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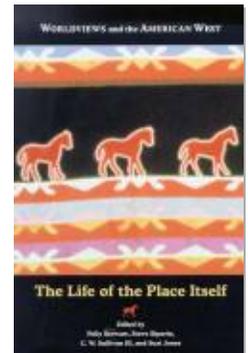
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Ride 'Em, Barbie Girl: Commodifying Folklore, Place, and the Exotic

Jeannie B. Thomas

In 1959, Ruth Handler of Mattel—inspired by paper dolls and a German sex doll—created an adult doll for little girls and named her Barbie. According to Mattel, the doll's full name is Barbie Millicent Roberts, and she attended Willows High School in Willows, Wisconsin, and then went to "State College" (Robins 1989, 26). Barbie M. Roberts has come a long way since those early days. In 1996 Mattel's net sales reached \$3.8 billion, and Barbie dolls represented nearly one-half of these sales (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 1). If all the Barbies sold as of 1997 were lined up head to toe, they would circle the earth more than eleven times (Tosa 1998, 107). Today, two Barbies sell every second somewhere in the world ("Twin Fates" 1999, 121). Clearly Barbie is a sales success.

In this paper, I look at one strategy used in selling Barbie: the marketing of folkloric themes. Of course, these are not the only themes used in marketing Barbie; popular culture and fine art are drawn on as well. For example, there's *Star Trek* Barbie and Ken; Barbie Loves Elvis; Barbie as Marilyn Monroe, complete with white halter dress flying up as she stands above the subway grill in *The Seven Year Itch*; Barbie as Marilyn Monroe as Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; and *X Files* Barbie and Ken. There is even a Harley-Davidson Barbie.¹ Barbies are also born of famous artistic masterpieces; for example, there's a Barbie inspired by a Vincent Van Gogh's painting, "Sunflower Barbie." She wears a yellow chiffon petal skirt and has "delicate leaves of green and green satin tendrils" encircling her waist, according to Mattel's description of her (Mattel 1999).

Mattel mines all levels of culture in its attempts to sell Barbie, and the folk level has proved a particularly rich source. Examining the use of folkloric currents in the selling of Barbie allows us to see how those involved with an important aspect of American culture—marketing of goods for capitalist consumption—select aspects of folklore that they think will have dollar value.² What I talk about in this paper is what could therefore be

called *commodified folklore*; that is, folklore and folkloric themes translated into marketable objects. My use of the appellation *commodified folklore* here is deliberate; I could have resorted to the more common phrase “folklore in popular or mass culture,” but that evokes folklore embedded in something larger. *Commodified folklore*, by contrast, connotes the historical primacy of folklore; the phenomenon I’m calling *commodified folklore* was created *from* folklore, and the folklore existed before the *commodified* version of it.

To be considered *commodified folklore*, the object of study must have folk antecedents and also be mass produced with the intent of sales or promotion. We may, in general, consider mass-marketed dolls to be *commodified folklore* because most dolls were originally created through informally learned, folk processes and only later mass produced and sold for money (Fennick 1996, 9–10). Regardless of origins—whether dolls were created through folk means or mass production—children’s play with dolls was and continues to be folk behavior.

I will focus my discussion of *commodified folklore* on the merchandising of the Barbie doll. First, I argue that folklore is a significant component in Mattel’s marketing of Barbie. Second, I identify some of the major folkloric currents in Barbie merchandising. Finally, I examine the manner in which Mattel presents this *commodified folklore*, paying specific attention to Barbie and the construction of the ethnic Other, the tourist gaze, exoticism and sex, the West, and the folk conflation of horse and woman.

The folkloric currents utilized in Barbie merchandising include legendry, fairy tales, mythology, rites of passage, holidays, costuming, and notions of place. Barbies drawn from the category of legend include Tooth Fairy Barbie, various mermaid Barbies, and angel Barbies—like Angel Lights Barbie, issued in 1992, who lights up and serves double duty as both a toy and a Christmas tree topper (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 118). Greek Goddess Barbie draws on mythology, while Barbie as Rapunzel and Barbie as Sleeping Beauty emerge from the exotic and otherworldly realm of the fairy tale.³ Barbie also participates in folkloric events such as rites of passage. Weddings are her all-time most popular rite of passage, but one can also purchase a graduation Barbie.⁴ She celebrates holidays including Christmas, Mardi Gras (Summers 1996, 39, 67), and Valentine’s Day. Indeed, in 1988 a doll named Holiday Barbie, which went on the market at Christmastime, helped Mattel make a profit during difficult financial times (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 118). This first Holiday Barbie was quite successful, and it remains a collector’s find. It has been known to fetch as much as twenty times its original value (Fennick 1996, 92).

After their success with dolls associated with holidays, Mattel yearned for a holiday that occurred all year round. It was this longing that led to the conception of Birthday Barbie (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 14). The birthday

theme can also be seen in Barbie's friend *Quinceanera* Teresa, created to celebrate fifteen years of Hispanic Barbie and her family of dolls (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 156). As early as 1963, Mattel created the Halloween-party-style Masquerade costumes for Barbie-and-family dolls (Westenhouser 1994, 34). In 1968, Talking Barbie said, "Let's have a costume party" (Fennick 1996, 41). Barbie's 1964–65 Little Theater costumes relied on folkloric texts and figures: the Arabian Nights, King Arthur, Guinevere, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, and Cinderella and her prince (Tosa 1998, 122–24, 126; Theriault 1992, 9).

Folklore continues to be important in Barbie's association with place. For example, reliance on place and its folk and popular associations can be seen with Country Rose Barbie, whose cowgirl costume recalls romantic notions of the American West. In the Dolls of the World series, Barbie hails from places like Peru, Puerto Rico, Thailand, and Poland, and she is often sold in her "authentic" folk costume. To use a western metaphor, Barbie rides herd on a large number of images and meanings, but Mattel's use of place and folkloric themes to construct Barbie as an attractive, non-threatening exotic Other is my interest here. Lore related to place—specifically foreign countries and the West—helps sell Barbie.

Looking at the thousands of different identities through which Barbie has been marketed makes me wonder if today she wouldn't be more aptly named Sybil. But it's just this ability to generate new identities that has led to Barbie's survival and success. In its 1987 *Annual Report*, Mattel says, "Barbie remains the highest volume brand in the industry, due in no small part to our ability to reintroduce the product line year-after-year to fit the current lifestyles of girls" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 35). In the 1988 *Report*, it says, "She's a new doll every year, and yet she's always glamorous and fun" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 39). The 1992 *Annual Report* reads, "The key is to make Barbie fresh and new every year, to develop multiple doll segments based on established play patterns, and to drive sales through effective advertising, promotion and merchandising" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 63). Barbie has been very successful with children, in part because she addresses major issues that children work through via folkloric venues, which Mattel calls "play patterns": in particular, kids play at being an adult and learn how to be an adult through their play (Mechling 1986, 97, 114).

Barbie is not only for kids, though; many Barbies today are specifically marketed to adults, which illustrates the company's attention to market segments. Their 1995 *Annual Report* says, "With a number one share in most every major global market, Barbie penetration continues to grow. . . . Most of the 100 dolls in each year's product line are designed for little girls, but the adult collector market also provides excellent opportunity for Mattel. There are 83 million women in the world today who grew up with the Barbie doll, and every one of them is a potential collector" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998,

87). One group of Barbies is heavily marketed toward adult collectors, although many of these dolls are also available to children in the aisles of major chain stores like Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Toys “R” Us.

International Barbie

In 1964, Mattel released “colorful costumes created to simulate pretend travel” for Barbie and Ken (Westenhouer 1994, 33). At that time Barbie and her boyfriend were off to see the world; in 1980 Barbie became the world. As Mattel tells it, “Barbie went international [with the Dolls of the World Collection in 1980]. . . . The dolls in this series combine *authentic* outfits with unique cultural profiles” (Mattel 1999; emphasis added).⁵ Both the selling of Barbie as tourist—a practice that continued with dolls like 1986’s Vacation Sensation Barbie (Summers 1996, 99)—and the selling of Barbies in the contemporary Dolls of the World Collection as natives of varied places (which are frequently tourist destinations) rely on tourist perceptions. Whether Barbie is presented as a tourist or a native may encourage the consumer to identify with her role, or persona. However, the intricacies of the native’s position are frequently hard to grasp from an outsider’s vantage point, especially if the outsider knows little about the culture. Therefore, it is likely that at least some consumers look upon these Barbies with the gaze of a tourist. By *gaze of a tourist*, I mean simply an outsider’s gaze at an Other person, culture, object, or place that is seen as distinctive and different from the outsider in significant ways (for more discussion of the tourist gaze, see Urry 1990, who breaks the gaze down into specific categories). The context for this perception on the part of the outsider is often one of play (i.e., the tourist’s vacation). John Urry says, “I have strongly argued for the significance of the gaze to tourist activities. This is not to say that all the other senses are insignificant in the tourist experience. But I have tried to establish that there has to be something distinctive to gaze upon” (1990, 128).

Interestingly, Barbie and Ken’s tourist costumes from 1964 foreshadow the use of native costumes in the contemporary Dolls of the World series. For example, the 1964 Ken in Switzerland outfit includes lederhosen, a black felt Tyrolean cap, and a beer stein (Theriault 1992, 121). These native costumes effectively turn the dolls into “something distinctive to gaze upon” (Urry 1990, 128). Creating something distinctive to capture sales was clearly the intent behind the contemporary Dolls of the World, which are more expensive than regular Barbies. The target audience, collectors, usually display dolls more than they play with them. This is a lucrative market segment; in 1995, adult collectors spent \$175 million on Barbie dolls (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 1). The idea of doll as native draws on constructions of natives as doll-like—cute and adorable, costumed indigenous peoples presented for the entertainment and consumption of tourists—and in the process commodifies them.

The Dolls of the World Collection relies on references to place and the traditional folk customs and costumes associated with that place. The dolls are generally named after a place, and the collection includes the following: Arctic Barbie (1997), Australian Barbie (1993), Brazilian Barbie (1990), Canadian Barbie (1988), Chilean Barbie (1998), Chinese Barbie (1994), Czechoslovakian Barbie (1991), Dutch Barbie (1994), East India Barbie (1982), English Barbie (1992), Eskimo Barbie (1982), French Barbie (1997), German Barbie (1987, 1995), Ghanaian Barbie (1996), Greek Barbie (1986), India Barbie (1982), Indian Barbie (1996), Icelandic Barbie (1987), Irish Barbie (1984, 1995), Italian Barbie (1980), Jamaican Barbie (1992), Japanese Barbie (1985, 1996), Kenyan Barbie (1994), Korean Barbie (1988), Malaysian Barbie (1991), Mexican Barbie (1989, 1996), Moroccan Barbie (1998), Native American Barbie (1998), Nigerian Barbie (1990), Norwegian Barbie (1996), Oriental Barbie (1981), Parisian Barbie (1980), Peruvian Barbie (1986, 1998), Polish Barbie (1998), Polynesian Barbie (1995), Puerto Rican Barbie (1997), Royal U.K. Barbie (1980), Russian Barbie (1989, 1997), Scottish Barbie (1981), Spanish Barbie (1983), Swedish Barbie (1983), Swiss Barbie (1984), and Thai Barbie (1998) (Tosa 1998, 146; Mattel 1999).

From the perspective of an American tourist, these dolls are all associated with exotic locations. Urry argues that there is a hierarchy of tourist sites:

Travel had always been socially selective. It was available for a relatively limited elite and was a marker of social status. But in the second half of the nineteenth century there was an extensive development of mass travel by train. Status distinctions then came to be drawn between different classes of traveler, but less between those who could and those [who] could not travel. . . . The car and the aeroplane have even further democratized geographical movement. As travel became democratized so extensive distinctions of taste came to be established between different places: where one traveled to became of considerable social significance. The tourist gaze came to have a different importance in one place rather than another. . . . Certain places were viewed as embodiments of mass tourism, to be despised and ridiculed. (1990, 16)

In general, international Barbies are from places that are now seen as respectable tourist destinations—unlike the working-class, nineteenth-century British seaside resorts Urry studied. However, cultural commentators still criticize many of the dolls on the basis of their shallow approaches to the cultures they represent:

Far from authenticity, these dolls have the theme-park bogusness of the “foreign lands” at Disney’s Epcot Center. . . . To be sure some of the Dolls of the World are less reductive than others. Malaysian Barbie, which the workers in Mattel’s Malaysian factory helped design,

gets high marks for authenticity and attractiveness. . . . But Jamaican Barbie is another story. “She looks like a mammy,” [Yla] Easton told me. “She’s got the head rag and the apron, and I’m like, ‘Why did they pick that slice of life?’ When they did the Nigerian Barbie at least they made her a regal person.” [Ann] Ducille is blunter: “That’s the one I call the anorexic Aunt Jemima.” The phrase book of “foreign expressions” on Jamaican Barbie’s box seems almost calculated to patronize. It includes: “Howyu-du (Hello),” “A hope yu wi come—a’Jamaica!” (I hope you will come to Jamaica!). (Lord 1994, 176, 177)

This Jamaican doll box depicts vernacular language in its description of the doll. Language associated with folklore also appears frequently on the doll boxes in the series. For example, the box of the recent Peruvian Barbie says,

¡Hola! (Hello) I’m Peruvian Barbie and I’m proud to welcome you to one of the most beautiful and mysterious countries in South America. . . . Of course you will want to enjoy our delicious Peruvian foods, especially the wonderful smells and yummy flavors of Creole cooking (highly spicy rice dishes). For fun, we love to watch soccer and volleyball. We also love to attend festivals and to dance the marinera and huaynos (two typical Peruvian dances), guaranteed to make you smile! Today I am wearing an authentic Peruvian dress shawl in vibrant multi colors, which reflect the excitement, passion and beauty of my country.

The box of Puerto Rican Barbie (1997) reads,

I live in Puerto Rico, a beautiful place often called the Island of Enchantment. . . . We love good food in Puerto Rico. Seafood like squid, shrimp, and codfish is a popular choice and often mixed with rice. . . . I hope you like the special white dress I’m wearing. It is very typical of a dress I might wear to a festival or party. . . . Tourism is a very significant part of our economy. Many cruise ships dock in the harbor of our capital city, San Juan. Long ago, pirate ships used to dock here too! Today, people from all over the world come to enjoy our beautiful country, delicious food and friendly people.

Thai Barbie also lives in a “beautiful country”—in fact, *beautiful* is a word used many times on these boxes, which is not surprising since beauty is a big part of Barbie, who was conceived as a fashion doll. Thai Barbie’s box says,

I’m Thai Barbie. I live in a beautiful country. . . . Many exotic animals like rhinoceros, leopards, and elephants live in the jungles and forests of Thailand. . . . My beautiful costume is created from the ceremonial clothing we wear to perform a traditional dance,



Figure 1. Polish Barbie (J. Thomas photo)

called the Lacon. . . . I have golden bracelets on each arm and my feet are bare, just like a real Thai dancer!

Then there is the narrative on Polish Barbie's box (figure 1):

Let me tell you about my beautiful country. . . . The Polish countryside is scenic and full of fun! We love to celebrate and have many festivals, where everyone dances the polka, a dance we invented in Poland! There are also many beautiful animals in the Polish forests. . . . My traditional folk costume is a lovely example of festival attire. My blonde hair is worn in two thick braids. I have a beautiful crown of flowers in my hair, tied with a pretty ribbon. I hope one of the boys will ask me to dance with him!

Of interest here are the references to the exotic, the authentic, and the traditional: foodways, the festival, and the folk costume—all of this in a narrative that sounds as though it could appeal to tourists as well as to doll collectors. These terms appear in scholarly folkloristic discourse, but in relation to Barbie, they're used in a fashion that creates a stereotypical image of the Barbie doll as the singing, dancing, happy native. Such language also helps conjure an image of Barbie as the ethnic Other. In her article about the tourist folklore surrounding the Hawaiian goddess Pele, Joyce Hammond writes, "Pele's power as a symbol of the Other derives most clearly from the replication of Otherness which is constructed for native women. The overwhelming number of photographs of island women in promotional tourist material for Hawai'i, as well as the predominant use of 'ethnic' women to greet tourists, dance for tourists, and serve tourists, attests to the tourists' equation of the native woman herself with the exoticism sought in the tourist quest" (1995, 163–164). The international Barbie dolls are presented in a similar manner. However, for tourists to Hawai'i, Pele is frequently constructed as a threatening, exotic, native Other (Hammond 1995, 162–163). Barbie is not constructed this way for her consumers. The descriptions of her create a non-threatening, ingratiating Other: The Barbies say, "Enjoy our delicious Peruvian foods." "Guaranteed to make you smile!" "I hope you like the special white dress I'm wearing." "I hope one of the boys will ask me to dance!" As native Other, Barbie invites the consumer to enjoy her beautiful country's delicious food and friendly natives. In short, Barbie is saying, "Let me please you." "Look at me with the gaze of a tourist and enjoy." Ann Ducille notes, "We are living in a moment where 'the other' has a certain kind of commercial value" (Lord 1994, 171). Barbie embodies this; she particularly represents a kind of accessible, inviting Other.

Folklorists and anthropologists have provided thoughtful definitions, discussions, and critiques—in folkloric and historical contexts—of terms that get used in the marketing of international Barbies, such as *authentic*, *traditional*, and *festive* (Bauman et. al. 1992; Bendix 1997; Duggan 1997; Dundes and Falassi 1975; Evans-Pritchard 1987; Falassi 1987; Glassie 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Posen 1993; Turner 1982). Of course Barbie is neither a scholar nor a folklorist and neither are her marketers. Instead they draw on and present folk factors in a superficial and digestible form because this constellation

of dolls, with its commodified versions of folklore and associated terms, sells. One doll in the series has sold so well that there have been several editions of her over the years. She is interesting because even though she's considered exotic enough to belong to the Dolls of the World Collection, her place, the American West, is a little closer to home.⁶ Her name is Native American Barbie.

The Barbie West

Mattel's internet web site shows images of six different Native American Barbies introduced in the last few years, not including the Eskimo and Arctic Barbies that also are a part of the Dolls of the World series. Other Native-American-themed dolls not in that collection include Nia, Barbie's first Native American friend (Augustyniak 1996, 30), and Barbie Olé, who wears a Navajo-style dress with a dreamcatcher around her neck and was a special convention Barbie designed by the Barbie Friends of Albuquerque Doll Club (Fennick 1996, 129). Invariably the Dolls of the World version of Native American Barbie (figure 2) is dressed in what—under the influence of Hollywood's frequent emphasis on Plains-Indian-style dress with a little Southwest color thrown in—has come to be pervasive in popular culture and could be described as an Anglo's construction of a generic Indian: buckskin, feathers, fringe, and turquoise. Mattel describes one Native American Barbie as “dressed in a festive outfit for ceremonial events. Native American Barbie doll looks authentic from head to toe. She's wearing a ‘buckskin’ fringed top with a matching skirt. Silver-color braided trim highlights her outfit. Her long black hair is adorned with a headband and turquoise-colored feather. In keeping with Native American traditions, she has soft ‘buckskin’ moccasins on her feet” (Mattel 1999). Mattel described a previous Native American Barbie introduced in 1996 with similar stereotypical images but also mentioned accessories not associated with Indians wearing pre-contact early contact period clothing: “This Collector Edition Barbie wears a tan buckskin-like dress with matching boots. The tiny papoose she carries has a ‘buckskin’ headband and diaper and comes with a matching backpack.” The Barbie introduced in 1997 is described as “beautiful in her turquoise-colored dress with matching moccasins. Her baby sister comes with her own carrier so Barbie can take her to a *picnic*” (Mattel 1999).

Mattel's Native American descriptions are further examples of the commodification and simplification of such terms associated with folklore studies as authentic, ceremonial, and tradition; they are also combined with idiosyncratic contemporary terms. For example, there is not a long historical record of pre-contact and early contact (the time periods to which Native American Barbie's clothes link her) Native American picnics. Picnics, diapers, and backpacks are commonplace for Americans of many ethnic backgrounds today, but here they are combined with an earlier, exotic era of buckskin and



Figure 2. Native American Barbie (J. Thomas photo)

turquoise. As M. G. Lord argues, Native American Barbie presents an outsider's interpretation of Native Americans (Lord 1994, 186).⁷

Native Americans joke that for every Indian and his or her dog, there are five anthropologists studying the Indian and two studying the dog.⁸ Well, even in Barbie's world there are such scholars studying out West:



Figure 3. Paleontologist Barbie (J. Thomas photo)

Paleontologist Barbie, to be specific (figure 3). While not a part of the Dolls of the World series, she is linked to place by the landscape depicted in her box. That place looks like the western desert, a locale for dinosaur bones, which is where Paleontologist Barbie's vocation leads her. It is apparent that some Barbie aficionados have an *Indiana Jones* view—a romanticized

view—of anthropology. For example, Sarasohn-Kahn describes an exotic leopard-print Barbie ensemble as “perfect for those glamorous anthropological outings!” (1998, 42). Even in its presentation of a career choice that is frequently tedious and dirty, Mattel plays up the romantic side, and the idealized association of place assists in this process. Frequently, the West has been construed as a romantic and exotic place. This is the West constructed for tourists to gaze upon. I use exotic here not just for its connotations of unusualness but also for its sexual evocativeness (as in exotic dancer) because part of Barbie’s attraction is sex. Indeed, Barbie owners of different ages have used the dolls to explore issues related to sexuality (Stern 1998). Even on the job out in the field, Paleontologist Barbie has big hair and sexy short shorts. At this juncture, it’s also pertinent to remember that Barbie was originally inspired by and closely modeled after a German sex doll, Lilli (Tosa 1998, 27–29; Deutsch 1996, 21).

Some of these notions of the West as alluring and even sexy could also be seen in Mattel’s 1981 Western Barbie. Pushing a button on her back caused her to wink an eye. Judy Shackelford, the first female vice-president of Mattel, observes, “Girls didn’t care if Barbie winked or not. Guys cared. They said, ‘God, look at that doll wink!’” (Lord 1994, 112). Western Barbie also had glamour and star quality: “Western Barbie. . . dressed in a silver-trimmed western jumpsuit, cowboy hat and boots, came with a unique ‘autograph-signing’ feature. This was accomplished through an autograph stamp, included with the doll, which attached to her hand. . . . Positioned as a Western star, she came with small pictures of herself to ‘autograph’ for her adoring fans” (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 13). Mattel also produced Western Ken and Western Skipper (“Make her twirl her lasso!”) at the same time (Deutsch 1996, 93). Since the advent of the Western Barbie doll in 1981, western influences have been omnipresent in Barbiedom (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 13). The West is one of the most highly represented American regions in Barbie’s world outside of the beach, which is usually a generic beach. When the beach is located in a specific region, it is often a western locale, California (as in Malibu Barbie and California Dream Barbie).

In the 1990s, a western emphasis continued in Mattel’s marketing strategy; Mattel’s web site includes a list of categories like Angels, Bridal, and Fashion Designer for collectors to check, indicating their areas of interest. The categories also include Native American and Western. Mattel’s 1989 *Annual Report* says, “Western Fun is the theme for a new Barbie line which captures the popular fashion style of the American Southwest” (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 44). As of 1999, I was able to locate several western-style outfits for Barbie in a local Wal-Mart store. I purchased five representative western fashions for Barbie (figure 4). Four are dresses with accompanying cowboy boots in colors that include pink, purple, red, and brown. Three outfits have fringe and expose Barbie’s midriff, two of these three are sleeveless, and all have very



Figure 4. A few of Barbie's western fashions (J. Thomas photo)

short skirts. Even the jeans outfit I bought for Barbie (which comes with white cowboy boots) includes a pink gingham top that reveals Barbie's belly.

As I looked at these outfits, I realized that Barbie would probably suffer hypothermia and/or frostbite if she actually had to wear this wardrobe in the West regularly. Obviously, these are not the clothes worn in the West on a daily basis; they're not the traditional, authentic western outfits worn for living and working in western climates. Jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, a hat, and work or cowboy boots would be more common garb. Barbie's western clothes are, to borrow from Thomas Adler, "more festal than ferial" (1981, 51). In the actual West outside of Barbie's dream house, clothes that appear most frequently and mundanely, that are routinely worn, would be traditional outfits. However, Barbie's clothes might be seen in the West during the summer in country-western dance clubs or on the backs of some tourists (figure 5). Indeed, Jane Fennick describes Barbie of the 1980s as a tourist in the American West: "For recreation, the 1980s Barbie doll could do aerobic exercise or roller-skate. Then she might go swimming, camping, or horseback riding on vacation in the West" (1996, 81).

A year after the creation of Western Barbie in 1981, Mattel brought forth a second western-themed Barbie, Horse Lovin' Barbie. Designed to appear as more of a native to the West, Horse Lovin' Barbie wore rather shocking red vinyl pants, a red and tan checked shirt, and an equally jarring vest trimmed



Figure 5. Barbie in western garb
(J. Thomas photo)

with wildly unruly fur. According to Barbie collector Kitturah Westenhouer, “With a western hat and saddlebag, she was ready for the rodeo” (1994, 111). However, she really looked as though she’d be more at home on the set of the 1980s TV show *Dallas*, with its oil-rich Texans, than on a the floor of a rodeo arena. This line of Barbies also included Horse Lovin’ versions of Ken and Barbie’s little sister, Skipper. Mattel sold horses for each doll separately: Dallas, Midnight, and Honey, respectively. Dallas had a colt named Dixie that was also sold separately. Finally, Mattel marketed a travel trailer for the horses and a jeep to pull it (Westenhouer 1994, 111). So not only did the West hold an outdoorsy, exotic-but-in-America’s-backyard sort of appeal, but Mattel found that it could be accessorized quite effectively too. The western theme also appears in Barbie-related merchandise. There have been numerous Barbie coloring books over the years, and some of these from the 1980s and 1990s feature a Western Barbie on the cover; for example, one is titled *Barbie: A Trip to Santa Fe* and shows Barbie in western clothes and cowboy hat holding a Native American pot (Summers 1996, 206). There are Western Barbie paper dolls (Summers 1996, 150) and Native American Barbie Hallmark Christmas ornaments (Olds and Harrias 1997, 263).

In the 1990s, more Western dolls appeared. They included Western Fun Barbie, Western Fun Ken, Western Fun Nia—an African-American Western Fun Barbie—and a Western Fun gift set including Barbie's horse, Sun Runner (Augustyniak 1996, 30). Western Fun Barbie ("Blazing new trails in fashion and fun!") was dressed in "turquoise tights, pink fringed jacket, pink, magenta, yellow, and turquoise western print skirt, pink felt hat, and pink cowboy boots" (Summers 1996, 100; Jacobs 1998, 230). In 1991 there was Trailblazin' Barbie who was "advertised as 'steppin' lively in cowgirl-cute Western wear"; she came with red cowboy boots (Summers 1996, 96). In 1993, retail chain Toys "R" Us exclusively sold Western Stampin' Barbie (both Anglo and African-American versions), Western Stampin' Ken, Western Stampin' Tara Lynn, and Barbie's horse Western Star—"Stamp trails of fun with Barbie boots and horse hooves!" Other western-theme dolls included retail chain Walmart's 1994 Country Western Star Barbie, who came in Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American, and Denim 'n' Ruffles Barbie with High Stepper ("Horse really walks!") Gift Set, a B.J.'s Club exclusive in 1995 (Augustyniak 1996, 54, 103, 30, 107, 74). In 1997, the Grand Ole Opry Collection included Country Rose Barbie, a glamorous western star in the singing cowgirl mold. She is described by Mattel as dressed in a "stunning red satin ensemble highlighted by a black 'suede' yoke and cuffs edged in golden trim. Beautiful embroidered roses, a white chiffon scarf and dazzling rhinestone accents add an elegant touch to her western outfit. From her rooted eyelashes and clear blue eyes, to her 'suede' western [cowboy] hat, Barbie is simply show-stopping. She even has her own guitar" (Mattel 1999). This Nashville vision of Barbie as the singing cowgirl includes key accessories like a cowboy hat and guitar. The guitar, an important part of western cowboy lore (especially associated with the image of the singing cowboy), is an accessory not usually marketed with western-themed Barbies or Barbies in general.⁹

There is one component of western lore that Mattel frequently markets to accompany Barbie—the horse, also a part of the romance of the West. This notion can be seen in Jill McCorkle's comments about her childhood play with Barbie: "My Barbies went horseback riding. . . . I never owned a horse and rarely got to ride one. It was my fantasy. Ken didn't go. He belonged to my sister and stayed in his box most of the time while my Barbies rode through the wild West" (1994, 13–14). Mattel's web site reveals that Barbie and her family own sixteen horses and ponies (plus one sea horse): Dancer, Dallas, Midnight, Dixie, Prancer, Honey, Blinking Beauty, Sun Runner, All American, Rosebud, Stomper, Western Star, Butterfly, Chelsea, Prancing Horse, and Nibbles (Mattel 1999). Barbie and her family have owned more horses than either cats or dogs. Several Barbie coloring book covers also depict her with horses (Summers 1996, 199). Barbie has not only owned horses, but a look at the manes that she has sported since the 1980s makes one start to wonder if Barbie is part horse.



Figure 6. Four-year-old girl engages in hair play: “curling” the family dog’s hair (J. Thomas photo)

Hi Ho Barbie!

Every time I walked down a Barbie aisle in a Wal-Mart, K-Mart, or Toys “R” Us in the 1990s, I was overwhelmed by two things: the pervasiveness of big hair and the color “Barbie pink.” A wall of Barbie pink is a merchandising tactic that began in 1991 (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 219); Barbie’s big hair is also a marketing strategy. Hair is a central part of Barbie’s being, despite the many difficulties it has presented Mattel over the years. For example, in the early days, Ken’s flocked hair came off in water, so many Kens were bald before their time. Mattel responded to this problem by introducing Ken with molded painted hair (Fennick 1996, 45). The 1969 Julia doll’s short hair was originally dark brown, but the fiber frequently oxidized, causing her hair to turn a dramatic shade of red (Fennick 1996, 61). The hair of Color Magic Barbie often became brittle, broke, and then fell out (Fennick 1996, 32). Mattel continued to research and develop new kinds of hair for Barbie and her friends (Westenhouser 1994, 52–53), and by the 1990s, all Barbies had extra-long tresses (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 50).

When focus groups during the 1970s revealed hair play to be a key component in the play value associated with Barbie, Barbie designers began to incorporate hair play features in the dolls. According to Sarasohn-Kahn, most mainline Barbie dolls targeted today to girls under ten years of age are hair-play dolls (1998, 129). Imaginative play, play with dolls, and play that uses patterns seen in the adult world are all folk behaviors of children that Mattel has capitalized upon in the creation of the Barbie doll. Hair play is

such a folk behavior; little girls learn from their parents, siblings, and friends how to comb and style their own hair and the hair of others. They often spend time styling and playing with the hair of family members, household pets, and friends (figure 6). For example, it is not uncommon to find girls braiding and styling each other's hair at slumber parties. After all, to groom is often to bond. Hair play is another folk activity that Mattel has commodified in the form of a Barbie doll.¹⁰

The list of official hair play dolls includes Beauty Secrets Barbie (1980), Pretty Changes Barbie (1980), Golden Dream Barbie (1981), Magic Curl Barbie (1982), Twirly Curls Barbie (1983), Super Hair Barbie (1987), Perfume Pretty Barbie (1988), Style Magic Barbie (1989), Totally Hair Barbie (1992), Hollywood Hair Barbie (1993), Troll Hair Barbie (1993), Glitter Hair Barbie (1994), Cut 'n Style Barbie (1995), Sparkle Beach Barbie (1996), Splash 'n Color Barbie (1996), and Hula Hair Barbie (1997) (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 129). According to Sarasohn-Kahn, a doll called My First Barbie was designed in part to help prepare the young Barbie consumer for future hair-play dolls (1998, 13–14).

This emphasis on hair play explains why so many African-American Barbies have the long flowing hair so emphasized in white culture instead of hairstyles that are more Afrocentric (figure 7). Kitty Black-Perkins of Mattel says, “The first Black Barbie that we did had short hair. . . . I thought the short haircut was adorable. What I didn't know at the time, because at that time we didn't rely on a lot of market research, was that half of the play with the doll was (and still is) in the hair. What we know now through our market research is that it doesn't matter what color the child is, they like that long hair! That's one reason why a lot of black kids will buy Barbie—for the length of the hair” (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 189).

One notable doll defined completely by her hair is Totally Hair Barbie. At the time of her production, her hair was the longest ever on a Barbie: at ten inches it reached her ankles. Totally Hair Barbie generated some parental disdain; Lord describes her as a “woolly object reminiscent of Cousin It from the *Addams Family*” (1994, 77) and cites an article in *Allure*, which describes the parental dismay generated by this doll: “These mothers have, in fact, singled out . . . Totally Hair Barbie, with her ankle-length tresses and tight, thigh-high minidress, as particularly horrifying; she looks, one observed, like ‘a professional fourth wife’” (1994, 185). Despite parental misgivings, Totally Hair Barbie generated \$100 million in worldwide sales during 1992; she was the most successful Barbie ever sold to that date (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 73–74). These dramatic tresses contribute to the vision of Barbie as exotic and sexy. Lord argues that, along with its play value, all this Barbie hair is sexy, which is part of its attraction, and she notes that historically hair has been seen as a sexual characteristic: “Ever since Milton's portrait of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, with her ‘golden tresses’



Figure 7. African-American Jewel Hair Mermaid Barbie (J. Thomas photo)

falling ‘in wanton ringlets’ to her waist, long hair has been part of the arsenal of seduction” (1994, 210).¹¹

At the end of the previous section, I compared Barbie to a horse because of her massive manes. This association of horse and female is not so far fetched; it certainly exists in the folk tradition.¹² Jan Brunvand talks about this motif in his study of *The Taming of the Shrew* tale in the United States (1968, 304; see also 1991). It can also be found in the cowboy poetry of Howard L. Norskog (1990, 83) and Lucky Whipple (1985, 134, 135). Elsewhere I discuss this motif’s appearance in western folklore and some of its sexual overtones (Thomas 1995). The German ads for Lilli, the sex doll that was the prototype

for Barbie, support this association. Some of these ads include risqué slogans like “*Ob mehr oder minder nackt Lilli bewahrt immer Takt,*” (“Whether more or less naked, Lilli is always discreet”). There is also an ad that conflates woman with animal, and it is a clear double entendre. It shows Lilli riding on a donkey and says, “*Sicher gefällt Lilli dir mit einem schönen Tier*” (“Lilli will please you with a beautiful animal”) (Lord 1994, 30, 28). Also, Barbie on her horse is somewhat reminiscent of Lady Godiva.

If Barbie is part horse, then toy horses these days are part Barbie. When I was a child, all my horses had molded and painted manes and tails. This kind of horse made up the bulk of the toy horses I saw in stores. The horses owned by my children today have voluptuous, flowing, multicolored, big-hair manes and tails that can be combed and styled endlessly. Toy horse manufacturers, it seems, have discovered the profitability of commodifying hair play as well. Of course, many of Barbie’s horses have big hair to the hilt. When Western Fun Barbie stands next to her horse Sun Runner or when Blazing Trails Barbie and “her horse blaze a trail through the colorful canyons of the West,” (figure 8), their combined sea of hair is almost enough to drown out the Barbie pink so pervasive in the toy aisle (Summers 1996, 155; Mattel 1999).

Selling Barbie

I have argued that in its marketing of Barbie, Mattel employs many folkloric themes, images, terms, and customs ranging from hair play to holidays to the Tooth Fairy to the use of words like *traditional*. In other words, Mattel is commodifying folklore. The company uses both folklore and place—foreign countries and the West—to help construct a sense of the exotic. That is, they use these things—borrowing an axiom from the tourist industry—to help create something distinctive for the consumer to gaze upon and then hopefully purchase (Urry 1990, 128). This has been an effective marketing strategy. In terms of sales, Barbie continues to ride tall in the saddle across the terrain of toyland.

However, some of the uses to which folklore is put in the designing and promotion of Barbie are troubling; many times they are superficial, manipulative, and stereotypical. When studied closely, though, Barbie frequently resists easy judgment. Part of the interest she generates as a cultural symbol emerges from her multivocality and her ability to be remade—the play and associations made with Barbie by her owners are conventional, unconventional, surprising, stereotypical, complex, shocking, delightful, puzzling, predictable, and unpredictable, depending upon the situation (see Lord 1994; Stern 1998). Initially in the mass media, males were most critical of Barbie; of concern was her “predatory behavior.” An early piece in *The Nation* argued that Barbie threatened to create a generation of “viperous” women; she was



Figure 8. Blazing Trails Barbie and her horse (J. Thomas photo)

just too independent (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 1995, 152, 154). Stern and Schoenhaus argue that Barbie was seen as “a perfect bitch” in the 1960s and as a “complete bimbo” by the 1990s (1990, 63). Much of today’s criticism revolves around Barbie’s unrealistic figure and the troubling messages about body-size expectations that the doll could be sending to little girls. Researchers have found that both Barbie and Ken are “relatively thin” compared to the non-plastic, human population. The possibility of having a body shaped like Ken’s is one in fifty; the possibility of having a body shaped like Barbie’s is less than one in 100,000 (Norton, Olds, Olive, and Dank 1996, 287). On the other hand, Kitty G. Abraham and Evelyn Lieberman studied children’s play with baby dolls and Barbie dolls and actually found that “nonfacilitative play” with other children (grabbing, hitting, kicking, pushing, glaring, shouting, screaming, teasing, commanding, and name calling) was observed much more frequently during baby-doll play than during Barbie-doll play. They discovered that the children’s “imagination were consistently at work” during play

with Barbie dolls. The children shared more, positively reinforced each other more, and made more mutual exchanges during Barbie play (1985, 13, 14). In 1995, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh also observed that Barbie collector cards focused on feminist history (1995, 148).

My discussion of the presentation of Barbie in this article and the research that documents the uses and types of play to which she is put demonstrate that Barbie truly does ride herd on a complex and multivalent variety of images, issues, and associations.¹³ Ironically, the Barbie phenomenon also speaks to the power of folklore. American culture assigns cultural importance to things that generate money. In Barbie's case, we can see that folkloric themes and presentations, whether positive or negative, are compelling enough that millions are willing to pay for Barbie-ized versions of them. This commodification of folkloric themes has helped make her the reigning princess of plastic. In a country where money talks, these purchases speak to us of the import of folklore through what seems the most unlikely of sources: a mass-marketed, plastic doll named Barbie.

Notes

Grateful thanks are due to Utah State University's FHE group for their insightful readings and suggestions.

1. Mattel marketed celebrity dolls, including dolls like 1977's Donny and Marie Osmond, from the 1960s onward (Deutsch 1996, 76). However, later they started foregrounding TV shows with Barbie taking over the personae of some of the show's characters. The first TV show Barbie was matched with was *Baywatch*, and many believed *Baywatch* Barbie resembled Pamela Anderson Lee (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 90).
2. Peter Stromberg (1996, 290-91) argues that consumerism is such an important part of American culture that it actually constitutes the "real religion" of many Americans. Grider (1996) discusses the commercialization of Halloween.
3. Mattel has started lines of dolls intended to engage little girls in the collector mode. The fairytale-themed Barbies fall into this category as does the American Stories series (Fennick 1996, 107).
4. According to Jill Elikann Barad, former Mattel chief operating officer, the wedding gown is one of the most popular pieces of Barbie clothing, but Barbie has never been truly married. "Little girls are marrying and unmarrying her all the time. If we were to officially set it, it would cut off some of the fantasy" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 115).
5. To determine which countries appear in the series, Mattel identifies at least one nation or region in which they have a production plant, subsidiary, or large or emerging collector population (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 123). Mattel also produces dolls especially for an international market; these are marketed abroad and not generally in the United States. For example, special less sexy Barbies resembling figures in Japanese cartoons and comics have been marketed in Japan (Shibano 1994, *passim*; Fennick 1996, 109). Also, Freundschafts Barbie commemorated the fall of the Berlin Wall (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 49). Of course, prior to the fall of the wall, Eastern Bloc countries had prohibited the importation of Barbies, which "exemplified every aspect of Western decadence and bourgeois culture" (Fennick 1996, 113). The fall of

the wall prompted Mattel to host an international summit for children: "In 1990, Mattel invited 40 children from 28 countries to the first Barbie Summit. . . . The conference featured tots as young as 6 years old discussing world hunger, degradation of the environment, and war and peace issues. . . . Mattel's idea for creating the Barbie Summit and the accompanying television ad campaign was an indirect result of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Mattel's management team was impressed with photos of Anika Polzin, a six-year-old whose first goal after crossing into West Germany was to buy a Barbie doll" (Sarasohn-Kahn 1998, 51). Mattel issued a special Summit Barbie to commemorate the occasion, which was sold in the United States.

6. Initially I thought that the South and the Southern Belle, due to their legendary and iconic qualities, would appear as much as the West and Western Barbie; this was not the case at all. The West is far more a part of Barbie's world than is the South.
7. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith gives an insider's perspective in her work of art called "Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World with Ensembles Contributed by the U.S. Government." The "dolls" she depicts are Ken and Barbie Plenty Horses of the Flathead Tribe; ensembles include "matching smallpox suits" (Lord 1994, 238-39).
8. This theme can be seen in the humorous list, "Being Indian Is," that Kenneth Lincoln includes in his 1993 book, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*; one of the entries is "Being Indian is meeting at least two dozen anthropologists before you're 21" (317).
9. Olds and Harris (1997) provide a comprehensive listing of Barbies and their accessories and clothing up to 1996.
10. McCracken (1996) offers an extended discussion of the social significance of hair.
11. Steele (1995, 21-22) discusses sex appeal and its relation to Barbie.
12. The subtitles "International Barbie" and "Hi Ho Barbie!" are puns that associate Barbie with horses. Part of the title of this article is a Barbie-ized version of a line on a Barbie Collector card that says: "Ride 'em Ken" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 1995:147), which comes from the Western expression, "Ride 'em cowboy."
13. For other work revealing the range and complexity of the discussion about Barbie dolls and Barbie play, see Cunningham 1993; Cordes 1992; Hohmann-Delf 1985; Lord 1994; MacNaughton 1996; Margo 1997; Motz 1983; Ebersole and Peabody 1993; Rand 1994; Rossie 1994; Stout and Mouritsen 1988; Sutton-Smith 1986; Turkel 1998; Wason-Ellam 1997; and Yocom 1993, 129.