (2006) explains that historically nostalgia has been treated as a physical disorder, a mental disorder, a "mere" emotion, and a symptom of the modern age. Nostalgia is something hard to explain in words, it involves a backward glance through history, but not toward a place or even a time that is necessarily real (Muller, 2006). Nostalgia involves feelings surrounding the

difference between past and present, but specifically the very irretrievability of the past is notable in the experience of it (Howard, 2012). Howard (2012) specifies that a necessary condition for nostalgic memories and feelings is that they can occur when someone is not aware of what can trigger certain feelings and bring on a sense of nostalgia. *Barbie's* release inspired audiences to share their feelings on online platforms like Reddit, along with their memories of childhood and how these factors interlock with who they are today. This film, for myself and many others (per Reddit threads), created a sense of nostalgia for audience members who cherished or were familiar with the Barbie franchise growing up. Many trans-binary and trans-nonbinary audience members on Reddit commented that they could identify with the message and plot of the film as they felt it aligned with their audience experiences. For example, there is a moment when Madame President Barbie apologizes to “Weird” Barbie for calling them “Weird” Barbie and isolating them for being different from the stereotypical perfect cisheteronormative Barbies. Following the apology, they ask “Weird” Barbie to join them and be a member of their cabinet. This moment created a space for queer audiences to feel as though they also received an apology for being ostracized for their non-cisheteronormative identity. Some queer audience members expressed experiences of nostalgic healing within their Reddit responses about moments similar to this from the film. Seeing such a direct moment of acknowledgment and healing within the film directly speaks to their experiences and feelings. Reddit user TimelessJo (2023), for example, wrote that “playing with Barbies and the nostalgia I have from that is a precious memory to me because it’s one of the few ways I got to be a girl, and this film felt so full circle.”

My Voice Amongst Others

My thesis speaks to what it means to recognize a coded meaning within the mainstream and to be recognized in a culture where you are considered an “other.” *Barbie* was a completely hetero, neoliberal film that made use of mocking heteronormative language to be pro-woman, but largely focused on cis-heterosexual women who are more powerful, smarter, and stronger than their counterparts. There was a lack of recognition in the movie about the body dysphoria and dysmorphia that Barbie (as a franchise) creates. There was, however, an acknowledgment that none of us can ever live up to the expectations put onto us socially and culturally. The movie also featured actors and actresses who are queer and transgender, but there was a lack of queer identity within the film’s plotlines (despite being deemed a movie for the LGBTQIA+) (Castagnaro, 2023). Audience members were left to interpret the movie and identify with it on their terms. This thesis thus also contributes to conversations about what it means for queer audiences to identify with plotlines and characters not made for them. Specifically, I explore how some viewers felt a sense of visibility based on a movie about breaking down cisheteronormative language. In addition to the performances of the actors and actresses, Reddit users reflected on the story about how to interpret the world around them while building a world for themselves.

The following two chapters explore the world-building within *Barbie* through the use of critical nostalgia theory, oppositional gaze theory, and identification theory. These theories help me analyze the commentary occurring on Reddit related to fans’ interpretation of *Barbie*. I include a critical analysis of Reddit threads, along with articles about the *Barbie* film. For both chapters, I follow a timeline for which responses I studied on Reddit, starting from the time the movie premiered and ending six months after the premiere. This timeline offered a clear archive for what I could reasonably analyze. We are living in a vast digital era where information is always surfacing, but I wanted to set perimeters for my research. My thesis will speak of queer

voices that actively shared their experiences with *Barbie* immediately after the film's premiere in theaters up until six months after. I will acknowledge these voices and their experiences, while also analyzing the content they chose to disclose and share. I also acknowledge that I cannot know the true gender identity of any given person in an online forum like Reddit. All I can know is their identity as they explain it in their profile, bio, or commentary. On many platforms, the assumed identity online is the white cis-hetero man as we operate in a world where whiteness is still the cultural norm. Therefore, if a commenter comes forward with a different identity, I will accept that identity at face value.

In Chapter One, I focus on how some fans “winked back” and queer the film through expanding the oppositional gaze. I discuss the role of characters within the film. I focus on the Barbies, Kens, the “Other” Barbies, and RealWorld characters. While discussing these roles, I examine the identification audience members expressed that they experienced as they watched queer actresses and actors they recognize in the film. Various audience members also took the discontinued Barbies to represent the queer population. They were ostracized and othered by the “normal” Barbies, and thus they can understand what Stereotypical Barbie goes through when she starts to question her identity.

Following Morris, every “weird” Barbie is a “textual wink” toward identities that misogyny does not reward. In my research, I also look at how audiences are performing a “wink back” at the film via Reddit commentary, queering *Barbie* through interpretation sharing stories that co-create media they believe is meant for them. The act of queering involves critically engaging with cultural artifacts to explore how meaning and identity are produced and re-defined against white cis heteronormativity. One method of queering involves the acts of winking back and worldbuilding. By doing this, audiences can build onto the world of *Barbie* and reimagine it

by crafting their own stories. When audience members share their personal stories on interactive, online forums, they are winking back at each other, and also creating space for further critical engagement. My analysis in this chapter focuses on how audience members perceive characters in *Barbie*. Specifically, I focus on how Reddit users communicate about the connections they have made between their own identity development and specific characters in *Barbie* that they believe have had similar feelings and experiences.

In Chapter Two, I dive deeper into how the film was able to create a sense of “nostalgic healing” for specific audience members. In this chapter, I dive deeper into critical nostalgia research, such as what creates these feelings within the film and how we all relate to a feeling not universally shared or understood to reflect on moments shared on Reddit where audiences reported their individual experiences of the film. I focus on the nostalgic healing experienced by those who had a “hidden self,” much like I had, as expressed in online Reddit responses. A common thread is that we acknowledged a part of our childhood memories that created pain yet could heal while/by watching this film. I draw from Reddit threads that involve assessing personal actions or expressions of personal growth and well-being after reflecting on memories, to discuss the notion of nostalgic healing. I explain the act of nostalgic healing within the context of other discourses about nostalgia, and also explore how experiences where audiences come face to face with nostalgia triggers can offer a recognition of the past and also a sense of healing.

As someone who personally identifies outside of cis-heteronormativity, I felt like I could identify with this film and its characters. This led me to explore my own identification and experiences with the film and intermix it with others’ Reddit users’ experiences with the *Barbie* film. Online platforms like Reddit allow for all types of communities. People who identify as

queer can find others with similar interests and inclinations in this virtual space, and collectively heal together.

Implications

For some, this project may not be world changing. For me, it is. This thesis builds upon Capuzza and Spencer's claims about why trans representation matters in popular media and how it needs to change. Additionally, I apply Iguarta's identification theory to audiences' emotional responses to the film, expanding their theory to include online responses and communities that have to read between the lines to have experiences of familiarity and identification by winking back at the film. Gaining visibility through popular culture can mean so much to audience members who feel they exist outside the norm. Growing up queer, I wanted to feel like I belonged, to see myself within the media, to be understood. It is only now that I am finally seeing my identity reflected in popular media. Of course, this reflection is not always perfect. My thesis does not claim that Barbie is a perfect queer representation. But it's a reflection, nonetheless. I want this thesis to amplify the voices of those who have to hide under the anonymity of an online-only identity, for queers who feel invisible or see how their identity is rarely visible within the mainstream.

Fanfiction One: Candy Barbie and Me



Figure Two: Candy Barbie Dress Up (Mooresville, NC, 2005, Photograph courtesy of Sean T. Durk)

“Did we do it?”

I looked down at Candy Barbie, a cheeky smile on her face and just shook my head.

“If you’re referring to growing up and being a Princess Belle, no.” Her face was mixed, I couldn’t tell if she was confused or upset. I had almost forgotten how we had idolized Princess Belle for so long. She was our ideal grown-up version of us. The long brown hair, the brown eyes, the walls of books. I had forgotten all my years of trying and wanting to be her, to be the

woman she was and to be loved by all. But it wasn't just that. I had a crush on Princess Belle, too. "But we do still love to read."

"What do you do then?"

I shrugged. How on earth do you explain rhetoric to a child? All I could think to say was "You like to research things about online identity and television."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't even know!" We both giggled.

"Mom let you cut your hair short like that?" I touched my hair. I had almost forgotten everything Mom would say about how pretty my long hair was and that she wanted to keep it that way.

"Yeah, well I lied about the length and then...she was okay with it."

She nodded, taking my words in. "Do you like it?"

"It's not as short as you'll want it, but I do like it. A lot has changed in the last 19 years, ya know?"

"Like what?"

"You no longer play with dolls or dress up. You don't only have to wear pink. You wear what you want and live how you want."

"Live how I want?"

"You'll find your princess too." I nudged my hip into hers, smiling.

Her eyes lit up, but her face stayed the same. But I knew what she felt, and she knew what I meant: That we dated women and not men. That we cut our hair and no longer lived "like a woman" like we thought we had to. We got to perform how we wanted.

"Do you still have Teddy?" She asked coyly, Teddy in her arms.

“Of course I do!”

Chapter One: Let's Make it Queer

The first thing I knew about Barbie was that she was pretty. She had long blonde hair, a perfect figure, a beautiful smile, and blue eyes. Barbie could be anything she wanted to be-- a hero, a firefighter, a friend, an astronaut, a teacher, Miss America, a veterinarian, a friend, a sister. She was popular, and fashionable, someone I thought I should aspire to be. She was also funny, smart, and humble. *My* doll was a mix of what she was created to be and who I reinvented her to be. *My Barbie* was a king, a bestie, a warrior, a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, and the star of the Star Wars franchise.

I knew about Barbie and her stories before I even knew what a franchise was. It was years before I even thought about why she might have been created. Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, came up with the doll as a concept after taking notice that her daughter, Barbara, and her friends were far more captivated by the adult paper dolls they saw in comic books rather than their other toys (Monteil 2023). The girls were more captivated by adulthood than playing with baby dolls. Around this time, Handler was the executive vice president of Mattel. When she pitched the idea of an adult doll to her husband and co-founder Elliot, he remained unconvinced that such a toy had mass market appeal (Monteil 2023). This idea only grew, however, when, during a family vacation in 1956 in Germany, Handler, and Barbara discovered Bild-Lilli, a fashionable, grown-up doll just like the one Handler had imagined (Monteil 2023). Inspired by seeing her dream come to life elsewhere, Handler found herself armed with real-life proof that there was a place for Barbie in the toy world. Excited by the idea of her doll on the shelves, Handler got to work on designs. On March 9th, 1959, *Barbie* officially unveiled itself to the public and debuted at the New York Toy Fair (Monteil 2023).



Figure Three. Handler and Barbie dolls (New York, 1967, Photograph Courtesy of Everett Collection Inc)

Over the next few decades, the doll became more famous than its own creators and its manufacturers. Barbie was an idea, a character, a story - Barbie was loved, cherished, and inspired many. *Barbie* was not just a generic doll; she had multiple identities and storylines.

As a child, I remember experiencing the different identities Barbie took on through toys and film: *Princess and the Pauper Barbie*, *Swan Lake Barbie*, *Fairytopia Barbie*, *Barbie in the Twelve Dancing Princesses*, among others. I think fondly about my childhood experiences playing with my Barbie dolls while watching these films, trying to recreate the plots with minor changes based on what I wanted to happen. I had many dolls--but of course, I had my favorites. I used these favorites to make new characters or recurring characters within stories I was recreating. I was using Barbie to craft my own imaginary worlds based on my own interpretation of the real world.

As I got older, I stopped playing with the dolls, trading them for novels and a whole new set of characters. However, when I heard about the *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023) film coming out in 2023, I was ecstatic. I came up with many different assumptions related to what I thought the

plot would be about. I turned to ads, articles, and trailers to help. The trailers and ads consisted of pastel colors, pop music, and “girly-pop” behavior. Patton and Sopelsa (2023) explain that many people (myself included) thought *Barbie* was going to be a movie for queers, reflecting on the Barbie franchise’s problematic heterosexual and white nature. In its advertising, however, Barbie never claimed to be a movie for the queers—but it also didn’t shy away from notions that it might be a movie for the queer community. The film advertised itself to many target audiences, and the queer audience was targeted largely through the film campaign’s use of campy advertising and innuendo-heavy trailers, strategies that were met with enthusiasm by fans. Thus, many fans thought this was going to be a film meant for the gays. Many websites publish articles talking about the “queerness” of the film. *Gay Times*, a British LGBTQIA+ news site, celebrated the day the movie was released, even going as far as to deem the day “Barbie Day,” and called the world-renowned doll a “queer cultural phenomenon” (Patton & Sopelsa 2023).

However, the queerness of the film was nothing more than rumors. *Barbie* has a healthy number of LGBTQ actors, a few coded minor characters, and perhaps some wishful thinking from audience members who choose to interpret the movie as queer. Yet, Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* (2023) has nothing overtly queer about it, in terms of setting, plot, or character development. Matthew Huff, an associate entertainment editor at Parade magazine, stated to NBC after seeing the film, “For a movie that spends so much time dissecting gender norms and highlighting the importance of diversity, I wish *Barbie* had openly acknowledged queer people” (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). On a surface level, the film reifies a white, cis, heteronormative view of society, in which straight and conventionally attractive men and women, the Barbies and Kens, rule their fictional world of BarbieLand while those who are considered to be “non-traditional” are outcasts (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). Both the Barbies and Kens are coded to embody heterosexual

relationships despite their lack of genitals, but there is a lack of inclusion on the discussion of queer identities. Matthew Huff was not alone in their desire of wanting queerness addressed within the film, many other audience members who had the same desire were left having to create their own interpretation of the film to include them. By creating their own interpretation, some audience members decided to “wink back” at *Barbie* and make their own representations of queer people when these were not seen or given, which I describe in more depth below.

Barbie never claimed to be a movie that was going to push boundaries. It never claimed to be a movie for the queers or one that was going to dismantle racism. Even so, many fans, including myself, were hoping to see these things happen, rather than the bare minimum of representation in casting that we were offered. It’s easy to wonder if critics and audiences should have expected anything more from the film. After all, it is a co-production of Mattel, who manufactured the famous doll, and Warner Bros. (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). Mattel was highly involved in the script development and filmmaking process and has, historically, not embraced its enthusiastic queer fan base publicly.

For example, Allan, as shown in Figure Four, was thought to be Ken’s lover and then was rebranded to be more heterosexual in appearance and relationship (Chapman 2023).



Figure Four. From Left to Right. Michael Cera as Allan in Barbie. Ken's best bud. (2023 Photograph Courtesy of Warner Bros and Mattel).

Chapman (2023) describes Allan's history, including how the doll came to fruition but was quickly taken off the shelves and rebranded. Chapman (2023) notes that Allan was introduced in 1964 as Ken's "buddy," but as the fine print on his box reads, "All of Ken's clothes fit him!" This phrase, of course, does not mean that Allan is queer. Yet, the fine print led to rumors that the pair had a homosexual relationship. Mattel has never commented on this, but Allan was discontinued in 1966. Due Allan's rumored romantic relationship with Ken and a public perception that he was queer, the original Allan doll was left to gather dust in many toy boxes. He was later replaced by the (equally forgotten) Brad as Ken's new friend (Chapman 2023). Allan then reappeared, renamed as Alan, as Midge's husband in 1991. (Margaret "Midge" Hadley Sherwood was created to be Barbie's best friend.) Further, Midge arrived as a pregnant Barbie doll in 2002, sparking its own controversy, with many thinking it was a move to canonize Allan as heterosexual (Chapman 2023).

Even with the *Barbie* movie's lack of queerness, the queer appeal of Barbie in general has more to do with the potential shape-shifting ability that the doll represents. Meanwhile, *Barbie* movie audiences are left with only a few fleeting (and not particularly pride-inducing) coded references to queer Barbie culture (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). Character-coding is used by writers and filmmakers to assign various traits associated with a certain identity to characters without explicitly labeling these characters as members of that group, and instead by implying a heavy hint (Jordan 2021). Audiences are greeted with brief appearances by Earring Magic Ken and Palm Beach Sugar Daddy Ken, for example, both of which Mattel denies were intentionally gay-coded (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). Further, Michael Cera's Allan, the one prominent coded

character (based on the 1960s doll), spends most of the film groaning about his life in BarbieLand. Allan's appearance in the film as the 1960s version was a subtle "wink" to those who knew about the queer history of the doll. The wink that occurs here acts as subtext, an underlying conversation with those who can recognize what's going on while other viewers might not. While it was a minimal "wink" about Barbie's possible queer history, some fans still relished in this, relating it to their queer identity.

The film also features a #MeToo-era inspired feminism, girl boss rhetoric, and a heavy helping of Mattel pride, as heard in the endless promotion of the Barbie slogan "You can be anything"--which might inadvertently be the queerest thing about the movie. Queer Barbie fans have had a long relationship with the idea that "you can be anything," as the idea relates to a malleable doll who has any career it wants, while also embodying what it means to identify as a woman--despite a lack of genitalia. This Barbie slogan, which was adopted in 2015 as a retooled version of the 1985 Barbie campaign "We girls can do anything," has come to define the brand in recent years and is meant to inspire those who play with the doll (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). While the change from "doing" to "being" might seem to make the slogan less action-oriented, it could also be interpreted as aligning with the idea that we perform (or *do*) our gender, while also catering to a broad, essentialist understanding of identity as fixed, stable, and *who we are*.

Meanwhile, *Barbie* coyly points out in its opening moments — a shot-for-shot reimagining of *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s "Dawn of Man" sequence — that the doll represented something utterly new when she stepped onto the scene in the late 1950s (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). As noted above, before this, girls' toys were essentially limited to baby dolls and the motherhood play these dolls inspire. However, Barbie represented a different vision of (white) womanhood, which was in line with rising American consumerism at the time. Girls were shown

that you didn't have to be a homemaker--you could be a woman with fashionable clothes and a career. You could even have prominent *boobs* (the beauty standard of the day). You could dream of being white, cis, heterosexual, skinny, conventionally beautiful by Western standards, and employed--the perfect woman everyone wanted to be or be with.

Barbies have been omnipresent for generations, with over a billion dolls sold since 1959. As years pass and society changes, however, the more fraught conversations surrounding the brand's legacy become. Barbie can now be "every woman," but not anyone can be Barbie. Barbie can have her looks, her dream man, and any career under the sun. This, in turn, creates a stigma for women who then feel a need to look and be like Barbie. Some women even live their lives dreaming of being Barbie, change how they look to resemble her, or feel forever compared to Barbie as an idea of the perfect woman. Criticisms about the doll's impossibly tiny waist and inescapable association with a narrow, hyper-feminine, blonde ideal of womanhood abound today. Yet, just as queerness isn't explored within the film, these beauty standards the doll represents are only lightly explored. Audiences are even made to feel bad for "Stereotypical Barbie" (played by Margot Robbie) at the moment she is met with criticism about her existence. This happens when Stereotypical Barbie meets who she thinks is the human who plays with her, a girl named Sasha. Stereotypical Barbie is excited to meet Sasha, but Sasha is not excited in return. Sasha tells Stereotypical Barbie how she is blamed for the expectation put onto women to look and be just like the doll. Thus, just as some queer fans identified with the film, other audience members might explore how the pain of living under a capitalist patriarchy made them feel.

The *Barbie* film set out to explore the role of imagination plays for audiences. In an interview with Fandango, actor Kate McKinnon, who is openly gay and plays "Weird Barbie" in

the film, said Barbie is about “imagination” (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). McKinnon states “It’s a way of expressing your innermost desires, and things that you’re exploring about yourself and the world,” she said (Patton & Sopelsa 2023). This sheds light on how the film explores what it means to use your imagination for world building, and how people built their own world for their own Barbies. As noted above, multiple audience members thought *Barbie* was going to be more queer than it was, while also acknowledging the criticism the doll has received over the years. While the film did not do this, that didn’t stop some fans from feeling as though it did—and then taking to the internet to acknowledge their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of *Barbie*. In this way, some fans “winked back” at the film by creating their own queer representation.

The Gaze, Identification, and Identity Performance

hooks (1992) opens their explanation of the “oppositional gaze” by describing what the role of the “gaze” was in their life. The “gaze,” as hooks describes, is meant to challenge and question but is far from welcomed by others. For example, when children are the ones who perform the “gaze” they are sometimes taught quickly to not do it openly (i.e., look the other way unless directed to look). Children are taught the power that looking can hold, and what it means to dissect and reflect on what is in front of them. hooks states that the “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally, where they can interrogate the gaze of the “Other” while also looking back and at one another to name what they see. The gaze can create power for the user and act as a form of resistance to create a space for oneself where they are denied it. hooks develops her argument on the gaze by explaining how some Black people watched television and mainstream media knowing they would never get to see a representation of their stories, but they were still able to resist the representation they were seeing. It was the

oppositional Black gaze that led to the creation of media that explored Black identity and stories in Black cinema (hooks 1992).

As a result, these communities either avoided the cinema together, or to enjoy it, they had to forget sexism, critique, and even racism--which was only possible if they identified with the white women, the closest ones to experiencing any kind of similar oppression of power. Some refused to submit and resisted, while others, like hooks, turned to cinema with a critical oppositional gaze. The oppositional gaze gave communities the space to have a new pleasure, the pleasure of saying no to what was forced onto them and ignoring the typical structures of power that force them to consume media uncritically.

Hanson explores various ways the oppositional gaze applies to other marginalized identities. Expanding on the oppositional gaze, Hanson (1999) detailed that when asking the question ‘How do I look?’ it often refers to being about either cultural representation (as in ‘what am I supposed to look like?’) or spectatorship (as in ‘is the cinematic look queer?’). Hanson (1999) suggests that the second question is pursued instead so that we focus on the similar ways of looking that are and are not available for queer pleasure and desire. The shift comes from us asking “who” gets represented to starting to ask the question of “how” we look *at* them or *with* them. Hanson’s goal is to pluralize our ways of looking (both onscreen and off) and to demonstrate how homophobia and homoeroticism sometimes unpredictably affect the visual field. The visual field relies on presented or expressed imagery. Combining Hanson’s question of how we look with hook’s oppositional gaze—for anyone who lacks representation within mainstream media—can be a gesture of resistance to not only the male heteronormative gaze but also toward the oppression of minorities within cinema by the all-inclusive gendering of women. The oppositional gaze cultivates a power to look, enabling marginalized spectators to document

what they see and construct dialogue with their own voice. The gaze expands to other groups that are oppressed and look back to resist, questioning how they are created to be represented. Similar to Hanson, I expand the notion of an oppositional gaze to include all marginalized groups. Some spectators of *Barbie*, specifically those who felt the film didn't offer a representation of their identity, used an oppositional gaze to create their own visibility.

Almost everything in the media is purposefully constructed to hold and direct attention. Mainstream media is crafted to influence the public to hold certain opinions and spread information; it controls trends and who gets "seen." Therefore, the portrayal of marginalized communities in *Barbie* (2023) is problematic as it reinforces regressive sociocultural belief systems, reifies stereotypes, and minimizes unique life experiences. Yet, following hooks (1992), marginalized communities know that the media reaffirms regressive ideas like white supremacy. However, with an oppositional gaze, viewers can "develop a critical spectatorship" (hooks 1992, 128). With this type of critical viewing, marginalized peoples can resist identification with films and separate themselves from these dehumanizing stereotypes, while also enjoying the film in their own ways.

Marginalized communities consumed the media, learning about accepted bodies and perceptions of themselves and/by those that weren't them. Such films gave various marginalized communities the space to look at white life without being punished, and in some ways be part of it. hooks (1992) argues that when there were representations of black women in film, their bodies and beings were there to serve. Similar stereotypical cultural essentialism exists for other marginalized communities represented in film. Marginalized communities are being used more than they are being represented, and used as a way to show the world who they are through stereotypes. Moreover, some people from marginalized communities don't see cinema as having

a significant relation to their lives, nor do they anticipate meaningful or positive representations of themselves (hooks 1992). But those watching a film could still form identification through acts of resistance, as they can see a wrongful portrayal while imagining one that is accurate.

James (2023) further argues that we need to repurpose the white gaze. “The white gaze is a racist orientation of looking that depicts non-white folks through dehumanizing scripts.” (James 2023, 2). With this in mind, James calls for the repurposing of the gaze as imitation, which activates the qualities of the white gaze. Through imitation, one can use the white gaze as a model and “wink” at specific audiences who know that they are using the repurposed white gaze to imitate what the white gaze wants them to be rather than who they are. James (2023) explains that “imitation enables the original representation to be recognized through a familiar lens, but in that same frame obstructs this representation, communicating to viewers a new meaning about that which is copied” (6). Therefore, imitation within the repurposed white gaze points to the tension of contradictions, gesturing viewers to see the original representation anew as a false act. The act of imitation disrupts the power at play that constructs stereotypes to be truth-limited representations and also points it out to audiences. Through imitation, we can enact a part of the gaze that only certain audiences will understand, we then repurposed the original. Through this, various audience members take back a shared stereotype through the act of imitation and acknowledging the fault in the perception of their identity.

I combine James’s role of imitation and expand it to act as a “wink back” that audiences can use to change the meaning of media that is not meant to represent them. As explained, *Barbie* was not a film for queers or non-white, non-hetero, non-normative bodies. There was a lack of representation in characters and plot lines outside of who was cast to play characters. The lack, however, did not stop some audiences from feeling as though the film was still relevant for

them. Some audience members took certain characters and plotlines and said, “I felt like this was a storyline about...”. Viewers are then recognizing this storyline through a familiar lens and imitating it to be their own representation. Through this action, viewers repurpose the original lens by imitating the original scene and making a new version of it. Viewers bonded with plot points, character arcs, and by doing so they identified themselves and their experiences through the act of imitation. Through identification, audiences connect with characters based on their desire for or their familiarity with them. As Igartua (2010) explains, audiences can empathize and relate to film characters—and they may feel a sense of themselves or things they care about reflected by the character—through the process of identification. But by imitating and “winking back,” audiences enact a process of identifying themselves with characters in order to write the story using their own interpretation. Through the act of winking back, viewers gain control of their own narrative. It is through this process that they create and tweak what it means to have a gaze and representation in popular media.

Performance is a common metaphor used to describe how humans choose to communicate with one another. We perform our identities to communicate who we are and our relationship to others, for example, as a way to understand and be understood in everyday life. Gratch and Gratch (2021) further explain that all of our performances start with us *doing something* that can act as a form of communication. Meanwhile, Gratch and Gratch (2021) note that one way to think about *digital* performance is to consider how one chooses to perform (i.e., construct and communicate about) one’s self-identity in virtual spaces. With this in mind, the “doings” I analyze in the following section are the ways in which queer audience members watched, interpreted, winked back at, and shared about *Barbie* on Reddit. I examine how these Reddit users perform their identities through sharing and explaining their experiences. As Gratch

and Gratch (2021) point out, performances require an audience, which includes the self. Thus, when Reddit users post on threads in their subreddit communities they are both communicating with an imagined online audience and also creating and performing their own digital self-identity by sharing narratives about themselves and their experiences (Gratch and Gratch, 2021).

Halberstam (1998), meanwhile, explains that bodies are presented as entities not free of gender, but defiant of gender, in their diversity and unpredictability. Although film characters may be readily gendered by viewers, they can defy gender roles in complex ways that acknowledge the importance of personality over body shape (Halberstam, 1998; Jane, 2015). In *Barbie*, many characters defy their gender roles by exploring their gender power dynamics. Many Barbies have powerful careers like being a doctor, CEO, lawyer, Nobel Prize winner, and so on. BarbieLand runs on womanhood and defines patriarchal society. There is power in these characters and nothing to stop them as they do not have to adhere to "Real World" patriarchal standards. The Barbies are the ones leading their society and do not have to fight their worth against a male counterpart.

In *Barbie*, the dolls are always performing the identities they were created to perform, but at the same time, audience members can interpret these narratives and identities differently and connect with them in a way not directly intended by the creators of the film. Audience members may sympathize and/or relate to the Barbies' experiences and expand it to include their own experiences that they feel are similar. They can see a character in the film expressing an emotion or memory and relate it to their own emotions and experiences. Audience members then bond what they see on the screen with their own lives and may begin to identify with a character's experiences and identity performances. By centering their experiences with those of a film a character, audiences create a relationship of familiarity between themselves and the character.

Barbie furthers the transmedia storytelling for the franchise. Through narrative, audience members were able to develop their own fan-made stories from watching the film and build their own world on Reddit (see Jenkins 1992). Reddit users do just that by situating their experiences and personal narratives within the story of the film and developing their own version of the story. By reading these narratives, it allows audiences to understand, or even relate to, how the Reddit users felt watching the film.

What is the “Right” Body

Like many other queer people, I spent a part of my youth denying the aspect of my identity and denying who I was. I had a desire to be accepted in social settings, but mostly I didn’t want to be different. I was an outsider in the “Real World” due to my identity, which is why I never allowed myself to express what I felt about being in the wrong body. Like many others in the LGBTQIA+ community, I was denied the chance to feel who I was and told who I should be and how I should want to be perceived. With this in mind, I explore how audience members wink back at each other in relation to *Barbie*—a mainstream film— by sharing their experiences on Reddit. I look at the ways they identify with *Barbie* film characters and ultimately co-create a filmic representation for/of themselves, despite *Barbie* not being intended for that.

Identification can work in the sense that an audience member may relate or empathize with a character and try to understand the character more (Igartua 2010). Following Igartua’s identification theory, audiences connect with characters based on their “desire” for or their “familiarity” with them. As Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) explain, popular media plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions of others—particularly through representations that

the media creates of various identities and demographics. According to Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel (2018), audiences tend to positively evaluate homosexual people when positive media representations of them are available (p. 3). Yet, western cinema still fails to put trans characters on screen at a rate consistent with other LGBTQIA+ characters.

For instance, Engdahl (2014) explains that “the notion of “wrong body” consists of a dichotomous explanation of the transgender experience as a state of “being in the wrong body” and not having a body that reflects who they are internally.” (267). Capuzza and Spencer’s (2017) work on “wrong body” discourse, meanwhile, and contends with the issue of visibility and invisibility in the film—which is transcribed through a character’s identity concerning film importance (i.e., main character or supporting character). Representation creates powerful role models and acts as a source of inspiration, and thus the size of a character’s role within a film can speak to interpretation that audience members may (or may not) take away. When queer characters are always just side characters with no personality other than being queer (like how Ken is “Just Ken” in *Barbie*, and is defined by his relationship to Barbies), this communicates a lack of importance to the audience. However, when a queer character is a main character and given a plot, their representation does more to create a powerful role model. Capuzza and Spencer (2017) point out, “At this historical juncture, transgender people, allies, and activists have joined together to challenge transphobia and transmisogyny. An important part of this larger public discourse is the commercial success and critical acclaim of scripted series” (215). Capuzza and Spencer (2017) emphasize the importance of having more developed LGBTQIA+ characters and what this means for some audiences, specifically within media that is popularly streamed and aired weekly. This demonstrates the need and desire to have characters that are

more than just a one-dimensional personality, constructed only to be “gay” (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017, 215).

Following Capuzza and Spencer’s “wrong body” theory (2017), there is a need for in-depth representations of characters that exist outside of archetypes designed through (or by) “normal” white, cis, male, heterosexual identities. With this representation, audiences must acknowledge character identity through emotions, and storylines. Additionally, Steinbock (2019) argues that omitting the foundational terms of either *trans* or *film* is imperative to trace the constant shift and lingering hold on how a transformative embodiment is conceptualized within visual culture. Yep (2017) explains that with the increased visibility of the transgender body in U.S. mainstream media, a new trans-normativity might be emerging. Thus, having these identities expressed on television helps to decrease cis heteronormativity as the norm. Yep (2017) goes further by stating this visibility creates standards through which trans lives are made intelligible by others in the cultural domain.

There is no specific archetype that I look for in a queer character, as none currently exist, and such characters are merely built from stereotypes. According to a study by the GLAAD Institute (2023), there were 659 series regulars set to appear on scripted primetime broadcast series in 2022-2023. Of these, 70 characters were LGBTQIA+. An additional 31 LGBTQIA+ recurring characters were counted, bringing the total to 101 LGBTQIA+ characters on primetime broadcast (DeerWater, 2023). Most LGBTQIA+ characters within media are depicted as though gender intersects with sexuality in a binary manner. If a character is queer, they are depicted as a binary gender (i.e., a man or woman) and also homosexual, thus creating an assumption that links sexuality to gender. This can be seen on primetime television shows like *Glee*, *Friends*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Gossip Girl*, where queer characters are written one-dimensionally (based

on their sexuality)—a notion that is offensive towards anyone on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Queer characters are often written with no expansion on their personality, gender, or sexuality, and some shows still also include a plethora of homophobic jokes and plotlines. The identity and plotlines for these characters focuses on them being queer and looking for love.

With this in mind, I want to acknowledge that this research does not speak for all LGBTQIA+ representation within media, and that it is not an absolute desert of options. While there is still a lack of representation, there is also a plethora of media which allows for a rich visibility of diverse queer identities. Movies such as *Booksmart* (2019), *Tully* (2018), *Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), and *Tangerine* (2015) explore LGBTQIA+ diverse identities. While I know there is positive queer representation in film, I chose to write about *Barbie* for several reasons. *Barbie*, for myself and others, was our first queer experience that allowed us to explore ourselves and the world around us by playing. *Barbie* also creates nostalgia for a variety of people due to her presence in their childhood. Thus, I wanted to explore how *Barbie* affected those in the audience holding onto that nostalgia. *Barbie* was not a film for queer people, but it was a film for those who loved the doll and love using their imagination. My focus on *Barbie* allows me to explore how audiences are reclaiming *Barbie* by sharing their own experiences related to the film.

Multiple performers playing heteronormative-coded characters in *Barbie* are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Hari Neff, Kate McKinnon, Alexandra Shipp, and Scott Evans, have all come out as queer in a mix of interviews and through their social media channels (Longo, 2023). Moreover, Kate McKinnon plays “Weird Barbie,” who is an outcast because she does not look, move, or act like other Barbies, and she lives with the other “weird” or discontinued Kens and Barbies in a graffitied house at the edge of BarbieLand. There were no

openly queer characters or couples in the *Barbie* movies I watched growing up. The lack of media representation affected how I saw my own sexuality, as I began to recognize it as a child. Lack of character development, screen time, and representation for queer characters affected my relationship with my gender and sexuality. Sexuality and gender weren't depicted as being on a diverse spectrum (and even now this holds true), but that didn't stop me from both consuming and resisting these one-dimensional representations. For example, as a child, I would recreate the *Barbie* movies I watched with my dolls, always adding in my Barbies as characters and giving them their own names and stories. Unlike in the movies, I had a special doll that I would pretend was myself along with another doll mine was "together" with. I would add us as characters into whatever story I was recreating. Even now, I still picture developed queer storylines for characters in media that I know are far from queer inclusive. Despite there being growth in LGBTQIA+ characters on the screen, a lot of the exploration of queer identity in characters is limited. Thus, there is still a need to bring more visibility to those who identify outside of the (white) gender binary by giving queer characters a place, voice, and fleshed-out character arc with traits other than their gender identity that help tell their story.

Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) studied the relationship between representation and audience to show the influence of LGBTQIA+ characters on various audience members. Their research shows that an audience is more likely to connect to a character based on personal investment and attachment to understanding a character (Madzarevic & Soto-Sanfiel, 2018). This aligns with Capuzza and Spencer's (2017) research on the need to have in-depth LGBTQIA+ characters who communicate identity through development and plotlines that audiences can relate to. Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) concluded that the consumption of narratives

depicting queer people affirmatively enhances positive attitudes toward queer people and weakens bias against them.

Yet, identification cannot occur without allowing audiences to gaze at stories and identities represented in the media they consume. Gaze refers to both the acts of seeing and being seen. Within a hegemonic Western culture that hinges on racism and sexism, the gaze and who is permitted (or well positioned) to use it center on who has the power to inform what is and is not culture (hooks 1992). This becomes incredibly evident within film. Hollywood cinema has long been identified as a space of knowledge production and dissemination, with a wide reach and huge power. Cinema is a way to influence audiences to have specific opinions and understandings of the world around them. Media allows some users to take the word of the writers as truth and interpret and identify with the world around them in that way. I apply research, such as Yep (2017) and Engdahl (2011), related to the wrong body and right body discourse, including how this discourse is implemented in popular media to dictate what and who can be a trans body. In the following section, I focus on the textual winks various members afford these heteronormative-coded characters (who are queer in their real life--outside of who they play in the film), who are confined to their heteronormative life in the film but can still create representation and acceptance by not being confined to a queer role.

How Do Audiences “Wink Back”

When I watched Gerwig’s *Barbie*, I had hoped it would be different. I was hoping to see queer representation amongst other forms of representation, but I didn’t. That didn’t stop me from feeling like I could identify with the movie. Nor did it stop me from feeling like I could take something from the film--even though it wasn’t meant to represent my community. *Barbie*

wasn't a queer movie about the joy within unique trans experiences, yet that was my experience and ultimate takeaway from the movie. I was interpreted and identified with audience members through repurposing the oppositional gaze to create queer expression and allow for the wink back to happen. I noticed how other audience members recounted similar thoughts through Reddit responses. While we may have experienced similar feelings, these are expressed differently through every unique Reddit post. To analyze the meaning that some queer fans took away from viewing *Barbie*, including self-reports about how the movie made them feel and how they felt about the movie, I completed close readings of seven Reddit posts from threads about the film *Barbie*. In my analysis, I focus on how the Reddit users repurposed the oppositional gaze toward the *Barbie* movie in order to queer the film, including how users interpreted the meaning of the film as one that intertwined with their identity and used Reddit as a platform to publicly wink back at the film.

When picking Reddit comments, I originally looked at 20 or more comments before settling on seven. I selected Reddit comments to analyze based on how Reddit users explain their self-identity in relation to their interpretations of the *Barbie* movie. I focus on how the Reddit users/*Barbie* audience members express their feelings about the movie, particularly in terms of how it connects to their identity, personal stories, and personal histories. In line with theories of world-building, these comments reconstruct the “real world” in which the audience members interpreted and publicly winked back at the film. As noted above, representation is important to communicate visibility and acceptance to an audience. When there is a lack of representation, viewers do not get that communication. Therefore, by interacting with *Barbie* in their own way, queer audiences get a chance to observe the story and see their own identities get explored.

“It’s also about the shame-free embrace of high femme aesthetics. I’m not high femme myself, but I absolutely believe that high femme folks deserve more general respect than they get. It was so great to see that wave of bright pink, both in and a few blocks around the theater. Not because it speaks to my personal experience, but because high femme people deserve this moment to stand fully in themselves with pride. I’m more than happy to be an ally for that.”

Once the patriarchy comes to BarbieLand, all the heteronormative Barbies suddenly give up their careers and independence for the Kens. This is a moment that acts as a way to wink at audiences and act as imitation by repurposing the film which occurs when audiences recognize what is being imitated through a familiar lens. *Barbie* imitates the role of patriarchy in society by “winking” at audiences. This winking imitation happens through the act of parody in the film and communicated to viewers, providing them with a new meaning. *Barbie* imitates what the function of the patriarchy is in the RealWorld first, furthering it when Ken brings it to BarbieLand. By creating the act of imitation, the film is winking at its audience about the issues of the patriarchy, while letting the audience laugh at the imitation.

In elasticity’s comment, they summarize their feelings about the film and argue that the “other” Barbies are the ones who recognized the underlying issues first, as they are not represented or recognized under the binary patriarchy of BarbieLand. In addition to that, within the film, these “other” Barbies are the ones who become the heroes central to solving the problems in the film. In line with this, elasticity states, “It’s true that my gender experience isn’t centered in this movie, and I’m fine with it. They tackled some major social issues and have sparked a more robust and far-reaching public conversation about misogyny, femininity, and the meaning of womanhood and manhood, than I’ve ever seen before. *And* it’s fucking destroying at

the box office.” Many of the “other” Barbies did not get a lot of screen time other than an introduction. McKinnon was one of few outcast Barbies who had more screen time, and even then their character, Weird Barbie, generally served as comic relief. Despite the lack of screen time, elasticity deems the “other” Barbies essential heroes through their interpretation of the film.

elasticity’s gender identity is not expressed in their post, other than their statement that they do not express themselves as high femme but were still happy to see high femme representation. The only indicator of elasticity’s identity is that the Reddit thread they posted on is a subreddit, a forum dedicated to specific topics on Reddit, for those who identify as non-binary. Through their other posts on different threads, it can also be gathered that they are in their mid-30s, live in California, and were AFAB. They post often on Reddit and respond to many different threads. elasticity has mentioned the lack of visibility of their identity many times, and mentions it again in their Reddit comment about *Barbie*. Overall, elasticity states that despite not being represented in the film, they still saw that the film was able to tackle issues they thought were important. They could still take away the importance of being a non-heteronormative identity and express their identity in relation of social issues.

Much like elasticity, multiple audience members felt as though they could identify with and have a queer experience while watching *Barbie*, and even found representation in the characters. On another Reddit thread, *I watched the Barbie movie and it made me understand something about my transitioning* was posted on a subreddit community meant to support FTM men. Reddit user promptlovebot posted on the thread about how they connected their identity to a character in *Barbie*, and detail how they could see themselves in the character Allan. In BarbieLand, Allan is unlike the multiple different Barbies and Kens that are depicted. For

example, as the movie's voice-of-God narrator states, "There are no multiples of Allan. He's just Allan," to which Allan (played by Michael Cera) responds, "Yeah, I'm... confused about that." Allan is also Ken's best friend but doesn't seem to fit in with any of the Kens or Barbies. When things take a turn for the worse in BarbieLand (after Gosling's Ken brings back the Patriarchy), Allan is the only male-presenting doll who doesn't agree with or take part in it. Instead, Allan tries to flee BarbieLand and ultimately helps the newly oppressed Barbies with their plan to take back BarbieLand.

As explained by Igartua, identification occurs when someone feels as though they have a sense of "familiarity" with a character and develop a bond. Promptolovebot, openly identified with Allan, explaining that "I personally saw myself in Allan. Not fitting in with the Barbies or the Kens, and feeling out of place in both environments. I think Allan was mostly a joke but I do think he's somewhat meant to represent men who don't fit in with the patriarchy's idea for men such as gay men and trans men." In this comment, promptolovebot identifies with Allan in the film, including how they both relate to, empathize with, and feel as though they can understand Allan.

Allan's sexuality and gender identity are unknown, and while the film leans very heteronormative, it is mentioned that the dolls have no sexuality. Their genders are also all assumed to be within the binary in the film. Allan's character is thus assumed to be male. promptolovebot has identified themselves in other Reddit posts as being a gay trans man, and while Allan didn't share this characteristic and wasn't directly connected to someone from the community, promptolovebot made the connection with him. By being able to connect with and redirect how they saw themselves within Allan, promptolovebot is able to "wink back" at the film by queering aspects not originally queer. Allan is never explicitly explained as a character

meant to represent gay and trans men, yet this Reddit user says they are. promptolovebot is committing the acts of seeing and being seen by redirecting how Allan can be interpreted through their own lens. promptolovebot recreates Allan as a queer representation by explaining how they see themselves and their personal experiences of being queer in Allan.

Similar to promptolovebot's comment about how they identified with Allan, InevitableGuidance76 felt as though they saw their MtF trans experience in and thus could identify with the *Barbie* movie. On a subreddit devoted to providing a community to MtF and other AMAB individuals, InevitableGuidance76 created a Reddit thread called *Just saw Barbie, and tbh, it makes for a decent trans allegory...* to discuss their thoughts and opinions and share the themes they saw emerge. InevitableGuidance76 explains in their comment how they saw Stereotypical Barbie transition from being their world's "male" to being a woman. InevitableGuidance76 starts by setting up their allegory: "Barbie, someone who lives in this fantasy world where everything is "good" for her. She is respected and admired, and has everything she could need to be happy. She lives in a female dominated world, but she doesn't feel like it's who she is." Through this, InevitableGuidance76 creates an analogy in which Stereotypical Barbie has experiences similar to someone who is MtF. Notably, this includes living in a world that seemingly supplied them with everything they needed to be happy and opportunistic, but they felt it just *wasn't them*, it wasn't Stereotypical Barbie. It wasn't what InevitableGuidance76 wanted just as it wasn't what Stereotypical Barbie wanted.

InevitableGuidance76 continues, explaining how Stereotypical Barbie was having feelings and thoughts about being "different" from the other Barbies and thus needed to "transition" into the Real World to solve the issue of having these feelings. As InevitableGuidance76 states, "However, thoughts get in her head that start to change things.

Even her normal mannerisms have started to change. She's afraid of what those thoughts could mean, and seeks out help from others to get rid of them." InevitableGuidance76 dives deeper into what they thought Barbie's experiences meant and how—for them—the film tells the story of what it means to transition into womanhood, including the emotions and changes that occur during this process. Thus, Stereotypical Barbie "transitions" to the real world where she's out in public for the first time and experiences a new world of emotions. InevitableGuidance76 furthers their analogy, relating Stereotypical Barbie's experiences of womanhood and the differences of gender privilege her character experiences to experiences being MtF. For instance, they expand on how Stereotypical Barbie experiences a role reversal in the real world. Stereotypical Barbie gets ogled and cat-called in public, and is shocked at the treatment she gets. It's completely different from the respect she got in BarbieLand. In a full role reversal, she loses the gender-based privilege she had and now has to deal with harassment and degradation. InevitableGuidance76 continues the MtF analogy, describing the objectifying experiences Stereotypical Barbie has as similar to someone who is MtF—the extreme change of experience when one leaves a world of male privilege to live on the other side.

InevitableGuidance76 goes deeper into their analogy of MtF experiences within Stereotypical Barbie's journey. While the Reddit user talks about MtF experiences broadly, they seem rooted in their own experiences being MtF based on discussion of their personal experiences. In the same post, InevitableGuidance76 expands on Stereotypical Barbie's new experiences while in the RealWorld, stating that "She starts being able to feel emotions. Tears are a first for her, and it opens a whole world of emotions to her. And the emotions she feels can sometimes really scare her." This Reddit user is able to deepen the allegory they're creating while also identifying with the character's experiences. InevitableGuidance76 does this by

detailing how many MtF experiences involve being able to feel their emotions again.

InevitableGuidance76 states that “Primarily crying, which both the movie and people’s testimonies say feel good to be able to do finally.” At the end of the film, Stereotypical Barbie is left with a choice, which InevitableGuidance76 mirrors in their trans allegory.

InevitableGuidance76 describes how “She’s back in a now changed BarbieLand and can be anything she wants. But despite having all the opportunities in the world, she feels like she doesn’t have a place in it, and decides to live in reality.” Many MtF experience that the life they lived had many opportunities open for them, but it’s not a world they felt they belonged in. Stereotypical Barbie did not feel as though she belonged in BarbieLand, and while she was scared to transition, she wanted it more than anything. Stereotypical Barbie wanted to be a real woman.



Figure Six: Rhea Pearlman’s Handler and Margot Robbie’s Stereotypical Barbie (2023, Photograph Courtesy of Los Angeles Times)

At the end of the film, Handler's character (the creator of Barbie) has a conversation with Stereotypical Barbie about turning into a woman and getting the chance to live the life she wanted. Stereotypical Barbie asks if there are prerequisites or a checklist to check off that makes you a woman. Handler smiles and says no, that she just needs to feel, referring to her inner emotions and experiences, and make the choice for herself. Stereotypical Barbie takes the dive to live in reality as a woman, "completing" her transition.

InevitableGuidance76 resists the heteronormative binary of the film and expands it into being a film world for not just queer people, but trans people, too. There are moments described in their Reddit post about *Barbie* that exemplify how the film's meaning can change through the use of an oppositional gaze: for example, as they resist the binary themes within the film. Stereotypical Barbie is not explicitly trans within the film, but that didn't stop InevitableGuidance76 from sharing that they believe the film is coded insofar as Stereotypical Barbie is having MtF experiences. Therefore, InevitableGuidance76 identifies with the movie and shares their interpretation with others on Reddit. By connecting to the world of Barbie and the story built within the film, InevitableGuidance76 resonates with it and takes away the message that one's gender can be understood through experiences rather than the confirmation of others and surgery. Stereotypical Barbie never has a surgical transition into being a "real" woman, but simply decides to be one. She is never told that she is in the "wrong body" or not woman enough, she is simply understood to be the ideal woman.

InevitableGuidance76 wasn't the only audience member who resonated with Barbie's experiences of womanhood. Queen_Illy posted a comment on a thread called *So um... the Barbie movie hit home (spoilers, don't read unless you've seen)* discussing the *Barbie* film on the subreddit for MtF or AMAB identities, stating "when she said she was at the gyno, I started

sobbing. I just had bottom surgery 6 weeks ago, so i really felt that hit home. I also felt like barbie in a beautiful way!” Like InevitableGuidance76, Queen_Illy felt as though they could identify with the experiences Stereotypical Barbie was having. What they saw as similar experiences allowed this Reddit user to feel an emotional connection to both the film and character. Queen_Illy was able to wink back at the film and queer a moment that was not created to be representative of a trans experience. Because the movie imitated a real-life experience that many women have in this scene, this Reddit user was inspired to share their own experiences and develop an understanding of how affirming it can be to go to the gynecologist. Sharing about this experience also allowed this user to wink back and queer an aspect of the film that wasn’t meant to be a queer moment. Queen_Illy describes how they felt like a beautiful woman--just like Barbie,--by having this common experience. At the same time, Queen_Illy reimagined this as an affirming moment for their gender identity.

Similar to how InevitableGuidance76 felt emotional about the ending of the movie, when Stereotypical Barbie chooses to become a woman, Illidan-the-Assassin states

That ending hit so hard. I was in theatre with my best friend (a trans man) and I was like "congrats for bottom surgery!" and he was like "!!!!!!" and we were both talking about the queer themes everywhere. From a trans masc perspective, he identified with Ken, because the super fem barbieland didn't really give him a place so as soon as he discovered the outside world he immediately leaped into the first thing that gave him a strong sense of identity, but never really *felt* the patriarchy.

Illidan-the-Assassin explains how they watched the film with a friend, and together they recognized a lot of queer themes in the movie. Not only that, but they made multiple connections between the film and their own experiences. They connected their personal life to aspects of Ken’s identity in *Barbie*. For example, their comment focuses on identifying with Ken’s search for purpose and identity, and their eagerness for community and acceptance. Illidan-the-Assassin

further this by stating how their friend felt similarly due to their gender identity journey. Together, the two wink back at the film through their queer interpretation, relating Ken's experiences to their own.

Another Reddit user described how the film has many of trans themes. shadowmonkey1911 posted on the Reddit thread *So um... the Barbie movie hit home (spoilers, don't read unless you've seen)*, stating "[W]hen Barbie is getting catcalled and she tells them 'I don't have a vagina' and the catcaller says 'That's okay' and still harasses her that's basically the movie subtly acknowledging that trans women experience misogyny." shadowmonkey1911 shares how they interpreted a scene that was tackling objectification of the female body was simultaneously a scene acknowledging the objectification and unfair treatment of trans bodies. This scene also relies heavily on imitation in multiple layers. The first layer is that—because Stereotypical Barbie is hot and appears as a woman—others automatically see her as a woman, despite her not having genitalia (because she is a doll). The second layer is mocking catcallers who objectify bodies by only caring about superficial looks. The third is the recognition, and in some ways the wink, that happens for audience members who are exposed to the mirroring of objectification that does not occur to just cisheteronormative women, but all women. Through their oppositional gaze and sense of identification, these Reddit users winked back, redefine the imitation of society in *Barbie*, and create a new meaning from it.

Barbie was a film designed to explore one's imagination, which encouraged some viewers to relate it to their trans identity and the experiences of transitioning through reinterpreting scenes to read as such. There are a plethora of moments that users redefined as being key moments that aligned with their personal experiences. For instance, early in the film when Stereotypical Barbie goes to the Real World, she takes a moment to herself on a public

bench to focus on figuring out which human is connected to her. Seeing the memories of the person connected to her, Stereotypical Barbie is moved to tears. She then turns to see an elderly woman sitting next to her and tells the woman how beautiful she is. Stereotypical Barbie is experiencing many “human” emotions that she never experienced in BarbieLand, and even cries for the first time. Reddit user RyeMonRoe, who posts often about their experiences transitioning from MtF, shared about this scene on Reddit, stating: “the bench scene too! Barbie learning how to cry. How amazingly bitter sweet it can feel as she notices all the beauty around her for the first time. It felt so relatable to when I first started hormones and started living for what felt like the first time. Such a wonderful movie!” As explained above, the scene was meant to show emotions Stereotypical Barbie is experiencing for the first time, but RyeMonRoe connected their own experiences to the character and scene, feeling as though hormone therapy allowed them to identify with and relate to what Stereotypical Barbie was going through. Thus, they winked back and reinvented the scene to mirror trans experiences.

A Queer World, for Me

Throughout the film, Billie Eilish’s song “What Was I Made For” can be heard in many emotional scenes. Thus, audiences connect this song with strong emotions they may experience when relating with the characters and the issues characters face. The song has a slow and melancholy melody, detailing experiences and feelings that Stereotypical Barbie has in the film. Yet, the words resonate with double meaning. The lyrics “Takin' a drive, I was an ideal. Looked so alive, turns out I'm not real,” may simply be about how Stereotypical Barbie realizes that she is a plastic doll, yet this also echoes an experience of feeling as though one is not truly living. Eilish’s song, as the title suggests, highlights Stereotypical Barbie questioning herself and why she

exists, wondering why she was made and what her purpose is. Eilish's lyrics, at least in part, helps to explain what moved me, and possibly others, to connect to *Barbie*.

Many others, as expressed through Reddit comments, felt like the song could be repurposed to mean something unique to the listener. The song was likely meant to be about more than just Stereotypical Barbie wondering if they were born in the wrong body. Meanwhile, the song left some audience members wondering why they were born in a body that didn't feel right for them. Trans bodies are constantly told what is and isn't right about their body, and this treatment traps trans bodies with a sense of having to perform a false expression of identity, one that is put onto us by others. Though Eilish's song "What Was I Made For" was likely not intended to be a transcoded song, it was interpreted as such by many.

The movie also wasn't designed to represent my gender identity and experience, but it still did; I made it do so. Many other Reddit users did the same thing, as they reimagined the film so that it offered them a sense of representation and visibility. Just like the Reddit users quoted above, other users explained how the movie was a unique experience that allowed queer viewers to connect to somewhat vague messages and rework these to be specific to their own lived experiences. These users were world-building as they reinterpreted scenes into what they felt the scene should be (just as I did while playing with my Barbies and toys as a child). They watched and understood that while the characters in *Barbie* might seem very different from themselves, they could still identify and form relationships with the characters. They could still have a meaningful takeaway from the characters and the movie. These viewers could see, on some level, the imitation of reality the film provided and wink back with their own performances of imitation. They could identify with the moments and messages of the film on their own terms.

Fanfiction Two: Military Barbie and Me



Figure Seven: Teresa Ballerina Barbie 1986 edition (2024, Photograph Courtesy of Kabouterba)



Figure Eight: JROTC Photo of D Durk (Mooresville, NC, 2015, Photograph Courtesy of Mooresville High School)



Figure Nine: Teresa Ballerina Barbie 1986 edition (2024, Photograph Courtesy of Vega's Decor)

“How’s the anti-pink thing going for ya?” I smiled; Military Barbie turned around. Uniform and all. I can still remember my distaste for it, wishing they had just given me a masculine fitting uniform instead. “Please spare me from the time travel jokes – there’s no need to bring Doctor Who into this. Let’s just talk.”

“Well,” She looked me up and down, focusing on my chest, or rather lack thereof, and then back onto my eyes. “I take it the anti-pink thing is still going strong.”

“Oh no, I still wear pink. I wear whatever I want. Even form fitting clothes now.” I gestured to my body as a whole and then pointed directly to my chest. “Especially after getting these removed”

Military Barbie smiled. It's murky for her at this age, she wanted our breast gone for so many different reasons. She was bullied for having boobs like I did and accused of stuffing her bra, boys would force hugs on her, she was overweight for so many years and thought the boobs made it worse — but she knew deep down it was because they didn't belong to her. You don't just look up men's cosplay and binding gear for nothing. You don't just create an alternate male you in your head to escape as for nothing.

“Did you cut your hair at the same time?”

“A few months before it happened. I didn't know the surgery would get approved like it did. I only got it a few months ago.”

“How did it feel?”

“It felt like I was finally moving in the direction of finding the right body for me.”

“Mom knows? Dad too?”

“Yeah. It took some time. They don't always get it either, but they love us no matter what.” I touched my necklace from our mom. “Can I ask you something though?” She nodded. There was so much to ask this version of me, so much to dive into. Do I ask about the alternate world in her head where “Dani” is who I wish I could be with short hair and a genital-less body? No. It would be too much, and it wouldn't really resolve anything. “Do you miss playing with Barbies?”

“I don't know. It's weird to think that I did when I wanted to play with my- our brother's toys. I think I just miss being that happy all the time. I was so unaware of it all. I miss playing with dolls and watching movies like that and life being so...”

“Simple.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “What about you? Do you miss it?”

“Yeah, I do. I miss all of it. I miss mom brushing my hair and getting me ready. I miss going to the playroom and watching TV as I got my dolls dressed and ready to play while creating their story arcs. I miss – I think I just miss being a kid and am mourning the fact that I’m growing up.”

She touched her hair, remembering for herself.

“Wanna hear something else I learned recently?”

“What?”

“That Ballerina Barbie we loved so much and said was us? Well, it turns out the dolls name was actually Teresa. She is a vintage Barbie Ballerina doll from 1986. She wasn’t even named Barbie.”

“Barbies aren’t all Barbie?”

“Nope. You’ll find that out in a few years though. Hug our parents for me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You’ll be okay. We’re okay.”

Chapter Two: Two Sides of the Same Memory

When I was younger, my mother would always be the one to get me ready for school. Almost always the same routine of her coming in to wake me up and pick out my clothes while I brushed my teeth. My dad was colorblind and couldn't pick out an outfit, or so he would say, but that didn't bother my mother. She cherished picking out my clothes and dressing me up, doing my hair, and pretending to put blush or other makeup on me. She acted as my introduction to what it meant to be a woman and what women do. I was in middle school when my mother confessed to me that she only really knew three hairstyles and would have to alternate through them because her mom didn't teach her anything else. She didn't really know how to dress me and would ask her sister how she dressed her daughters to figure out something similar for me. Yet, as a child, I didn't know this. I just thought my mom had it all figured out and knew everything.

My mother was my first exposure to womanhood. My understanding of how to perform womanhood came from her. It was years later that I learned my mother was repeating the performance she was nurtured to know. I always found these maternal moments comforting, this shared performance between us was unique. My love for her and her care for me made me want to be her. These experiences were my introduction to love and nurture, and thus I replicated them with my dolls. I think that was why my favorite part of playing with my dolls. I loved the part in which I got to set everything up and pick out outfits for my dolls, so much so that I would spend my entire playtime doing just that. It acted as a sense of familiarity that I had within my relationship to my mother.

Whenever I think back to that time, I am filled with feelings of longing and wishing to experience it again--the comfort and joy within my relationship with my mother, to have my

mother do my hair and pick out my clothes and be shielded from the world and live under the guise of that performance. If only to just go back in time before I knew the complexities of exploring my queer identity, to just pick up my dolls and play games like I did as a child, with no thoughts of what it meant to be older and have a true responsibility to myself and others. I was not aware of the gendered performance I was doing, nor was I aware of how I would feel about the fact that I was performing gender this way when I grew up. For a long time, I had mixed feelings about the duality of my performance as a child, performing girlhood but wondering what it would be like if I didn't. I would play with my dolls knowing I should but wonder what would happen if one day I chose not to and just did what I wanted. I cannot help but to reminisce about my childhood and how easy things were before I recognized the pressure I put on myself. Yet, I am still filled with a longing for the past and the joy I experienced as a child, despite being aware of the hardships I also experienced as a young person in the closet.

This longing for the past and joy I once experienced are feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a specific longing or feeling for a past time when things seemed better, simpler, or more joyful. It is a pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again. Nostalgia can function as a memory of happiness and is usually associated with memories of joy. It can be a source of comfort in times of sadness or distress. This wishful yearning and feelings of nostalgia are not unique to just me, but rather a shared feeling by many people about wanting to go back to the "good old days." Reminiscing on the "good old days" is a form of nostalgia rooted in reflecting on homesickness or yearning for long-gone moments, similar to my yearning for my childhood.

There is a predisposition, caused by cognitive biases such as rosy retrospection, a form of survivorship bias, for people to view the past more favorably and the future more negatively

(Khoshghadam, Kordrostami, and Liu-Thompkins, 2018). This predisposition can take the form of looking back on the past with rose-colored glasses and only seeing the good while neglecting everything else that occurred at the time. Some people may be nostalgic for the past as they perceive it as a simpler or happier time. This could be due to the idealization of past experiences, cultural influences, or personal circumstances. However, this wistfulness and romanticization of thinking about the past allows some to ignore how the past had challenges and limitations. Encouraging a focus on creating meaningful experiences in the present and future can help individuals find fulfillment and contentment in their lives and help them recognize the issues of the past, while also finding closure and moving forward (Khoshghadam, Kordrostami, and Liu-Thompkins, 2018).

Growing up queer involved a blend of joy and pain. There were two truths existing at the same time regarding my identity. To my parents, I was a child who loved to read and play. But to myself, I knew the truth that I was a child playing out my queer fantasies of same-sex love. I was a well-behaved child. I was a child hiding in plain sight. Hiding my queer identity came at a cost for many years, feeling like I was not queer enough in the LGBTQ+ community, not girl enough for some of my friends, I wasn't faking enough for my own family. I was always needing to change myself to be what everyone else wanted me to be. I grew up feeling like I needed to look more feminine, but I wanted to communicate my identity as queer so that other queer people could recognize me. Despite all of this, there was still joy and comfort from that part of my life that caused a yearning for these specific memories. It is not that I am discarding the pain now, but rather acknowledging that two personal truths can coexist. I can yearn to go back and play with my Barbies while knowing there was a bit of agony there, too.

The coexistence of these truths led me to watch the new *Barbie* film. I still had a love for my childhood engagement with the dolls and a slight resentment of it. When I watched the *Barbie* movie in summer 2023, I was filled with feelings of nostalgia, longing for a part of my childhood that I had closed the chapter on. I felt a yearning to go back to those days of being a child and playing with my dolls so blissfully. The movie, to me, felt like a comforting hug. The film had so many layers to interpret. A major aspect of the film that truly stuck with me is how the entire story was an imagined scenario, like one I would recreate with my toys as a child. Ferrera's character Gloria imagined the entire story that served as the plot of *Barbie*. Recognizing that this movie was just imagined helped me to heal my hidden child (who would do the same thing).

BarbieLand and the Real World, which we see developed in the film, center on Gloria's recreations of the two worlds and are based on her interpretation of the worlds, as she dives into a story about identity, power dynamics, and feminism. Gloria's RealWorld is not the actual real world, it is her interpretation of the world, thus she is then building her own world heavily based on the actual real world and her social construction of it. Audience members recognized that it is based on our actual real world due to the similar features, power dynamics, and social cues. BarbieLand becomes Gloria's escape, due to her love of playing with the doll as a child and later playing Barbies with her daughter. Gloria even mentions how she kept and played with some of the Barbies her daughter wanted to get rid of because she was sad and needed a familiar comfort. From this, audiences drew a connection of Gloria creating BarbieLand as her escape and saw the intertwining of how these Barbies and story creation heal Gloria as she has feelings of nostalgia.

This chapter largely centers on my own experiences of addressing my hidden self through nostalgic healing while watching *Barbie*. There is a lot from my childhood that has caused me

pain. Having to perform as someone I wasn't day after day left me with a lot of painful memories. At present, I can perform in a way more aligned to my feelings, beliefs, and values, but that doesn't mean I don't yearn for that innocence I once had and wish I could go back to being a child, or even heal the child that needed healing. When I watched *Barbie*, I felt as though this part of me that I had hidden away for so long was seen. Hearing Billie Eilish's song *What Was I Made For* allowed me to engage with my own feelings of nostalgia and self-healing. As a child, I wondered so much about what I was made for and why I felt so confused all the time. I was raised experiencing the hardships of being a woman, yet I *wasn't* a woman and would never be one. I was denied the chance to express my gender by my community and myself. I was forced into a dual hardship of not getting to be "what I was made for" and not knowing this was the problem.

I, like many others, had thoughts about and feelings of what I term "nostalgic healing" while watching *Barbie*. Therefore, this chapter focuses on analyzing seven Reddit comments I picked based on their analysis of the film through the lens of their own experiences. These Reddit users describe various experiences of *Barbie* and felt as though they could heal while watching this film. For my analysis, I focus on a different set of seven Reddit comments all posted within six months after the film was released. I chose these specifically due to how they address—explicitly or implicitly— feelings of nostalgia in relation to their perception of the film and their personal stories.

Healing Through Nostalgia

In 1688, Johannes Hofer coined the term "nostalgia," combining the Greek *nosos*, meaning to return home; and *algos*, for suffering or grief, pain or longing (Anspach, 1688, 381).

It is a desire to return to your past and missing a part of your life. By understanding how this term came to be, we understand its origin and meaning more. The term “nostalgia” reflects one’s feelings and desire of return, home, affective relations, and the body. Additionally, Battaglia (1995) argues that nostalgia is performed by people involving themselves in a particular act that engages them with a sense of familiarity that explores these feelings of longing. For instance, it can occur when looking at old photos or watching a show you watched as a child, something that reminds you of “home.”

Further, Battaglia’s (1995) notion of “embodied nostalgia” is a nostalgia that is created by and for corporeal bodies that are working to develop effective systems and practices for understanding and feeling at home within a familiar community. Thus, these feelings of longing make us want to return to a community that feels familiar and connects to the past. Battaglia (1995) writes

Nostalgia may be in fact a vehicle of knowledge, rather than only a yearning for something lost. It may be practiced in diverse ways, where the issues for users become, on the one hand, the attachment of appropriate feelings toward their own histories, products, and capabilities, and on the other hand, their detachment from – and active resistance to – disempowering conditions of postcolonial life. (77; emphasis as in original)

Battaglia (1995) theorizes a tense notion of nostalgia, stressing the importance of retaining its affective attachments and its productive ties to home, homeland, and community. The tension that is a result of experiencing nostalgia creates a desire to reproduce the familiarity that we miss. This desire is more than just missing a place we called home, but it is also a wanting to go back to the past and give into complex feelings of wanting to be in a different time. Home is more than just a place we crave; it can be expanded to have additional associations. Terry (2008), for instance, uses “home” as a verb to describe the performative process where one makes or

constructs a sense of home, with “home” not always having to be a physical place. This sense of home can be reuniting with family, friends, going to a favorite spot, reading or watching an old series, all these things that we associate with the past. This longing for our “home” is one of many things that can create feelings of nostalgia.

It is more than just a “home” that creates a longing, but rather the people that linger in our memories that we develop relationships with. “Performance genealogy” centers on bodily and discursive transmission of memories across time and space (Roach 26). With this in mind, Huell (2020) adapts “performance genealogy” to relate it to her understanding and engagement with nostalgia. Genealogy in general refers to the study of one’s descent or ancestry. Genealogy, as Huell uses it, is also connected to historiography, the study of how histories are socially constructed, focusing on the creation of familiarity and community. While I may not be studying ancestry like Huell, the theory she uses is applicable to my research. I focus on the role of familiarity in relation to performances through Reddit users' commentary. Recognizing and experiencing familiarity is a cognitive phenomenon that makes us more likely to favor familiar things over unfamiliar things. Experiencing familiarity enables us to make connections. In the case of *Barbie*, this is by becoming familiar with the embodied film characters and plot while developing a bond/relationship with these that might also be productively studied. With this in mind, I explore the “familiar” and “relatable” experiences and performances within the queer community that have been expressed on Reddit threads.

Roach (1996) provides three themes for the performance genealogist to consider: kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission. Kinesthetic imagination is a “faculty of memory,” which serves as “impetus and method for the restoration of behavior.” (Roach, 1996, 27). Roach (1996) uses the term “vortices of behavior” to identify

technologically or architecturally produced sites that induce particular types of performance. These vortices of behavior act as a cultural understanding that comes from performance and functions of everyday life. Vortices of behavior “canalize specified needs, desires, and habits in order to reproduce them” (Roach, 1996, 28). Displaced transmission is the process by which cultural and social performances are passed on and refunctioned in new contexts through surrogation and/or the repetition of alternative types of performances. According to Roach, these alternates are always doomed; they “either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually [exceed] them, creating a surplus” (2). Surrogation always fails; it is not something that can ever be a perfect replica. It is always just an attempt at filling a hole. Roach (1996) continues, stating

The three-sided relationship of memory, performance, and substitution becomes most acutely visible in mortuary ritual.... In any funeral, the body of the deceased performs the limits of the community called into being by the need to mark its passing. United around a corpse... the members of the community may reflect on its symbolic embodiment of loss and renewal (14)

Gratch (2013) adapts Roach’s surrogation theory and expands it to a digital platform. Explaining that while there is no physical corpse, but rather an online network that is uniting instead, its users are still connecting and contributing to a digital archive of their own (Gratch, 2013). Through surrogation, Reddit users are also filling the personal gaps that they have by using *Barbie*-related personal narratives and sharing these with other users on the platform. Displaced transmission occurs as these Reddit users recall their memories of gendered performances and see them reflected and repeated in *Barbie*, which reminds them of their own (generally false) childhood or youth gender performances. There is no way to recreate their past selves and experiences, as we all change over time, but these users imagined and connected with

what they remember of their younger selves through this process all the same. By repeating and refunctioning their old performance, they can revisit old memories in a new context.

Roach argues that vortices of behavior are crafted by technological invention and social organization (Roach, 1996, 28). These vortices of behavior occur when the space compels you to act in a certain way, based on what it was meant for and the way it is constructed. Reddit was founded as a social news website where its users could submit content, such as links and text posts, which are then upvoted or downvoted by the community. It allows for users to post thoughts or ask questions and then allow other users to respond. Reddit then can compel a certain type of performance for its users that allows for disclosure as users expressed their thoughts and feelings. Kinesthetic imagination, that place where memory and imagination meet and unite in bodily action, is deployed by the site and the user to activate the idea and ideal of home. Further, when constructed in the singular, home activates the “truth of ... fantasy, or of daydreams,” and how its “material consequences” play out in performance (Roach, 1996, 27). When thinking of the kinesthetic here, imagination, I will mainly focus on visual imagination with occasional mentions of (in)ability to imagine hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching things. Finally, in addition to simply having visual imagination, kinesthetic senses focus on how the body feels as you move. An example of this would be if I try to imagine jumping down some stairs. I can't see or hear it necessarily, but I can imagine the feeling of the muscles in my legs pushing off and then absorbing the landing.

In order to explore and experience critical nostalgia, one must reconnect an aspect of their past to the connection they're experiencing at present, including what created feelings of nostalgia. When reconnecting with one's hidden self, there is an exchange between one's past self and their present self as they compare aspects of their everyday performances. Roach (1996)

explains that surrogation is how communities preserve and practice memory. Huell (2020) later expands this, explaining that surrogation occurs when there has been a rupture in the social fabric and alternatives are sought and put into place in order to foster the illusion of historical continuity. Therefore, the job of critical nostalgia is to recognize how this hidden self came to be and enact restorative methods that acknowledge the emotions that come from this experience. These methods can be different for everyone but might, for example, take the form of comparing one's childhood struggles with the imagery and storylines they see in media today that mimics and helps explain their hidden self.

Critical nostalgia asks that we pay attention to feelings of nostalgia and inquire about their source. It asks us to attend to our desire to make a wound feel better, while also looking at the affective registers of returning to the past and creating a home. Affective registers are what trigger these recurring feelings and the longing to return to a different time. Reddit users have done this when recalling their childhood after experiencing triggers that remind them of it while watching *Barbie*. Huell (2020) explains that critical nostalgia can be thought of as an extension of genealogies of performance, as there is a need to investigate the origin of these memories that enable us to continuously revisit and refunction them as interacting tools for activating histories. Within the Reddit space, users revisited their old memories with a new lens created by *Barbie* and applied it to their old memories. Both critical nostalgia and critical genealogy possess a historical consciousness and an attitude toward the past, a past focused on the familiarity they experience and wish to connect with. Critical nostalgia and critical genealogy create ways to explore how and why Reddit users are having specific childhood memories resurface while watching *Barbie*. These notions allow us to see past the connection users had to the film but

focus on the why users are sharing on these online platforms today, what this has to do with *Barbie*, and what it may mean for them.

Nostalgia typically gets dismissed as being obsessed with an “idealized past” or a state of being “stuck,” usually thought of one seeing the past through rose-colored glasses (Spitzer 91; Huyssen 7). However, Boym (2002) disagrees with this singular thought of what nostalgia is and differentiates it by explaining that nostalgia has two forms: restorative and reflective. According to Boym (2002), restorative nostalgia insists on the rebuilding of a lost “true” past, while reflective nostalgia contemplates “longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). With this in mind, critical nostalgia is modeled after a form of reflective nostalgia as it does not propose a new set of habitual memories, but instead imagines the complexity of forgotten memories and wonders about the desires that drive remembering them (Boym, 2002, 49). Boym (2002) further explains that “nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress” (10). Nostalgia is able to function as a way of moving forward from past experiences while also reflecting on the past. Meanwhile, Huyssen (2006) argues that “nostalgia counteracts, even undermines linear notions of progress” (7), and that holding onto the past only prevents growth. Huyssen (2006) observes a contemporary obsession with nostalgia triggered by the unstable present and describes nostalgia as an engagement with “the irreversibility of time: something in the past is no longer accessible” (7). Huell (2020) responds to this, explaining that critical nostalgia is a method of decentering the present while simultaneously *refusing* to use the past as a tool for stabilizing the present in an increasingly unstable world. In other words, we are not using the past as an escape from the present, but rather nostalgic experiences place us in a liminal space that is not exactly the present, nor is it believing the present is perfect, but at the same time is also not simply framing the past as a better option.

Boym (2002) affirms that nostalgia is heavily associated with feelings of loss, but it is also “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiv). It is the sense of looking fondly at the past through rose-colored glasses, ignoring all of the bad things and just focusing on the good. For Castiglia and Reed (2011), nostalgia occurs as a way “to awaken to one’s responsibility to the past is not, then, an imperative to recreate the past exactly and transparently *as it was* but rather an invitation to ethical imagination” (154). Ethical imagination here works as a desire and fantasy that are likely to infiltrate histories and allow imagination to do some diversifying work to recreate and reimagine the past. Nostalgia can function as romanticizing the past and picturing oneself within it, but without most of the harsh reality that came with the past--simply fixated on the joy of our experiences and memories. Yet, Castiglia and Reed argue that envisioning the past always coincides with ethical imagination as a romanticization can occur when ethics are ignored. de Szegheo Lang (2015) argues similarly that nostalgia seeks more than the way things actually were, and that critical nostalgia involves imagining forgotten aspects of the past that are largely inaccessible. Nostalgia, as Boym explains, is a desire to live in a world with opportunities that the present does not offer or to go back and live within a memory that has already long passed.

Davies (2011) writes that “a backwards look can be a critical gesture gleaning what it is of value to the here and now and beyond” (17). Thus, looking back can help us to grow and move forward and carry on with us memories and mementos of ourselves. To this, de Szegheo Lang (2015) states that while the present creates the conditions for certain LGBTQIA+ pasts to seem desirable, a look at what is desired can also indicate “what is of value to the here” (244). With this in mind, a critical nostalgia might make visible ways of living in the present that do not restrict us to only focusing on the negatives of the past. Just as Boym (2002) points out with the

concepts of restorative and the reflective nostalgia, we can learn and relish within two truths at the same time. Nostalgia can focus on the joy and the misery of the past simultaneously. Value can be found within the memories that come from this and be carried forward as one heals through a recognition of these two disparate truths. I grew up miserable that I couldn't be who I wanted to be and had to perform as someone else, for example, but I still had joy and experienced happy memories that I carry with me. I can heal old wounds by recognizing that it wasn't all bad, but that doesn't make my remembered misery less valid.

Nostalgia has usually been viewed as being static and unidirectional in its desire for an idealized past; it can be viewed as someone resisting change and forward movement. Since nostalgia is always grounded in the present, however, nostalgic longing creates a double vision where the present is interpreted through the past. Nostalgia operates as a lens. Thus, rejections of a nostalgic perspective do not acknowledge the importance of this temporal split. Highlighting the dual nature of the phenomenon, Boym's "reflective nostalgia" works as a lens that does not seek to rebuild a mythical past but engages in a "meditation on history and passage of time." Nostalgia can enable a look at a painful past which allows reflection and healing.

For some, engaging in nostalgia can come from interacting with various forms of media that operate as a way of viewing the past and present. Castiglia and Reed (2011) stress the importance of mass media in creating a sense of shared history, especially for LGBTQIA+ people who are not usually born into families or communities that can transmit cultural memories regarding sexually non-normative pasts in person (115). I, like many queer people, had to find a community for myself. For LGBTQIA+ people who must find their own community, mass media becomes an important space of self-discovery and identity negotiation, a place for people to share and express a need for a community (Hansson, 2013). Yet within mass media,

there is a lack of queer representation that leaves queer people having to create their own representation and a need to form their own communities. Platforms like Reddit give opportunities for queer people to interact in a virtual space and form such communities. This need of having to create it for oneself draws users to Reddit and creates online queer communities where they can share their experiences with others. Keeping this in mind, I explore the reflective nostalgia at work in the online queer community of Reddit and its various subreddits, where users talked about their personal experiences with others about *Barbie*.

Howard (2012) specifies that a necessary condition for nostalgic memories and feelings is that they can occur when someone is unaware of what can trigger these specific feelings and bring on a sense of nostalgia. *Barbie's* release inspired some audience members to share their feelings on Reddit, along with their memories of childhood and how these factors interlock with who they are today. *Barbie*, to myself and others (per reddit threads on the film), created a sense of nostalgia for some audience members who cherished or were familiar with the Barbie franchise growing up. Many trans binary and trans nonbinary audience members commented on Reddit that they could identify with the messages and plot of the film, that they felt *Barbie* aligned with their personal experiences. Through sharing, these users are able to connect to each other and act as worldbuilders themselves. For example, there is a moment when Stereotypical Barbie and company are introduced to the outcast Barbie. In this moment, there is recognition of the divide created and the pain it has caused. This moment created a space for some queer audience members to feel as though they received a moment of recognition for being ostracized in the exact same way for their non cisheteronormative identity and engaged with nostalgic healing from now being able to have a community. Many queer audience members expressed an experience of nostalgic healing, created by seeing such a direct moment of acknowledgement

and healing within the film which also directly speaks to their experiences and feelings. In the following sections, I reflect further on reddit comments in which audience members discuss how their experiences with *Barbie* (2023) inspired nostalgic healing.

Healing The Hidden Self

I asked myself in my research how one could reconcile with their hidden selves in online communities. To really understand this, I explored Battaglia's (1995) concept of practical nostalgia, which reads nostalgia as constituted equally by performances of past and home. Such performances of nostalgia create a chance for reflection on the past and origin (Boym, 2002). In these comments from various users, I saw users reflect on their longing for the past and the differences between their present. *Barbie* allowed these users to engage with aspects of their gender and identity that they missed or saw differently. While there are many layers to critical nostalgia in practice, I will focus largely on how nostalgia is connected to the construction and healing of one's hidden self. Therefore, I ask myself as I analyze relevant Reddit comments: How are the Reddit users expressing their history? How do they feel connected to their history? How do they feel *Barbie* allows them to connect to their history? How do *we* reconcile with our hidden self, heal, and move forward from painful past experiences? By exploring these questions, I highlight how important the feelings and experiences shared online are.

In this analysis, I focus on the feelings that viewers had from watching *Barbie* and how various audience members connected with other viewers on Reddit to share their experiences. Audience members watched the *Barbie* film for lots of different reasons. I, like some, watched it as an ode to my childhood self who played with Barbie dolls and enveloped myself within the world of the doll. When I watched the film, I didn't know that the child that I had hidden away would have this chance to feel seen and heard. I wasn't alone in this feeling as many Reddit users

expressed similar thoughts. Goldstein (2023) explains that this hidden aspect is characterized by emotions of glee, wonder, and exasperation. These characteristics are attributable to their experiences before coming out or recognizing their gender which lead to this aspect of needing to hide a part of your internal self and experiences.

Barbie (2023) allowed some audience members to interact with their “hidden self” due to the resurfacing of past emotional trauma that members felt they could heal while acknowledging the feelings through the film. *Barbie* allowed viewers to confront feelings of turmoil about not getting to discuss and acknowledge an important aspect of themselves in their youth, and the complications that can come from having to hide who you are. In these online spaces, users often shared their own interpretations of cisheteronormative media and their experiences. In this chapter, I focus on subreddit communities and how users treated the space like a safe place, a home, and a community where they could openly share their personal thoughts. In online Reddit communities, some users felt as though their experiences with *Barbie* (2023) were “familiar” and “relatable” to what others might have experienced. Thus, an online queer community developed around sharing about these similar feelings, along with past and present performances of self.

As explained above, in terms of nostalgia, ideas of home and community are a large part of what creates a feeling of longing. What makes up a home or a community can vary from person to person. Something I saw the most within my research was how people would relate aspects of the film to something they experienced themselves and share it with others online, which in turn created conversations. There is a lot that can be assumed by online communities, but everyone typically shares anonymously within subreddit communities. Users craft their own usernames and share to people that they don’t know in their physical life, yet this online space functions as a home where a user can feel as though they can share intimate details.

Reddit user Wonderingimp, for example, posted on a subreddit thread called *Barbie made me cry. I figured out why*, “I (Heterosexual 25-year-old male) saw Barbie with a friend of mine. In the Billie Eilish ending sequence, I ended up shedding a tear or 2, and originally I thought it was because the Billie song was just really good and the scene was emotional.” Wonderingimp felt comfortable enough within this subreddit community that they could share their feelings about the film, knowing that others would respond and relate to them. Even if they weren’t sure of others’ responses to what Wonderingimp might say, they knew they could still talk about being emotional. Wonderingimp continued their post explaining that, “I wasn’t satisfied with this answer, especially because the day after I was stricken with this gut wrenching nostalgia that I, a 25 year old man who had never played with Barbie, could not figure out.” Here, Wonderingimp is able to reflect on an experience of nostalgia they had while watching the film, despite never actually playing with the dolls. Wonderingimp expresses a longing for a community in which they didn’t grow up in. They didn’t grow up experiencing girlhood, yet they had a longing for this community that they saw before them in the film despite not actually ever playing with the dolls or necessarily relating to the feminine community.

They further this point, saying “Then it hit me. Women in that movie treat each other with this sort of 'female camaraderie' that I have rarely seen showcased in film. The kind that you find in the ladies room at a bar (or so I've heard). I always thought it was jealousy that made me feel a little melancholy about this phenomenon (the men’s room is a distinctly less positive experience), but then it hit me. I *have* experienced this before, and I lost it.” Wonderingimp recognizes their longing for a community they romanticized. Wonderingimp is experiencing a nostalgic feeling as they watch the film and witness this community that is supporting and celebrating womanhood. As Boym explains, nostalgia consists of multiple different emotions. Wonderingimp is looking at

an experience they never had and longing for it, because they wished they would have had a community like it. Wonderingimp finishes their post by sharing

Women, generally speaking, treat little boys as kindly as they treat other women. An 8 year old could probably full tilt sprint at any woman on the street and after a confused moment would probably be embraced as if it were her own child. For obvious reasons, this is lost into adulthood, and I think that's why I felt that pang of nostalgia. I never realized how painful the loss of this connection was until I watched Barbie and realized how nice it actually used to be. I kind of wish other men could be made aware of this going into the film, maybe they'd be more open to its message.

Watching this film reminded them of a maternal love that they had longed for, to be an open and loving community. Of course, Wonderingimp shared an idealized image that they had of the female community and witnessed on the outside looking in. They shared their thoughts, what they were seeing through their rose-colored glasses, and why they had longed to be a child again. *Barbie* allowed this user to engage with a reflective nostalgia and wonder what life would be like if they could go back.

Wonderingimp was not alone in this thought, as user spookymochi agreed with them and responded to what they shared. spookymochi posted in response, “I don’t remember who, but I saw someone on TikTok talking about about something similar and how they relate to Allan. This is because he’s comfortable with the Barbie’s and the Barbie’s never have a problem accepting him.” spookymochi furthers the thread, relating something they saw on a different app experienced by a different audience member than themselves, and relates the experience to what Wonderingimp has just explained they felt. “They also talked about how women get to be “girls’ girls” and are always more likely to express kindness to others for being different, whereas they felt shunned by other men growing up. So instead of finding camaraderie in friendship from men; they found it in friendships with women.” Despite the two users having different experiences,

they identified with the shared phenomenon of acceptance within the virtual community.

spookymochi identifies with how Wonderingimp feels and relates to the experience shared about nostalgic longing and healing that watching the film displayed.

Through this connection and understanding, both users can reflect on a shared understanding of gender on Reddit. spookymochi goes on to state “I’m a woman, but I thought about this quite a bit in the movie with regard to toxic masculinity and male friendships. Men aren’t allowed to express emotion as freely or show softness.” While they do not share the same gender identity as Wonderingimp, that doesn’t limit their ability to try to understand how Wonderingimp feels and relate their own interpretation of the film to what they share. Continuing, spookymochi says “So relationship dynamics in friendships have always been different when it comes to friendships among men...and I should mention that on the flip side (and I think Ken is guilty of this); it has always been impossible for me to have male friends unless they are queer.” Just as spookymochi was able to relate to Wonderingimp’s experiences, they then shared their own and relate to this lack of freedom for cisheteronormative men to express their emotions. Building onto Huell’s point about the importance of building community and familiarity within nostalgic experiences, the performance of writing these Reddit comments and sharing within the community created on this platform transforms the space. The threads are a home to discuss being familiar with others, or even having an online family in which you can share aspects of your identity and emotions you have hidden from others. Indeed, the responses that developed around Wonderingimp’s involved many people who came to support and share similar feelings.

Just like spookymochi, Meliecho experienced nostalgic healing by trying to understand Wonderingimp’s shared sentiments, and also expressed their own and yearning for something not

experienced. Meliecho responded to their thread, stating “I’m crying for you. - No, really. I mean it. No sarcasm, no patronising, no infantilism, just honesty.” Meliecho was able to empathize with the experience Wonderingimp had from watching the film. Meliecho continues, saying “You experienced something wholesome and wonderful that made you feel good - a kind of love, protection, and acceptance that you lost when you grew up. It makes sense that you - that any human - would want to feel that kind of (I’ll go ahead and say it again) love that came with no strings attached.” In this statement, Meliecho was able to reflect on the nostalgic healing Wonderingimp mentioned. Meliecho understands the emotion, the reflective nostalgia, that Wonderingimp is expressing based on their experience watching *Barbie*. Meliecho furthers their point by expanding on the nostalgic healing Wonderingimp expressed, “What you saw between the lines on the screen let you - your soul - remember that feeling. You remembered it, you mourned the loss of it, and you want it back. It makes perfect psychological sense. And it is nothing anyone - man or woman - should be ashamed of.” Meliecho was able to connect with how Wonderingimp expressed their feelings about healing their hidden self to mourning for a loss of community from their childhood memories. By doing so, they connect within the online community, this space of familiarity, about their shared emotional experiences from the film and forge a bond through reflecting on their own personal experiences.

Wonderingimp was able to explore reflective nostalgia, but they were also able to reflect on their own experiences that allowed them to heal their hidden self. They could acknowledge their complicated feelings about their gender performance and identity. Emotions play a key role in a viewers' connections to a film and why they might experience nostalgia. Reddit user Brokegaysonic, for example, creates a connection to their personal life and feelings about *Barbie*. Their comment was focused on the character “Ken” played by Ryan Gosling. Gosling’s

“Ken” was someone struggling with their identity and fitting in amongst a world he feels he doesn’t belong. Brokegaysonic states “I’m a trans man and I really felt the movie resonated with me as well. I felt an awful lot like Ken. Spending my time growing up in a feminine world of pink and not fitting into it, only to find the patriarchy could benefit me after transitioning.” Brokegaysonic was able to reflect on their past experience of wondering where they fit in, they experienced a sense of nostalgia seeing and relating to a character who had similar experiences to them. As Howard (2012) specifies, nostalgic memories and feelings can occur from triggers we don’t always understand, Brokegaysonic felt surprised when they had nostalgic experiences of their childhood surface from watching the *Barbie* film. Brokegaysonic furthered their argument stating that “I felt the rush of power of being perceived as a man but realized that it hurt the women around me I had grown up so close to. And like Ken, I had to realize that my manhood was not based on how Barbies or other Ken’s saw me - it was something I had to define for myself.” Brokegaysonic, like wonderingimp, reflects on their masculinity and its perception within society due to their internal reflection after watching the film. These users explored the emotions that lead to their connection to and understanding of *Barbie*, letting the film be a metaphor for their experiences.

Wonderingimp was not alone in expressing how *Barbie* inspired reflective nostalgia and also healed part of their hidden self. The aspect of being able to heal one’s hidden self can be complex and different for everyone. For some it is acknowledging a longing to be who they once were, but for others it is acknowledging the pain that comes with change and closing that chapter to move forward. Reddit user might_never_know, for example, posted about the complex feelings *Barbie* invoked for them, stating “It was very complicated for me to watch because of the way that it made me think about my own masculinity. So, for a bit of context, I’ve been

passing for a little while now. It's been kind of a shocking development.” might_never_know opened up about how the film made them reflect on their own experiences of gender and identity. might_never_know’s comment sheds light on the reflective nostalgia that they encountered watching and experiencing the film through their own lens. Watching *Barbie*, they felt complex feelings about passing, they state “In some aspects of my life I feel like an imposter - I'm seen a certain way and I know I *am* that certain way, but it still feels like I don't belong because I'm not used to being treated like the guy I am. But at the same time, it's given me the ability to see myself as I am. I am a gay man, not a straight woman.” Just like Wonderingimp, might_never_know reflects about their identity and open up about their experiences related to being masculine.

might_never_know also reflects on how *Barbie* allows them to interact with both a memory and their present self by acknowledging how the film would have affected the two different self-identities. might_never_know shares that “I played with barbies a lot as the kid. If I was a cis woman, that film definitely would have landed with me the way it was meant to. But because of my identity I found myself in a position where I related more to Ken and I could kind of relate to Barbie, but Ken's moments earlier on in the movie were so much more impactful to me.” Here, they acknowledge their past self and how the film would have affected them then. While they could still connect partly to Barbie, they really connected with Ken and the experiences Ken had learning about male privilege in the Real World. might_never_know explains, “Specifically the moment where Ken is asked the time. It was so fucking relatable. Ken went from being ignored and pushed to the side to a world where he was respected, and that's exactly what my experience with being a trans man is.” might_never_know explains that their personal experiences are similar to what Ken experiences, as the character who suddenly and

unexpectedly understood the meaning of their own white male privilege. Through sharing about this experience, might_never_know is reflecting on their past experiences and memories of starting to pass and acknowledging what it was *really like* for them. might_never_know was experiencing the euphoric feelings of passing juxtaposed to their experiences prior to transitioning.

Writing about *Barbie* (inspired by their reflective nostalgic experiences), might_never_know shared that “ It can feel painful to not be validated in my past experiences and traumas, but I think I do have to come to terms with the fact that I can have trauma *and* be in a place of privilege at the same time. Both can be valid experiences and one doesn't erase the other.” might_never_know describes the two-sided experience of nostalgia, the joy that has come with one's life but also the pain they have experienced from oppression and being “othered.” They healed a part of their hidden self by accepting these coexisting feelings of joy and trauma as they watched the film. They identified with characters on the screen as well as acknowledged who they were as a child, and the child they did not get to be. They recognize the part of their youth that would have connected to the film and the part of themselves in the present that does. Both experiences are true.

When longing for the past, some forget the pain that might still exist within it. There is a notion that when one experiences nostalgia, it is simply just a longing for the joyful and fun memories of the past without acknowledgment of the pain. However, Reddit user might_never_know discusses experiencing both of these feelings while having a reflective nostalgic experience watching the film. might_never_know explores how they felt they could identify with the film, specifically the character arc of Ken, saying “I think the movie was slightly painful because it brought about the realization that I am gaining privileges. I know

that's a controversial topic and I don't want to derail the conversation. I'm just saying that I do get more respect than I once did, and it can be easy to kind of fall into the trap that Ken did.”

Nostalgia can be hard to explain in words as it is never just one feeling. Nostalgia involves looking back at one's history and experiences. In might_never_know's post, they reflected on their trauma prior to transitioning and their male privilege they now have. might_never_know describes their now and their before, knowing that just because their truth is different now, that doesn't mean their past experiences were any less valid. might_never_know's experiences before and of transitioning can be validated even as they experience the privilege of transitioning and passing. Thus, they engage with a reflective nostalgia through watching *Barbie*, sharing on the Reddit thread, and coming to terms with experiences of healing their hidden self.

SnooEagles3302 similarly commented about their feelings of nostalgia by connecting to Weird Barbie:

Weird Barbie was insanely lesbian coded and I'm surprised they didn't do more with that in a film supposedly about women's relationship with gender. I enjoyed the film as a comedy movie that parodies the "manosphere", but if you look at its gender commentary from a feminist or LGBT perspective cracks definitely start to appear. I must admit I got weirdly emotional during the first fifteen minutes because the Barbie nostalgia attempts unlocked repressed childhood memories of feeling completely alienated from other girls.

As Howard (2012) explains, nostalgia involves feelings surrounding the experiences of the past that surface in the present. While watching the film, SnooEagles3302 was able to see themselves and their repressed childhood feelings in the film. They connected to Weird Barbie and that character's alienation just as they were alienated from their peers. By seeing an experience they had within *Barbie*, SnooEagles3302 healed through that representation of themselves and could connect to Weird Barbie as though they were one in the same.

TimelessJo, another Reddit user, also found a sense of recognition and healing within the film. TimelessJo posted on a subreddit dedicated to those who are MtF and anyone who identified as AMAB. In their post, TimelessJo explains the moments that moved them emotionally and let them explore their feelings on their identity: “I don’t want to fully dominate the movie which is about womanhood in general, mortality, gender, power, and is also hella queer. It’s not a trans movie. My cis wife sobbed at different parts...” In the comment, they acknowledge the difference of what they thought the film is about versus what they interpreted it as. TimelessJo then begins to list all the parts of the film that they thought to be “trans” coded, scenes that came across as something for the trans community, and that spoke to them:

- 1) Barbie’s reminder to Ken that he’s more than the things he always thought he was
- 2) The Barbie played by a trans actress taking the part of the plan where she has to pretend to not know she’s pretty
- 3) Barbie finding out she doesn’t need permission to become human, she can just do it. This is the part that broke me.
- 4) The film ending triumphantly with a person who doesn’t have a vagina now having a vagina and going to a gynecologist

TimelessJo acknowledged how they interpreted these scenes by attaching personal interpretations of a MtF journey onto the scenes. TimelessJo explains that they thought “it’s not A trans movie, but it’s still pretty trans.” Further, they reflected on a memory they hold dear to their identity: “Playing with Barbies and the nostalgia I have from that is a really precious memory to me because it’s one of the few ways I got to actually be a girl, and this film felt so full circle.” TimelessJo, through watching the film about Barbies, relished in the nostalgia of playing with Barbies as a child and what it means in relation to their experiences of womanhood and identity. They interpreted the film’s message from their own perspective while reminiscing on the longing they experienced of wanting to play Barbies and getting to be a girl.

Analyzing and comparing these comments by multiple Reddit users allow us to see the ways in which users share with each other to create a queer online community, while also using Barbie as an impetus to bond over familiar past and present experiences. Healing one's hidden self looks different for everyone, as shown in these Reddit comments.

So, Do We Heal?

Through my analysis, I reflect on how heteronormativity functions differently in both BarbieLand and the Real World, along with the role of feminism, queer identity, and the acceptance and rejection of these various norms in the two worlds. After further study of identification theory, my analysis focused on how audience members experienced this film beyond the casual viewing experience. On Reddit, for instance, multiple viewers commented about feeling like they truly resonated with or related to specific quotes or character arcs in the film (each of which spoke to their personal experiences). This led to me looking at the online unfolding of posts on Reddit related to *Barbie*, digital self-identity, and character/plot identification.

Within the Reddit comments I analyzed, I see the formation of and get to experience a community where feelings of nostalgia are openly expressed. When analyzing *Barbie* and other commentary, Reddit users in these various communities bonded over their own shared experiences. This led to the recognition of the similar ways users had to perform gender in the past and the recognition of reconstructing memories and narratives they are sharing from this act. These Reddit communities created bonds that allowed some users to engage with and heal their hidden self.

Fanfiction Three: A Message to *My Barbies*



Figure Ten: Barbie Princess Diana (Mooreville, NC, 2006, Photograph Courtesy of Rachel Durk)



Figure Eleven: Rachel Durk in her 20's (Long Island, NY, 1989, Photograph Courtesy of Victoria Casoria)

There is so much I wish I could go back and say to you all, to *my* Barbies. So much that I wish I could change, to help them, to just tell them who they will grow up to be and what they will do. To just spare them of the misery I had, even if that misery made me who I am. Did I really have to be called slurs in order to be myself? Did I have to get bullied for being fat and gay? I don't know, but I was and is part of me. These are also the experiences that left me wanting to fill a hole.

When I first started this project, I wasn't sure where it would take me. I knew that researching something close to my own identity would bring up a lot of feelings, but I didn't know it would bring me a sense of closure or that I would, in some ways, connect to comments from people who had no idea who I was--and ultimately feel less alone. I feel affirmed in knowing that so many others shared parallel experiences to my own. I wasn't doomed to the life of being an outsider, always looking in on a life I could have had if I hadn't been so different, but a life filled with joy and sorrow for those who never get to understand the true beauty of being and living like me. That may sound vain, but I've earned that right to sound like that. I have fought with everything in me to become who I have.

While working on this project, I constantly wondered about the child in all of us. A child that was hidden away so deeply, who never got to see the light of day and heal. I suppose there's hope in knowing that a future me had never and still hasn't invented time travel to come back and chat with me or stop me. Nonetheless, the desire to go back to the past is and has always been there. I can never go back and have those conversations with my past Barbies, and that's okay. I cannot go back to the past because of what lacks in my present, and that's okay.

Preventing that pain from the last does not stop us from moving forward. From continuing on and healing in our own way.

If I could, I would tell my younger self, my hidden self: There will be a day when you will chop your hair off. To others, it's just a haircut and style change, but you'll know it is so much more than that. It is you saying goodbye to the dream your mother had of you being the woman she was. You'll start to dress with more gender fluidity in your clothes, no longer feeling a need to wear blouses and be pretty. You'll get top surgery, and you'll feel scared at first and like you might hate how you look after – but it dissipates. That's just the post-op depression. Slowly, you are freeing yourself from this societal pressure of how you thought you needed to look because you were conditioned so long to look that way. But most importantly, you still collect plushies to comfort yourself and you still read fantasy, but now you read queer fantasy and collect toys you couldn't play with as a child.

You will spend years watching television and reading books, pretending to be the queer character of your dreams in them. You will date boys wishing they were girls. You will cry yourself to sleep at night because you are so tired of living a lie. You will remove mirrors from your room so that you don't have to see someone you don't want to be. You will come out time and time again, facing backlash and performative allyship. I wish I could say that changes, but even now, in 2024, there is not enough visibility for you and so many other queer people. You still have to create your own queer media. You are still actively healing yourself. But that does not diminish the joy you will feel in your life. That does not make you hide yourself. You will have queer love. You will make friends that will last a lifetime. You will dress freely. You will be happy to perform the way you do now rather than hide as you did for so many years.

You are healing.

You are brave.

You are cherished.

You are Queer.

Conclusion: Healing My Hidden Self

The first word that came to my mind after watching *Barbie* was cathartic. In a way, I felt like a part of me was finally able to exhale this long breath I had been holding. I am no stranger to recognizing that I look feminine and still hold a lot of my feminine features that are aligned with being a woman, but I am long past apologizing for it. While I knew gender and the expression of it to be very fluid and different for everyone, I didn't let myself have that same understanding. I felt as though it wasn't true for me. That I myself did not meet the "enough" threshold that I knew so many others had put onto me. I told myself that I was in the wrong body and needed to be different to be in the right body. I let others and my own insecurities put a standard on me. I told myself that I was not non-binary enough just like so many others had done to me. I went into *Barbie* expecting to feel like a fraud once again, I think that's why it felt so emotional for me.

This thesis was not only meant to discuss *Barbie*. It was centered on researching online communities and the performances we adapt online to express our identities. Through the lens of world-building, I focused on how users dually understand the world of *Barbie* and Barbie as a franchise through understanding the developed character Barbie as a whole. Barbie is more than just a toy. Barbie is in shows, films, songs and media. Barbie is an idea, an identity, that is shared amongst society. Barbie is its own world that has been built through transmedia storytelling and sharing of personal stories in online forums. On various Reddit threads, users got the chance to explore their own narrative and imagination by recreating the *Barbie* film to be their own interpretation. Reddit users redefined the film through identifying with various characters and plot points which allowed them to build onto the film in their own way while sharing it with others.

I know that *Barbie* was far from perfect as a film. It barely scratched the surface of discussing feminism and issues within the patriarchy, but it was also a parody film meant to just poke fun at those systematic flaws while focusing on the beauty of one's imagination. It did not give queer representation past casting, but it never promised to as much as audiences thought it would. I think that is a separate issue without a true compromise on what is and is not representation. Does having queer representation mean the continual outing and development of a queer identity? Are we part of the problem in always just assuming a character is normative? Are they always unless stated otherwise? I do not know. What I do know is that my fantasies will never end.

Watching *Barbie*, coming face-to-face with part of my childhood, was emotional for me in so many layers. I went with a group of my friends and didn't even know how to tell them why I was crying the way I was, but I don't know if they would even understand it if I did. Womanhood to me had been something I tried to push away for so long because accepting that part of me, acknowledging it as more than a joke, terrified me. I felt as though accepting the part of me that was raised to be a woman would create a layer of hypocrisy identifying as non-binary. I thought if I didn't hate or resent it, that if I wished to go back and relive parts of its complication, that I wasn't non-binary enough. I grew up escaping my problems with fantasies. I would imagine myself in other worlds living different lives. Just like Gloria did in *Barbie*, escaping her reality through her dolls. I "poached," as Harry Jenkins would say, so many fiction worlds that I would write myself into and create myself as a character to work through whatever I needed to work through. I was desperate for the escape from suffering through the complex emotions I had around my gender on top of being a teenager.

I cried the first time I saw the ending of *Barbie*, but I really didn't understand why at first. There were so many moments that I felt connected to, that I felt represented me and my own experience. I was born and raised to be a girl and spent so much of my life performing and experiencing life through that identity. In a way, I think that part of me was able to finally have a form of closure by watching this film and interacting with a part of my past, without it being heavy and burden-like. I, like many of the other Reddit users comments I analyzed, reconstructed the world of so many films and rewrote so many scenes to be something to give myself representation and to feel as though I was being understood. I would identify myself with characters that didn't have my experiences but experienced something close enough to where we at least had the same emotions.

All of us that are interacting with *Barbie* through rewriting scenes and characters, repurposed a hegemonic white masculine gaze and create a gaze for ourselves, which we can share with our own communities on Reddit. There may be a lack of representation within the film, but that does not mean we cannot create our own gaze and identity within this film. I was a child who loved Barbie, but I was also a child who knew I had to love Barbie. While watching this film and interacting with these online communities, I got to see others who expressed similar feelings and experiences. I got to read about viewers who grew up playing with Barbies and felt they didn't know how to accept them or how to feel. This commentary from viewers gave space for other users on the Reddit platform to respond and offer empathy towards them.

At the end of the movie, Stereotypical Barbie can choose to become a real woman. It is as easy as simply making the choice. I think this big moment where Stereotypical Barbie decides between staying as she is or getting to be a real woman like she desires with Billie Eilish's song "What Was I Made For" playing in the background – that is what moved me to connect to this

film. I spent so many years before recognizing my gender identity wondering why I was like this, why I felt the way I did, and why I couldn't just be like everyone else. When I made my choice to finally come out, it wasn't as easy as it was for Stereotypical Barbie. For so long I was forcing myself to be like the other "Barbies" in my world, but now I could finally be a "Weird" Barbie and be myself.

This movie wasn't designed to represent my gender identity and experience, but it still did because I made it to do so. I reinterpreted many scenes and messages to be what I felt they should be, just like I did as a child with my toys. While watching the film, I understood that these characters were not me and nothing like me, but that didn't stop me from recognizing that I could still take something away from them. It was through the film's own act of imitation that I performed my own act of it. I chose my own messages to identify with in the film by winking back at it. And I did all of this, just like these Reddit users. Just like the Reddit users, I rewrote scenes within the film and shared them with my friends.

This thesis was not only meant to discuss *Barbie*. It was centered on researching online communities and the performances we adapt online to express our identities. Through the lens of world-building, I focused on how users dually understood the world of *Barbie* and Barbie as a franchise through understanding the developed character Barbie as a whole. Barbie is more than just a toy. Barbie is in shows, films, songs and media. Barbie is an idea, an identity, that is shared amongst society. Barbie is its own world that has been built through transmedia storytelling and sharing of personal stories in online forums. On various Reddit threads, users got the chance to explore their own narrative and imagination by recreating the Barbie film to be their own interpretation. Reddit users redefined the film through identifying with various characters and

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Vita

D Durk is a queer activist and scholar from Mooresville, North Carolina. They studied Communication Studies and Public Relations at Appalachian State University, where they also prided themselves on being part of campus life. They produced and wrote a broadcasted comedy show for AppTV, they ran a non-profit student PR agency, acted as Captain of the App State Debate team, and participated in numerous clubs and organizations dedicated to activism and social justice. While working on their MA in Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University, Durk became fascinated with what it means to create and perform an identity in various spaces while operating under a lens of vulnerability within their work. During their time at SU, Durk helped in the creation of The Gay Gala in which Aevyn and them looked at queer photography over the decades and recreated them as a queer public memory project. After graduating, Durk plans on exploring their research interests while exploring other academic prospects in Library Science. For now, Durk will be doing what's best for them.