Rhetorical Analysis:

The Life of Multicultural Barbie

The name Barbie is a very familiar in societies all over the world. Most children, girls in particular even own that particular popular doll. However, according to the article, “From Multicultural Babrbie and the Merchandising of Difference” by Ann duCille, Barbie herself is a way that society establishes cultural norms. DuCille exposes Barbie as being a key factor in what children determine is valuable in and around them.

Ann duCille was the director and chair of the Center for African American Studies at Wesleyan University (Greene 527). She won the Myers center Award for the Study of Human Rights in 1997 from her book Skin Trade. She comes across as very knowledgeable in her field because she has studied race and popular culture (527).

The rhetorical situation, first of all starts off with the fascination that DuCille had to dolls at a young age. When she received her first doll in the 1950’s, there was no option to have dolls in any other race besides white. For duCille however, she did not take note of the black absence of skin color on these dolls (duCille 528). She does remember though, that in her make-believe world that her day dreams were acutely white. Needless to say, the products that she was consuming profoundly influenced her thoughts of the outside world.
Throughout the essay, duCille’s intended audience are the parents of multicultural backgrounds. This is to show focus on how Barbie was firstly the icon of true white womanhood and feminism, however later trying to satisfy all audiences with the release of multicultural barbies. The pathos that the author appeals to is the self-image side of adolescents. She states that little girls often fantasize themselves as Barbies and all that she brings (532). The barbie doll herself gives the assumption of glamour, perfection and anorexia. Young girls see this image and begin to think that being really thin, long legged, luxuriously haired and a buxom beauty is how the world wants them to be viewed (532). However it reality this idea of perfection rarely exists.

Continuing on with self-image pathos, duCille also brings up the clinical study conducted by black psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940’s. In this study, black and white children had to choose between either a black or white doll based on attractiveness and niceness (535). The two used this study to demonstrate the negative effects of racism and segregation on black children. What they found was that nearly seventy percent of black children chose the white doll (535). The final results were that when a black child chose a white doll, that it was reflecting a negative self image.

Although multicultural parents are the primary audience, a secondary audience would be Mattel, the creators of Barbie. They would be a secondary audience because duCille emphasizes on how these dolls should help reflect an image of the child holding the doll.

DuCille’s second audience intention was to attack the business and media industry. By attacking the business industry she speaks about having the first African American Barbie, also known as Colored Francie. Colored Francie, as well as the other first black Barbies, included physical features of white Barbie. She points out that they physical features did not show
representation of a true African American woman but one of a white woman but with a painted skin tone (533). So, duCille is trying to exhort black parents to encourage their children into buying the African American Barbie and also to instill into that child’s mind that white dolls with the extension reflecting into white people, are not by any means any more attractive or nicer (536). The point being, the more a parent compliments such multicultural dolls, the more a child will associate those compliments to their own self image.

Throughout the essay duCille was trying to teach the public about the different phases of Barbie. She also wanted to show how long it took for the multiculturalism of dolls to be released into the public. However she also argues that even with the ninety different shades and types of Barbies offered today, there is one thing that remains, the ideology of beauty, which is a matter of physical characteristics (536).

In 1990 two African American women was asked to develop a new line of more realistically sculpted black fashion dolls (536). Their final product was a doll that had fuller lips, broader noses, wider hips and higher derrieres who they named Shani. Now young girls are able to really live the concept of having a doll that resembles her. However, even with these new physical attributes, the focus was still on the beauty, wealth and success of Barbie, and not her brain (537). According to duCille, Barbie is just a piece of plastic but what she suggests about gender and race in the world isn’t good at all.

Now we look at the cultural relevance to the article. In modern society our culture is really diverse. There are many different ethnic audiences and when people think of Barbie, they want to think that she is a doll that represents them. People also believe that every culture has physical feature differences. Going with that thought, it would only be customary that Mattel
produces multicultural Barbies that coincide with individual races. That is why today, Mattel offers a rainbow collection of colors, races ethnicities and nationalities that mostly markets the original prototype of Barbie except with a wardrobe change and color change (533).

All in all, many different valid points that argued duCille’s view were addressed, creating an overall effectiveness for this article. The golden line being that through producing and consuming good and ideas of products, society creates cultural norms through such products. The success of the article came through the emphatic tone used. The author emphasized the impact that Barbie has on our culture, mainly with young female children. This type of communication worked well in giving information to parents and all readers of the article.