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Queering the Horse-Crazy Girl (Part II):  
 Ponies, Girls, and Difference

In my second round of horse-crazy girl talk, I consider the popular image of horse-crazy girlhood<sup>1</sup> as represented by the current stock of My Little Pony toys, comparing them with Breyer model horses and with the all-too-familiar Barbie doll. I hope to show how My Little Pony projects a far-from-innocent sexuality onto girls' passion for horses and sexualizes and commodifies girl-horse love.

The My Little Pony figures, which first appeared in toy stores in 1982, are small, mass-produced, inexpensive toys that represent caricatures of ponies.<sup>2</sup> The Ponies, produced by Hasbro, the world's second largest toy-maker, are colorful, cartoon-like soft plastic figures, with long manes and tails that can be brushed and fashioned, a key selling point that links them to popular lines of Barbie dolls with similarly excessive and style-able hair. These toys are heavily marketed to girls, as is made perfectly clear on the My Little Pony homepage, which states: "Welcome to Ponyville! For more than 20 years, MY LITTLE PONY has given little girls a world of surprises and spontaneity, sunshine and silliness" ([www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/](http://www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/)). A look through the 28 pages of products on the website reveals an array of Pony figures and accessories. Each Pony has an alluring "girly" name, such as "My Little Pony Graceful Glimmer as the Winter Crystal Princess Pony." [Display #1 Graceful Glimmer Pony:  
[www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/default.cfm?page=Products/Detail&product\\_id=17382](http://www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/default.cfm?page=Products/Detail&product_id=17382)]  
 This pony is a small white figure with a long silver mane and tail. She comes with a "tiara-dress," which lights up, a ring, a brush for her hair, and a barrette. Her cost: \$9.99.

There is also the Pony I have with me today, the Flower Garland Pony, whose box identifies her as a “Divine Shine Pony,” and provides her birth month (October), her birth stone (pearl), her favorite color (powder blue), and her favorite pastime (“collecting fancy purses”). The models come in an array of pastel and florescent colors, and they also come in flavors, such as “My Little Pony Butterfly Island Sunny Scent Pineapple Paradise Pony,” a bright pink Pony with a yellow and green mane and a yellow tail. She is “scented like fresh, sweet pineapples,” comes with a hairbrush, and only costs \$4.99.

In contrast, another popular toy marketed to horse-crazy girls are the Breyer horse models, whose first incarnations appeared in 1950, and which aim at naturalistic representations of various breeds and famous – real and fictional -- individual horses after which the models are named. These toys are made of hard plastic, porcelain or bronze, and cost anywhere from around \$14 up to \$300, depending on the size and material of the model, with collector’s items costing much more. The Breyer website boasts that “no two Breyer model horses are ever exactly alike” ([www.breyerhorses.com](http://www.breyerhorses.com)), as their models are handcrafted in a five-step-process beginning with an artist-sculpted clay model and ending with hand-painted details.<sup>3</sup> The Breyer marketing strategy is very different from Hasbro’s. [Display #2 Breyer Nokota:

[www.breyerhorses.com/products/product.php?item=1279](http://www.breyerhorses.com/products/product.php?item=1279)] For example, the 2007 Benefit Model is a limited edition reproduction of the American Nokota horse, whose uniqueness lies in its historical connection to the feral horses of the 1880s who lived in areas from Texas to Montana. Clearly stated in the description of this model is that part of the proceeds from their sale goes to non-profit organizations that help maintain this breed.<sup>4</sup> However, certainly not wanting to be left out of the My Little Pony niche, two of Breyer’s dozen or more equine product lines are the “Ponies” collection, geared toward

three- to five-year-olds, and the “Wind Dancers” collection, more fanciful models for ages six and up. Although these Breyer models remain more “realistic” than My Little Pony in their representations of horse bodies, the models do have long, brushable manes and tails.<sup>5</sup>

In working through a feminist and queer analysis of these two species of toys marketed to horse-crazy girls, I am inspired by Ann Ducille’s discussion, “Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference,” concerning the phenomenon of Mattel, the world’s largest toy-maker, trying to include racial and ethnic difference in the Barbie product line. Ducille suggests, “the most intriguing questions are about what makes possible the mass production of difference,” as she asks, “How does difference look?” (339). Ducille is specifically addressing the homogeneity of Barbie’s unchanging body type and Mattel’s stereotyping approach to representing racial difference through variations in skin tone and clothing. [Display #3 Ms. Garnet Barbie:

[www.barbiecollector.com/shop/product.aspx?product\\_id=61437&shelfid=150152](http://www.barbiecollector.com/shop/product.aspx?product_id=61437&shelfid=150152)]

In contrast to what seems to be Mattel’s deep-seated resistance to altering Barbie’s body type to more accurately represent the female population as a whole, Breyer trumpets the wide variety of horse bodies and types it produces (for example, there are 160 different models within their most popular “Traditional” product line). These representational differences in part reflect the diversity of horse breeds that have been developed through centuries of selective breeding to produce bodies that satisfy different human employments of equine labor. In thinking about the failure to represent difference in the body type of Barbie, compared with the variety of bodies represented by Breyer horse models, it also seems important to ask, what, in the popular imaginary, allows

difference in the representation of horse bodies but not for the American female human body?

My hypothesis in answering this question runs along political lines, and I suggest that racial differences among humans signify socio-cultural power disparities with long and sordid histories of colonialization, genocide, slavery, and racist and sexist oppressions, and that resistance to representing true human variations reflects or is a manifestation of the resistance to reading these histories in the bodies of our culture and the anxious desire to mask racial difference behind or within easily readable markers.<sup>6</sup> As a colleague pointed out, reducing the diversity of women's bodies to one idealized representation, to which girls and women are expected to identify, devalues the multitude of real differences in female body types, colors, shapes, textures, and proportions, in the work of rendering all women equally "manageable."<sup>7</sup> Barbie and her Little Pony sister are partners in patriarchal domesticating practices.

Nonhuman animal difference, on the other hand, does not carry with it the same political valences and dangers, despite practices of subjection and slaughter that link human and nonhuman histories. In particular, domestic animals are thought of as products of human culture, objects that participate in human societies and civilizations in numerous ways, not the least of which are their providing food, clothing, and labor, be this agricultural or affective labor, or the labor of transportation, war or entertainment. Never have nonhuman animals demanded the legal rights sought after by human populations. Indeed they cannot themselves ask for such protection in languages that are legally recognized, and, even when humans ask for them, nonhuman animal rights position animals as property, that is, as objects under the ownership and control of human subjects.<sup>8</sup>

My Little Pony and the Breyer models both objectify horses as bodies for human consumption. However, they do so in different ways. Breyer models work to emphasize human-nonhuman difference by representing the sheer variety of, albeit idealized, horse bodies that have been and are available for material consumption. My Little Pony conflates girl bodies and horse bodies, reducing difference by, again, employing a standardized body type (all MLPs have the same basic shape) and by fetishizing hair as a fashion accessory. Both body type and hair appeal to familiar narratives of female seduction and stereotypes of feminine appearance and behavior, without, however, focusing on fantasized adult breast-to-hip measurements and thereby giving a more “appropriate” pre-pubescent (the “little pony”) version of sexualized girlhood. A 2007 article in *Bitch* magazine helps make clear the objectifying work the current stock (which is the “third generation”<sup>9</sup>) of My Little Pony does in conflating girl and pony bodies:

[Display MLP again here]

Today’s My Little Pony displays upturned, accentuated buttocks; smooth, glittery skin; a tilted head; an exposed neck; long eyelashes; lowered eyelids; dilated pupils; long, slim legs; shifted weight; accentuated hair—even, in some cases, parted lips. The Budweiser Clydesdales these are not. (“My Little Calliponian” 19)

Today’s My Little Pony is actively seductive, selling a certain version of pre-adolescent female sexuality. The images these toys offer girls, along with the scripts that accompany each toy, are fantasies of female sexual availability, very much reflecting heteropatriarchal consumer culture, quaintly packaged in the “innocent” body of a little pony-girl.<sup>10</sup>

The question I would like to leave feminist consumers with is, how have we arrived at this hyper-sexualization of horse-crazy girls, particularly over the last couple of decades? I suggest there are other ways of understanding girls' passion for horses that accounts for female agency, subjectivity, and sexuality – along with consideration of the active role that horses play in these partnerships.

In thinking about the potential solidarity of horse-crazy girls and the women they grow up to be, I finish with visual artist Deborah Bright's fantasy about the "subversive" possibilities of horse-crazy love. In commenting on the frequency with which depictions of horses appear in the portfolios of female art school applicants, Bright says:

I daydreamed a whole nation of horse-girls who shared this obsession; a fierce army of horse-lovers impervious to the contempt implicit in the men's mockery. Ignoring the social consensus that they should have 'moved on' from horses to boys, these hopeful applicants were signaling their membership in a subversive sisterhood. If we nurtured their talent and insistence on deviant passion over peer pressure, we could move mountains ("Horse Crazy" 22).<sup>11</sup>

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#### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> In my dissertation, I discuss how late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American popular culture commonly reads girl-horse love as a transitional stage (with horses as transitional objects) passed through in a developmental trajectory that leads to boys and to heterosexual reproductive sexuality. As such, this cultural narrative functions to retain the innocence of childhood (see note 10 below) while also constructing the female subject within a sexually accessible frame. In addition, this reading of girl-horse



love figures the horse partner as purely symbolic, an objectified and depersonalized figure through which normative ideologies of desire can be mirrored.

Beverly Lyon Clark, in her critical work on children's literature, talks about the devaluation of childhood that posits childhood as something adults need to grow out of, a state of being deficient in maturity and complexity. She calls this "the stepping-stone phenomenon" (10) and associates it with developmental theories that insist on prescriptive growth out of childhood and into adulthood (11). She also notes a concurrent "nostalgia" (11) for childhood, with the ironic juxtaposition that childhood is to be outgrown while its loss is mourned. Childhood is also associated with a necessary dependency, which is often equated with lack of agency, a trait that domestic animals share in popular configurations with children. Positing children and animals as dependent enables adults to self-define as autonomous and independent humans, in the same way that rendering women dependent enables the construction of the autonomous male subject.

<sup>2</sup> My Little Pony has poor ratings on [www.ethicscore.org](http://www.ethicscore.org) for phthalates and PVC (poly vinyl chloride) content, as well as for workers rights violations at Chinese suppliers. For a discussion of phthalates and PVC, see Shapiro. "Toxic Toys: Why Europe's Children Are Safer Than Ours." *The Nation*. November 5, 2007. 11-17. Barbie girls have a lower ethicscore but they don't contain phthalates.

<sup>3</sup> The complete process is 1) the creation of an individual clay model, 2) a steel mold of this model, 3) injection of cellulose acetate to create the product, 4) an airbrush paintjob, and 5) hand-painted touch-up and details.

<sup>4</sup> Breyer, owned by Reeves International, also has a large adult collector's market. Every summer collectors can show off their models and share their passion with others at Breyerfest. Breyer also produces a model-horse collector magazine called *Just About Horses*.

<sup>5</sup> Many of the Breyer models for younger consumers include human figures and tack and other accessories. I find this interesting in thinking about what messages Breyer sends about human-horse relationships, where humans are the riders and/or caretakers, and how this message contrasts with the girl-pony conflation of My Little Pony toys.

<sup>6</sup> See Anderson.

<sup>7</sup> This term and credit for this insight goes to Kris Weller (email correspondence, 21 January 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See Bryant and Weller.

<sup>9</sup> The first generation arrived in 1982; the second generation in 1997; the third generation in 2003.

<sup>10</sup> In analyzing the concept and work of childhood in American culture, James Kincaid points out how the construction of lack on the part of the child is transformed via the "eroticizing of empty innocence" (17). Yet, innocence is the flip side of "depravity" (ibid), and the slippage is everywhere apparent. The ambiguity of erotic innocence constitutes both the legibility and the illegibility of the horse-crazy girl: as a child, she is denied sexual agency yet her desire for horses is conveniently read as some form of penis envy. In looking at childhood as a cultural construct, James Kincaid suggests that "The child is a functional, a malleable part of our discourse rather than a fixed stage; 'the child' is a product of ways of perceiving, not something that is *there*" (19). The same is true for the construct of the "horse-crazy girl." Just as queer theory works to de-essentialize sex and gender binaries, destabilizing the identity categories that calcify

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social roles and cultural norms, a queer look at childhood and at representations of nonhuman subjectivity can suggest the potential instability of the categories of “childhood” and the “human.”

<sup>11</sup> In addition to her words, see Bright’s own subversive exploration of girl-horse love in her photographic series of portraits of toy horses in “Being and Riding.” In her photographic portraits of models horses, Bright critiques the patriarchal devaluation of girl-horse love while at the same time articulating the transgression of girl-horse love through imagery that evokes sadomasochistic references, with distinctive queer valences.