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The Therapeutic Power of Synthetic Relationships with Dolls



EMILIE ST-HILAIRE

The author considers adult doll play as therapeutic intervention by examining how the physical properties of reborn dolls and also sex dolls provide comfort and establish needs met through care giving. She discusses dolls providing a sense of personal identity through narrative play, community, and retail therapy, and she describes the companionship attained through imaginative perception and social connections, all benefits that accompany what she calls a synthetic relationship. Drawing from research related to doll therapy in dementia care and from studies on sex doll usage, she considers original research on reborn dolls. She proposes that doll ownership can therapeutically support personal development and good social and mental health, thus improving broader social relationships for many doll owners. **Key words:** doll collection; dolls; doll therapy; imaginative play; play therapy; reborn dolls

REBORN DOLLS ARE hyperrealistic baby dolls created by physically altering and repurposing storebought dolls. For a doll to be considered reborn as a baby, an artist meticulously paints the doll and applies realistic hair and other details.¹ Today, blank kits are available for reborn doll artists, and tutorials have proliferated online over the past decade or so, contributing to an increase in reborn artists and collectors. More recently, an explosion of TikTok videos featuring reborns have brought increased attention to such dolls, sometimes adding controversy to the initial shock often ignited by the uncanny realism of these creations. The issues, concerns, and questions that arise in relation to reborn dollatry (or a love of dolls) have evolved alongside shifts in the culture and practices of reborn enthusiasts.² For many years, reborn doll owners have become the subject of human-interest stories in news coverage of the hobby. Editors tend to produce headlines that seek to shock or promote stories that aim for the tragic, but the most fascinating aspect of this phenomenon to me is how many adults prefer the company of dolls. Collectors have a variety of reasons to own

dolls and affection for them is nothing new. What is unique today is how these days such relationships develop given the support of imaginative perception, advanced materials, and online communities. I prefer to call these connections “synthetic relationships” as a term for the practice of sustaining meaningful personal interactions with a surrogate companion.³ The companion is synthetic, but the emotions that emerge from the interactions are real.⁴

In this article, I specifically discuss reborn dolls—and also sex dolls—in relation to adult doll play. It is important to note that reborn dolls are not used in a sexual way. Sex dolls themselves have existed for over a century but have really grown in popularity since the turn of the twenty-first century.⁵ The establishment of manufacturers that use soft silicone and strong internal armatures to create realistic adult-sized dolls has led to increased cultural awareness of sex dolls and an appreciation of their use as a synthetic companion that goes beyond sex.

As indicated in my title, I am proposing that synthetic relationships with dolls can be therapeutic, and I describe the characteristics of contemporary synthetic relationships and explain the practices that support companionship through dolls. I first came upon reborn dolls by chance in 2016, and these realistic baby dolls have turned out to be surprisingly complex and intriguing. There exist persistent misconceptions about women who enjoy dolls, and uncovering what lies at the root of these misconceptions—sometimes involving stigma and even hate directed at adult doll enthusiasts—has compelled my research. Contrary to popular narratives, I have found that this type of doll play does not arise necessarily in response to fertility-related traumas, which is a common explanation for ownership of a reborn. The fact that the play is fun seems to be obscured by apprehension and concern directed toward any adult who has such a doll. From a more cynical perspective, the image of a woman who has time to play with what some perceive as a fake baby incites suspicion because of the archaic notion that motherhood is a serious obligation that should be undertaken at the expense of personal amusement and all other interests. Reborn doll play is inextricably tied to this concept of motherhood, but, in practice, doll play proves to be very different. Doll owners are the first to point this out: they know that these are dolls, and that is, in fact, what they desire. Reborns both are and are not about babies. They provide an example of the complexities of self-care in contemporary life and how challenging it can be for others to examine critically and publicly this kind of play.

I discuss three aspects of adult doll play as therapeutic intervention by

asking the following questions: First, how do the physical properties of the doll provide comfort and establish needs met through care giving? Second, how do dolls provide a sense of personal identity through narrative play, community, and retail therapy? And finally, how is companionship attained through imaginative perception and social connections? These benefits—comfort, a sense of personal identity, and companionship—accompany what I call a synthetic relationship.

A further question worth addressing right away concerns doll therapy. Synthetic relationships are therapeutic for which issues exactly—loneliness, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness? Overall these concerns offer an accurate description of the general malaise of living in the crisis of climate and late capitalism of recent decades. To enjoy oneself frivolously in the face of such difficulties could itself be seen as a radical act (or, perhaps it is not frivolous, but instead terribly important). Add to this the increased sense of self and possibilities for self-actualization and healing that can emerge from a synthetic relationship and we can see that dolls are indeed powerful.

How do the physical properties of the doll provide comfort and establish needs met through care giving? Whether visually or through touch or by convincing dialogue, the impressive ways in which human-like entities imitate living beings sells us on the fantasy that they are like us at all. Reborn dolls look like real babies. Their bodies are weighted to have the delicate heft of an infant. They fit into diapers and baby clothes, which adds to the tactility and even the smell reminiscent of little babies. Made of soft vinyl or silicone, such a doll must be cared for to prevent damage. Cleaning and bathing the doll become acts of care that offer the doll owner a sense of purpose and even devotion to the doll. Reborn dolls costs hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars.

Similarly, adult-sized silicone sex dolls require maintenance and care. The heavy body must not be left in certain positions too long or it will become misshapen. Dust, dirt, and makeup must be removed to preserve the skin surface. Wigs require regular maintenance as well. These care requirements can establish a bond between doll owners and their dolls. Beyond what is required to maintain the physical characteristics of the object, some doll owners extend their care to include imagined medical needs.

Reborns such as micropremie newborns are representative of babies in need of extra special care. Some reborn doll collectors desire these smaller dolls, as they do reborns with physical features indicative of Down's syndrome or other conditions requiring additional care. These types of dolls have become more prevalent in recent years.⁶ The (perception of) additional care required

can lead to a stronger bond for a doll owner. Attentive doll owners can, in turn, have their own need for touch and attachment fulfilled by their doll. Michele White is one of very few scholars who has published research on reborn dolls. In her “Babies Who Touch You,” she describes how some artists present preemie and micropreemie reborn dolls as more real and more lovable because of their fragile and damaged appearance.⁷ White’s analysis focuses on how doll artists selling their work on eBay use specific language to convey the sensations of physically touching and emotionally feeling for the reborn babies offered for sale. She describes how dolls portrayed in hospital settings and wrapped in medical tubing produce a visceral reaction.⁸ One seller described the skin tone of a reborn offered for sale as follows: “Not all of the baby’s circulation has developed completely, thus displaying the bluish cast to areas of his face and limbs.”⁹ The seller initiates imaginative perception for the buyer by creating a narrative around the helpless, possibly sick, baby in need of care. Caring for reborns can offer a sense of control and comfort. Furthermore, care is something that can be offered, like a gift, in the form of service.



Figure 1. Tiny fifteen-inch preemie baby, Blessing, watched over by one-year-old sized Liam. Courtesy Victoria Deviller, Photovoice Project.

An offering of care would ordinarily entitle one to a return of some kind, since most cultures abide by a rule of reciprocity with regard to gift giving.¹⁰ Giving care and giving a gift bear some similarities worth thinking through to understand both the benefits and the dark side of giving. Phillippe Chaniel is a French sociologist and scholar of Marcel Mauss, the father of French ethnology. Chaniel has written about the “family resemblances” of the gift and of care.¹¹ He proposes that “care, like the gift, is clearly a total social relationship. . . . It forms a matrix for human relationships. In short, care is more than caring, just as the gift, the bedrock of human sociability according to Mauss, is more than giving.”¹² Chaniel notes that, ultimately, we may not even know within a relationship who is the giver and who is the receiver of gifts or of care. But the environment in which care is offered matters to the quality of care. High-quality care is a limited resource because of the effort it requires. Offering high-quality care normally proves essential to the giver’s happiness because offering subpar attention damages the self-perception and well-being of a care giver. Care, then, is “a collective undertaking. It defines a couple, a pair, or, as with partners in conversation, the reply gives sense to or makes sense of the question and cements the relationship.”¹³ This reply could be gratitude, appreciation, or love. Even when care work involves financial compensation, it merits a response from the recipient.

Unfortunately we commonly undervalue care work, and therefore care workers are frequently overworked and poorly paid. The infant care supplied by mothers is devalued yet expected to be endless. The fact that child care can be both rewarding and very difficult seems a paradox beyond comprehension in a society focused on rationality and individualistic enterprise. In the parent-child dyad, care emerges from love and the desire to see offspring succeed. In other contexts, care might be motivated by financial compensation and—in some cases—by pity. Chaniel draws from Paul Ricoeur to address these motivations, proposing that “good care” more resembles a gift the further it lies from pity or charity. In the case of pity, there seems less likelihood of compensation or reward for care, which causes a disparity and undermines the exchange between receiver and giver.¹⁴ Chaniel believes a porous boundary exists between care and gift, given the reciprocity criterion. But this brings up the matter of repayment. A form of domination can arise here because “the gift can confer power to the extent that the other is indebted,” and Chaniel wonders if the same cannot be said of care. Is nonreciprocated care, or unsolicited care in excess, a form of domination?

While, like the gift, care may thus become more symmetrical and mutual, it may also be sublimated into grace. Such moments of grace are common in the experience of caring, moments where it is a case of giving for giving's sake without aiming to immediately satisfy a duly identified need. This dimension, of play, pleasure, even desire, is clearly part of care-giving. What is a state of grace if not a fleeting moment when human interaction escapes from the weight of routine, function, and usefulness, an unsought and unexpected moment when social rules and constraints are temporarily suspended, where (institutional) time stops briefly for a spontaneous action, an instance of grace, a freely bestowed gift, or a beautiful gesture, a delicate attention, a fleeting complicity revealed in a word, a smile, a laugh, a bodily touch. Accepting that a touch of grace lies at the heart of care means recognizing this necessarily non-utilitarian, non-qualifiable, unpredictable, unexpected, unsought, immeasurable aspect of what is given as an extra. Being inestimable in both senses of the term, this [support for life] ceaselessly weaves and reweaves, as if for their own sake, the sensitive and invisible links that symbolize our common interdependence and our shared vulnerability.¹⁵

This extended passage feels ready made for explaining the joy of doll care. Grace is a beautiful term to describe the “freely bestowed” gift of care, particularly from the perspective of the giver. But doll care is actually a solitary activity. Does the solitude and seeming one-sidedness of doll care pervert the connection to “interdependence and shared vulnerability”?¹⁶ No, because care is not only beneficial to the receiver (a point made clear by Chanial). It makes sense that a doll owner benefits from the imaginative perception and performative motions of care work. I have avoided casting synthetic relationships as sad because they confer joy, comfort, and grace to the doll owner. It is hard in a contemporary, individualistic society to seek out opportunities for graceful interdependence and shared vulnerability. The challenges of materialistic culture, the expectations of independence, and the devaluation of vulnerability (perceived as weakness) makes care, love, and relationships difficult. These facets of modern life are challenging. That some people resolve to escape from “the weight of routine, function, and usefulness” through synthetic relationships is a hopeful, even utopian prospect.¹⁷

In the case of a synthetic companion, no expectation of further giving will arise as it might with an organic partner. Even though the partner is an inanimate

human figure, it can offer a return on the emotional investment. A participant in the study about sex doll owners by Norman Makato and his colleagues explained that “you get what you put in,” suggesting that the care and love freely offered to a doll is reciprocated via imaginatively perceived gratitude, improved health, or love¹⁸ As Chaniel described, the giving of care does, in and of itself, provide a return of happiness and the aforementioned feeling of grace. It may be as simple as having something to give; in a capitalist society where nothing is free, the giving of care comes close, and it can feel good for that reason alone. Furthermore, those who need assistance in their life may sometimes feel they are a burden to others. Giving care or affection, however, is something that can be offered even if one has little else to offer. No one wants to feel they have nothing to give. For individuals living with disability that requires assistance, caring for a doll can fulfill a desire to give care while benefitting from the physical comfort of touching, handling, and cuddling a doll body. To provide care is to be needed, and this constitutes an important social role that can subsequently contribute to a doll owner’s identity as a care giver and support a sense of self.

The performance of care is responsible for much of the reciprocity in a synthetic relationship. It is the physicality of the doll that prompts caring behavior, which initiates bonding and positive affective states. The performance of care is significant because it differs from simply daydreaming or other, more passive mental activities. By physically cradling, rocking, cuddling the doll, or brushing its hair, or changing its clothes, the owner’s body performs familiar actions that reference and recall real-world experiences. These actions can convey expertise and are a form of knowledge.¹⁹ And such performances can also be thought of as the transmission of cultural identity. How one acts contributes to who one is. In the case of a synthetic relationship, acts of care produce a care giver identity. There is an intimacy to doll care that can produce a closeness hard to find in social relationships with other human beings. Particularly in the age of digital connection, it is rare to find moments of true intimacy. From the feeling of being watched to the compulsion to make private moments public, neoliberal capitalism is so absorbed in the personal that reliable and reciprocal intimacy becomes clouded, if it is still possible at all.

Real Emotions, Synthetic Relationships

Experiencing real emotions within a synthetic relationship is not a new phe-

nomenon. Fictional romance as experienced, for example, in a video game, film, or novel, can produce real emotions. Particularly in interactive media, personal choices can lead to the development of romantic relationships in which the player becomes significantly invested. The entanglement of emotions between a player and a fictional character is called “bleed.”²⁰ This is a phenomenon documented in scholarship about video games, and it aligns with the investment sex doll owners describe in their synthetic relationships. Is it harmful to explore romance and relationships with fictional entities? This is an important question, one too large to address adequately here. Interestingly though, a recent article seeking to examine whether sex doll relationships increase a doll owner’s tendency to objectify women found no correlation between doll ownership and objectifying attitudes. The authors Jeanne C. Desbuleux and Johannes Fuss mention that “dolls could also provide healing experiences for some users, and our data shows that some individuals report a benefit from owning a doll, with an increase in mental health, a lowering of perceived stress in social situations, or a positive change in attitudes toward women.”²¹ We need more research in this area to parse the range of activities and relationships doll owners are creating with their synthetic companions.

Images of dolls in need of medical care demonstrate, perhaps to an extreme, how caring for a doll can create a bond and offer a sense of purpose for a doll owner. It is interesting to consider that one of the benefits observed in doll therapy in dementia care is a lessening of personal needs upon the introduction of a baby doll.²² The requirement to care for another person reduced a patient’s own needs, such as the desire for companionship due to loneliness or distress. By having a doll owner step into the role of a parent or other care giver, doll play can be nostalgic (reminiscent of baby care), or it may evoke memories of childhood. The doll focuses the patient’s attention and physically brings about caring behavior.²³ Over the past couple decades, doll therapy has been widely studied in the context of Alzheimer’s and dementia care, and insights from this research prove interesting in relation to the therapeutic use of dolls more generally. Psychologist and doll therapy researcher Rita Pezzati and her colleagues found that once the need for attachment was addressed, the doll therapy patients were more likely to exhibit (positive) exploratory behaviors.²⁴

As they wrote, “The clinical observation of doll therapy interventions has highlighted how the person with dementia shifts from requesting care and protection for him/herself—through vocalizations, gestures, crying—to reassuring the doll, which is perceived and treated as a real baby. It promotes moments of

peacefulness and tranquility, with significant reductions of disruptive behaviors. Patients often display care giving (rocking, caressing, kissing, squeezing the chest, arranging clothes, combing) and exploratory (manipulating, moving, carefully observing, sniffing) behaviors associated with emotional expressions, such as joy, surprise, tenderness, and concern.²⁵

Creating and sharing doll play narratives can affect an individual's identity through altered self-perception and new social roles, which support the therapeutic—or healing—potential of synthetic relationships.

In addition to a care-giving identity, another role often explored through doll play with a sex doll in particular is that of romantic partner, husband, or boyfriend. According to a 2018 survey of sex doll owners by anthropologists Mitchell Langcaster-James and Gillian R. Bentley, motivations for sex doll ownership include companionship, sex, difficulties with real relationships, mental health, and photography.²⁶ Only 14 percent of survey respondents stated that sex was exclusively the core element of their sex doll relationship. In many cases, the owners find the companionship provided by the doll is sufficient, and some prefer the doll as a partner. Safety and comfort can be found within the limitations of dolls as social beings.

One respondent describes their doll play, synthetic relationship in rich detail: “A typical conversation when arriving home would be me getting into bed, waking her up, and her telling me that she missed me and she loves me. She’ll ask me to cuddle with her and tell her about my day. Sometimes she’ll ask me to help her change, or to brush/braid/play with her hair. I then ask her what she dreamed about while I was gone, and she tells me. Sometimes she has beautiful dreams, and sometimes she has terrible nightmares. But she always knows she’ll be okay, because I’ll be there when she wakes up.”²⁷

This respondent imaginatively perceives that his doll has a personal life, and he views himself as a protector or an otherwise comforting presence for his doll. Constructing a personality for one's doll can influence self-perception through the role play involved in bringing a fantasy to life visually and physically. The owner appears, through the eyes of the doll, as he or she desires to be seen. Other respondents similarly described the quotidian activities they engage in with their dolls such as sleeping in bed, watching television, or having sex.²⁸ Photography is a common activity enjoyed by sex doll owners, and images can be shared within the collector community. Similarly, reborn doll owners find support among other reborn enthusiasts online. Posting photos and videos in forums or groups constitutes an important part of reborn dol-

latry for many doll owners. So I address companionship through the doll collector community.

The Reborn Community

In her 2017 video “Reborn Baby Clothes Shopping at Walmart!” the reborn owner and YouTuber known by the user name Little Foot Nursery holds her camera in her hand as she explores what is new in Walmart’s baby section.²⁹ She is looking for preemie clothing for her dolls whom she references by name. As she browses, her hand-held camera follows her movements, and she comments on what items she finds cute and whether or not she will purchase them. The cute aesthetics of such items, especially when deployed upon a cute reborn at home, afford interactive and therapeutic relief.

Shopping excursions for clothes and accessories for a reborn form a common subgenre of reborn doll videos posted online wherein the narrators share their thoughts in real time while recording visits to stores. Such shopping videos commonly feature clothing, but they also showcase accessories on these excursions or in the posttrip accounting format of “haul” videos. Shopping videos do not always include audible narration. Some people are not comfortable speaking aloud while shopping and filming. Others choose a less busy time of day to shop. Bringing YouTube viewers along on shopping trips with a video camera may help some shoppers dispel anxiety about shopping for their dolls because content creation for social media is relatively mainstream in the TikTok era. Rather than seen as erratic behavior, live filming can suggest that a shopper assumes the status of social-media influencer. Some creators bring a reborn doll along on their excursions. The camera links the experience to approving fans, which can provide comfort to the shopper.

Content creators who purchase high-end clothing and accessories for their dolls can enjoy a sense of pride and even prestige. For many reborn doll collectors, the baby department in stores like Walmart is a place of refuge.³⁰ Shopping provides retail therapy that can be enjoyed second-hand by viewers.³¹ Retail therapy is a concept that has been examined by psychologists, marketing experts, novelists, and other cultural producers.³² A 2013 study by consumer psychologists questioned the assumption that retail therapy has primarily negative associations such as time wasting and the accumulation of consumer debt. The study suggests that “making shopping choices can help to restore a sense of personal

control over one's environment and reduce residual sadness." Prior research has shown that sadness increases a willingness to pay and comfort seeking, it is hardly surprising that shopping can offer psychological benefits. Many people find comfort in perusing an abundance of consumer goods, choosing the items that stand out to them as most desirable and making them their own. Particularly when an individual feels low, a self-treat can be an effective mood enhancer.³³ Furthermore, to provide for baby is to be a good mother, so publicly performing such provision can promote positive social perceptions.³⁴ When shopping for a reborn doll, the products are "for" the reborn, but they are primarily a self-treat for the doll owner. Unlike other reborn doll activities, shopping for baby products allows the dolls' owners to step into the role of providers within a public space, yet preserve their privacy because no one knows they are shopping for dolls. Even to enter the baby department involves an assumption that one has business there—that is, there is a baby in one's life. As Lucenda Plancarte (a California-based collector) explained to a journalist for the *Guardian*, she used to feel uncomfortable passing by baby products: "To go to a store and walk by the baby section was painful, I had no reason to be there. But now I do. Now, I can go into a baby section and be like 'oh that'll look cute on my doll.'"³⁵ Compared to browsing a toy department for doll accessories, shopping for a reborn necessitates an experience indistinguishable from shopping for real baby supplies.

The sociologist Jean Baudrillard offers ways to consider how objects of desire function to produce affective states. He argues that collectors can generally attain a sense of control and even an improved perception of self-worth through their collection. Because collectors have full control over the entities and characters that they bring into the realm of their collection, their grouping, handling, and arranging objects within a collection can be seen as a way of exercising control.³⁶ The collector is master of this realm, and even the passage of time can be affected by the enjoyment of the collection. This sense of security and control resonates with descriptions of the calming effects of reborn dolls described by collectors.³⁷ One cannot always choose who is present in one's life, but doll owners do have this power, at least when it comes to their synthetic relationships, sometimes known as a doll family.

Doll ownership can provide a sense of identity with positive associations from membership in a doll collector community. Here the collection can be admired by other enthusiasts, and new relationships can emerge. The identity of a doll expert is available to some active community members. Online friendships support one's identity as a collector and a community member, and these

relationships provide further companionship and connection through dollatry. Sociologist Mary Chayko describes a community as “a set of people who share a special kind of identity and culture and regular, patterned social interaction.”³⁸ She explains that, even without any face-to-face interactions, a collective identity can emerge from shared interests and a shared sense of purpose. Many reborn doll enthusiasts become doll artists, which affords them yet another identity as well as a creative outlet that can also be therapeutic. Companionship can be found by connecting with other enthusiasts, in addition to enjoying the company of dolls.

Conclusion

I launched an online questionnaire in 2019 as part of my doctoral research to hear from reborn doll owners about their involvement in online communities. Question four of the form asked: How important are reborn baby forums and groups for you? A strong majority—about 80 percent of respondents—replied in the affirmative.

Here are a few of their comments on this point: “Highly important. It’s an online support group for the hobby. . . . I like chatting with people who understand the hobby without judgement. . . . My friends think the hobby is creepy. . . . They are very important. . . . It’s amazing to meet new people who share the same passion and interests as you. Reborn community is so amazing and supportive. . . . I feel they are important to me because I like the socialization. . . . Very! Love receiving feedback, whether good or bad; gives me inspiration and motivation to improve. . . . All the members of the groups I am in are the most caring and supportive people.”

This last comment comes from a doll artist. I have not discussed the stigma associated with adult doll play in detail, but harsh comments are frequently posted on, for example, a video of a reborn being fed real baby formula.³⁹ This has become a big issue in recent years as formula shortages have been experienced in several countries. Other scandals involve reborns in strollers taking up spots on public transit instead of moms with babies. People are understandably wary of what are seen as “fake babies,” and it proves difficult to read the hobby as play.

What I have highlighted here are some of the features of synthetic relationships: comfort, companionship, and a sense of personal identity. These benefits actually demonstrate a desire for social connection. Some doll owners describe

their doll use as therapeutic while others have them just for fun. But play can be therapeutic, and there is no shortage of stress in contemporary life. Doll ownership can offer a sense of comfort but also of power and control. An increase in doll enthusiasm might be seen as an increase in the desire for these feelings of power. I hope my research can expand our understanding of the therapeutic potential of adult doll play and synthetic relationships. The thousands of people engaging in these relationships all around the world present us with fascinating questions and new evidence about the capacity of humans to find companionship and joy through dolls.

NOTES

1. One account of early reborn exists as a 2006 (archived) web page authored by Joyce Moreno. Moreno explains how she created a realistic doll in 1990 and shared her techniques for the “original art of reborn.” Joyce Moreno, “History of Reborn,” *Sweet Dreams Baby Nursery* (2007). <https://web.archive.org/web/20070212135629/http://www.sweetdreamsbabynursery.com:80/AboutTheArtist2007.html>.

2. Dollatry is a word with recorded usage in the midnineteenth century meaning “the worship of dolls.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “dollatry, n.” <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5148966887>.

3. Not every doll owner would qualify their attachment to their dolls as having the status of a relationship. Many enthusiasts and collectors appreciate the artistry and other qualities of human figures without experiencing a bond with a particular doll that might be described as relational. It would be safe to say that there are degrees of attachment and imaginative perception, from the most basic anthropomorphization to deeply intimate connections.

4. This term can also describe relationships with virtual entities, such as artificial intelligences like chatbots. I first wrote about synthetic relationships in 2019. Emilie St-Hilaire, “Synthetic Relationships and the Future of Non-Human Companions,” *Public Scholars Blog*, Concordia.ca School of Graduate Studies (September 3, 2019). <https://www.concordia.ca/cunews/offices/vprgs/sgs/public-scholars-19/2019/09/03/synthetic-relationships-and-the-future-of-non-human-companions.html>.

5. Abyss Creations, founded in 1996, was one of the first companies to specialize in silicone sex dolls. RealDolls are their brand of sex doll. Anthony Ferguson, *The Sex Doll: A History* (2010), 44.

6. Reborn Patience is one example of a kit for a doll with the features of a baby with Down Syndrome. “Reborn Patience Awake (21” Reborn Doll Kit),” *Bountiful Baby*. https://www.bountifulbaby.com/products/3598?pos=2&_sid=309c2c9b9&ss=r.

7. Michele White, “Babies Who Touch You: Reborn Dolls, Artists, and the Emotive Display of Bodies on eBay,” in *Political Emotions*, edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (2010), 77.

8. Ibid., 79.
9. Ibid.
10. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1966).
11. Philippe Chanial, "The Gift and Care: Reuniting a Political Family?" *Revue du MAUSS permanente* (June 25, 2014). <https://journaldumauss.net/./?The-Gift-and-Care-1129>.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Norman Makoto Su, Amanda Lazar, Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell, "Of Dolls and Men: Anticipating Sexual Intimacy with Robots," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interactions* 26 (2019), 13.
19. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), 20.
20. Annika Waern, "'I'm in Love with Someone That Doesn't Exist!': Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game," *Proceedings of Nordic DiGRA 2010 Conference: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players* (2010), 5.
21. Jeanne C. Desbuleux and Johannes Fuss, "Is the Anthropomorphization of Sex Dolls Associated with Objectification and Hostility toward Women? A Mixed Method Study among Doll Users," *The Journal of Sex Research* 60 (2023), 220.
22. Rita Pezzati, Valentina Molteni, Marco Bani, Carmen Settanta, Maria Grazia Di Maggio, Ivan Villa, Barbara Poletti, and Rita B. Ardito, "Can Doll Therapy Preserve or Promote Attachment in People with Cognitive, Behavioral, and Emotional Problems? A Pilot Study in Institutionalized Patients with Dementia," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014), 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00342>.
23. This describes the positive experiences patients have demonstrated with doll therapy. Someone with no interest in doll therapy or a patient who has grown tired of it will not respond in the same way. For example, in one study a participant who initially enjoyed doll therapy was seen the following day swinging the doll by a leg above the participant's head. Wendy Moyle, Jenny Murfield, Cindy Jones, Elizabeth Beattie, Brian Draper and Tamara Ownsworth, "Can Lifelike Baby Dolls Reduce Symptoms of Anxiety, Agitation, or Aggression for People with Dementia in Long-Term Care? Findings from a Pilot Randomised Controlled Trial," *Aging & Mental Health* 23 (2019): 1442–50.
24. Pezzati et al., "Can Doll Therapy Preserve or Promote Attachment," 3.
25. Ibid., 2.
26. Mitchell Lancaster-James and Gillian R. Bentley, "Beyond the Sex Doll: Post-Human Companionship and the Rise of the 'Allo doll,'" *Robotics* 7 (2018), 17.
27. Ibid., 12.
28. Ibid., 10.

29. Little Foot Nursery, “Reborn Baby Clothes Shopping at Walmart!” YouTube, August 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDjXD16Sw>.

30. Walmart is one of the most common retailers featured in reborn enthusiast shopping trip and “haul” videos wherein shoppers buy clothing and accessories for their reborn dolls. Walmart has twenty-four hour locations across Canada and the United States, allowing some shoppers to choose less busy times to shop. Shopping in thrift stores for baby items is also common but is less often featured in shopping or haul videos on YouTube.

31. Scott I. Rick, Beatriz Pereira, and Katherine A. Burson, “The Benefits of Retail Therapy: Making Purchase Decisions Reduces Residual Sadness,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 24 (2014): 373–80.

32. Ibid.

33. A. Selin Atalay and Margaret G. Meloy, “Retail Therapy: A Strategic Effort to Improve Mood,” *Psychology & Marketing* 28 (2011), 638.

34. Personally, I have been surprised by the frequency with which strangers seem to enjoy commenting on purchases I make for my infant, particularly at my local Walmart.

35. Kelli Korducki, “People Don’t Get It’: Inside the World of Hyper-Realistic Baby Doll Collecting” (embedded video), *The Guardian* (February 26, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/feb/26/reborn-doll-baby-lifelike-collecting-women>.

36. Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, edited by John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (1994), 9.

37. Rose Doll Expo, survey by author, 2018 Rose Doll Expo (Davis Conference Centre, Layton, Utah, July 13–14, 2018).

38. Mary Chayko, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness* (2008), 6.

39. Victoria Soliz, “Woman Who Shared Video Feeding Reborn Doll Baby Formula during a Shortage Responds to Backlash.” *Your Tango* (November 22, 2022). <https://www.yourtango.com/news/woman-feeds-dolls-baby-formula-during-shortage>.