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**Article**

# **Remodelling Barbie, making justice: an autoethnography of craftivist encounters**

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## **Abstract**

I provide an autoethnographic account of “craft activist” workshops wherein I facilitate participants to remodel dolls to reflect their feminist or other social justice concerns, and describe one specific workshop with a powerful, personal impact in relation to childhood sexual exploitation. In drawing a connection between the vulnerabilities of one workshop participant and my own, I reflect upon our responsibilities as ethical feminist researchers. The larger function of the workshops is thereby argued as a co-created feminist space whereby we attend to the needs and desires of our intersectional feminist community. I draw upon material from diverse fields, such as art therapy, ethnography, and cultural studies to flesh out a consideration of how to transform difficult emotions and experiences into useful ‘equipment for living’, and to contribute to a scholarly conversation about the intersections of autoethnography, craftivism and feminism. The central questions answered by the work are, firstly, how representations of stigmatised identities or experiences have impacted upon me as workshop facilitator, and secondly, how we can continue to come to voice with, and support, each other in our making of a more just world.

## **Key Words**

Craftivism, workshop, vulnerability, dolls, child sexual exploitation, United Kingdom

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### 1. Craftivist Barbie?

*“Justice isn’t something we wait for; it’s something we MAKE”.*

(Sarah Corbett, foundational British craft activist, 2013, p.60)

Traditionally, there has been a negative feminist orientation to Barbie and other similar dolls, represented as harbingers of female preoccupation with an unattainable embodiment, and holding up an impossible exemplar of consumption as a performance of hegemonic femininities. Since 2012, I have been running workshops inspired by the ethos of “craftivism” (a portmanteau word combining craft and activism), where people use craft materials to remake Barbie and other dolls into artefacts that better reflect their lives, bodies, experiences or research findings. In a craftivist paradigm, activism is reconceived as something quietly powerful which can be based in craft activities and the transformation of mundane objects. Workshop creations can be seen at <https://superheroicdolls.tumblr.com/> and <http://bit.ly/FeministKilljoyDolls>. Workshop participants are generally social science researchers, academics and community activists. Some workshop creations are strong and powerful statements, such as ‘Not your bitch Barbie’, who refuses to do her male colleague’s emotional labour. Some question conventional thinking, like ‘Recoverella’, who is a ‘fully recovered from anorexia’ doll, eternally bound to her anorexic self. Some, like ‘Non-binary gender Barbie’, point to the painful restriction imposed by social roles, such as the ‘male’ doll’s face with a ‘female’ doll’s face tightly stretched and pinned over it. Some question women’s representation in a professional field, such as the ‘Vessel’ doll created by a health

visitor; this doll is naked but for a hoodie pulled up over her face, a hollowed-out stomach, and a fluorescent pink netting umbilical cord attaching this vessel to the all-important baby. The ‘heartbreaking doll’ at the centre of this paper however was created by a participant in a community youth group.

This is an autoethnographic work, where accounts of individual experience are considered as ‘insider texts’, especially those which concern difficult or hidden experiences, or which are related to injustice. Such critical autoethnography also explicitly renders the standpoint of the writer as highly visible, and vulnerable. In this type of work there is explicit writing drawn from the lived experience, considering the self without neglecting the social and cultural context of those experiences. In terms of the structure of autoethnographic work, some autoethnographers use narrative poetry (e.g. see Blinne (2010) and Faulkner (2018) for the specific uses of this technique as feminist inquiry); many interweave their personal accounts within the rest of the text (e.g. Crossley, 2009; Defrancisco, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter, 2007). Lacking confidence in my ability to generate poetry, I took the latter approach. The paper therefore begins with my autoethnographic account of a workshop provided for a “girls group” in an economically deprived area of a large urban centre. I describe the powerful personal impact of one participant’s creation of a heartbreaking doll. This is then related to the aim of autoethnography: to transform difficult emotions and experiences into useful “equipment for living” (Burke, 1973), through an examination of what the workshops offer participants. To do this, the account of the heartbreaking doll is followed by an examination of autoethnography as method and a review of literature which connects autoethnography, craftivism and feminism. Other transformed dolls created within the workshops are also described in relation to stigmatised identities and experiences, the ontological deficit of shame, and strategies for the control of vulnerability. The affordances of these craftivist workshops are then examined in regard to the power and pleasures they provide, as well as

the potential problems that need to be addressed in any such undertaking. The paper concludes with a reflexive consideration of the central question of what the workshops can teach us about feminism, community and coming to voice with each other, and one final autoethnographic scene.

## **2. The heartbreaking doll**

### Scene 1: paying attention

There was a heartbreaking doll. It was made by a young woman in a 'girls' group'. The group took place weekly in a community hall in a deprived area of a northern town. The stated aim of the group was to foster social inclusion; essentially, it was a way of keeping in regular contact with at-risk youth, and was funded as part of a larger organisation with the aims of redressing health inequalities, and promoting community participation and collaboration. The larger organisation was funded by the city council and a National Lottery grant. The broad guidance I had been given from the workshop commissioner was that the session should focus on building confidence and self-esteem, the aim of the group more generally being to foster resilience in these vulnerable girls and young women who live in deprived communities.

There were three youth workers present. I arrived early to set everything up. One of the youth workers helped me, and she described some of the issues that the attendees were dealing with. Abuse. Neglect. Sexual exploitation. Close family members going to prison. Bullying as perpetrator and victim. Very early pregnancy, social work involvement and giving a baby up for adoption. I thought about their lives and their ages, 13 to 17, and I decided to begin with something that might speak more to their lives and their problems, before moving to the Barbie transformation task. So, I wrote this on the flipchart stuck

to the screen at the front of the room: “Imagine or remember some of the bad things people might say about you. Write them down on post it notes and stick them on the whiteboard (if you want).”

I remembered the youth worker said that the literacy of the group was not high so I read these words out loud. The girls looked at the youth workers for encouragement. There was a long moment’s silence. I produced some post it notes myself. *Lanky. Bad. Weirdo.* I put these on the whiteboard. The girls and workers seemed reassured about what to do; several post it notes followed. *Little shit. Low life. Attention seeker. Chav. Slag.*

Next, I wrote, “Now let’s think of some positive things we think about ourselves or we have heard other people say, and do more post its.” I read this one out too. This time everyone took longer to come up with fewer notes, but there were some.

Everyone in the room took part in the “post it note” activity: six group members, the three youth workers and me. I felt it was important to show the group members that everyone experiences this, and to remind them that other messages about our identities are available beyond those negative ones projected onto us by others.

Finally, I wrote and read out, “Now take a doll and turn it into one that reflects who you are”. The girls fell upon the dolls in excitement and gathered up armfuls of supplies.

One attendee put herself as a little tiny doll in the middle of a large group of dolls and toys, including three toy dogs. One rounded out a fashion doll with several layers of foam padding, wrapped a leopard lycra fabric ‘dress’ around it and pronounced “Now it looks much more real”. One took one of the ‘boy’

dolls, put a red check shirt and jeans on it and said, “It’s all about the Look” - it visibly resembled her.

One young woman was late and missed the first two tasks. She had appeared in court for the first time that day; she came in and told everyone all about it. She was very excited and apparently confident. The youth workers did a good job of engaging her with the task. She eventually sat down in the only seat left - next to me. She took up a doll. She gagged it with tape, she blackened the forehead, the eyes, the chest, the arms, the dress. She blackened underneath the dress. She carelessly cropped its hair. An artist’s rendering of this doll can be found at [bit.ly/HBDoll](http://bit.ly/HBDoll). I looked at this doll and I wanted to cry, but it also made me angry. I really wanted the dolls’ maker to give the doll a post it note to see what she might have to say to us. The maker refused. I wanted to take a picture of this doll before she took it away with her. She said, “I don’t want the fuckin thing, take a picture, do whatever, just fuck off right.” I took the picture.

The youth worker who helped me set up also helped me put what little remained of the dolls and craft supplies back in the suitcase. She said, “I should have warned you not to get everything out. They always take everything they can because they have so little.” She called me a taxi; I cried all the way home. The taxi driver tactfully ignored this, and I was very grateful. I do not like it when people draw attention to my emotions.

## Scene 2: a hook

Two years later and I keep coming back to this image of the heartbreaking doll. What is it about the doll that breaks my heart? How does that break feel? I am showing a picture of the doll to my friend Lauren, a talented artist who also

happens to be a researcher in sexual violence. I describe how the doll was made, the black pen, the sound of the scissors on the hair. I start crying again and I apologise. I say, “I don’t know why I always cry when I think about this doll.” “There is a hook there”, she says. “Something that you are stuck on. Maybe it is not about the doll but about YOU. What is there in you that is stuck on this doll?”

The doll makes me curious, and I am ashamed of this curiosity. I want to know the story, I want the creator to talk to me. But I am also afraid to listen. I feel that I won’t be able to do anything about this burst of honesty. I’m embarrassed that I took this picture because I was quite persistent in asking for it, and I shouldn’t have been. And because it betrays such vulnerability, a helplessness that I cannot alleviate. I’m sad that my attempt to give this group a small space to think something positive for themselves has not worked for this young woman. I’m anxious that I may have caused some harm to this young vulnerable person. She didn’t get to undertake the first two tasks; was she ready for the doll transformation?

I have come to grief over this: I feel like the task suddenly failed. The task was to mend hearts a little bit. She made a doll that breaks hearts. I give myself grief about it – the task was supposed to help the group see where they have some power in their lives to see and do things differently, even in only a small way, to think that no matter how outsiders describe them, they know some good things about themselves and can share that with others. There was no redemption possible for the broken-hearted doll. Its creator was not given the same opportunity to think about the positive messages that are available. I feel a very great sadness for that young woman’s history and her future. Her vulnerability,



her involvement with the criminal justice system, some family details that the youth worker shared with me: this cannot lead anywhere good. But also, the doll is heartbreaking because it reminds me of my own fragility, my vulnerability, my broken family, my own sexual exploitation, feelings about which I have tried so hard to deny, to cover up with rage and achievements. If I had been asked to undertake this task at this age, my doll would have looked like this. Silenced. Bruised. Vulnerable. Shamed. Anxious. Disgusted. Grieving for something lost.

The hook, where I am stuck, is wishing that someone had paid attention to my grief and lack when I was once like this young woman is now. I am her and she is me. And the road we are on is dangerous and fraught and there are many trials to come. Like the doll's maker, my childhood and adolescence took place in an economically deprived area. My family's social capital was severely limited by economic and social circumstances. Each generation of my family had its significant historical, social and emotional trauma, and passed this poisoned legacy on to the next generation. The outlook for me was bleak, as is the outlook for the maker of the heartbreaking doll. And yet .... I am here, writing this. And here she is: I ask her to represent herself in a doll, and she does. We witness this doll, this young woman, and we feel her pain, restriction, lack, damage. We pay attention. We see that she is fragile. We contain and hold her fragility for a moment. We enable that acknowledgement of fragility. We can attend to her anger: I don't want the fuckin thing, take a picture, do whatever, just fuck off right. I don't want this thing that represents me. An unwanted identity. Yet these experiences, however painful, make us who we are, and we cannot deny them without denying ourselves.

### **3. Autoethnography: a vulnerable method**

The paper now puts these two autoethnographic scenes into context, with a consideration of the implications and functions of autoethnography, and a review of related literature, before considering the affordances of the workshop and the responsibilities which arise, and finally, concluding with a reflexive section in relation to a third and final autoethnographic scene.

#### *The purpose of autoethnography*

The epistemic aim of autoethnographic work is to contribute, critique or extend knowledge in some way. This paper considers the experience of running the Barbie transformation workshops, and in particular the nuclear episode of the heartbreaking doll in the girls' group, and relates these experiences to a scholarly conversation about the intersection of autoethnography, craftivism and feminism. The paper also provides some material about the impact of child sexual exploitation, an experience which is difficult and hidden, in a culture which most often silences or mistrusts survivor accounts. In a feminist work on understanding life after child sexual abuse, Warner argues that "personal accounts of child sexual abuse [...] provide debates with depth and detail, without which [...] theoretical work would be impoverished and mainstream understandings of abuse survivors' lives would be superficial" (2009, p.248). Warner was also concerned with how to effect the transformation of 'survival' into 'recovery' after child sexual abuse, arguing that for many "recovery can barely be imagined" (2009, p.249). The present paper provides a contribution of the author's narrative from decades in survival mode and steps toward recovery. The account therefore embraces vulnerability in using personal experiences to describe, understand and challenge cultural practices, as well as to explore questions we have about our own experiences. The

uses of vulnerability in this process are to disrupt taboos, break silences and reclaim lost or disregarded voices – the core work of autoethnography as constructed by Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015, pp. 38-40).

Outlining ethnography's affective turn in her 1996 work, *The vulnerable observer*, Ruth Behar reminded us that “readers need to see a connection between [the vulnerable person I am writing about] and me, despite our obvious difference, and they need to see a connection back to themselves as well” (p.16). I am drawing an emotional and intellectual connection between myself and the creators of the heartbreaking dolls I have witnessed, not in order to assert some form of identity claim, but because this enables me to draw deeper connections between my personal experiences and the central argument: that the workshops act as a co-created feminist space whereby we can attend to the various needs of our broad feminist community and give voice to each other in a way which makes justice.

Writing in this vulnerable way does not however mean that anything (personal) goes. Behar argues that “the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument” (1996, p.14). I could have written a more traditional academic account of the heartbreaking doll and other encounters with stigma, without including my own. However, much like the rupture in anthropology which Behar discusses at length in *The vulnerable observer*, to pretend that we are not only affected by, but also deeply invested in, what we observe in our life and research journeys is to deny our common humanity with those we observe, and to deny our own vulnerability in a way which is deeply problematic.

#### *Autoethnography, craftivism and feminism*

Boon, Butler and Jeffries, in their explicitly autoethnographic and feminist exploration of liminal spaces, define handcrafts as a “reflexive activity through which generations of

women have made sense of their lives” (2018, p. 91), and they consider the process-oriented work of handcrafts as “ a form of life-writing and theory-making through which we stitch ourselves and our thinking into being” (p.91). Similarly, the work of Tal Fitzpatrick, a textile artist and craftivist, conceptualises making decorative things by hand for drawing attention to injustice as a form of change making, in what she terms ‘DIY citizenship’ (2018). This brief review covers literature in which feminists have undertaken such reflexive activity using crafts to draw attention to, and challenge, gender-based oppression, and relates these to my practice in the workshops and to the narrative presented within this paper of justice as something that is made, not waited for.

Coleman (2018) used an individual and critical autoethnography as a method of reflecting upon the experience of art teacher education, arguing that the creation of a digital portfolio of work allows for an exploration of rhizomatic connections between artefacts, practice evidence and the different parts of identity involved in becoming an art teacher. Although much work in autoethnography is from this individual perspective, there are some collaborative projects, such as the work of McNair (2019) in the arts education field, who used collaborative life writing and visual story-telling to challenge dominant narratives of Black children in the US public school system. These two papers from the field of art education usefully epitomise the poles of purpose for autoethnographic engagement. At one end of the pole is a narration of experiences simply to forge deeper connections with their meanings, as in Coleman, and at the other end is work like McNair’s, explicitly political work which seeks to deconstruct those meanings into a challenge to problematic representation and injustice. This explicitly political stance is dominant throughout the literature combining autoethnography with activism and feminism seen below. In relation to my practice in the workshops, certainly when I began, the intention was simply to enable some playful deconstruction of a gendered representation of body image ideals via the readily understood

cultural symbol of Barbie. Within the present paper, I consider the multiplicity of deconstructions and reimaginings of Barbie made possible by the workshops as specific challenges and ripostes to ubiquitous problematic representations.

Drawing upon Stanley's foundational work in sociology and autobiography, Ettore constructs autoethnography as an engagement with the feminist maxim 'the personal is political', raising "oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity" (2017, p.359), using such precarity to note and speak up against injustices. Therefore, I move to an examination of how feminist autoethnography has been used within some unusual research spaces, where women's experiences in patriarchal structures point to important problems where the political is very much personal. In these women's accounts they challenge matters such as the surprising absence of anorexic-experience voices from even critical feminist work on eating disorders (Holmes, 2016); moving from shame to pride, and activism, in relation to menstruation (Quint, Pickering, Wiseman & Armstrong, 2019); the emotional and physical labour of reproductive failure (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2019); and, in her account of trying to find suitable places to express breast milk at the academic workplace, van Amsterdam (2015) exposes the physically and psychologically painful lived experience behind legally sufficient provision. There is also a large strand of autoethnographic work relating to activist researcher reflexivity, whether co-produced, as in Kara (2017) examining issues of power and identity in co-production of activist research, or individual, as in Lac and Fine (2018) considering researcher difficulties and positionings in participatory action research with minoritised students.

In relation specifically to Black feminist academic activism, Baker-Bell (2017) examines her experiences of resistance as a Black feminist literacy researcher, and Behl (2019) considers the relationship between her own experiences and the persistent under-representation of women of colour in political science, despite significant attempts to diversify the profession.

Finally, I turn to the polemical and inspiring work of Griffin (2012), who focusses firmly on how she refuses to stay quiet to keep others comfortable, in embracing the subject position of ‘The Angry Black Woman’. Her focus is on using anger as a productive force rather than a destructive one, and on how we can use our difficult experiences to challenge the systems which oppress us. Griffin argues that autoethnography is therefore a way to live what bell hooks calls ‘talking back’: “moving from silence into speech” which is “a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible” (hooks 1989, p.9).

Feminist autoethnography therefore foregrounds ethical concerns in a vulnerable way, speaking out against injustice by both pointing out, and presenting alternatives to, our precarities. The focus of the present paper on researcher reflexivity, in relation both to the process of the workshops and the narrative of my personal experiences, is intended to make a contribution in relation to feminist craftivism. Therefore, I now turn to the workshops themselves, with a consideration of what they make possible, and what needs to be attended to in this work.

#### **4. Affordances of the workshop**

##### *Method of play: a small riot*

Before the workshop participants arrive, I take time to make the (usually carefully bland, institutional) room look colourful and enticing. I prop up all the dolls to be remodelled: Barbie, Bratz, Action Man, Cindy, Disney character dolls and princesses, wrestlers and other action figures, pound shop dolls and those from charity shops. I strew around the other materials: fabric, pens, scissors, glue, card which sparkles or reflects, tape, needles and thread, paint, glitter, lollipop sticks, labels, stickers. This results in a chaotic, colourful riot of materials, which I find quite helpful in persuading the participants to let loose. I prop up a remodelled doll here and there. In troop the participants. They sit at the cabaret style tables and I give a brief introduction to the task and remind them that no one is going to be judging

the quality of their production. I talk about some of the example remodelled dolls. We look at a passive plastic Barbie, with her permanent rictus, tiptoes and impossible proportions; we consider the musclebound plastic wrestling figure, or the impassive, depressed-looking Action Man. We start to imagine them as modified objects which can reflect our own personal ‘project’, in Ashworth’s term (2003) – the thing we are most trying to achieve in our lives. For some, they make a doll which reflects the struggles of their research participants or of their own field of inquiry. I ask the participants to think about the qualities they bring to their project, their skills, knowledge and experiences, and any vulnerabilities they need to be careful about.

Then I ask them to begin the doll transformation. For many, their last opportunity to be creative and free in this manner was in primary school, so this most often results in silence. I ask people to stand up so they can look at all the materials; I circulate, help people find things, comment supportively on what people are doing, ask them what their plans are for their creation. I encourage people to support each other, and encourage talk and laughter. I keep an eye on the time and encourage people to finish their creation so we can talk about what they have done. After starting out quite tentatively, I often notice that, after people have been talking to each other for a short while, there is a definite loosening of the atmosphere, a lightening. The body language changes to more open stances, easier movement, surer movement. There is what I can only call a shimmer of excitement in the room as people laugh while they talk about often serious issues, in a supportive way, in communion with those who have their own problems. Ringrose and Renold characterise such moments as “glow”, defined as “affective intensities that can circulate in moments like these”, where ruptures to “normative cruelties of sexual and gender constructs erupt into the air and expand into the space leaving residues of feeling strong powerful and capable of transformation” (2016, p. 115).

*Rebellions: the dolls as feminist resistance*

The affordances of the Barbie transformation workshop are to make possible some small, local, quiet yet powerful activist rebellions against the taken-for-granted nature of patriarchal culture, and the Foucauldian specific techniques of power by which our unruly bodies are transformed into well controlled, docile bodies. As Gill and Orgad (2017) argue, patriarchal culture is dissolved in all of us, always there but somehow hidden, as exemplified in supposedly new and liberatory injunctions to ‘women: love your body’, as presented to us by a chorus of corporate media voices. Gill and Orgad propose that the purpose of these ‘new’ messages is to remind women that their appearance is still their most important attribute (and perhaps the only important one). In such a scopoc, sexist economy, Barbie is most often critiqued by feminists as fomenting a normative discontent with the normal fleshy bodies of women and girls, what duCille (2003, p.346/7) argues as “Barbie as a real threat to womankind – a harbinger of eating and shopping disorders.” Barbie is “always perfect, ageless, and childless” (Lobel, 2018, p. 85). In contrast, as Gill argues (2007, p.117): “Women are never the right age. We are too young, we’re too old. We are too thin, we’re too fat. We wear too much makeup, we don’t wear enough. We are too flashy in our dress, we don’t take enough care. There isn’t a thing we can do that is right”.

Being de(con)structive to Barbie could be interpreted as per Kuther and McDonald (2004), who asked American children aged twelve to fourteen for their thoughts and opinions on Barbie and what kinds of play happened with this toy. They noted that it was very common for children to engage in aggressive and destructive play with Barbie at that age, and argued that this is a manifestation of hostility to expectations of feminine perfection and submission. Smilan (2015) literally deconstructed Barbie as part of an art project to make sense of her own feelings of being undervalued as an art teacher. She described this deconstruction as enabling her to find voice and community after the release of “a private yet externally



induced turmoil” (2015, p. 71). In the workshops we examine our own private yet externally induced turmoils, and working in feminist communion we share our experiences and foreground some alternative embodiments and ways of being in the world. In reconstructing Barbie and other dolls in our own images through art and craft materials, we are engaging in what the craftivist movement define as a combination of craft and activism, “a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper and your quest for justice more infinite” (Greer, 2018).

The workshops have enabled a multi-pronged and messy resistance, whereby the homosocial enactment of being in a critical mass enables what Ahmed has termed a ‘feminist snap’, “a tipping point ...a snap might seem sudden but (...it) is one moment of a longer history of being affected by what you come up against” (Ahmed, 2017, p.190). The gathering of a critical community, and permission to play in a serious way, stimulates a reflection upon the conditions of our captivity, and a cathartic interrogation, decoding and re-envisioning of Barbie into a rebellious character. In Nussbaum’s terms, these gatherings enable us to “see the structures of power more clearly, and so (we) can the more clearly evade them” (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 77). To bring this back to the compass of craftivism, as Corbett (2013, p. 60) reminds us: “Justice isn’t something we wait for; it’s something we make”.

### *Making together*

Not only do we make justice; it’s important that we make it together. I argue here that the workshops function in an atmosphere of *communitas*, defined by Douglas (1984, p.104) as one which brings qualities of “good fellowship, spontaneity, warm contact” in a relationship with each other which does not draw attention to status. We build shelter for each other in this atmosphere. I have described above the initial unease with which most participants greet the injunction for creativity. This lack of experience or skill with the creative materials

readily engenders a feeling that no one is the expert here. Perhaps more powerfully however, within the workshops there is also a flattening of the usual hierarchical relations of our bodies and agencies. In the culturally-preferred mode of feminine embodiment, that of the well-disciplined subject, we compare our fleshy embodiments to the feminine imaginary of Instagram and myriad alternative mass media venues, and we are positioned in shifting hierarchical relations with others within the rushing currents of everyday discourse. Often in the workshops there is a degree of anonymity where established, highly cited professors may be rubbing shoulders with students and researchers just starting out in academe. I facilitate this by asking people to write a name badge for themselves with only their first name.

Not everything is communal in the workshops, however. Participants are free to transform Barbie and other dolls and materials in any way they choose and thus to make visible any 'project' (as in Ashworth, 2003)) that they find important during the workshops, and to discuss it with others, or not, as they see fit. Not everyone takes part in the group 'identity parade', and people sometimes destroy their creations, stripping them and putting them back with the workshop materials. Thus, in Goffman's terms (1990), for participants, the management of both impressions and information is easy and under their own control. For example, one doll was left behind after a workshop, as they occasionally are. Without looking closely, I packed it back in my suitcase of materials. When I stripped its outfit several months later, thinking to reuse the doll, I discovered its legs were covered from knee to top of thigh with self-harm cutting type 'scars'. If it is hard to talk about self-harm then I am glad this doll's maker could share this secret with me rather than take her doll away, and I thank them for being brave enough to do this. The maker was able to avoid the ontological deficit accruing to the stigmatised self-harming identity, and at the same time the medium of the workshop afforded them an opportunity for disclosure, but in such a way that they did not have to deal with any impact of this disclosure on others.

### *The uses of hurt feelings*

In attending to the many feminist dissatisfactions with normative cultures, I wish to foreground Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy, who encourages us to "attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near" (2010, p.216). Ahmed suggests further that by attending to our unwanted feelings as well as those we more readily welcome, we can start to use all these feelings as a feminist ethical resource – they help us care for each other. To return therefore to the heartbreaking doll, the young woman who created the heartbreaking doll was angry. Angry because she was hurt. Angry because she was fragile. The workshops are not 'art therapy' but workshopers often say they value the opportunity to talk about their lives and their own 'hooks', the things that make them angry, but expressed in an agentic way. In *Art therapy and anger* (2008), Liebmann argues that anger can be conceived as a destructive emotion to be managed away, or a constructive emotion that we can welcome, and which it is healing to express. I have worked hard to move on from my rage because it outwore its usefulness in my life as a coping mechanism. It was getting in the way. But perhaps revisiting anger about my past has enabled me to construct a different vision of the future, one where my vulnerability can be expressed and reflected upon, in feminist community. Liebmann comments on the uses of group creative expressions for dealing with anger. The relative slowness of making something helps us reflect more on what is going on. Making something is a less threatening way to approach issues. The group aspect of the work is one of the things that participants say they most welcome. Nevertheless, inviting vulnerability in a group setting comes with a great responsibility. Through undertaking this autoethnography I have realised that I must attend more carefully to what comes up and signpost to appropriate support. I have also realised that I need to look after myself within this, remaining alert to anything that is difficult and seeking support with it. I return to the uses of anger at the conclusion.

### *The modern 'diverse' Barbie?*

No examination of Barbie would be complete without an examination of the racial politics involved. Just as Barbie presents a gendered ideal, duCille (2003) draws our attention to her racialised ideal, arguing that Barbie is presented by her manufacturer Mattel as normatively white. What is discursively familiar in the world of 'fashion dolls' is white Barbie with her literally impossibly slim body and enlarged breasts, perfect 'white' skin, straight long blonde hair and blue eyes. The company had a much-hyped diversity of dolls released in early 2016 with three new body types: 'curvy', petite and tall. Seven different skin tones, 22 different eye colours and 24 hairstyles were vaunted as part of this release (and some of the dolls were notably flat of foot rather than poised on permanent tiptoe) but it is notable that the white doll hairstyles are much more varied than those of the black doll, where little approaching 'natural' black hair is to be seen. However, in the context of falling Barbie sales, it is hard not to be cynical about this championing of diversity and inclusivity. According to the BBC (2015), in 2009, Barbie accounted for more than 25% of the US market for dolls and accessories, but that figure fell to 19.6% in 2013. Further, the trend in Barbie sales is firmly downward, with sales 25% down between 2012 and 2017 (Statista, 2018). As duCille argued, the toy industry is one of many where multiculturalism is a simple "additive campaign that augments but does not necessarily alter the Eurocentric status quo" (2003, p 332), and these new releases do nothing to counter this argument. White Barbie is still the (literal) mould for the Black Barbie (for more on this, and the charged history of Barbie and her modern alternatives, see Lobel, 2018).

The first few times I ran the workshop, the dolls provided out of my own pocket were exclusively 'white', since they were the cheapest I could find – from charity shops and bargain high street chains such as 'Poundworld'. After feedback, I began to seek out a variety of dolls, different colours and different bodies; however, inclusivity proved expensive and I

began seeking small amounts of funding from workshop commissioners. The workshops are useful in encouraging participants to remake the doll in an image that is meaningful to them; participants have no problem in deconstructing the dolls and other materials into forms that represent their daily struggles, hopes and triumphs. Barbie, Ken and friends have been recoloured, burned, shorn, had limbs and breasts removed, head swaps, and been given feminist inspired 'make-unders', with 'make-up' paint removed, and comfortable shoes improvised from playdough or tin foil. Nevertheless, it remains essential to provide a wide range of dolls to avoid any participant feeling that the 'white' doll is meant to represent us all.

To return to duCille's argument, "deconstructing Barbie may be our only release from the doll's impenetrable plastic jaws, just as deconstructing race and gender may be the only way out of the deep or muddy waters of difference" (2003, p. 346). Representations of Barbie and other dolls are open to question, even, or perhaps especially, when multinational corporations attempt to provide diversity for profit; but we can also re-present these neoliberal visions in our own images, not with a profit motive but to talk about things that are problematic, disturbing and difficult, both to hear and to live. Rather than reproducing the narrative of Barbie as "other" to feminism, this paper argues that we can use deconstructions and re-imaginings of Barbie to gather together and build shelter for each other, no matter how temporary and fragile, in order to support and build community.

## **5. Conclusion: coming to voice**

I now conclude by relating Freire's theory of critical pedagogy to the affordances of the workshops, before a third and final autoethnographic scene. Freire (2000) argued that working in community, we can move in stages from firstly noticing or foregrounding a problem, and finally to arriving at practicable solutions that we could not initially imagine. I argue that the workshops enable such movement, whereby feminists and others can go from the problem of Barbie reified as a model of the perfect aspirational woman, to perceived

practical solutions (feminist antipathy to Barbie) to presently practised solutions (don't let kids play with Barbie, protest Barbie) to practicable solutions which are unimaginable from the perspective of normative culture. Such solutions include the subversion of Barbie into such alternative forms as non-binary, a black angel, comfortable in trainers and hoodie, proudly sexual on her own terms, and full of anger and love, with a protest placard firmly in hand. Our resourceful creations point to possibilities for love and joy which would be hard to imagine without gathering in a spirit of equality and sisterhood to question the mundane and taken-for-granted. Further, what I wished for the workshop participants has also been granted to me; there has been a parallel process whereby participants and myself have been enabled to come to voice through the workshop encounters, to speak our truths even though this makes us vulnerable and can be painful. Therefore, I now conclude with consideration of the uses of vulnerability in context, using as a framework Wilkinson's (1988) personal, functional and disciplinary reflexivity.

#### *From survival to the work of recovery*

In the account of the heartbreaking doll at the beginning of this paper, I referred to two pivotal scenes; the first, where I encountered the heartbreaking doll and felt a deep connection to it, and the second scene where I realised what that connection was telling me. Before moving to a third and final autoethnographic scene, I now describe how I have moved forward in relation to my experience of childhood sexual exploitation, through several levels of reflexivity, beginning now at a personal and functional level in writing the paper, reading the reviews and moving forward.

Firstly, in the specific process of writing this paper, I began by preparing a theoretical summary of the workshops, and in attempting to flesh it out, I kept returning to the image of the heartbreaking doll. I realised that I was somehow 'stuck'. I wrote the first two

autoethnographic scenes on a two-day writing retreat with my departmental colleagues. It was not easy to engage with the emotional impact of this doll, but in this task I was helped by Sriskandarajah's (2018) autoethnographic piece on her praxis as an eating disorder therapist. I found this piece to be extremely visceral, affecting and above all, brave; I read and re-read it, and it inspired to continue writing this personal and emotional paper, despite my many doubts and fears about this type of work. I presented an early version of this paper at a feminist psychology conference, which felt vulnerable and raw but gave me support and useful feedback in taking it forward. The reviews of my submitted paper were very positive, but one reviewer noted that I had continued to silence myself. Reading this feedback on work which felt so open and vulnerable, both personally and professionally, was intensely painful; however, eventually and reluctantly, I had to concede its truth.

This gave me an imperative to reflect further upon the impact of my encounter with the creator of the heartbreaking doll, and the uses of vulnerability; this led me to anthropologist Ruth Behar. She discusses the work of Roth on 'sitting *shivah*', a mourning custom observed in Jewish communities where those closest to the dead person are asked to sit at home for a week, to mourn in community; they are expected "to dwell with loss, to recover [their] poverty" (Roth, 1995, as cited in Behar, p.168). I had lived so many years being angry and over-achieving, denying even to myself any hint of having been affected long-term by my experiences. This was functional on some levels, but also meant that I was denying myself the opportunity to dwell with the losses which childhood experiences brought, and denying how these had impoverished me, in terms of many types of relationships. I needed to 'recover my poverty' even though it was difficult and painful to do so, to 'dwell with my loss' rather than continue to deny it.

Through this work, I was horrified to bring to conscious realisation that for many years I had lived with my primary drive being to protect my abuser, at considerable personal cost. I was

also functioning as if having been abused led to the conferring a shameful ontological deficit, attempting to control the impact of this by being guarded and limited in my partner and social relationships. My relationship with myself was self-punishing with an underlying feeling of never being good enough, no matter what the external achievements. It has been a relief to move to a new frame of understanding, where the work of healing is the most important thing, where I think of my self as in need of care, including a return to therapy, and where I prioritise being kinder to myself in many ways. This has meant that I am also better attuned to the needs of others in a more genuine way than before, since I am not preoccupied with my own defensive needs. To return to the compass of Griffin (2012), I am trying to use my anger as a productive force, rather than a destructive one: to stop punishing myself for something that was not ever my fault and to use my reflection on this difficult experience to challenge that which oppresses us. Nevertheless, it is hard to move from survival mode after all these years, and the work of recovery and healing continues.

I have come to understand that my original conception of the workshop as a form of feminist activism that I could provide for others was insufficient. The workshops are better conceived as a co-created feminist relational space, a place to foreground the personal as political in a participatory, action research paradigm. The implications of this are both ethical and practical; future workshops need to be reconceived as research, rather than activism, and with an ethical responsibility not only to provide materials and time, but also to pay careful attention to the interpersonal work within this space, and with appropriate support signposting available to all. Finally, in regard to disciplinary reflexivity, I believe that this work has highlighted that it is important to connect to the significant losses we undergo as feminists in a patriarchal culture. In attending to our own vulnerabilities as well as those of others, we are doing important feminist work, caring for each other and ourselves in a way that could not be more different from current mainstream conceptions of self-care. The



personal puts a value to sorrow and tears, putting them to use for purposes of a life politics (Michaelson, 2015). By taking an icon of appropriate femininity, Barbie, and remodelling her into something which better captures our difficult experiences, and our complex multi-faceted identities, we can draw attention to what limits us - and we can also conceive of possible alternatives. To return to Sarah Corbett's quote at the beginning of this paper therefore, this communal Barbie transformation work has enabled some small and local justice to be made, whereby we need not wait to be granted equality but can imagine reshaping various discursive positionings in our own images for the purposes of social justice.

### *Scene 3: putting a value to sorrow and tears*

The waiting room is large, warm, thankfully empty. Avoiding the low leather sofas and armchairs, I perch on a swivel chair positioned in front of a wide wooden desk. I feel my heart pounding. Sweat prickles under my scarf. I wait. I remember a time in the dentist waiting room when I was waiting for the anaesthetic to kick in. As the roof of my mouth went numb, I ran out and went home instead - couldn't face the root canal work, couldn't handle not being in control of the inside of my own mouth. I pick up my bag. I could just run.

Too late. My psychotherapist pokes her head around the door and smiles. Together, we go up a flight of stairs and I sit in the chair with my back to the wall. "So," she says. "*How are you today?*".

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### **Biographical Note**

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