

“That’s Because They’re Dream Houses, Mother***!”: *Barbie*, Utopian Camp, and a Conversation Between Two Allans**

Tyler Everett Adams and Edmond Y. Chang

{A spare, dark stage, black curtain, two mismatched chairs awkwardly angled toward one another, flanked by two unkempt plants, a simple wide spot. An AI-generated approximation of Indigo Girls’ “Closer to Fine” strums in the background. Two, non-identical men, dressed identically in colorful striped shirts, blue shorts, blue sandals enter from opposite ends of the stage, nod, sit, fumble with microphones, begin without introductions.}

Tyler Adams: *(as if quoting scripture)* Camp is “understood not only as a strategy of representation, but also as a mode of enacting self against the pressures of the

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dominant culture's identity-denying protocols."¹ José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. Chapter 5, page 120.

Edmond Chang: (*humming*) "I'm trying to tell you ... hmmhmm ... 'bout my life / Hmm ... hmm ... hmmhmm ... insight between black and white..."

TA: "Functional form is aligned with a normalized spatial and temporal mapping of the world, whereas the expressive exuberance of the ornament promises something else another time and place that is not hamstrung by the present."² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, Chapter 9, page 150.

EC: "And the best thing you ... hmmhmm ... hmm ... hmmhmm / hmmhmm ... hmmhmm ... take my life less seriously..."

TA: "Both the lone lunatic and the crazed collective stage a desire that I have called queer utopia."³ Muñoz, *Cruising*, 10, 170.

EC: "Hmm ... hmmhmm ... did marry or see a B-grade movie / Hmm ... hmmhmm ... my performance, hmmhmm ... hmmhmm ... see through me..."

TA: (abruptly) *Barbie* (2023) begins in Barbieland, a matriarchal society in which Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) and her "duplicate" dolls reside. At the onset of an unanticipated existential crisis, filled with thoughts of mortality, cellulite, and dread, Barbie approaches Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) for help. Weird Barbie informs that her owner in the Real World must be playing with her and having similar thoughts and problems, so that she must go and find her owner to stop her afflictions. Stereotypical Barbie decides to follow Weird Barbie's advice, and drives to the Real World with a stowed-away Ken (Ryan Gosling). There she finds Gloria (America Ferrera), the mother of her "owner" Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt) and a Mattel employee, who has been playing with Sasha's old Barbies. After Mattel tries to place Stereotypical Barbie back in the box, she escapes with the assistance of Gloria and Sasha. The three return to Barbieland only to discover

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 120.

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 150.

³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 170.

that Ken has beat them to the punch and has indoctrinated Barbieland with the patriarchy. It is up to Gloria and the gang to return the now brainwashed other Barbies to their former states of independence, and thwart the Kens before they override Barbieland's constitution to turn it permanently into Kendom.



A conversation between two Allans. Image generated by Adobe Firefly.

EC: (vamping) *So camp.*

TA: (camping) *So queer.*

EC: *Barbie* is camp. *Barbie* is queer. *Barbie* is utopia. The costuming and practical sets alone are a dream!

TA: The first time I saw *Barbie*, the camp was apparent from the first frame. I was totally delighted. To *camp* Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a bold and

much needed move. And then once Barbie and Ken were on the pink brick road invoking *The Wizard of Oz*, I knew I had to write about it.

EC: For me, the first time I saw *Barbie* I was in a near empty theater on a weekday morning. There was hardly anyone in the audience. It was like my own private screening, and I got to engross myself in the film and its worldbuilding possibilities. Like you, from the first chords of “Also Spoke Zarathustra,” I knew I was in for a wild ride, and I immediately thought of you and your work on queerness, camp, and performance. After I left the theater, I felt like there was something more complicated going on than just a silly movie about a silly doll. I didn’t want to just flatten it as just one big commercial, one big product placement—it is that, of course—but there had to be an alternative reading, a reparative reading, a more radical reading, especially because it was being criticized for being “too feminist” on the one hand or “not feminist enough” on the other. Gerwig herself said of the film’s inspiration,

There were so many interesting things about Barbie to me as a cultural icon and a totem. It was invented in 1959 and it's changed and expanded, but it persists until today and it also seems to be so human to me, just this idea of like we make a doll and then we get angry at the doll. Well, that's such a funny thing that humans do, and what does that mean and what is that interaction? And how we invest in inanimate objects and then let them transform us and then we transform them back. I think in a way we think of ourselves as quite evolved, but that to me seems to be a very, you know, almost mystical investment in an object, which I thought was an interesting place to start anyway.⁴

I don’t believe in all-or-nothing arguments—“hot take” criticism is too knee-jerk, too easy sometimes. I want to “yes, and” the critiques. I really do think there is something critical, worthwhile, albeit imperfect about the movie and the worlds it imagines, explicitly and implicitly, intentionally and accidentally.

TA: Exactly, and I think *Barbie* is camp for many reasons. The film has the general elements: a heightened sense of theatricality and excess in the sets, costumes, and acting. It also has incongruous juxtapositions between the “Real World” and Barbieland, and it has fantastic deployment of ironic and sardonic humor like in

⁴ Rollo Ross, “A Minute With: Greta Gerwig on Making ‘Barbie’ a Surprising Movie,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/minute-with-greta-gerwig-making-barbie-surprising-movie-2023-07-19/>.

the dance party scene: bright lights, major disco vibes in terms of decor and costume, vibrant music with even a “bespoke song,” excessive theatricality (Simu Liu’s “Rival” Ken literally sparkles when he flips) are all camp materials. The Barbies all agree that it is the “best day ever” (but also a day like any other) and immediately after Stereotypical Barbie (a doll) has an existential crisis and “thoughts of death” when technically an inanimate object. For Stereotypical Barbie to experience this within a matriarchy, which is often reductively a stand-in for feminism broadly constituted, provides a layered but campy social commentary.

EC: According to Muñoz, queerness, queer lives, queer worlds, queer futures are “a horizon imbued with potentiality.”⁵ Queerness is desire, pleasure, pain, struggle, contact, connection, performance, and possibility. *Barbie* is one way to explicate and explore these horizons. Muñoz continues, “We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there...we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”⁶ *Barbie* is aesthetic, speculative, performative. It makes me think, it makes me wonder. It is utopian, and it is weird, messy, and incomplete in its complicated and complicit relationship with pop culture, capitalism, and whiteness. This is why I think we’d both agree that it’s camp—*utopian camp*—offering new dreams, new pleasures, and exits from old ways and entrances into new worlds.

TA: *Barbie* is camp for many reasons, and it is actually perhaps more accurate to say it is pastiche with camp elements or can be read as camp. Again, avoiding totalizing or overly determining things. For example, beyond the homage and parody of *2001*, we see camp very early on in the opening credits when Stereotypical Barbie reveals that she not only wears heels to bed but that she has pre-formed feet. Not only is this a humorous and theatrical juxtaposition (the actor’s “real” body versus the doll she is portraying) but also a subtle, campy comment on the shoe style itself. The wearing of such a shoe, viewed to be a pinnacle of femininity yet painfully bemoaned by women in the real world (and Barbie herself in a later scene), is so comfortable when one’s arch is literally contoured to wear it.

⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

EC: I really appreciate the film's and your attention to detail. Camp is in the details. And camp is in the connections, resonances, and sometimes grinding edges between the expected and the unexpected, the proper and the punk, the everyday and the fantastic—it is “incongruity, theatricality, and humor.”⁷ Camp is oxymoron. Camp is brazen nuance. Camp isn't funny ha-ha, it's funny queer.

For example, I think most of *Barbie's* camp is happening in the background, in the periphery, in the side eyes and sleights-of-hand. I like all of the secondary characters and action, bits, and business coloring in the spaces around the mains. I think they tell us more about the world we are inhabiting more than the main characters, which happens a lot in stories and media. These side characters flesh out the world in ways that the author, director, or artist might not be able to do with the so-called leads because of publisher, studio, or political constraints. That's the double-edgedness of these characters: they are too often tokens—often queer, of color, non-normatively embodied or atypical in other ways—but they are also afforded a kind of freedom and agency because they are deemed unimportant or marginal. Jack and Karen in *Will and Grace* can be so over the top, ignore respectability politics, because they are not the proper, intelligible, acceptable leads. In *Barbie*, I love Alan, Midge, and Weird Barbie. I also love all of the Barbies and Kens of color. In the infamous beach scene between Gosling's Ken and Liu's Ken, the sophomoric “beach off” bit is not camp precisely because it is trying way too hard, yet the earnest looks of Kingsley Ben-Adir's “Basketball Ken” and titillation of Ncuti Gatwa's “Artist Ken” in the background are queer, camp, and hilarious. I also love Issa Rae's “President Barbie,” whom we will talk about later and for whom this discussion is dedicated, and Alexandra Shipp's “Writer Barbie.” In a sense, these are the actors and characters that can take risks, play around, and point up the absurdity and constructedness of it all.

According to Susan Sontag's oft-cited “Notes on Camp,” camp is denaturalizing, artifice, exaggeration, and “a sensibility that, among other things, converts the frivolous into the serious.”⁸ This of course interpellates the definition provided in Christopher Isherwood's autofictional novel *The World in the Evening*, one of the

⁷ Esther Newton, “Role Models,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 103.

⁸ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 53-54.

only examples of literary camp, which argues that camp “has underlying seriousness. You wouldn’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun *out* of it.”⁹ However, for Sontag, this seriousness is neutral, neutralized, even neutered: “It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical,”¹⁰ which is problematic and incredulous.

TA: Camp is definitely political. Utopian camp is political. Muñoz quite essentially describes camp as a method of “breathing new life into old situations” for the “queer, ethically marked, or other subject” and a “practice of suturing different lives, of reanimating, through repetition of difference, a lost country or a moment that is relished and loved.”¹¹

EC: I think camp at its best is critique, is vernacular theory about us and the world around us. In other words, to borrow from Newton who borrows from Muñoz, “camp is a ‘strategy for a situation.’”¹² I love this idea that camp is a process, a transformation, a strategy, and often a laboratory for community, collaboration, and survival. In that vein, what about this for our own “notes on camp”:

- camp is about situation, context, audience, performance *for* and performance *by* someone(s)
- camp is a kind of recognition, a way of perceiving, a kind of subcultural understanding
- camp is a practice, a way of being, a way of doing, a constellation of language, presentation, performance, and performativities
- camp is usually intentional but sometime it is not
- camp is often contradictory, ambivalent, and purposefully clashing and confounding
- camp is play, a mixture of “high” and “low,” messy, weird, sometimes unexpected
- camp is analysis, critique, transformation, and political

⁹ Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013): 110.

¹⁰ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 54.

¹¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 128.

¹² Newton, “Role Models,” 102.

- camp is embodied, playing with bodies, and at its best, interrogating gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, feeling
- camp is queer, camp is desire

TA: It is definitely queer. Camp allows a positive reading of the self or group into a society that otherwise rejects, marginalizes, or ignores them, which is why I personally reject when people argue that camp is not inherently queer a la Sontag¹³ and others. To be camp is to be at least in some way “queer,” nonnormative, albeit broadly constituted. Either the camp person or camp object in question is queer themselves *or* the person reading or receiving something as camp is queer in relation to the person or object in question. A John Wayne film is camp to me, both in how I receive it (ridiculous) and the idolized, virile, heterosexual masculinity presented in the film shows me to be a queer spectator through my homosexuality and effeminacy.

Camp has historically been received as an appropriative mode of gay male and queer subculture, which absorbs and replicates the production of the creative and performative output of women. This has led camp to be dismissed, not just for its privileging of popular culture and “low art” but also for its functioning as a possible interlocutor of misogyny, whiteness, and the sustaining of hegemonic gender roles. In *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Pamela Robertson attempts to produce a methodology for what she calls *feminist camp*, one that interprets and uses images of “camp female excess” not as the simple bolstering of sexism and patriarchy. Instead, Robertson claims that “camp’s attention to artifice...helps undermine and challenge the presumed naturalness of gender roles and to displace essentialist versions of an authentic femininity.”¹⁴ While the possible interlocution with oppression must never be trivialized, pathologized, or ignored, to assume it is inherent to camp is to ignore the critical potential of the camp sensibility as an aesthetic, performative, and political mode.

Which brings me to what I perceive to be the utopic nature of camp, or the possibility of camp allowing us to desire utopia. I think the best camp must exist in relation to the utopic. And while it is not perhaps inherently a display of utopia

¹³ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 64.

¹⁴ Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996): 6.

itself, it is one of the more pleasurable ways to come to understand that our present is insufficient, not enough, and deeply in need of change. So called “straight camp” or the attempt at straightening camp is a watered-down version of true camp. But this is often due to a lack of commitment to both camping and what one wants to result from the camping. The “straight camp” is a camp that wants to simultaneously destabilize but also maintain the hegemonic norms that benefit the subject in question. Queer camp, critical camp, instead allows us to queerly “see” the “here and now” is not enough, both through what is rendered to be a limiting social constructions and a desire for more of the communal aesthetic pleasure that is derived from experiencing camp.¹⁵ It is, indeed as Mark Booth describes, “commitment to the marginal” but not at all “greater than marginal merits.”¹⁶ The margins camp can orient us toward is instead a Muñozian queer horizon, full of potentiality.

EC: Absolutely, and in the words of one of my favorite definitions from Phillip Core’s *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*, “Camp is always in the future; that is why the present needs it so badly.”¹⁷ Queerness, camp, and marginalized experience shares a common thread—they have a complicated and often contentious relationship to normative representation, history, embodiment, and temporality.

TA: Ultimately, I think it is quite impossible to cleanly, perfectly define camp (nor should we try), and in this way I agree with Fabio Cleto in that it operates through a “radical semiotic destabilization, in which object and subject discourse collapse into each other.”¹⁸ Camp is the playful and theatrical performance or stylization (both deliberate and unintentional) of the excess of a particular thing or meaning. I believe there are essential core ingredients: theatricality, humor, and the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous things. These would be our liquors. Additively,

¹⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 70

¹⁶ Mark Booth, “Camp-Toi! On the Origins of Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 69

¹⁷ Philip Core, “From *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 86.

¹⁸ Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 86.

camp operates through “parody, exaggeration, [and] amplification.”¹⁹ I think camp has been or considered as purely ridiculous humor or purely a scathing critique, and this limits what camp can be or do (perhaps akin to too much vermouth). Camp is an assault on perceived seriousness through juxtaposing the serious and the absurd, and by overextending the serious fractures it and exposes it to be hollow or empty of pure meaning. *But* camp’s goal is not then to simply show us what we should take seriously or to provide a replacement for the serious. Instead, camp’s goal is “the creation of an attitude...within a cultural setting” which allows the spectator to see “form and content” through “new eyes;” in this way camp is “dialectical” or relational.²⁰

Barbie traffics in gender parody, feminist camp, and queer utopia as a means to consider and reconsider the position of women in society, feminist acts and interpretation, and how to work toward a more equitable society. Through the work of the constructed nature of gender and its performance through parody and gender as masquerade. What is articulated then is the “infinite rationality between screen and spectator, thus breaking away from the representationalist tradition which posits this configuration as a relationship between a passive object and active subject.”²¹ The creation of a camp feminist spectator allows for both the critical and laughing gaze, both of which are active counter-hegemonic modes that disrupt, displace, and disturb conventional ideas of femininity and what constitutes a woman.

For example, Weird Barbie (magnificently portrayed by Kate McKinnon) is a highlight of the *Barbie* film, and perhaps one of the most active participants in the critical camp, queer and feminist dialectic. Weird Barbie is ostracized in Barbie World, and is described being once the “most beautiful Barbie of all,” yet after her person played with her “too hard in the real world,” and now “she is faded into an eternity of making other Barbies perfect, while falling more and more into disrepair herself.” Weird Barbie functions as a guru and medium between Barbie

¹⁹ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 29.

²⁰ Scott Long, “The Loneliness of Camp,” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994): 79.

²¹ Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, “Introduction,” in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013): 14.

World and the Real World, perhaps as a direct relation to the level of impact the “real world” has had on her. She is in a hideous puff-sleeved pink dress and both her dress and face have been drawn on with what looks like a child’s scrawl. She exists in a constant state of the splits, and her hair has been cut in an asymmetrical manner much shorter than the other Barbies. Gerwig describes her inspiration coming from having “a lot of hand-me-down Barbies” as a child, ones who had already had been played with extensively, and that “it felt almost like a spiritual conduit to the world of play through that Barbie.”²² McKinnon being a comedic genius and point of view as a lesbian woman give a particular humor to the character. Weird Barbie’s aesthetic and McKinnon’s performance give the sense of “soft butch” which within the lesbian community describes a woman who presents a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics interchangeably rather than constant or prescribed performativity.

EC: I love this reading of Weird Barbie and want to add that the film is decidedly heterosexual. Mostly. Not necessarily heteronormative, but definitely not trying too hard to ruffle the feathers of mainstream audiences, sponsors, and critics. The queer possibilities are there; the utopian impulse is there in the film’s humor, camp, parody, earnestness, and easter eggs. What I find interesting is that there is very little obvious queerness in the Barbies. If we take queerness as queer sexualities, identities, and performativities, we don’t see much of this in the Barbies themselves. Femininity is queen, but that doesn’t automatically mean that there isn’t queerness. Carol Hay reads *Barbie* as a way to confront femmephobia and argues, “The hyperbolic femininity of Margot Robbie’s portrayal of the iconic doll strikes me as tantalizingly closer to queer camp than as anything that’s supposed to be taken as a sincere role model.”²³ Therefore, the Barbies’ queerness is more coded, perhaps reflecting the historical near-invisibility of lesbians and queer women in media, erupting in nods like “Girls night” and Birkenstocks and the Indigo Girls’ “Closer to Fine” and of course Kate McKinnon’s Weird Barbie, who as you say is perhaps the queerest and butchest of the bunch. Obviously, queer

²² Brian Hiatt, “The Brain Behind Barbie,” *Rolling Stone*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/barbie-greta-gerwig-interview-margot-robbie-ryan-gosling-superhero-movie-1234769344/>.

²³ Carol Hay, “Barbie Used to Be Everything Wrong with Patriarchal Beauty Ideals, Feminist Professor Says. Now She’s Closer to ‘Queer Camp,’” *Fortune.Com*, July 17, 2023, <https://fortune.com/2023/07/17/barbie-movie-beauty-standards-patriarchy-queer-camp-femmephobia-feminism-scholar/>.

actors playing Barbies or Kens is another way to code queerness like Hari Nef's "Doctor Barbie."²⁴ Ironically, perhaps, is that the Kens' queerness is much more apparent, readable, even expected. I think this is in part because homosociality and homoeroticism are far more legible in a patriarchal world—it's still about men, after all—even if it is parodied, denied, and policed.

TA: After diagnosing Stereotypical Barbie's "portal" problem, Weird Barbie holds a high heel in one hand, and a Birkenstock sandal in the other, which Barbie/Robbie must choose between. Choosing the high heel represents essentially burying her head in the sand, and pretending everything is fine; the sandal represents choosing to go into the real world and knowing "the truth about the universe." Barbie/Robbie immediately chooses the high heel, to which Weird Barbie responds "No, we'll do a redo; you're supposed to want to know." As Barbie/Robbie continues to try to pick the high heel, Weird Barbie humorously declares, "I'm bummed. You're a bummer. That's a bummer... [waves sandal] No! You're doing this one! I just gave you a choice so you could feel some sense of control."²⁵ The scene is humorous but also echoes of Newton's transformation of a sense of melancholia into the system of humor. While Barbie/Robbie perhaps has (or rather, had) the "choice" to live ignorantly in Barbie Land, Weird Barbie and her soft-butch status never was allowed the choice of ignorance, as the world has literally written on her. And, indeed, for feminism and women's liberation to succeed, there is only one choice: the Birkenstock sandal/"the truth about the universe." The use of the sandal/heel imagery is also playfully pointed: literally contort or break the body to society's standards of femininity (the heel) or to eschew them (the sandal).

EC: We have been talking about the Barbies and Kens, but I want to circle back to my earlier comment about camp being in the details and the space afforded, albeit limited, to the "other" characters. Put plainly, I don't think *Barbie* is actually about Barbie (or Ken). They are MacGuffins to get us to the one-two-three-crunch-Tootsie-Roll-chewy center of the film: Gloria and her daughter Sasha.

²⁴ Joseph Longo, "The 'Barbie' Cast Opened Up About Queer Representation In The Movie," *BuzzFeed*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/josephlongo/barbie-lgbtq-actors-hari-nef-alexandra-shipp-scott-evans>.

²⁵ See "Barbie (2023) | Transcript," *Scraps from the Loft*, September 7, 2023, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/barbie-2023-transcript/>.

TA: This is the twist, the reveal that all of the events of the film stem from Gloria, who is the “girl” playing with Stereotypical Barbie, and there is something a bit campy about the thought of a grown woman playing melancholically with dolls...but perhaps that’s part of the envisioned utopia! Not the melancholy part but a world in which that doesn’t feel sort of inappropriate or out of step.

EC: I definitely agree with this utopic, queer, camp vision of the film. Yes, the movie is about women helping women, the relationships between mothers and daughters, and about what it means to be a woman in a heteronormative world, especially after Gloria, Sasha, and Stereotypical Barbie (helped by Allan) return to find Ken has infected Barbieland with the virus of patriarchy turning it to Ken-dom.

TA: The group goes to Weird Barbie’s house for help, and Stereotypical Barbie collapses to the floor, in the manner of a discarded Barbie, and weeps in the throes of her existential crisis. She movingly reveals that she feels she is insufficient, imperfect, that she is no longer “Stereotypical Barbie pretty,” and that she believes that “being a woman” demands only the exceptional. The things she lists off are perfectly ridiculous: not being the President, never performing brain surgery, not being on the Supreme Court, or flying a plane.

EC: This is when Gloria steps in and Ferrera’s “It is literally impossible to be a woman!” monologue is the heart that beats at the center of the film. But this is why I think the movie is really about Gloria and by extension Ferrara herself and other women of color. Even as Gloria teaches Barbie the perils and promises of becoming a human woman, rehearsing the all-too-real reality of Brown women educating white women, the film interrupts the moment with the voiceover of the narrator (Helen Mirren), saying, “Note to the filmmakers: Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point.” The obvious joke here, of course, is that Robbie is still stereotypically pretty, beautiful, and attractive even while ugly crying. However, I offer a different meaning: Margot Robbie, a white woman, *is* the *wrong* person to cast because it should have been a woman of color in the first place. Of course, given the pop cultural and political economy of Hollywood (and Mattel), that would never have happened. Therefore, I hear implied meanings, lacunae in Gloria’s monologue, missing beats right before or after each

“woman.” Gloria reveals and witnesses the trials and generational trauma of already being a woman, particularly a Latine woman (here quoted at length with my emendations):

It is literally impossible to be a woman [of color]...Like we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we’re always doing it wrong. You’re supposed to be THIN but not TOO THIN and you can never say you want to be THIN. You have to say you want to be HEALTHY but you also have to be THIN...You have to be a boss, but you can’t be mean. You’re supposed to lead but you can’t squash other [white] people’s ideas...You’re supposed to be a career woman [of color] but always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men’s bad behavior, which is INSANE, but if you point that out then you’re accused of complaining. You’re supposed to be pretty for men but not SO pretty that you tempt them too much or threaten [white] women. You’re supposed to be part of the sisterhood but also stand out but also always be grateful. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It’s too hard, it’s too contradictory...and in fact, it turns out, somehow, that not only are you doing it all wrong but that everything is also YOUR fault. I’m just so damn tired of watching myself and every single other woman [of color] tie ourselves in knots so that people will like us.²⁶

Of course, you can change out or extend the reading for queer or disabled or some other marginalized identity or embodiment. The monologue is incredibly moving, skillfully played by Ferrera, which earned her first Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress (and demonstrates the power of side characters). The monologue is a searing critique of white, patriarchal, heteronormative contradictions so powerful that Writer Barbie, played by a Black woman, is snapped out of the “Kenchantment.” Armed with this reading, I cannot help but sense this racial undercurrent, this “feeling brown” to borrow Muñoz’s phrase, because it “gestures to performance’s ability to attune us twofold to the utopian potentiality of queer worlds that are not-yet-here and the brownness of a world that is already here.”²⁷

TA: Exactly! Stereotypical Barbie too realizes that revealing the “cognitive dissonance” of the patriarchy, which “strips it of its power.” Stereotypical Barbie

²⁶ See “Barbie (2023) | Transcript,” *Scraps from the Loft*, September 7, 2023, <https://scraps-fromtheloft.com/movies/barbie-2023-transcript/> and Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, *Barbie: The Screenplay*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2023): 88.

²⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): xxiii.

acknowledges that it is the work of Gloria, a woman of color and implicitly women of color, that is what ultimately allows us to see and destabilize white, patriarchal society. In fact, most of the Barbies in the scene are women of color and the white characters (with the exception of Stereotypical Barbie) are queer coded and ironically discontinued dolls: Barbie Video Girl, Growing Up Skipper, even “Sugar Daddy” Ken and Magic Earring Ken. These outsiders and outliers are the ones who save Barbieland, suggesting that the solution is intersectional coalition.

I think the Gloria throughline makes you question if she is theorizing or envisioning her own version of utopia, a Muñozian “backward glance that enacts a future vision” (Muñoz 4). She’s looking back doubly vis-a-vis Barbieland, both reminiscing of her daughter experiencing childhood play and fearing the world Sasha is walking into as she grows up, and simultaneously playing herself to sort of escape her quotidian existence by envisioning the world she wants to be better for Sasha.

And all the while, the scene never loses its underlying humor. Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) is in the splits on the wall the entire time, there is a solid “white savior Barbie” joke, a map of Barbieland a la-Murphy-bed drops out of the wall like we are suddenly in a camp spy or acting film. And the scene is filled with campy clashing patterns and vibrant colors. It’s wonderfully balanced, and never once heavy handed, which I think gives it a subversive potency.

EC: Muñoz argues, “Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness” (106).

TA: The film envisions a Black woman as President, a transwoman as the head of the medical establishment, a larger bodied woman speaking in government and being commended for holding logic and emotion at the same time, every night is a dance party, and then the guys are just around to beach each other off. And it’s a campy, queer one! I mean, pre-formed feet for heels? Everything is pink? Delicious.

That said, I think the *Barbie* and race conversation is complicated but still needs pushing. It would have been very easy for the writer’s to work in a line for Ferrera

about the difficulties of white beauty standards for people of color. Further, what I also stated earlier (re: the intersectional band going and ultimately saving Barbieland) is *observed* but never *discussed* within the film. I had to do a little bit of “work” to “read” that moment. Ultimately, the film never fully or adequately escapes the gravity of white feminism. Here I am thinking of bell hooks when she points to the very generic idea of feminism that is usually displayed in popular media as merely women seeking to be equal with men:

...since men are not equals in white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure, which men do women want to be equal to? Do women share a common vision of what equality means? Implicit in this simplistic definition of women's liberation is a dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed. Bourgeois white women interested in women's rights issues have been satisfied with simple definitions for obvious reasons. Rhetorically placing themselves in the same social category as oppressed women, they are not anxious to call attention to race and class privilege.²⁸

So in this way, I do think the film props up whiteness and white feminism of sorts, but I struggle to believe it entirely. The cast is incredibly diverse, just not perhaps overtly utilized in the manner in which it could or we desire. It feels like a matter of next steps. And simultaneously, if we are waiting for a work of art to holistically and entirely do what we want, I think we will be waiting for a very long time. Nothing can hold everything. This is where the potential of a Muñozian queer utopian camp can intervene.

EC: I don't think we need to rehash all of the critiques of the film's white, mainstream feminism not because there shouldn't be a conversation about it. Rather, I think we risk the all-or-nothing logics of the “hot take,” value signaling, and flattening the productive ambivalences in and around the movie. I am more interested in taking the film's everyday feminism and spinning it out into a vernacular theory about gender, race, sexuality, and so on. I do think that the film largely presents a homogenous world—both in terms of Barbieland and the real world—even though it attempts to address diversity and inclusion. But how might we locate and expand those punctuated moments, gaps, and leverage points that offer more radical and queer possibilities? Yes, Barbie largely represents white, cisgender,

²⁸ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, New edition (New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015): 18-19.

able-bodied, traditionally beautiful femininity. Yes, Barbie functions as synecdoche for capitalism, consumerism, Hollywood and US imperialism. Yet, as we have been discussing, Barbie complicates and disrupts some of these heteronormative expectations and narratives—from the failure of the romance plot to the lampooning of a major corporation to the camping of mostly white, mostly “normal” identities and bodies.

For instance, I just taught *Barbie* in recent class on literature and social justice, and one of the things I noted was that Ken is supposed to be the “villain” of the movie. Though, I supposed, patriarchy and the “real world” are the “big bads” we could say. But Ryan Gosling’s portrayal of Ken is so nuanced and ultimately likable that in some ways it undermines the argument of the film. We are supposed to care about the Barbies more than the Kens; feminism is supposed to overcome patriarchy and misogyny. The moments that Gosling’s Ken is at his worst—when he turns Barbieland into Kendom and utters the guttural “You failed me!” is rough—it is oddly recuperated by Gosling’s sadness and vulnerability. The Kens are hurt by toxic masculinity, too, and the Barbies need to rethink the supposed fairness of Barbieland; they need an answer to the question, “Where do the Kens go at night?” This is one of the limitations of a gender reversal plot, where the power dynamics are simply swapped one-to-one, because while it calls attention to the asymmetry of the structures and systems parodied, it also replicates the limits and frustrations of the binary. I know that the film is trying to go there by the end, but it is left underexplored and undertheorized.

Therefore I want to go back to the title of our essay and the quote by President Barbie at the film’s denouement. After the Barbies repair Barbieland’s Constitution and restore the Barbie-order to things, the Kens return *Monty Python*-cantering back from their frolic-fight-dance-battle on the beach to find everything back to “normal”:

KEN RYAN GOSLING
(losing his shit)
Is it my imagination, or did these
Mojo Dojo Casa Houses just get
dreamier?

The Barbies all step out into the open.

BARBIE ISSA
(from on high)
That's because they're Dream
Houses, mother*****.

She's censored by a Mattel logo.

BARBIE ISSA
That's right. We've re-instated the
Barbie Land Constitution to what it
should be. And returned all the
Barbies' brains and autonomy.

All the Barbies cheer!²⁹

President Barbie's "motherfucker," albeit bleeped out, is the only curse word in the PG-13 film, which earned the rating for its "brief language" and "suggestive references" (re: the much clumsier "beach off" scene). The Kens gasp and pearl clutch at President Barbie's audacity, and it is this moment that stands out as camp on multiple levels. It is funny, incongruous, theatrical, emotive, evocative, performative, and powerful. And it is gendered, racialized, angry. President Barbie/Issa Rae's Blackness is part of the camp, embodying Sequoia Barnes's provocation: "To me, camp is inherent in black style. We have a cultural symbiosis with the highly stylized. There is a hard to name and even harder to describe seemingly innate emphasis on the adorned body to exercise one's blackness."³⁰ The "mother*****!" is a provocation, a clap back, a genuine expression of simmering anger in a movie that desperately tries to maintain its candy coating and playful veneer.

²⁹ See "Barbie (2023) | Transcript," *Scraps from the Loft*, September 7, 2023, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/barbie-2023-transcript/> and Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, *Barbie: The Screenplay*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2023): 104

³⁰ Sequoia Barnes, "If You Don't Bring No Grits, Don't Come': Critiquing a Critique of Patrick Kelly, Golliwogs, And Camp as A Technique of Black Queer Expression," *Open Cultural Studies*, no. 1 (2017): 685.



President Barbie saves the day. Image generated by Adobe Firefly.

TA: To add, Muñoz argues, “Queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time.”³¹ One can read this moment as a brief camping of the Blaxploitation film aesthetics of the 1970s. Blaxploitation films often relied on “shock value to provoke thought” and their badass protagonists often “overcame racism in some way.”³² Blaxploitation films took the white gaze and inverted it, and the genre “incorporated stylistic elements, reconstructing depictions of black characters in mainstream films and, in the process, deconstructed popular, stereotypical images of black women.”³³ President Barbie’s moment

³¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 171.

³² Laura L. Finley, “Blaxploitation Films,” in *Violence in Popular Culture: American and Global Perspectives*, edited by Laura L. Finley (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2019): 31–33.

³³ Camille S. Alexander, “Forget Mammy!: Blaxploitation’s Deconstruction of the Classic Film Trope with Black Feminism, Black Power, and ‘Bad’ Voodoo Mamas,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 4 (August 2019): 839–41.

channels the vibrant energy of the genre's leading ladies like Pam Grier and Marki Bey, and takes the general tone of the film and subverts it for a moment. And it is camp that allows for the moment to be both incredibly humorous and thought provoking as "camp has been employed as a strategic manoeuvre that embraces stereotype to demystify assigned identity through humour."³⁴ This is the kind of camp that is often most effective, one that uses mimicry and parody to lay flat any sort of supposed "depth" of hegemonically imposed stereotypes or behaviors. Instead, the camping of Blaxploitation films, already inherently critical, allows for a "hallowing out from within" and a "performance of excess [and] depth is undermined by being taken to and beyond its own limits"³⁵

EC: President Barbie offers a punctuated moment of racialized camp that makes a mockery of the Kens, the Mattel executives, and even the Barbies and film itself. Like the close reading of Gloria, these moments of disidentification and disruption—what Muñoz defines as "affectively charged strategies of minoritarian survival and self-making, carving out a space for resistance and communal self-enactment"³⁶—are a kind of distributed but asymmetrical critique of race. President Barbie's strut and bleep can be read as what Brian Stephens calls Black camp, "a provocative analytic" and a "playful way of inflating identity to expose the artificial nature of categories often assumed to be stable and real,"³⁷ particularly stereotypical racial fictions. President Barbie's character and portrayal by Rae might be read "within a queer of colour critique that connects camp and signifying through black camp[,] and illustrates how the techniques and qualities of both traditions are performative weapons that come into sharp focus to serve the vulnerable in ways that are undertheorized."³⁸

TA: When I think of *Barbie* and camp, I return to a quote in *Cruising Utopia* that seems to have only grown more relevant or even prescient since the book's initial publication:

³⁴ Brian Stephens, "Prissy's Quittin' Time: The Black Camp Aesthetics of Kara Walker," *Open Cultural Studies*, no. 1 (2017): 655.

³⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, "Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, Or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 224.

³⁶ Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 63.

³⁷ Stephens, "Prissy's Quittin' Time," 646 & 647.

³⁸ Stephens, "Prissy's Quittin' Time," 658.

[a]t the center of *Cruising Utopia* there is the idea of hope, which is both a critical affect and methodology. Bloch offers us hope as a hermeneutic, and from the point of view of political struggles today, such a critical optic is nothing short of necessary in order to combat the force of political pessimism...My turn to Bloch, hope, and utopia is a challenge to theoretical insights that have been stunted by the lull of presentness and various romances of negativity and have thus become routine and resoundingly anticritical.³⁹

It would be quite easy to desire to produce a scathing, unrelenting feminist critique with a film like *Barbie*. But *Barbie* as a drama? It would be insufferable, darling. The film's cheeky camp allows for the viewer to exist in a state of critical yet hopeful pleasure, and observe the film's triumph not being found solely in the individual or hero but instead in collectivity. And so I think the film is ultimately hopeful. It is not a concrete, direct roadmap to utopia but instead shimmering glimpses of its potentiality.

EC: All in all, I do think *Barbie* is fun, campy, feminist, and definitely utopian. Its utopian camp recognizes the limits of mainstream media and yet still manages to play with tropes, expectations, and queerness all wrapped in pink, pink gingham. Put simply, if utopia is imagining otherwise, then camp is too. If utopia is looking for and inhabiting other possibilities, probabilities, and potentialities, then camp is too. If utopia is a horizon, a sensibility, a "there not yet here," then camp is too. *Barbie* teaches us that utopian camp is community, generosity, whimsy, and a well-placed curse word. I think the best definition of this sensibility, this feeling, this desire is from the deep end of Sontag's "Notes on Camp":

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character'...Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp', they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.⁴⁰

Utopian camp is a strategy for life, living, survival. Utopian camp is a strategy for love. I don't think it gets more Muñoz than that!

TA: (once again solemn) "The critical work that utopian thought does, in its most concise and lucid formation, allows us to see different worlds and realities. And

³⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4-12.

⁴⁰ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 65.

this conjured reality instructs us that ‘here and now’ is simply not enough.”⁴¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, Chapter 9, page 171.

EC: (humming) “There’s more than one answer ... hmmhmm ... hmmhmm / Pointing me in a crooked line...”

{The AI cover of “Closer to Fine” starts up again. The two non-identical men stand, bow, and exiting separately, dropping loose papers, stage right and stage left. The music plays an uncomfortably long time before the house lights come up.}



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⁴¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 171.