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RACE AND RAG DOLLS

Critically Engaging the Embodiment of Diversity in Lalaloopsy Transmedia

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Young children's engagements with literacy occur as immersive and embodied interactions with an increasingly commercialized and globalized textual landscape (Carrington, 2005). On a daily basis, preschoolers not only read or listen to their favorite stories but embody their favorite characters and narratives through engagements with media franchises that link multiple products across multiple platforms. As children watch television programs and DVDs, tap through games and apps on tablets and phones, play with dolls and action figures, they can also be clothed in licensed apparel, snack on character gummies, tote school supplies in themed backpacks, and so on. These franchises of branded products grounded by a media narrative, or transmedia, produce far-reaching, ubiquitous, and pervasive flows of merchandise but also circulate discursive messages attached to media narratives and amplified through advertising (Lemke, 2009).

A significant and ongoing pedagogical concern for teachers, parents, and caregivers is the troubling depiction of diversity in media products that children encounter in their everyday lives. Problematic representations of difference in popular media range from persistent stereotyping to systematic underrepresentation, as in tokenism in which one character stands for an ethnicity, race, or gender. A classic example from children's media is the "Smurfette principle" (Pollitt, 1991) where a troupe of male characters includes a token female whose gender is *the* defining marker of difference from the other characters. In the Smurf franchise, the male characters' bodies are identical (e.g., body shape, clothing) while their names suggest behaviors that establish their individuality (e.g., Brainy, Grouchy, Jokey). By contrast, Smurfette's body and name marks her as Other. The feminine diminutive *ette* in her name establishes a male normativity while gender division is inscribed on her body by a short lace dress, heels, and long blonde hair. Smurfette's sexuality is exaggerated to emphasize her femininity as *the* important way of distinguishing this character. We read this

as [White] Girl; her femaleness is stressed while her Whiteness, indexed by long straight blonde hair, is unmarked as normal and unremarkable.

In this article, we consider how media achieve this homogenization through scripts about girls' bodies, the emphatic foregrounding of a unified gendered identity, and the erasure of race in girls' media where pink is constructed as the only color that matters. Thus when children play with a media doll or action figure, they engage and animate the sociopolitical scripts in its character narrative and those embedded in its vinyl skin and nylon hair, normalized through wide circulation across global markets. Media body scripts assume greater importance given the immersive nature of children's transmedia play that produces powerful and durable emotional attachments (Marsh, 2005) to franchise characters (Pugh, 2009). The scope of licensed products for daily consumption encourages children to eat, drink, sleep, and *live* in-character. Multimedia also invites repetitive engagements by enabling children to watch a favorite DVD again and again (Marsh, 2014). Children's animation and replaying of the scenes and songs that they know by heart further entangle bodies, scripts, and desires, opening opportunities for remixings and critical transformation (Collier, 2013; Hains, 2012).

The Lalaloopsy brand is a product line of rag dolls, launched in 2010 by MGA Entertainment, a multinational corporation best known for their Bratz dolls. The Lalaloopsy characters are rag dolls who "come to life with the last stitch" and have adventures together as a group of cooperative friends who live in Lalaloopsy Land. In the narrative, each button-eyed rag doll is unique, marked by an accessorizing pet, a house constructed of found objects, an identifying fabric and color scheme, and a particular creative talent suggested by names such as Jewel Sparkles, Dot Starlight, Crumbs Sugar Cookie, Peanut Big Top, Mittens Fluff, and Bea Spells-a-Lot. The dolls share a "cute" motif: small bodies topped with very large heads and eyes, a trope common in children's media that nods to anime (e.g., Hello Kitty, Powerpuff Girls). The ric-rac trim, retro color schemes, and rag doll motifs in the logo, doll clothing designs and accessories, and packaging signal a retro femininity reminiscent of U.S. 1950s homemaking culture.

The global franchise website features short video games and an iPhone app, along with a browseable list of 269 products: dolls,¹ dollhouses, playsets, and accessories; a recent release includes rag doll princesses, fairies, and horses. A search of the Toys "Я" Us website returned 202 products including ear buds, bikes, craft sets (sticker and coloring sets), costumes, slippers, backpacks, lip balms, and body tattoos. The anchoring narrative that links all this merchandise is circulated through the Lalaloopsy television show, first aired on the Nick Jr. U.S. cable channel in early 2013. The show aims to educate young children through "a socioemotional curriculum, designed to teach preschoolers how to be resilient, creatively solve problems by embracing diversity, and how to be a good friend" (Nick Jr. website, 2013). In this chapter, we critically engage the body

scripts of two brown-skinned Lalaloopsy dolls to see how race and ethnicity are designed and read by parents/consumers who wish to provide their children with diverse toys.

Theorizing the Embodiment of Diversity in Children's Transmedia

Drawing upon nexus theory (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) and informed by feminist poststructuralist perspectives on gender and race (hooks, 2003) we trace the histories and emanations flowing in and out of children's global transmedia to reveal how dolls materialize media scripts about and with bodies. We look at Lalaloopsy dolls as dense points of contact to see how dominant texts about race and gender are re-inscribed and reinforced through the doll designs but also to see how we might think beyond resistance in ways that respect children's emotional attachment to these toys (Pugh, 2009) and that recognize the fluidity and complexity of children's play with media toys. The recognition of play as an embodied and immersive literacy that reads and animates toys requires an extended analysis of toys to uncover their body scripts—displayed in digital images across global media networks, in character actions in television or webisode narratives, in advertisements and marketing to a particular demographic, and embedded in multimodal design (e.g., color, texture, sound) in the product manufactured materials (Wohlwend, 2012).

Nexus theory takes an action orientation to discourse analysis that is particularly useful in uncovering how body, media, and scripts come together in everyday events. To explain how actions with things create meanings, Scollon (2001) drew upon theories that situate literacy and language in the sociocultural histories of practices shared among members of a culture. Nexus theory attends to body and action, recognizing that discourse becomes submerged in familiar practices and can be made visible by examining routine, expected, and unremarkable actions with everyday artifacts. Ordinary artifacts such as toys or consumer goods accrue shared expectations for users (e.g., who may use a doll and how it should be used) (Rowse & Pahl, 2007). Finally, these tacit expectations circulate in trajectories in and out of objects, bringing into every use a set of histories that affect the child's immediate actions with an artifact as well as future actions. In this way, dolls are assemblages of bodies, histories, and anticipated uses that evoke expected body scripts when players animate them. Transmedia anchor particular nexus so that its embodied ways of being and performing not only pervade every aspect of daily living but also flow across global markets and social networks. When children play with a doll, they take up its normalized expectations for sets of practices and embody them into imaginary here-and-nows as *converging cultural imaginaries*, key sites of cultural production by and for children (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). Rather than fixed or finalized, these imaginaries are fluid sites of converging nexus as

children enact and remix scripts and play in and out of the resonances and ruptures among discourses.

Discourses in this paper are considered ideologies that legitimate and foreground particular nexus and their embodied ways of talking, gesturing, moving, handling things, dressing, playing, and so. Discourses recruit, providing means for social actors to affiliate with particular groups as well as legitimizing disparate power relations among groups and individuals (Gee, 1996). In nexus analysis, discourses circulate power in *glocalized* trajectories, inscribing global relational identities on bodies, practices, and artifacts in and out of moments of locally situated activity (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Important to the study of transmedia, these trajectories not only involve histories and imagined futures from any moment of action but are spatial as well as temporal, so that media products interrelate across the places children travel during the course of a day within homes and communities as well as across vast global networks. Transmedia are intertextual and must be read across the franchise (Kinder, 1991); in this case, each Lalaloopsy doll links to other products, across multimedia networks, made sensible through narratives in television episodes, an official website and fansites, commercials, video games, and mobile apps. The immersive and pervasive nature of these contexts means that children do more than affiliate or identify with dolls and their body scripts; rather children *live* these scripts within highly transmediated spaces.

Children's play with Lalaloopsy transmedia must be situated in its past, present, and anticipated sociocultural contexts and also investigated for its trajectories across products and places on global networks and local spaces of consumption. Elsewhere, Karen has demonstrated that as children play, they make visible and negotiate multiple sometimes contradictory scripts clustered in a franchise's transmedia. In other words, children do not passively absorb or reproduce a doll's body scripts. Instead, because play is productive, collaborative, and potentially transformative, children can remake commercially given narratives and consumer expectations. For example, young girls and boys remixed Disney Princess scripts with other popular media to make more satisfying characters and play action, morphing Princess Mulan into a flying SuperMulan or Cinderella's Fairy Godmother into a "Scary Godmother" ninja.

Our aim here is to examine how a discourse of diversity is constructed and circulated through body scripts in design features manufactured in the Lalaloopsy dolls and in the ways parents as consumers respond to these designs. Using nexus analysis of two dolls in the Lalaloopsy franchise, we examine the various body scripts communicated through the dolls; that is, how children are expected to "read", identify, and play with these toys. We see pedagogical potential in children's play with the dolls as opportunities for embodied critical engagement with consumerist and raced media (Medina & Perry, 2013; Medina & Wohlwend, 2014).

Research on Gender and Race in Children's Doll Play and Media

In this section, we unpack converging nexus of bodies, materials, and scripts in the Lalaloopsy transmedia franchise. To tease out discourses that recruit children and their parents to the franchise, but also to make visible the gendered and raced body scripts and practices in Lalaloopsy nexus, we begin by making a bridge between the research on gender, dolls, and transmedia in girlhood studies (Hains, 2012; Marshall, 2011; Wohlwend, 2009) and erasure and Whiteness in critical race theory in literacy studies (Carter, 2007; Willis, Montavon, Hunter, Burkle, & Herrera, 2008).

Gender, Consumption, and Doll Play

The notion of body scripts moves beyond verbal scripts in film narratives, advertising messages, and corporate marketing strategies to make visible the non-verbal modes in product material designs and intended and actual uses. Toys—dolls in particular—are artifacts designed to emphatically signal their anticipated uses so that children can easily use them for play (Brougère, 2006). Dolls provoke performances of particular social actions for pretend characters (baby, mother, princess, cool girls) and for children who are the doll players (preschoolers, girls) (Carrington, 2003).

Multiple Lalaloopsy dolls populate the franchise but no doll emerges as memorable; a single *brand identity*, merged into one generic persona, is its primary script. Marketers develop this “brand as person” to establish an emotional bond with target consumers, giving users an imagined body rather than a functional product to interact with (Aaker, 1996). This embodied brand also constructs a brand–consumer relationship by emphasizing particular attributes or futures that a child (or her parents) might desire while the brand–consumer relationship positions the brand-as-character as a friend and role model for preschool girls. The Lalaloopsy embodied brand communicates cuteness, cooperation, and diversity but through an homogenizing individualism; that is, each doll is unique in color and occupation/talent but identical in size, shape, and other aspects of body. There is a sameness here that re-inscribes a colorblind normativity through messages of friendship and cooperation.

Race, Erasure, and Children's Media

Black feminist theorists have examined how the interrelationship of Whiteness and male superiority discourses subordinate African American females' identities (Collins, 1998; Giddings, 1984). Critical educational theorists have represented Black female subjectivity as a layered, shifting and complex reality (Carter, 2007; Willis, et al., 2008). Their projects as a whole counter hegemonic discourses that seek erasure of African American female bodies not premised on consumption or the reproduction of norms of Whiteness.

This body erasure pervades various popular culture and media texts for children, as in the absence of Black bodies and homogenization of race that materializes in the Smurfs' unified blue skin, a norm that is coded White through Smurfette's blonde hair. As a consequence of the absence of female Black bodies in children's popular media, African American girls tend to function with a Du Boisian (1989) "double consciousness": "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps us from being torn asunder" (p. 5). Within such a climate, it is extremely difficult to maintain complete alliances to African American epistemologies and ontologies; hence, body negotiation or body negation ensues. They must see themselves in a process repeated throughout Lalaloopsy, in (or as) embodied through the other. In literacy research, how we represent the lives, experiences, and voices of the oppressed is an irresolvable debate (Blackburn, 2009; Willis, et al., 2008).

In the next section, we examine the discourses in Lalaloopsy dolls, websites, and social media to identify converging nexus and their interaction, looking for ambiguities and ruptures that could open opportunities for critical engagement.

Analysis of the Embodiment of Diversity in Lalaloopsy

Narrated and Embodied Diversity in Doll Scripts

Diversity is touted across the Lalaloopsy website, commercials, and television episode descriptions. However, comparison of particular dolls' character descriptions and doll skin colors indicates little diversity. Few doll narratives explicitly refer to race or ethnicity in the character descriptions, and generally, those that do are problematic, re-inscribing racial and ethnic stereotypes (see Table 10.1). For example, Feather Tell-a-Tale echoes histories of media depictions of Native American/First Nations indigenous people as dangerous "savages" in *Pocohontas* (1995) or *Peter Pan* (1953), indexed through the described "sewn from" materials—moccasins—and practices such as "braiding." Nexus analysis of the Feather Tell-a-Tale doll design reveals essentialization at work through the doll's clothing and accessories that homogenize tribal practices through incongruous combinations that ignore differences across nations and blithely combine prominent stereotypes: a buckskin dress, feather headband, and mini-totem "pet."

The "rag dolls" (which paradoxically are made of hard plastic) have bodies and facial features that are identical, thus interchangeable. Skin color, hair color, and clothing are made important as primary markers of difference and doll individuality or "personality". Doll hair colors span the rainbow, favoring bright pastels: pink, lavender, aqua. This variety of hair color is a "difference that doesn't matter" (Orr, 2009) as it signifies no cultural identity. Skin color then produces the product differentiation that drives collectability ("collect 'em all") and signifies

TABLE 10.1 Examples of dolls that re-inscribe racial and ethnic stereotypes through materials and narrative description.

<i>Doll</i>	<i>Skin color</i>	<i>Sewn from</i>	<i>Narrative on lalaloopsy.Com website</i>
Feather Tell-a-Tale	Brown	Pair of Moccasins	“a nature girl who loves animals. Her favorite activities are braiding hair, doing crafts, and telling stories...from morning till night!”
Yuki Kimono	White Geisha Makeup	Kimono	“loves to giggle and laugh. She likes folding paper into fun animal shapes, but sometimes she folds them too many times and she can’t tell what they are”

A doll archive can be found at http://lalaloopsyland.wikia.com/wiki/Full_size_doll_merchandise.

ethnic and racial diversity, which increases desirability for consumers seeking diverse dolls. This difference is amplified through each doll’s clothing, accessories, and explicitly stated context, which for Brown dolls may foreground race through an often stereotypical masculinist re-inscribed cultural script as in Feather Tell-a-Tale’s buckskin-clad “nature girl.” More often, though, Brown dolls are light skinned so that race and ethnicity are ambiguous. Following the success of Bratz—another product line by MGAE—this is intentionally manufactured racial ambiguity.

The Bratz dolls and their mediated manifestations are strategically ambiguous in their ethnicity, as manifested by their varying skin tones and “exotic” names such as Sasha, Jade, and Yasmin; only one of the original dolls (Cloe) is clearly Caucasian. As one MGA executive rather crassly described the global advantages of this strategy, “We don’t even market them as belonging to a particular race. We have little girls in South Africa who think Sasha is South African, girls in Samoa who think she is Samoan and girls in the United States who think she is from Harlem.”

(Parry, 2003, p. 3, quoted in McAllistar, 2007, p. 248)

A survey of dolls listed on the Lalaloopsy website confirms that racial identity is primarily signaled through skin color, rather than other material features or narrative signifiers. The majority of dolls are light skinned across a range of light beige, pink, or peach tones. Of the 117 characters available on the Lalaloopsy website at the time of writing, 30% have skin colors in a range of brown tones (see Table 10.2).

In the sections, we examine Lalaloopsy’s manufactured diversity and consumer response by comparing two of the original dolls in the first series in the franchise: Dot Starlight and Mittens Fluff ‘n’ Stuff.

TABLE 10.2 Examples of Lalaloopsy dolls that mark race through skin tones only and not through narrative references.

<i>Doll</i>	<i>Skin color</i>	<i>Sewn from</i>	<i>Narrative on lalaloopsy.Com website</i>
Dot Starlight*	Dark Brown, African American	Astronaut's Spacesuit	"loves science, and she's always got her head in the clouds"
Mittens Fluff 'n' Stuff*	Brown, ambiguous	Eskimo's [sic] Scarf	"loves hot cocoa, snow fights, and snuggling by the fire"
Swirly Figure Eight	Brown, Ambiguous	Ice Skater's Costume	"a winner who thinks practice makes perfect. This ice princess loves glitter and twirling, even though it makes her really dizzy"
Blossom Flowerpot	Brown, Ambiguous	Gardener's Glove	"super-patient and caring, always cheerful, and loves to dig around in the dirt"

17 additional dolls have brown skin tones and no explicit signifier of race or ethnicity in accompanying scripts.

* Indicates one of the original eight dolls now featured as main characters in the television series.

An Explicitly Raced African American Doll

Dot Starlight, the only dark brown doll in the franchise, clearly reads African American through its deep skin tone and its dress trimmed in U.S. colors. The *explicitly raced* doll also conveys an aspirational script that aligns with feminists' and U.S. educators' desires to see more girls of color represented in science and technology professions. The narrative constructs Dot as a scientist who studies astronomy with a "sewn on" date of "July 20 (First Man on the Moon)". Dot's dress, "made from an astronaut's space suit," reads American through its red, white, and blue trim and futuristic through its metallic sheen. The doll design tempers these features of "Right Stuff"² masculinity with nostalgic feminine innocence in the form of 1950s vintage features: yellow Shirley Temple finger curls tied up with a big red bow, fitted shirtwaist dress with a Peter Pan collar, ruffled skirt, and organza and net petticoat.

Consumer response to the now discontinued Dot Starlight was robust, making the doll difficult to find. Reviews by parents on amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com/Lalaloopsy-500414-Dot-Starlight/dp/B0046A9OOS>) show that in part, the scarcity of explicitly raced dolls heightens demand.

The shortage of the Dot Starlight doll in 2012 corroborates Ted's experience as a parent and consumer. He purchased the sought-after doll for his daughters because its body scripts combined an explicit African American racial marker with a narrative of female empowerment and scientific achievement through its

body scripts in the astronaut costuming and character description: “a scientist who loves to dream about space.” From a feminist perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that the Dot Starlight is now no longer available despite its demonstrated popularity, as it represents an empowered female Black body that must be erased. A parent in one review objected to the body design, rejecting the doll’s blonde hair as an unwelcome imposition of Whiteness on the doll’s Black script: “it would have been fabulous not to have the reinforcement of ‘blond and beautiful’ mixed up in it.” The reviewer further pointed out that MCA did not draw from the range of complexions and hair types that could have further strengthened the Dot Starlight doll as an explicitly raced toy: “It’s just a shame the darkest skinned doll, the one most easily picked out as representative [of] African people, is kind of spoiled.” Thus, even in this explicitly raced doll, racial erasure is at work, tempering its power by altering the Black female body to make it not *too* Black.

What is crucial for us to make clear is that parents both critically and uncritically buy consumer products that re-inscribe and at the same time disrupt racial stereotypes. The notion of racial ambiguity is often represented in products without parents consciously being aware. This is evident in the paragraph below when one parent suggests,

My daughter is four ...Dot Starlight was an amazing find! My little one is biracial with dark skin and blonde hair. To find a doll of any kind that looks like her is rare ... to be a Lalaloopsy I was so excited! She squealed and screamed ...[when she opened it].

In this moment of shared delight, we see the child’s emotional response to finding her own body reflected and validated in the doll’s body script. It reveals not only the child’s desire for identification and attachment but the longing of parents of color who seek to counter and fill the emptiness of racial erasure for their children.

Furthermore, we suggested earlier in the chapter that racial representations within media and popular-culture toys remains stubbornly White. Therefore, for many parents of color, just finding any non-White doll is viewed as progress. They may therefore unconsciously or consciously gleefully gravitate toward a racially ambiguous doll as the best alternative. Ted notes:

In fact, I know this was true in my own purchase of Dot Starlight for my daughters. Yet, what is also true is that for many African American girls their identity is distinctively linked to hair texture and color. Dissertations have been written on Black women and hair. Documentaries have been made on the subject. Would Dot Starlight have been purchased by any parents of color on clearance if her hair texture was short, kinky and black? Not to essentialize, but it reflects the hair texture of many African American women. I would, of course, have preferred Dot Starlight with short black

kinky hair in Bantu braids or cornrows. The doll would have reinforced normative definitions of Blackness as beautiful similar to my daughters.

In this regard, Dot Starlight represents both racially ambiguous coding and erasure of normative definitions of ethnic black texture and style. However, similar to music and other ethnic art forms, there is **growing demand** for ethnic products that exhibit cross-over appeal to expand markets and increase profits. Furthermore, many parents of color may delay or ignore critical discussions with their children regarding race and images. Often they engage in these conversations as a result at a moment of crisis in the child's life when an incident makes the child aware of their difference.

An Ambiguously Raced Doll

Racial ambiguity is a script that is much more apparent in the body scripts of other Lalaloopsy dolls. Mittens Fluff 'n' Stuff exemplifies the *ambiguously raced* light brown dolls in the Lalaloopsy franchise (<http://www.lalaloopsy.com/enus/section/shop/product/399322/mittens-fluff-n-stuff>). Like Dot Starlight, the website narrative does not mention race. However, the narrative hints that the doll could be First Nation, "made from an Eskimo's glove" amplified by a white fur vest in the doll's costume. Other costume elements add feminine features to support the script "figure skater": a polka-dot net tutu over white pantaloons over a striped sweater and leggings.

In contrast to Dot Starlight, consumers who bought the Mittens doll (in 102 reviews in the top six pages for the doll on amazon.com) did not mention skin color or racial identification. Demand for this doll was extremely high during the first holiday season following the franchise launch in 2010. The *New York Post* reported a "Cabbage Patchlike hysteria among holiday shoppers" which drove up the price of the \$25 doll to "as much as \$89 on the Internet" despite the manufacture of one million Mittens dolls. One shopper attributed the strong demand to "Mittens' medium-tone skin, [that] likely appealed to a larger, more diverse audience of girls." This mother's analysis aligns with the MCA marketing strategy for racially ambiguous dolls that appeal to a broad range of consumers. However, we question whether this scripted racial ambiguity fulfills parents' quest for diverse dolls or merely re-inscribes "a difference that doesn't matter" (Orr, 2009) through racial erasure.

Critical Engagement with Designed Diversity

To critically engage the designed diversity in Lalaloopsy within commercial and social worlds of childhood, Ted draws from his lived experience as the father of two daughters, as a consumer of the Dot Starlight explicitly raced doll, and as a critical scholar of media, race, and masculinities and femininities. The dolls act as

a technology (Foucault, 1978) re-inscribing a gender division which contributes to the need to perform double consciousness; that is, although the emphasized femininity in the doll designs foregrounds male absence, this absence backgrounds a patriarchal gaze that marks girls' bodies as Other in relation to both Whiteness and a hegemonic masculinity (hooks, 2003).

As a parent of two African American girls, Ted was socialized into his daughters' cultural worlds and this context provided chances for deeper insights into the discursive construction of African American girlhoods. It was apparent in his daughters' play and conversation that popular culture transmedia artifacts and scripts were shaping their worlds. It was here that Ted witnessed the power of transmedia to communicate specific gendered and racialized scripts as he learned the dialects of girlhood. Ted notes:

It was through my daughters that I was introduced to Lalaloopsy. Despite not having cable television, my daughters learned about the dolls' existence through the discourses of their preschool classmates. This was the pedagogical experience that was transformative. As such, I observed how race is constructed within the discourses of the students, informed by the persuasive strategies that African American children employ to intervene into crises affecting their communities.

These experiences provide a useful lens to analyze the rhetorical decisions media designers make to represent an image of racial ambiguity in their narratives about girls of color. When media designers feel compelled to create racially ambiguous dolls, they are re-inscribing racial erasure and moving away from ethnically defined toys. To do this, media designers must construct popular culture media texts where culture is "erased" in order to identify with their audiences and tap into their consumption habits. When such erasures are transmitted through discourse, or replicated in popular toys as racial ambiguity (as in the case of Lalaloopsy), these technologies uphold binary ways of seeing Black childhood, marginalizing children and their communities. In this way, nominal tropes of "diversity" combine with body scripts of racial ambiguity in ways that justify exploitation, oppression, and domination.

Conclusion

Recognizing that discursive struggle incites more discourse (Foucault, 1978), how should educators help children respond to global and pervasive media? We close by proposing a pedagogical response that engages racial ambiguity and its purchase, not only for manufacturers who create light brown dolls to expand demand by creating broader demographic appeal in global marketing, but also for consumers who use racial ambiguity to claim light-skinned privilege and re-inscribe racialized scripts. We argue for critical engagement rather than critical literacy, recognizing that familiar frames for understanding literacy as semiotic representation or interpretation cannot stand up to the transformative power of immersive play with transmedia (Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011). Critical literacy activities that hope to prompt children to critique their favorite media through rational critical literacy deconstruction can fall flat or merely elicit a voiced criticality in the classroom that evaporates on the playground. Critical engagement moves beyond talk to engage the body scripts through play within the dominant imaginaries that children live in and recognizes children as already knowledgeable cultural producers. Rather than critical responses to scripts through verbal or visual readings and writings, critical engagement uses literacies like play and drama to allow children to respond productively with bodies and action, encouraging exploration of multiple body scripts and acknowledging children's emotional attachments to beloved characters, and their creativity as cultural producers. For example, we might ask, "What potential imaginings and alternatives does racial ambiguity offer for children playing in and out of multiple nexus of gendered, raced, and consumerist scripts in Lalaloopsy?"

In order to support children in critically engaging complex media scripts, parents and teachers must first understand dolls as technologies designed to invite children to take up particular scripts as doll players, consumers, and boys or girls. Although transmedia technologies foreground a dominant discourse, we do not mean to imply that they forestall other potential readings and possibilities for imagining through play. More research is needed on playful pedagogies that integrate critical deconstruction with thoughtful mediation of everyday encounters with media scripts and transmedia designs. We need critical media pedagogies and curriculum developed by teachers and situated in children's worlds that honor children's emotional investments (Jones & Shackleworth, 2013) and recognize the impact of media affinities on peer culture relationships while encouraging children to challenge, improvise, and revise restrictive scripts in dolls, toys, and other transmedia. Imaginative pedagogies developed with children, peer cultures, and local communities are powered by collaborative play and media production in literacy playshops (Wohlwend, Buchholz, Wessel Powell, Coggin, & Husbye, 2013), critical scripting (Medina & Perry, 2013), and dramatic inquiry (Edmiston, 2010; Enciso & Edmiston, 2003). In these

approaches, literacies such as imaginative play become new basics (Dyson & Genishi, 2013), core academic disciplines that recognize children as knowledgeable cultural participants and creative cultural producers.

Notes

- 1 The number is constantly increasing as new dolls are added each month.
- 2 *The Right Stuff* is a 1983 film featuring the preparation of U.S. astronauts in the 1950s, who competed to prove they possessed requisite traits and behaviors (i.e., Right Stuff) for space flight.

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