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'Get in the box, you Jezebel!': Barbie, gender identity and coalitional feminism

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‘Get in the box, you Jezebel!’: Barbie, gender identity and coalitional feminism.

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“Get in the box, you jezebel”: Barbie, gender identity and coalitional feminism.

Abstract:

Any movie about Barbie would seem antithetical to feminism – if not outright anti-feminist. The saturation of pink, the damaging beauty standards and the performance of a stereotypical and limited notion of femininity are all evident in the film. Problematic, too, is the fact that the film is also a Hollywood blockbuster, made with a huge budget and the backing of corporate giant Mattel. However, in this paper we will argue that despite these factors, and in some cases because of them, the film demonstrates a radical feminist message. This, we contend, can be seen in two ways. Firstly, the film revels in its performativity – gender in Barbieland is absolutely distinct from biology, and thus is critical of the essentialising discourse promulgated by gender critical feminists. Secondly the problems of patriarchy are always viewed as systemic rather than individual, and as such require more effort to solve than merely ‘leaning in’ to the dominant power structure. We will argue that the ability of some of the Barbies, humans, Kens and Allans to form a coalition, despite their differences, and work together to overthrow patriarchy constitutes a critique of choice or neo-liberal feminism *as well as* gender critical feminism.

Keywords:

Patriarchy, Barbie, Gender, Sex, Coalition

Introduction

Since its release in 2023, *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig) has received ire from both the left and the right side of politics. It has drawn criticism for being both ‘not feminist enough’ (Jazmine Casas, 2023) and functioning as ‘feminist propaganda’ (James Hibberd, 2023). In this paper we would argue that it is in this liminal space that *Barbie*’s messaging is most effective. The film has been able to draw in a broad audience, and still function as a politically charged text. In this paper we will argue that *Barbie* dismantles mainstream feminism in a number of ways. Firstly, it can be specifically read as a critique of the relatively recent, but high profile, strand of feminism called Gender Critical Feminism, or Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism [hereafter, GCTEF].ⁱ *Barbie* challenges the GCTEF belief that women are to be understood as a biologically fixed identity group. Secondly, we argue that while there is much in *Barbie* that conforms to a notion of popular, choice or neoliberal feminism, the plot and characters are consistent in recognising that patriarchy is the real existential threat, and the film rejects any kind of individualised or ‘lean in’ feminism. We will also detail how individualism is implicit in both GCTEF and popular, choice or neoliberal feminism and that as such, these movements are ill-equipped to bring about any kind of material change. Instead, we argue that *Barbie* emphasizes the need to build coalitions in order to effect structural change. Using Anna Carastathis’ re-working of coalitional feminism, we will argue that *Barbie* demonstrates how we would be better served by returning to difference feminism (Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, 2002) and embracing provisional identities that support political coalitions, “born of necessity” (Carastathis, 2016, 183) that challenge the immediate and specific lived effects of the patriarchy.ⁱⁱ

Outlining the sex-based essentialism of Gender Critical Feminism

To bring our arguments together, it is important to introduce the main tenants of both GCTEF criticism and popular, choice or neoliberal feminism. Holly Lawford-Smith (2020), an Australian GCTEF scholar, traces the historical lineage of GCTEF back to the radical [lesbian] feminist separatist movement that emerged in the United States in the late 1960s. These radical feminists commenced a tradition which sought to centre the idea of women as a dominated sex-class (Emma Edwards, 2021, Lawford-Smith, 2020) and the solutions they advanced coalesced around the production of “a theory *by* women *for* women *about* women” (Lawford- Smith, 2020, also see Kate Phelan and Lawford-Smith, 2023). For Lawford-Smith (2020), contemporary GCTEF is “the *revival* of radical feminism.” Jane Clare Jones (2023a) argues that the “decoupling [of] sex and gender deprives feminist analysis of its explanatory power”ⁱⁱⁱ while Tomas Bogardus (2022, 2) states that “the concept of womanhood is central to feminism.” Bogardus critiques a number of responses to the question of *who is a woman* that are broad enough to include trans women within the boundaries of womanhood, such as Katharine Jenkins expansion of Sally Haslanger’s ameliorative views and Mari Mikkola’s deflationary account.^{iv} Bogardus argues that these views of womanhood are conceptually engineered to be both overly inclusive [of trans women] and overly exclusive [of some cis women]. His solution is to return to sex-essentialist biologically-based definitions of *woman* and *man*, and to use these definitions to assert claims for sex-based rights shared by all cisgender women (Bogardus, 2022; also see Mary Leng, 2023).

This return to a biological, rather than cultural, definition of womanhood has drawn numerous critiques from feminist scholars. Catharine MacKinnon writes that: “so-called gender critical feminists do not centrally critique gender but centrally affirm sex, making the label a misleading appropriation of terms” (2023, 41, n. 10). Sara Ahmed labels GCTEF as

“gender conservative” (2021), Jilly Boyce Kay points out its “regressive logics” including its fatalistic bioessentialism (2024, 1), and for Nancy Fraser it exemplifies a “reactionary populism” (2016, 282). In line with these scholars we argue that *Barbie* reaffirms that patriarchy, rather than womanhood, is central to feminism (Edwards, 2021, Katy Montgomerie, 2021) in its formation of coalitions of feminist activity, and in its demonstration of how essentialist identity-based politics can obstruct such coalition building (Fraser, 2000).

Satirising sex essentialism with *Barbie*

In *Barbie*, Gerwig, and co-writer Noah Baumbach create three worlds which the main characters move between [Barbieland, Kenland and the RealWorld], revealing insights about the constructed organisation of sex/gender in all three. Within *Barbie*, the inhabitants’ lack of biology is evident in the film’s opening montage where Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie), [referred to in this paper as Barbie], has no capacity to eat or drink, simply going through the motions. It is enforced by Weird Barbie’s (Kate McKinnon) comment about Ken’s (Ryan Gosling), [hereafter Ken], “nude blob” and Barbie’s assertion, upon entering the RealWorld, that she and Ken have no genitals. The lack of genitals implies a lack of any GCTEF biological marker to distinguish gender. Yet the dolls all behave in stereotypically gendered ways. The female Barbies all have long hair, hourglass silhouettes, and wear feminine clothes and make up. The male Kens bear all the hallmarks of stereotypical masculinity, short hair, athletic builds and chiselled features.

However, when we are introduced to Barbieland we quickly learn that this is a world in which the patriarchal script has been flipped. Barbies are lawyers, doctors, physicists,

authors, construction workers and astronauts. They comprise all the members of the Supreme Court and the president is also a Barbie. Gerwig, when interviewed, noted that “Barbieland is this reversed world” a place where Barbies command power and Kens are an underclass (Brian Hiatt, 2023). This role reversal is echoed by Helen Mirren’s comedically dry narration which explains that “Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him.” The gender dynamic of the classically Hollywood action film is inverted in *Barbie* (Ho, 2023). Ken plays the usually feminine role of trying to attract the attention of Barbie, and all other Kens exist “as convenient dance partners” (Dockterman, 2023b). This is in line with the fact that Ken was only manufactured by Mattel in 1961 to serve as a companion to Barbie in response to those who wrote to complain about Barbie’s singleness. The creation of the Ken dolls, and thus the subservience of the Ken characters to the Barbie characters in the film, recognises that Kens were only produced to keep Barbie more stereotypically feminine, and demonstrate her desirability to male partners. As Gerwig states, “Ken was invented after Barbie, to burnish Barbie’s position in our eyes and in the world”, noting that this is “the opposite of the creation myth in Genesis” (Shannon Carlin, 2023).

However, this power imbalance highlights the power imbalances that women face in their lives. In *Barbie*, the flipped power imbalance is, as Gerwig notes, “unsustainable” and an uprising by the Kens occurs after Barbie and Ken make a trip to the RealWorld where Barbie hopes to find Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), the girl whose sadness is thought to have opened a portal between Barbieland and the RealWorld. Instead, Barbie finds that it is Gloria (America Ferrara), Sasha’s mother, whose feelings of disempowerment and invisibility has caused the rift between their worlds. Both Barbie and Ken quickly realise all the ways in which patriarchy impacts upon the lives of women and men. Ken immediately recognises it as a place where “everything exists to expand and elevate the presence of men,” and Barbie learns

that women are objectified and vilified by all genders: “men look at me as if I’m an object, girls hate me.” Barbie escapes from the Mattel CEO (Will Ferrell) and Executives - a group comprising of thirteen men – who literally want to put Barbie back into her box. Ken rushes back to install patriarchy into Barbieland, making it into Kenland, a patriarchal system where Kens reign supreme.

***Barbie*, patriarchy and GCTEF**

In its journey to the RealWorld *Barbie* reminds us, as Simone De Beauvoir (1972, 295) wrote, “One is not born, rather one becomes a woman.” De Beauvoir’s famous assertion can be read through Judith Butler’s formulation of gender performativity, in which Butler claims that gender is a social construct which once learned via social scripts, can be endlessly performed even when it is divorced from the material body (1987; 1990). In this way, we would argue that *Barbie* challenges the foundations of GCTEF, as we see that the Barbies and Kens are able to perform femininity and masculinity despite their lack of genitals (See Anna Temel, 2024 for an extended explanation of this). Of course, GCTEFs could respond that this is a fictional movie about a mass-produced toy — it is not real. Our response is that *Barbie* exemplifies how feminist theory and politics would be better served if kept separate from the question *who is a woman*, as this would allow women, cis and trans, and others, to focus on a cause-driven politics directed at the target of feminism — breaking down the foundations that underpin systemic patriarchal power (Montgomerie, 2021).

The limiting problem for GCTEF is in the belief that a bounded class of biologically-identified women is needed on which its political cohesion can be grounded. We would argue that in making the systemic nature of patriarchy visible the movie highlights that a porous

boundary (Sandra Fredman in MacKinnon, 2023; Carastathis, 2016) is no issue if hoping to achieve the collective political action of feminism. As radical feminist Biddy Martin (1994, 105) argued in response to earlier forms of lesbian feminist separatism, long ago:

The work of complicating our theories has too often proceeded, however, by way of polemical and ultimately reductionist accounts of the varieties of feminist approaches to just one feminism, guilty of the humanist trap of making a self-same, universal category of ‘women’ – defined as other than men – the subject of feminism. At its worst, feminism has been seen as more punitively policing than mainstream culture.

Or, as Antony (2020, 531) suggests, “whatever the inherent philosophical interests of such questions as ‘what is it to be a woman,’ there is no practical or political need to answer them.” For many feminists the policing of the borders of feminism is a distraction that is at best meaningless, at worst, politically dangerous.

Alison Jagger (1998) argues that the paradox of separatism is that the small group, which could produce liberated thinking about dominant discourses, may simultaneously operate to limit critical thinking about their newly produced discourses, by using the threat of expulsion to limit its own members. Lesbian separatism seemed to do this, alienating experiences of non-lesbian women and others, and treating trans women’s narratives as duplicitous and self-serving. According to Iris Young, the logic of identity achieves universalisation only by expelling that which it cannot include. As a result, it “turns the merely different into the absolutely other” (Young, 1990: 99). That which is expelled is reframed as deviant, bad, or irrational. What makes it a particularly dangerous fiction is that this ideal of impartiality reifies the judgements of privileged groups (Young, 1990). The expelled others in the GCTEF embrace of biological womanhood are not just trans women, but also cisgender

women that support trans inclusion — women that have been labelled by GCTEFs as “handmaidens” to male privilege. This is despite the fact that all women and trans people are ultimately disempowered by patriarchal structures. In doing this, GCTEF limits its ability to create meaningful coalitions that can respond to structural power.

Barbie reiterates this, not only by focusing on protagonists who, with the exception of the human characters, have only performative gender identities, but also by pointing to patriarchy, and not the Kens, as the enemy of the Barbies. As Barbie is quick to point out to the harassing men she meets on Venice Beach, neither she nor Ken have genitalia. Yet, this lack of genitalia is no barrier to the Kens overthrowing of Barbieland in favour of the patriarchal Kenland, replete with horses which Ken thinks of as man-extenders, MojoDojoCasaHouses that replace the Barbie Dreamhouses, and a complete takeover of the government and its institutions (Ho, 2023).

***Barbie*, patriarchy and popular feminism**

The cultural construction of [hyper]femininity in *Barbie* has been widely noted. As Dockterman explains, “Barbie leans heavily into femininity- the assault of pink has been relentless” (2023a, 1). For many, the pinkness, glossy merchandising and backing from Mattel has been problematic. *Barbie* seems to represent a hegemonic [and deeply problematic] notion of popular/choice feminism. Popular feminism is a happy, uplifting feminism that is positioned as opposite to Sara Ahmed’s *feminist killjoy* (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, 2018). There are, of course, differences between popular feminism, choice feminism and neoliberal feminism, but all three strands share a

focus on individual struggles and have been noted for their elision of collectivism and their lack of focus on structural changes. For Banet-Weiser, “popular feminism is decidedly not angry—indeed, — anger (at sexism, racism, patriarchy, abuse) seems to be an old-fashioned vestige, a ghost of feminism’s past, one not suited to the popular media context of contemporary feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, 15). We see this at film’s very beginning when the narrator informs us that, “Barbie changed everything, then she changed it all again . . . she might have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more. She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career. Because Barbie can be everything, women can be anything.”

This framing of Barbie’s power in individualistic terms is congruous with popular feminism which suggests that women currently have the freedom to choose the scope of their own lives – even within patriarchal systems. As Banet-Weiser points out, popular feminism is “corporate-friendly; it has benefited from decades of neoliberal commodity activism, where companies have taken up women’s issues, especially those that have to do with individual consumption habits, as a key selling point for products” (2018, 12-13). This has been pointed out by Athena Bellas who writes that:

Mattel produced a large line of goods based on the film . . . One can purchase a vast array of items, such as “Ken-rgy” coffee mugs, mousepads adorned with an image of Stereotypical Barbie’s face, a toy replica of the film’s Barbie Dream House and pink Corvette, Weird Barbie costumes, and President Barbie dolls. Further afield, Mattel has also collaborated with major makeup and fashion brands like Sephora, Chi, O.P.I., Cotton On, Zara and Fossil to produce Barbie-themed commodities like skincare products, swimsuits, nail polish, jewellery, candles and purses (2024, 4)

As the Mattel CEO in *Barbie* reminds us at the end of the film, sparkle and female empowerment are synonymous. We would hazard that Gerwig and Baumbach are being ironic here, but there is no doubting that the conflation of these two distinct qualities “sparkle” [as a stand in for hegemonic femininity] and “female empowerment” do work together in *Barbie*, especially in initially drawing audiences in.

We would argue that it is this popular feminism, so pink and sparkly that it doesn’t resemble “traditional” feminism, that initially attracted audiences. As Alycia Byrnes reports: “For the film to earn \$1.4 billion internationally, moviegoers of all political leanings must have showed out” (2024, 6). The film does not initially appear to take aim at conventional ideas of ideal femininity, and critics have lambasted *Barbie* for its hegemonic view of white womanhood, arguing that the titular Barbie and Ken are played by white actors, and that the struggles of the protagonist Gloria as both a woman and a Latina are not adequately explored in the film (Della Winters, Courtney Grimm and Raveena Bola, 2024, Scarlett Nhi Do, 2024). Despite the diverse cast in the film, in which actors of African American, Chinese, Rwandan and Latina background make up the majority of Barbies and Kens focussed on in the film [including Issa Rae as an African American Barbie President], critics have argued that the diversity of this casting does not challenge the white ideal, but rather functions to consolidate its hegemony through the rhetoric of feminist empowerment (Byrnes, 2024, Nhi Do, 2024). As many have noted, an empowerment of white women only is an exclusionary, rather than inclusionary feminism, and one that often empowers white middle-class women at the expense of BIPOC women, queer and trans women, working class women and disabled women. We believe this criticism can be partly levelled at *Barbie* as the titular character has the most satisfying character arc at the film’s conclusion. We can see how the Kens’ lives

will be slightly altered at the end of the film, but ultimately Robbie's Barbie undergoes the most complete [individualised] transformation.

This whitewashing is, we argue, a logic seen in both popular feminism and GCTEF.^v In their quest to define who is a woman, both GCTEF and popular feminists privilege individual identities over systemic activism. Biological essentialism generates a privileged, universal position by ignoring the diversity of female experiences, and the historical and contextual discourses which structure each individual's experiences of the world. But there is a "weightlessness" (Banet Weisser, 2018, 21) to the standpoints of both- neither popular feminism nor GCTEF are called upon to critique the structures of patriarchal society. In place of this ignorance, is the presumption of a privileged class of usually white women who produce and profess a singular position that becomes totalising. Michaela L Ferguson argues that:

choice feminism is radically depoliticizing: it discourages us from forming judgments about the value of different choices, it discourages us from giving a public account for the choices we make, it shuts down critical discussion about which choices should be valued and which choices are mere illusions, it uncritically embraces consumerism and most problematically for the future of feminism, it deters women from being active in politics to improve childcare, public schools, and working conditions, all of which are deemed private matters (2010, 250).

As Banet-Weiser reminds us, "Within popular feminism, empowerment is the central logic; with little to no specification as to what we want to empower women to do, popular feminism often restructures the politics of feminism to focus on the individual empowered woman" (2018, 17). The "*This is what a feminist looks like*" t-shirt of popular feminism (Banet-

Weiser, 2018) shares similarities with the “*Woman: Adult Human Female*” t-shirt of the GCTEF movement. These kinds of feminisms privilege a certain kind of woman, at the expense of others who are rendered invisible.

***Barbie’s* coalitional feminism**

While we agree that more attention could have been paid to the intersection of racism (and of class, queerness and ability) and sexism in *Barbie* we would also argue that issues of racialised oppression are beyond the scope of Barbieland, with its most obvious focus on, as the narrator informs us, “feminism and equality.” Rae, who plays President Barbie speaks of this issue: “My worry was that it was going to feel too white feminist-y, but I think that it’s self-aware. Barbieland is perfect, right? It represents perfection. So if perfection is just a bunch of white Barbies, I don’t know that anybody can get on board with that” (Dockterman, 2023b).

Moreover issues of systemic racism *are* visible in the RealWorld of the film. Of the thirteen Mattel executives, only two appear to be of BIPOC appearance, in contrast to the majority of the warehouse employees who appear to be played by BIPOC actors, reminding us that under patriarchy not all men are equal. The contrast with the mostly white CEOs and the mostly BIPOC factory workers seems too obvious to not have been a deliberate choice, given the other casting choices in the film. Yet it must be noted that Mattel’s first BIPOC Barbies only came out in 1980, and previous to this, dark-skinned Barbies had European features and were marketed in relation to Barbie as either her friend or babysitter (Toni Gonzales, 2023, Yasmin Jeffery, 2024). But in the film, two of the BIPOC Barbies are the President and the Nobel Prize winner for literature. Neither function as an addendum to the titular character. The

central human characters we see in the film are Latina, and bilingual. We are reminded of this, in two separate parts of the film, as we watch Gloria's husband struggle to learn Spanish. America Ferrara has also said that as a child, she was not drawn to Barbies because "I didn't feel very represented or reflected by it" (Gonzales, 2023).

Given that the main concern of the film is gender, it is nonetheless important to note that the key in overthrowing the patriarchy that the Kens have installed is the willingness of a mixed cohort of characters to recognise that patriarchy poses the most dangerous existential threat, and to work together to overcome it. When Barbie returns from the RealWorld to find a patriarchal wasteland replete with horses, large cars, brewski beers and Kens who have become experts at belittling their Barbies by getting them to rub their feet, fetch them beer, and listen to endless explanations of pop culture phenomena, Barbie is angry, stating: "You can't do this. This is Barbieland. The Barbies worked hard and dreamed hard to make it what it is." Ken explains that unlike the RealWorld, where men need formal qualifications like "MBAs, medical school and ... swim lessons" to hold power, in Kenland, being a man is enough. This is a critique of the power that patriarchy imbues men with, and the false idea that men of merit hold positions of power. This is satirically illustrated through the Mattel CEO and his executives who move as a hapless flock throughout the movie. There is nothing about this group of men that inspires confidence. Without Gloria, or, in his own words, his "Executive Words Lady" - the CEO of Mattel cannot even use his card to successfully go through the turnstile of his own building.

So when Ken reveals that in 48 hours the Kens will vote to make the changes they have made permanent via a constitutional change, Barbie sinks into hopelessness, and is unable to take action. "I'm just going to sit here and wait and hope that one of the more leadership-oriented

Barbies snaps out of it and does something” The notion of a woman leader to save women is synonymous with the kind of lean-in ideas evident in popular feminism’s refusal to properly name and critique systemic power. Disgusted, Gloria and Sasha begin their journey back to “their own messed up world” leaving Barbie to hers. Yet, on their trip back to the RealWorld, Gloria and Sasha encounter Allan (Michael Cera), who is also intent on escaping this new version of Kenland. It is important to note that while “all of Ken’s clothes fit him,” Allan is still an outsider in both Kenland and Barbieland — he held little power under the Barbies’ rule, and less under the Kens’. Allan functions as a reminder that hegemonic masculinity dominates all that do not conform to it. Gloria and Sasha decide to go back because they realise that even if they cannot make Kenland perfect they can at least try to make it better. Gloria, Sasha and Allan find a despondent Barbie lying face down, mourning her lack of any power: “I can’t do brain surgery, I’ve never flown a plane. I’m not the president, no one on the Supreme Court is me.” In this, Gloria recognises and gives name to the helpless contradiction that being an empowered woman while conforming to stereotypical femininity entails, saying “It is literally impossible to be a woman.”

Gloria’s speech emboldens Barbie and the other outliers and margin-dwellers that are gathered at Weird Barbie’s home.^{vi} Among them are Growing Up Skipper, Barbie Video Girl, Writer Barbie, Allan, Sugar Daddy Ken and Earring Magic Ken. Gloria’s speech has a de-programming effect on Writer Barbie and harkens back to the feminist consciousness-raising work done by second-wave feminists (Byrnes, Janice Loreck and Nonie May, 2024). Gloria also points out that being a woman means never forgetting “that the system is rigged.” Gloria’s mention of the system is critical here, as is the way in which one system [Barbieland] can be replaced by another [Kenland]. The focus on systems, rather than individuals, is a critical reminder of what feminists should focus their energies on.

The coalition that is created to deconstruct Kenland constitutes radically differing identities: humans, Barbies, Kens, Skipper and Allan. As the political coalition grows, they then set about creating competition between the Kens who now need the external validation that the Barbies have been giving them. In *The New Statesman*, Lawrence Freedman, an Emeritus Professor of war studies analyses how the Barbies were able to take back power. He writes:

First, the importance of *coalitions*. The counter-revolution depended on the alignment of the outliers, who knew what was going on, with Stereotypical Barbie's group (which devised the strategy). Meanwhile the lack of unity among the Kens assured their defeat (2023).

The denouement of the film is complex and satisfying, and a lot of this is due to the way in which Gerwig and Baumbach have shown how patriarchy can negatively affect men as well. After the Barbies take back Barbieland, Ken confesses "It was hard running stuff. I didn't love it."

This kind of coalition building has been seen as essential to many feminists. Meagan Tyler argues that all attempts at reducing identity formation to individual feelings or biologies are reactionary (2021). Trans affirmative feminist, Sally Hines, agrees arguing that identity-based politics has most often acted as an excluding mechanism, rather than a unifying mechanism (2013). In contrast, Tyler calls for a feminist politics that will "challenge the structures, and name the perpetrators [of capitalist patriarchy]" (2021, our insertion). To achieve this end, Tyler cites Pragma Patel who states, "seeking solidarity and building alliances is a tricky business since it requires a feminist vision that is not shaped by who we are but on shared moral and political values" (2021). This quest for collective action allows for the opportunity

for political opposition “even when there is disagreement and dissent” (Tyler, 2021) between individual members of the political coalition (Carastathis, 2016).

Feminism is, as MacKinnon reminds, “a political movement” (2023, 3). To explain this further, we will re-deploy Carastathis’ critique of the white feminist appropriation of intersectional feminism (2016). Carastathis’ argument is that Crenshaw’s original position on intersectionality — in which she demonstrates how Black women’s rights have suffered because of how Black women are disempowered by racial politics [which favours Black men] and feminist politics [which favours white women]^{vii} — has been simplified and appropriated by white feminists to maintain their privileged control over feminism — to give white feminists the “right to exclude” (2016, 74). In doing so, these white feminists have ignored both the structural sources of BIPOC feminist silences, and the liberatory aims of BIPOC feminist scholarship based on their own plural experiences. Arguing against this Carastathis states:

Identity remains a useful basis for political organizing, as long as identity categories are conceptualized as coalitions. Here, Crenshaw deliberately undermines the dichotomy between “identity politics” and “coalitional politics,” whereby the former is viewed as a kind of separatism based on sameness while the latter depends on alliances built across differences. In fact, intersectionality reveals that this distinction between “identity” and “coalition” rests upon an exclusive focus on differences between groups, failing to consider differences within groups, which an intersectional critique of existing identity categories illuminates. (163)

In *Barbie*, the coalition —despite their differences — is easily assembled for a clear and common goal. Patriarchy is the problem, and because Robbie’s Barbie is coded as a White

woman, it is the only issue that *she* sees in the RealWorld. But it is important to also note that it is the only structural change that Ken sees too, and it is one that he enacted when he returned to Barbieland. In Kenland, all Kens are equal - racism, classism, homophobia, ableism and trans exclusion do not appear in Ken's patriarchy.

Interestingly many GCTEF theorists insist on the primacy of biological sex identity over all other intersectional differences and the most vocal GCTEFs, who are almost all white, believe that they are able to enunciate a universal position for/ consciousness of "all women", by expelling other positions. Following from Carastathis, such a movement would "falsely universalize [the] relatively privileged experiences and identities" (2016, 2) of their cisgender women members. The experiences of trans women are reduced to those of deviant or deluded men. The misgendering is not simply a linguistic or legal turn in the debate — it reproduces both the appearance of absolute cis white male privilege and the reality of relative cis white female privilege by erasing the experiences of all other women, trans and cis. Further, the effect of this re-marginalisation is not just the dilution of the political power, but also that the important intersectional experiences and struggles of BIPOC and/or trans women are "absorbed into [or expelled from] hegemonic feminism" (2016, 103, our insertion).

It is from coalitions formed and led by people on the unprotected margins that the "entrenched perceptual-cognitive habits of essentialism, categorical purity, and segregation" (2016, 2) can be resisted and overcome — that new methodologies can be developed that remedy exclusions and erasures in ways that allow for productive politically-based coalitions ["coalitional horizon of struggles" (2016, 161) in Carastathis' terms] formed from robustly inclusive representations of the experiences of all women. But such transformative opportunities are stripped of power in the GCTEF concern with the sex-essential or sex-

realist categories of womanhood (Kay, 2024).^{viii} The opportunities are also lost in popular, choice and neoliberal feminisms with their insistence on a lean-in, happy feminism that seeks to work within patriarchal structures, rather than forcefully and thoroughly critiquing them.

For Fraser, “the point is that the formation of social groups proceeds by struggles over social discourse” (1992, 179) which allows for fluid, non-dominating coalitions between people caught in networks of power (M.E. Bailey, 1993, Marilyn Frye, 1996). Elizabeth Grosz suggests that patriarchal power can be more forcefully challenged by these “...strategically located strikes at power's most vulnerable places” (1990, 92). These strikes occur at the everyday practices, constraints and systems of power of society (Barbara Risman, Kristen Myers and Ray Sin, 2018) each with a resistant group of subjects, motivated by personal experiences of, and resistances to, the normalising structure.

To return to *Barbie*, having witnessed RealWorld and Kenland patriarchy, can the outcome that was produced by the coalition in *Barbie* be considered transformative, or did it merely serve to reinstate a matriarchal society that [re]displaced the Kens to the margins? The original Barbieland also contained hierarchies of power, both between the women and men, and within each group — the cheerleading position of Allan as the Kens play volleyball was indicative of in-group hierarchy. Even Robbie's Barbie was uncomfortable in her limited role as Stereotypical Barbie. As Weird Barbie states, ‘I don't know, but if you ask me, you had something to do with [the opening of the portals], too’ (our insertion). The transformation of patriarchy can only occur when the underlying structures and power differences between people are changed, rather than by simply replacing men in power with women in power. Using queer politics as an example, Cathy Cohen (1997) suggests that movements aren't about reforming to integrate outside groups into the existing structure, but about transforming

“the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (437).

So whilst the barbie-in-power hierarchy is reinstated, the resolution of the film also allowed for some changing power dynamics. The newly reinstated President Barbie saw that no Barbie or Ken should be living “in the shadows,” and refused the Mattel CEO’s claim that “we can just go back to normal.” She offered the Kens a lower, circuit court judgeship, presumably because she has seen how ill-equipped they currently were to hold positions of power (Ho, 2023). The narrator wryly remarks, “Well, the Kens have to start somewhere. And one day the Kens will have as much power and influence in Barbieland as women have in the RealWorld.” So, *Barbie* imagines an alternate future which is transformative in aspiration and indicative of some structural change.

It is also important to note that the coalition that secured change was propelled forward by those on the margins- the Latina humans, Weird Barbie, Allan and others. Contrary to popular or lean-in feminist narratives, the titular Barbie was not *the* decisive force in the formation, planning and execution of the coalition. If anything, Barbie was positioned as marginal and her popular feminist protestations against Kenland were presented as self-indulgent in comparison to the decisive action taken by the coalition. Other Barbies and humans narrated the steps to change and were more active in producing the distractions that destroyed the rule of the Kens.

Having solved the structural issues in Barbieland the characters set about closing the portal between the two worlds. However, Barbie does not want to be remain in Barbieland. Not

even Barbie can live up to the Barbie stereotype, choosing instead to become mortal and ordinary (Ho, 2023). She tells Ruth Handler (Rhea Pearlman), the inventor of the original Barbie doll: “I want to be part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that’s made. I want to do the imagining, I don’t want to be the idea.” Our reading of this is a hopeful one. Barbie has turned away from biological essentialism, stereotypical femininity and popular feminism relinquishing the stable power of being Stereotypical Barbie in Barbieland, to experience the “variability and change” of life as a human which had once been frightening to her (Byrne, 2024, 4). Her assertion that she “want[s] to be part of the people,” is a reminder of the importance of coalitions over individuals. Barbie then asks Ruth for her permission to be human. It is interesting that Barbie eschews the word woman asking instead to be human, or “part of the people” (Daisy McManaman, 2024).^{ix} Of course, Barbie is coded as a woman when she re-enters the RealWorld in the film’s last scene, but critically all other signifiers of traditional femininity have been discarded. Gone are her pink dresses, her accessories – even her hat! Barbie has embraced her flat feet, opting for the Birkenstocks she rejected earlier in the film (Ho, 2023; Winters et al., 2024). She wears jeans and a blazer, an outfit acceptable to all identities on the gender spectrum.

Conclusion

In *Barbie*, the problems of gender inequity are loosened from the biological body (Temel, 2024), and are shown to be created by patriarchal systems of inequality. It is this insistence on viewing patriarchy as the main definer of Barbie [and Ken’s] experiences that is the radical heart of this film. The film neatly bypasses or deflates (Antony, 2020) the question of *who is a woman* as an unnecessary and unproductive quest for certainty

and containment of identities (Carastathis, 2016, Alyosxa Tudor, 2019). In line with Martin, *Barbie* is a “transgression [of identity politics] in the form of visible difference from norms that are then exposed as norms, not natures or inevitabilities” (1994, 106, our insertion). In forming political groups, compromises between individuals will be necessary. It is in coalitions, rather than separatism, that is our culture’s best chance at re-imagining a different future.

In the end, Barbie rejects the box that the Mattel executives try to place her in when she enters the RealWorld. She has rejected the notion of herself as a commodity object, the stereotypical pink version of popular feminism. And, as we have demonstrated, the film also rejects the narrow versions of womanhood that are put forth by GCTEFs, choice, popular and neoliberal feminisms. Gerwig has acknowledged that the glossy popular feminism that film promulgates is a way to make audiences comfortable, but she notes that the film is a “surprising spicy margarita,” adding: “You can already taste the sweetness and you sort of go with the spice” (Dockterman, 2023b). As the promotional posters for the film proclaimed: “If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you.” For both Gerwig and Robbie, *Barbie* is a feminist movie.

We would argue that the glossy view of feminism that the film advertises enables its success. As Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg agree, “By facilitating feminism’s widespread embrace, neoliberal feminism has also – and paradoxically – helped to pave the way for more militant and mass feminist movements” (2020, 18). They go onto to say that:

The ‘keeping the struggles together’ is the usually invisible labour of social reproduction that mostly women do, in every context. This keeping the struggles together also, as Silvia Federici (2018) has discussed, allows for the emergence of the ‘collective subject’ – the subject that is not only crucial to populism but antithetical to the ‘popularity’ of popular feminism that immediately centres the individual (20).

By keeping the focus on the systemic problems wrought by patriarchy, *Barbie* demonstrates the power of a coalitional approach to dismantling hierarchies, and the importance of inclusiveness to anyone invested in these struggles. This collectivism, is, we would argue at the centre of the film’s radical feminist impulses.

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ⁱ Neither term provides an accurate or complete description of this group. For the rest of this paper, we will use GCTEF [gender critical trans exclusionary feminism].

ⁱⁱ Whilst our paper is not a transfeminist paper, some of the consequences of our argument support transfeminist outcomes.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is also reflected in the rejection by many GCTEFs of the foundations of intersectional feminisms. GCTEFs argue that intersectionality may result in specific rights claims for certain groups of women, but these claims are not related to the experiences, standpoints and politics of women *qua* women (Phelan & Lawford-Smith, 2023). As a contrast, Cohen's intersectional feminism hopes to build "a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades" (438). Cohen hoped that progressive and transformational coalitional work within queer politics would cross any imposed identity-based boundary between heterosexuals and homosexuals, and would include marginalized heterosexuals [single mothers, teen mothers, women of colour dependent on welfare] as potential allies in battling heteronormative privilege.

^{iv} See Talia Bettcher (2018) for a critique of this type of argument.

^v Even Clare-Jones (2023b) acknowledges that some GCTEFs have lurched towards populism that has resulted in identity-based relationships with other political actors that are antithetical to feminism. We would suggest that this is a necessary consequence of the identity-based foundations of GCTEF. Kay (2024) has explained the overlaps between popular choice feminism and GCTEF, as a form of reactionary feminism, in the following way:

I locate reactionary feminism as a key part of the broader turn to openly rejecting "liberal," "progressive," or "girlboss" feminisms within popular and political culture; this phenomenon may seem to resemble feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism, but is based upon a rejection of social justice, a deep and transphobic bioessentialism, and hostility to liberationist feminism (3).

^{vi} The spectacle of exclusion is demonstrated in the remote location of Weird Barbie's house, away from the Dreamhouses. Temel (2024) explains the significance as the "simultaneously... punitive consequences" that exist for those who are positioned outside of identity groups. The GCTEF misgendering of trans women, as "trans identified males" or just "males", is one example.

^{vii} Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality examined the ways in which Black women are legally disenfranchised in anti-racist and anti-sexist legislation (1991). Crenshaw built on the work of Black feminist praxis including "the work of Frances Beal, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Toni Cade Bambara and the Combahee River Collective" (Jennifer Nash, 2019, 42).

^{viii} But as one reviewer responded, Crenshaw (1991, 2017a, 2017b for examples) also evaluates the outcomes gained from coalitions formed in real-life organizations, institutions, knowledges and practices. On the ascension to power of Barack Obama, and his subsequent avoidance of Black grievance, embrace of post-racialism and instantiation of colorblind rule as his 'unifying' political strategies, Crenshaw (2017b, 43) stated "the guilt-averse white majority and the grievance-prone Black minority could come together as one, in a blessed state of ur-American forgetfulness." Both Cohen (1997) and Kimberle Crenshaw (2017a, 2017b) warn against the reformist tendencies in coalitions, even when these coalitions are based on loosely formed provisional identities. We cannot make a claim about the success of the coalitional group in *Barbie* in producing transformational change to the underlying structures in patriarchal society, as the film leaves this open.

^{ix} One reading of the movie's final scene is that Barbie's trip to the gynaecologist signifies a reinscription of sex essentialism over a gender essentialism that pervades the movie? Temel

(2024) suggests that Barbie's reflective move into the RealWorld, and especially into the gynaecologist's office, reinforces the constructs of compulsory heterosexuality. Alternatively, Winters and colleagues (2024), using a Deleuzian framework of becoming, suggest that because there is no determination of how long Barbara Handler [Stereotypical Barbie] has been in the RealWorld nor any dialogue after Barbara delivers the line, the visit can offer the audience "a line of flight to escape the hegemonic constraints of their identities and ways of being" (5), and be read in non-essentialist gender expansive terms as a political statement that affirms the rights of *all* women, cis and trans, to bodily autonomy and reproductive justice.