2024

A Latina's Qualms With Barbie

Arien Roman Rojas
Johnson County Community College

A Latina's Qualms With *Barbie*

The doll that is everything and loves pink moved crowds of people to movie theaters last summer. Donning their best pink clothes, girls, gays, and theys took their loved ones to watch Greta Gerwig's highly anticipated Barbie movie.

The relatable comedy has already won a Golden Globe for its Cinematic and Box Office Achievement and been continually praised since its release for breaking bounds, making women everywhere realize we've all had the guitar played at us. Barbieland is truly something out of my dreams: a pink world run by a female president where every night is girl's night and men don't harass us: Sign me up!

Back in July when the movie first released, I had very high expectations in that theater. The seven-year-old inside me, who had grown up with Barbie and lived many adventures with her, wanted to leave the theater with zero complaints. Sadly after watching the movie twice in theaters, seven-year-old me did not get her wish. Still, this wasn't a feeling I was happy with. It seemed unfeminist of me to have qualms with a movie that was all about women, written by women. What more could I demand from this movie? More powerful female cast members? More diversity? Even more mesmerizing scenery? A more fashionable wardrobe? It had it all. It even managed to emphasize that beauty doesn't equate to youth and perfection, swiftly destroyed a neo-patriarchy and tackled the intricate dynamics of mother-daughter relationships.

 Yet all that wasn't enough to satisfy *this* hater.

After watching the movie for the first time with my friends, I came home in a huff. I was somehow disappointed that Margot Robbie and Gerwig had sold me this movie as the quintessential feminist film. Instead, it was a confusing movie with little depth that barely attempted to depict the female experience. The movie was trying to fit into too many genres at the same time. It wanted to be a comedy, a piece of feminist cinema, as well as tune into how

difficult it is to be a human who's alive and not perfect. In trying to be everything, it never developed these points enough to make a statement. The fact that it packed so much into 1 hour and 54 minutes without much development, left my friends and I thinking, "what was the point of that?"

When I told my mom that my friends and I couldn't wait for *Barbie* to come out, she questioned why I wanted to see a "stupid, childish" movie. Unlike my mom, I kept up with the *Barbie* press, and I defended the film: "No, mom. Barbie is supposed to be feminist. Margot Robbie even reminded us that 'Barbie went to the moon before women were allowed credit cards.'" I'm sure Robbie made more points about how Barbie advanced the feminist movement, so I was expecting a movie to inform the masses about the real struggle of women. How silly of me to expect a movie about a traditionally white, blonde doll to include radical feminism that didn't center white women.

Regardless, I went to see the movie again with my boyfriend's sisters. I laughed more and was able to enjoy the plot. I also understood some of the underlying points it was trying to make: women didn't have to be perfect or young to be considered valuable, and the patriarchy hurts us all. Despite the fact that the majority of the points the movie made regarding women were pertaining to appearance, not wage gaps, or discrimination, or the ever current lack of body-autonomy, I found there was truth in the movie. Even though I wasn't completely satisfied, I left it at that because maybe I was demanding too much from a PG-13 movie about a doll for children.

In the car, my boyfriend's younger sister couldn't understand why I hadn't liked the movie the first time, and honestly I couldn't tell her either. I tried to think of all the reasons I'd jotted down in my brain why this movie was a big disappointment, and I couldn't think of a single one. During the whole car ride home she was raving about how much she loved it, but I

still had an uneasiness in my stomach that I couldn't shake or understand, until I came home and discussed it with my parents.

My parents had seen me enraged after the first time watching it, and after coming home the second time all I really did was sit down in silence and say, "I think I was wrong?" My dad was confused about my change of perspective and basically yanked the answer out of me. It all came down to America Ferrera's monologue and Greta Gerwig's casting of her.

America Ferrera is most famous for her role as Betty Suarez in the television show *Ugly Betty* (2006). However, I knew her for two of her previous roles in *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). For those who have not heard about this film, *Real Women Have Curves* (*RWHC*) centers on Ferrera's character, Ana Garcia's, tumultuous relationship with her mother. It is a raw, coming-of-age film that explores the difficulties of mother-daughter relationships especially in an immigrant, Mexican, low-income family. Garcia wants to move away for college, but the norm for Latino families is instead to live with our parents until our mid 20s, a universal struggle that first generation immigrants have had with their parents which is also related to the income disparity between white and latino families. *RWHC* was an original movie for Latino-Americans about Latino-Americans at a time when our stories weren't told, unless it was to advance stereotypes.

In 2017, Greta Gerwig released *Lady Bird*. This A24 film stars Saoirse Ronan as a high school senior who has a tumultuous relationship with her poor mother. "Lady Bird" wants to move away to New York for college, an idea that her mother isn't happy with. With five academy award nominations and praise from its viewers, *Lady Bird* was highly received. Still, the similarities between *Lady Bird* and *RWHC* were undeniable and since Gerwig never cited *RWHC* as inspiration for her movie (despite doing interviews where she cited other movies as inspiration) she received criticism for appropriating the Latina experience. Even Josefina Lopez,

the original writer of *RWHC,* alluded to Gerwig's white-washing of her movie, turning it into a film digestible for a white audience. *RWHC* received no academy nominations and remains under the radar for those who aren't cinephiles or in pursuit of Latina movies.

When I learned of Gerwig's casting of Ferrera in her upcoming Barbie movie, I was aggravated to say the least. I wanted to believe that casting Ferrera as a main character in *Barbie* was some sort of reparations, a way for Gerwig to apologize for the success of her nearly identical movie. After watching *Barbie,* however, I'm not so sure.

In Ferrera's TED Talk "My identity is a superpower -- not an obstacle", she mentions that she "wanted to play people who were complex and three-dimensional. People who existed at the center of their own lives," and that quote expresses the problem with Gloria, a character in *Barbie.* Take a few lines from her monologue for example: "You have to be thin, but not too thin," and "You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much." There could be criticism about how appearance-focused this monologue was, alluding that womens' most heavy struggle is based on their appearance, which is, of course, completely vapid. However, my initial reaction to the speech wasn't in regards to its focus on appearance, instead; it was about its lack of innovation. Many Twitter threads, Tumblr posts and TikToks about the female experience have already said Ferrera's speech, making better points. However, a speech like this hasn't appeared in popular media, and maybe that is why it received a lot of praise for encapsulating the female experience. But does it capture *Gloria's* female experience?

Gloria is a Latina. She has a half-white-half-latina daughter and a husband who is learning Spanish for her. She works a job where she has no influence, despite her talents, and has thoughts of "irrepressible death." Even though she's one of the main characters in *Barbie,* Gloria's identity isn't explored.

A monologue is an invitation into a character's psyche, but this monologue didn't fully accomplish that. As a Latina, Gloria would have had even more problems than a white woman like Barbie (whom she's addressing in her speech of encouragement). If we're talking about how "it is literally impossible to be a woman," why not bring in insightful, prevalent issues? Perhaps even issues relating to Gloria's role as a Latina?

Gloria could have mentioned that Latinas in general, and Latina mothers in particular, are paid [26% less than white women](#). She could've touched on how we're sexualized from an early age because we're perceived as "spicy;" or how [24.8% more white women](#) attain college degrees than Latinas. Gloria could've even broken the fourth wall and mentioned that only [3.1% of lead actors in TV](#) and only 5.3% in films are Latinos. Yet, none of that is mentioned in the climactic speech that Gloria makes about the struggles of being a woman in a patriarchy. Since the notion that not all women face the same struggles was omitted from this speech, instead of creating a moment to symbolize solidarity, it created alienation from Gerwig's Latina and women of color audience.

It's not like there weren't opportunities for the exploration of both Gloria and her daughter Sasha's character either; if Gerwig still wanted to keep the main Barbie white and blonde as some sort of social commentary, she could have explored the fact that Gloria didn't buy her Latina daughter a brown Barbie but opted for a traditional one. Gerwig could've explored why Sasha, a Latina-American teen thought Barbie "destroyed girls' sense of worth" and why despite this, Gloria still holds a special place for the doll. Gerwig could have even kept Gloria's speech as is, broad and "inclusive", but instead included a very in-character line from the outspoken, blunt Sasha about the specific struggles of women of color. Still, none of those options were explored.

Ferrera has been very open about her disprivileged position as a Latina actress in Hollywood, and she has been vocal about her desire to uplift Latinas in our society. As a co-founder of Poderistas, a "[a digital lifestyle community that inspires, affirms, and informs Latinas to leverage our power](#)" I found it hard to believe Ferrera would not have wanted more depth to her character, and disappointing that Gerwig did not make that desire possible. Gerwig's casting of Ferrera was a poor attempt at sharing the spotlight and promoting diversity. Directors can't expect to cast their main characters with non-white actors and pat themselves on the back for "doing their part" without acknowledging what it means to be a person of color in America and to have that as part of your identity. *Especially* in a movie that talks about how the patriarchy affects women, and how "impossible" it is to be a woman.

If you don't think about *Barbie* too hard and, instead, focus on how enjoyable most of the movie is, then it seems better than average. However, even conceding that not everything has to be about race, *Barbie* is still a missed opportunity. Considering the few movies about women that are greenlit in Hollywood, especially those with such a diverse cast, Gerwig and Robbie owed more to their audience. *Barbie* was a highly marketable movie with a diverse demographic, yet the opportunity to educate people who wouldn't go out of their way to seek feminism, especially intersectional feminism, wasn't ceased. *Barbie* could have found ways to incorporate more significant depth coated with humor like it did with other groundbreaking points and still have remained a highly profitable movie, but that did not happen.

As a Latina I often feel disconnected from the triumphs of women in the United States. Even a movie like this, that was set to depict the female experience and had both America Ferrera and Ariana Greenblatt, two Latina actresses cast as main characters, didn't make me feel like my story was being told. Instead it highlighted a narrow white-feminist lens. The film lacked

depth, grazing the pool of sexism and problems in America today without diving deep, and that left me unbelievably disappointed.

I've been playing with Barbies since I could remember. I watched every single Barbie movie from, *Barbie in the Nutcracker* to *Barbie: Mariposa.* She was the only doll I played with, and yes, she did shape my idea of what beauty was and how I fit into it. In the 2000s Barbie movies did depict characters that weren't white, but they were often sidekicks, and more importantly, they weren't the dolls that were easily attainable and desirable as a movie-watcher. My mom chose to buy me Barbie dolls because her movies were "about being kind and strong," and despite the fact that other dolls like Bratz had characters which were more ethnically diverse, Barbie movies had "no emphasis on their physical appearance."

I have bittersweet feelings about Barbie now as a young adult. She was my childhood, but she was also the reason eight-year-old me, newly immigrated to Kansas and among mostly white Americans, was shocked when she learned she wasn't white, that she wasn't blonde, that she wasn't the lead, and that people preferred she looked like someone she wasn't. Barbie dolls sadly played a part in my low-self esteem, and ignoring the uneasy relationship that many women of color growing up in the US had with Barbie seems obtuse and insensitive. Gerwig seems to have made this movie while residing in the same picture-perfect dreamworld that Barbie inhabited, and sadly that's not the world women of color live in.

I'm not asking Gerwig to take on the role of writing me the perfect Latina next time she wants to include us in her films, nor am I saying that writing POC characters is exclusively for POC directors. I'm simply requesting that she takes the time to acknowledge our experience, make real consultations with the people she's casting, and make her characters well-rounded the next time she wants to empower women. Casting Ferrera was a choice and making one of the main characters Latina was a choice, yet if you were blindfolded while watching *Barbie,* you

wouldn't be able to tell that Gloria was a Latina woman by what she says, how she behaves, or what is important to her. As Ferrera said in her TEDTalk: "Presence creates possibilities," and our presence deserves to be heard. Hollywood is finally understanding that representation is important; the next standard we need to hold directors to is proper representation.

Works Cited

About Us. Poderistas. (2024, March 5). https://poderistas.com/about-us/

Anthony , M., Howard Nichols, A., & Del Pilar, W. (2021, December 21). *A look at degree attainment among Hispanic women and men and how covid-19 could deepen racial and gender divides*. The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/resource/a-look-at-degree-attainment-among-hispanic-women-and-men-and-how-covid-19-could-deepen-racial-and-gender-divides/

Barbie. Directed by Greta Gerwig, performances by America Ferrera, Ariana Greenblatt, Warner Brothers, 2023.

Ferrera, America. "My identity is a superpower -- not an obstacle." YouTube, uploaded by TED, 21 Jun 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjquHTj4HlY.

Fischer, S. (2022, September 27). *New report calls out U.S. media for lack of Latino representation*. Axios. https://www.axios.com/2022/09/27/latino-representation-media-film-tv-study

Gerwig, Greta. "Greta Gerwig Explains the Inspiration Behind 'Lady Bird'" *Vanity Fair,* 01 Dec. 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/video/watch/greta-gerwig-explains-the-inspiration-behind-lady-bird

Get the facts about the pay gap for Latina Equal Pay Day. Lean In. (n.d.). https://leanin.org/data-about-the-gender-pay-gap-for-latinas#!

IGN (@ign). "Margot Robbie gets REAL." *TikTok* 12 Jul. 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@ign/video/7255125360742796586

Rodriguez, M. (2018, January 31). *"real women have curves" writer Josefina López says "Lady Bird" like a 'white version' of her film*. Remezcla. https://remezcla.com/film/real-women-have-curves-josefina-lopez-lady-bird/