



INTRODUCTION

## The Transnational Doll from Our Childhoods

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As I write the pages of this book, a variety of Barbie doll companions sit on my bookshelves. Some are from my childhood, others I received as gifts during grad school, and others I acquired through the years in my continued research about Barbie. They are joined by Barbie paper dolls, Barbie PEZ dispensers, and miniature Barbie cake toppers. Some traveled with me, while others became part of my life more recently, but they all serve as reminders of my girlhood and that of many Puerto Ricans. With this I do not intend to make a blanket generalization about Puerto Rican girls to claim that they all play(ed) with or even own(ed) a doll. However, it is not far-fetched to state that Barbie has been a constant presence in many Puerto Rican girls' lives. During the 1990s, Puerto Ricans had "the highest per capita number of Barbies in Latin America" (Negrón-Muntaner 2004: 224); 72 percent of Puerto Rican children at the time owned at least one Barbie doll compared to 49 percent in Chile, which was the second highest in Latin America. One reason for Puerto Rico's high numbers, and especially the stark difference between the first and second highest numbers, is the island's political and economic ties to the United States.

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Notes for this section can be found on page 25.

An American Icon in Puerto Rico: Barbie, Girlhood, and Colonialism at Play  
Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez

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Puerto Rican girlhoods cannot be separated from Puerto Rico's colonial history, as it has been a U.S. territory since 1898. As such, the constant back-and-forth movement of people between Puerto Rico and the United States is a central part of Puerto Rican identity (Duany 2002). Hence, transnationality often defines what it means to be Puerto Rican. While as a territory Puerto Rico is part of the United States (and there are many political and economic ramifications this territorial status entails), there is sovereignty in the culture and traditions found there. Thus, there are cultural borders that Barbie must permeate. Barbie, who is a U.S. icon and who embodies what many in the United States believe to be "real American" values—whiteness, heterosexuality, and social and financial capital—then becomes an even more complex figure in Puerto Rican childhoods. For many, she is the very thing Puerto Ricans must reject: the veneration of a U.S. icon in a U.S. colony. Nevertheless, Barbie is a transnational object (Grewal 2005; Hegde 2001; MacDougall 2003; Negrón-Muntaner 2002) that has permeated national borders as well as cultural ones. In this regard, Barbie in Puerto Rican girlhoods fits the more literal definition for transnationalism that speaks to operating across national boundaries. Many movements between Puerto Rico and continental United States are caused by economic necessities, as populations move in search of better opportunities to thrive financially. Consequently, Puerto Ricans have become transnational subjects of two lands. In the cases presented in this book, Barbie as an object often served as a companion for some of the participants as they moved to or from—between—Puerto Rico and the continental United States.

Yet not all transnational experiences take place by physically moving from one place to another. Ann Smith (2017), in her introduction to *The Girl in the Text* (the inaugural book in the Transnational Girlhoods series), suggests redefining the term "to include the process of weakening borders other than those between nation-states" (9). So, if we consider that transnationalism goes beyond physical borders, Barbie in Puerto Rico is an excellent place to examine this notion. I posit, then, that Barbie can be transnational not just in the ways she travels across the world and is adopted into local cultures but also, perhaps even more so, in the ways she affords transnationalism without requiring physical movement. Yes, for some of my participants Barbie was a travel companion when their families moved from Puerto Rico to the continental United States or vice versa, but for many, Barbie was a vehicle for transnational imagination, through which they could travel back and forth. For some girls, transna-

tionalism transpired in their homes in the form of Barbie play, negotiating language, culture, and ideologies. For other girls, playing with the doll provided a space to imagine upward mobility that only seemed possible to them by moving to the continental United States.

*An American Icon in Puerto Rico: Barbie, Girlhood, and Colonialism at Play* presents an examination of Barbie's arrival and subsequent place in Puerto Rican girlhoods with a lens toward the doll's role as a transnational object in transnational contexts. The book highlights the complicated relationships that women and girls in Puerto Rico have with Barbie. In Puerto Rico, Barbie is an embodiment of contradictions. As a toy produced in the United States and brought to the island during times of economic changes, Barbie is simultaneously a representation of dreams and opportunities for financial upward mobility and a reminder that not everyone can have those opportunities. She is both a representation of idealized (white) beauty standards that girls are conditioned to look up to and a distorted image of beauty that girls reject. Barbie in Puerto Rico is both a welcomed icon of U.S. culture and a contended symbol of colonial power. Concurrently, through Barbie, this book looks at the contradictions and complexities that are also part of girls' lives, specifically in Puerto Rico.

## Memoirs of Puerto Rican Girlhoods

There is no clear or single way to map the experiences of being a girl in Puerto Rico. Yet, examples of girlhood experiences have been documented in literature through memoirs produced by Puerto Rican women writers like Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer. Their accounts focus on issues often encountered in Puerto Rican girlhoods, such as girls finding their own identities (where language, culture, and race play important roles), facing puberty, and inhabiting the borderlands between girlhood and womanhood.

Adding to the already difficult experiences and biological changes in a girl's life, Santiago (1993, 1999) and Ortiz Cofer (1990)—just like some participants of this study—had to navigate other complicated issues, including moving to a new place. In *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), Esmeralda Santiago chronicles her life as a young girl living in Macún, a *barrio* in Puerto Rico, and her move to Santurce, a developing metropolis closer to the island's capital and a stark contrast to Macún. Moving to this new environment made Santiago (1993) an object of jokes among

her more “sophisticated” peers, who considered her a *jibara*—a term usually referring to the people of the interior mountainous regions of Puerto Rico—for the dialect she used, for never having heard of Santa Claus, and for not “knowing how to use the pencil sharpener screwed to the wall of the classroom” (39). The term has a negative connotation here, as Santiago’s peers used it to refer to her as someone who is ignorant or uncultured due to a lack of education. Her second memoir, *Almost a Woman*, begins with her experiences as a thirteen-year-old living in Brooklyn. Santiago (1999) writes about having to face the trials and tribulations of entering the teenage years along with the difficulties of being an “Other” in a new place. In some ways she was experiencing the situations of her past in San-turce, but on a much greater scale. She narrates her journey as she stands on the bridge between girlhood and womanhood—*casi mujer* (almost a woman)—and the bridge between Puerto Rican culture and the new world she has entered, being prevented from crossing over by her family’s conservative traditions.

Speaking from the point of view of her child self in *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, Ortiz Cofer (1990) negotiates two different cultures: her homeland, Puerto Rico, and her host city, Paterson, New Jersey, and the constant migration from one place to the other. Her experiences resemble those of many Puerto Ricans who spent their childhoods migrating between the island and Los Nueva Yores, Puerto Ricans’ way of referring to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Some of my participants experienced this movement during their childhoods; those who did, spent one to three years in the United States, though most of their childhood occurred in Puerto Rico. Among many things, Ortiz Cofer (1990) had to negotiate her identity in both places; she was too *gringa* when she spoke Spanish and too Latina when she spoke English. Similarly, for Santiago (1999) there was an added pressure to recognize her often-conflicting identities in this new world. She had to avoid sustaining her mother’s disapproval for embracing “Americanness” too readily and simultaneously find ways to elude being mocked by her American classmates for her old-fashioned ways, which were perceived as direct products of her Latina roots.

Ortiz Cofer (1990) also writes about the important women in her life—her mother, her grandmother (whom she called Mamá), and the women from the stories her grandmother told her—who taught her different lessons about womanhood and being a woman in a patriarchal society. Growing up in a Catholic family, Ortiz Cofer (1990) learned what many

Puerto Rican girls continue to learn to this day: that the only birth control is abstinence, that you need to marry unless you want to be a *jamona* (an old wench, a mature woman who has not married), and that dating too much makes you a *puta* (a whore, a woman that is too easy). Comparably, Santiago (1999) discovered through the stories about other women what it means to be a (good) girl and later a (good) woman. She learned quickly that white Americans' only exposure to Puerto Rican culture was *West Side Story*, where a girl had the option of being bad, like Anita, or good, like Maria. The same binaries appeared in her own culture, where her mother urged her to live carefully so she is not perceived as too loose but also not too naïve: "I decided to never become one of those calculating *putas*, but neither would I become a *pendeja*, who believed everything a man told her" (Santiago 1999: 15). One cannot consider these binaries of "good" versus "bad" girlhoods without also thinking about the ways that racialized bodies are often assigned the latter descriptor. Data shows that adults perceive girls of color, particularly Black girls, as less innocent and in need of less protection than white girls (Bernstein 2015; Epstein, Blake, and González 2017), something that I examine more deeply in chapter 2. This adds a layer of complexity for Puerto Rican girls, whose innocence is never presumed because of their skin color. Further, and chapter 4 discusses, racial identity in Puerto Rico often characterizes Blackness in negative ways.

Like many Puerto Rican girls, Santiago (1999) and Ortiz Cofer (1990) describe girlhoods full of binaries, contradictions, and conflicting ideologies. Their stories, briefly described here, serve as blueprints for understanding certain Puerto Rican girlhoods and for making sense of the stories shared in this book.

## Methodologies and Ethics

How does one begin to explore the role of such an iconic doll in any context? Originally, when planning the project that developed into this book, I was curious about how Puerto Rican girls interacted with Barbie. Did they play with the doll? Did they create complex narratives? Did they reenact their own lived experiences through the doll? I wanted to understand girlhood through girls. Fortunately, I found that, when recruiting participants, a good number of women wanted to be part of the study. Thus, what resulted was an intergenerational examination of girlhood experiences with Barbie, beginning with the first generation to play with Barbie when the

doll was initially produced and continuing to girls in the present. The study described in this book engaged in memory-work with adult women and girls in order to learn about their interactions with Barbie and the social and cultural implications these memories had on their girlhoods and, if applicable, on their adult lives. I explored the childhood experiences of Barbie play of eighteen adult participants, who all identified as having interacted with Barbie to varying degrees, and the experiences of three preteen girls who at the time played with Barbie. These interactions included both the presence and absence (the acceptance and rejection) of Barbie in each girl's childhood. Working with both adults and children afforded this project a more extensive insight into the experiences of girls from different generations playing with or even rejecting Barbie dolls. By doing so, I was able to describe and interpret the role of Barbie play and Barbie culture in some girls' identities as well as the meaning those experiences had in adulthood.

The group represents only a small sample of girlhood experiences. They neither stand in for larger discussions of Puerto Rican girlhoods nor do they (or I) claim to speak for all Puerto Rican girls and women. As people learned about my research through conversations, social media, or word of mouth, some reached out to me, wanting to share their stories. What began as a vision for mostly individual stories ended up becoming a collective endeavor. When compiling the schedule for interviews, I noticed that I could group some of the participants together based on their relationships to each other. From the beginning, I knew that I would carry out a group interview with the women in my family in order to capture our familial interactions. Yet, when childhood friends, colleagues, and mother/daughter pairs signed up, the possibilities for sharing individual and collective stories increased.

Before each interview began, I reminded participants that they could stop the interview at any point and that they did not have to respond to anything they did not feel comfortable answering. The majority of the interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. During individual and group interviews, I asked participants about various aspects of their experiences with Barbie, including, but not limited to, the narratives they created when they played, the roles they assigned to their dolls, and their access to Barbie merchandise. As each round of interviews concluded, I transcribed and translated the audio recordings to English using participants' pseudonyms that they either chose or asked me to assign them.

Because my study required participants to reconstruct past and present lived experiences, I prepared myself to be sensitive to the emotions that

memories might trigger and to respond accordingly. To do so, I drew from methods and approaches employed in examining and eliciting memories (Crawford et al. 1992; Haug et al. 1987; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002). It was important to me that I always remained sensitive to participants' emotions and reactions to questions, especially about race and class. If I perceived any discomfort on their part, I either rephrased the questions or moved on to other questions. Once adults shifted from talking about their experiences as children to sharing their perspectives as adults, I was able to ask direct questions about topics that may be uncomfortable and may not arise organically. For instance, I asked, "Did you care about the color of her skin?" or, "Do you think she was too thin or that she was a role model?" Because women were working through their memories and needed to think and reflect upon their interactions with Barbie from many years ago, asking these types of questions directly was beneficial. However, in my interviews with girls, I approached this differently. I did not ask these direct questions because I was more interested in their genuine responses, preferring that over talk about specific subjects like race, gender, or body image just to answer my own research questions. I aimed to allow girls to guide the interview, and I raised questions mainly when they brought up topics. For instance, one of my questions intended to find out if the color of Barbie's hair and/or her skin was something important for my participants. Instead of directly asking these questions to girls, I waited until they mentioned Barbie's hair or skin to ask them about them more in depth.

It was also important to me that participants were allowed to choose the location for the interviews. First and foremost, I wanted my participants to feel comfortable and safe, and I also wanted to meet them in a place that was convenient for them, as it was important for me to develop a trusting relationship with them. By letting them choose the time and place, I allowed them to be part of the research process, which helped disrupt the researcher-participant hierarchy common in positivist research. Offering the choice to select the setting of our encounter let them know that their voice was valued in every step of the research process. This also allowed me to capture more personal experiences that may not have happened otherwise. For instance, when participants invited me into their homes, I was able to carefully look at some of their Barbie objects to see how they were placed within the home and to get a sense of where play happened.

These objects served the important purpose of illustrating participants' interactions with Barbie. Participants maintained a personal relationship

with the artifacts they shared with me, and in whichever form they were shared, they were part of the participants' stories and their lived experiences during childhood—and in some cases even adulthood. Some participants provided pictures of their Barbie dolls, Barbie houses, and other Barbie objects, while others still kept some of their objects and were able to share them with me. For the interviews with girls, I invited the mothers and daughters to bring Barbie dolls or anything related to Barbie so we could talk more about it together. Some of the interviews with girls took place in their homes, where they showed me many of their Barbie artifacts and at times also demonstrated a typical episode of doll play. Even in interviews that did not take place at girls' homes I was able to get a sense of their Barbie artifacts and what transactions occurred between girl and object. For an interview with two sisters, for instance, their mother brought a plastic bin that stored the girls' dolls and doll accessories. The girls also brought a Barbie DVD and a Barbie book. The sisters talked about these items during the interview, and I was able to look through the artifacts as they told stories.

Having these artifacts, either in person or in photographs, allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of their significance in my participants' lives, and they served to bring up stories and memories of Barbie play. Many adults that I interviewed no longer had these artifacts in their possession, but some were able to provide pictures of them. These pictures offered a visual representation of the three-dimensional artifacts of childhood play. They still served to elicit memories and deep conversations about the stories created through Barbie, the stories of the participants' childhood, and Barbie's significance in their lived experiences.

In addition to individual and group interviews, I engaged in the study of about three hundred Barbie artifacts at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. Through this research I closely examined and documented the different ranges of Barbie dolls that have been produced from the doll's conception up until a decade ago. These dolls represent the different eras of Barbie throughout which my participants have engaged. I examined the types of dolls produced, the changes Barbie has undergone, the colors of her clothes, the types of accessories and products that accompanied the dolls, among other aspects. Finally, part of the data was informed by document research. In the time spent at the Strong Museum, I also studied various texts about Barbie (Gerber 2009; Sarasohn-Kahn 1996; Tosa 1998) and original documents (transcripts, photographs, preliminary reports) from a research study about the role of



dolls for women growing up in the 1910s and 1930s, specifically mothers and daughters. The documents from said study provided a model for approaching and structuring my own study of familial relationships. Additionally, during my time in Puerto Rico I examined local newspapers and magazines from 1959 to 1962 to understand the context of the time when Barbie arrived in the island.

As a researcher, I needed to consider my approach to examining the data as well as any bias or subjectivity I would potentially bring to the study. While total objectivity in research is often highly encouraged, Glesne explains that complete objectivity is “neither possible nor desirable” in qualitative research (2011: 152). Throughout the study I kept in mind that my subjectivity could still inform my research as long as I remained critical about it. This especially emerged naturally through my own memory-work—as a participant of my own research—where I not only described my memories of Barbie play but also reflected on them and how they continue to shape my own understandings. This was also a critical aspect of my interpretations of the experiences that participants shared through groups and individual interviews when they exercised memory-work. I also considered and continuously reflected upon how I was representing my participants through the presentation of the data. To avoid misrepresentations, I aimed to contextualize and situate my participants’ testimonies as much as possible. In addition, I quoted them extensively rather than paraphrasing them in order to avoid changing the meaning of their expressions.

## Working with Memories

Based on the memories that emerged during my interviews and conversations with participants, I looked at the construction and performance of their own identities in relation to Barbie.<sup>2</sup> To achieve this, I drew from methods of qualitative inquiry, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the various experiences that women had with the doll. By studying the experiences of women and girls from various generations, I was able to more deeply examine the role Barbie played and continues to play in Puerto Rican girlhoods.

Guided by memory-work (Haug et al. 1987; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002), the participants were encouraged to share stories from their childhood and to think about what those memories meant to them as girls and

as adults. In addition, participants were encouraged to bring personal Barbie artifacts to share during interviews, such as dolls, photographs, books, magazines, or any other Barbie item from their childhood. By employing artifactual memory (Brown 1998; Reid-Walsh 2013) as a method of data collection, I was able to collect stories triggered by the artifacts and also examine the objects of play. In one specific case, the artifacts comprised a plethora of Barbie dolls that the participant began collecting as an adult.

Memory-work was developed by German feminist and socialist Frigga Haug and others and published in *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (1987), and its underlying theory is that “subjectively significant events, events which are remembered, and the way they are subsequently constructed, play an important part in the construction of self” (Crawford et al. 1992: 37). This is an important differentiation between memory-work and other types of accounts, such as testimonials or confessionals, centering on the word “work.” Mitchell and Reid-Walsh explain, “The person remembering is the one who ‘works back’ or ‘works through’ the memory” (2002: 62). In this “exercise” the person remembering is willfully pulling out memories and questioning them, with the goal being *why* it was, not *how* it was. Naturally, the process of memory-work relies on *memories*, and memories can be unreliable. Yet, those who employ the method are less concerned with the unreliability of memories. Instead, they are interested in the process that recalling memories involves. Crawford et al. argue that

the memories are true memories, that is, they are memories and not inventions or fantasies. Whether the memories accurately represent past events or not, however, is irrelevant; the process of construction of the meanings of those events is the focus on memory-work. (1992: 51)

Those who draw on their own memories do so from the assumption that our past has something to tell us about our present selves, about our individual subjectivities, about what made us what we are. What is important, then, is the value and meaning each author places on their memories rather than the exactness of the memories themselves. In this research involving memory-work, there is a deliberate remembering about a deliberate phenomenon. Memory-work is a feminist social constructionist method because it disrupts the barriers between the subject and object of research. The basis for knowledge is the women’s everyday experience. Accordingly, the researcher positions herself as part of the group, becoming “researched” as well, while the participants become researchers, “thus

eliminating the hierarchy of ‘experimenter’ and ‘subject’” (Onyx and Small 2011: 775). In addition, memory-work requires an environment that is open, one in which the participants feel safe sharing their memories and they can trust those around them (O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer 2005). Thus, just like most feminist and girlhood research, the building of rapport between researcher and participants is imperative.

Memory-work is often employed in girlhood studies research because it allows women to think about their own childhood and look at it through a critical and informed lens. The method has been used in different ways to investigate various phenomena. It can be used to explore other people’s memories of certain events or activities, while it can also be used to explore the researchers’ own experiences. As previously mentioned, Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000) employed memory-work to understand how adult women feel about Barbie and how their play may have shaped who they are today.<sup>3</sup> For Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000), these accounts are significant simply because the women are admitting to playing with Barbie in a field where that is highly criticized. The accounts shared by some of the women showed the significance of Barbie play in their adult life. Their play with Barbie had somewhat foreshadowed their conventional or unconventional professions: “a teacher constructed school tableaux for Barbie; the architecture professor and the Internet critic similarly presaged their unconventional professions through their play with the doll” (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 2000: 186). This was a significant aspect of my research, which was dependent upon the questions I asked participants.

Some of my women and girls in this project had an idea of the types of issues their Barbies faced, their professions, relationships, and other general ideas, even if they could not completely remember the narratives they created. Yet, because one of my questions aimed to trigger their memories by asking “What did the dolls mean to you?” I was able to find out more about the participants through their answers. Furthermore, these questions served to elicit more memories about their play than directly asking them, “What type of narratives did you create?” By thinking and reflecting on their childhood with dolls, the participants provided an insight to how these experiences contributed to their sense of self, both as children and as adults.

Memories can be deemed unreliable for various reasons. Sometimes our memories can stem from a reworking of what we actually *do* remember and what we *want* to remember: discussing an interview he remembers seeing when he was little that helped him deal with his own sexuality,

Muñoz admits, “My memory and subjectivity reformatted that memory, letting it work within my internal narratives of subject formation” (1999: 4). Nevertheless, whether his memory was accurate or not, whether he was remembering an actual event or a reworking of a memory, he understood that he needed that memory to be part of his self (Muñoz 1999: 5). As Rand (1995) argues, we should not take memory accounts exactly as they appear to be. We select what we want to remember often due to its significance while we also choose (consciously or inadvertently) what we want to forget. Instead of focusing on the veracity or accuracy of the memories, I am more interested in the implications these memories have in the women’s construction of identity. As seen in Muñoz’s (1999) case, the fact that this was a memory of something he believed had really happened contributed to his formation and to his later acceptance of being a queer Latino. In the same vein, my participants—as well as myself—could be remembering aspects of Barbie play that may or may not have happened or that could have happened slightly differently; yet, what is important to take away here is *how* they remember them, *why* they remember them, and what their significance is for their (our) lives. In discussing what to ask of participants during their memory-work, Haug suggests that participants should avoid recounting sequences or biographical stories as they allow the author to “reconstruct herself” (1997: 4). Her concern is not so much with the reconstruction of the memory itself but rather the reconstruction of the “self,” *who* the participant makes herself to be. While it may be inevitable to have some participants reconstruct who they were/are, it is important to examine what these reconstructions of the self may be telling about the person’s identity and experiences.

Sometimes the emotions attached to the memories can distort the ability to question what is being remembered, i.e., the *why*. This may happen especially if we think of memories as exclusively carrying or being a product of nostalgia, and if we simultaneously associate nostalgia solely with sentimentality. However, the resistance of thinking through memories or the emotions that are carried with them can be a site of exploration in itself, and a place to further examine the meanings and constructions of self that are attached to them. Atia and Davies propose that “nostalgic thinking can be a force that complicates, rather than one that simplifies” (2010: 181). In this sense, what can be transformative about nostalgia is “what can allow it to be useful, creative and generative, even radical, rather than its popular designation as sentimental” (Strong-Wilson et al. 2013: 5).

## Working with Girls and Adults: Possibilities and Challenges

Giving girls a voice is an important aspect of girlhood studies, as noted by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2008) in their essay titled “How to Study Girl Culture.” They offer insightful observations about the world and their own lived experiences. Especially when critically studying a children’s toy such as Barbie, which has undergone excruciating examinations since her creation, their voices are crucial. Elizabeth Chin’s (1999) ethnographic work with ten-year-old poor and working-class Black children in New Haven, Connecticut, presents a model for Barbie research in which girls’ agency is central. In her study, the girls’ interactions with dolls complicate the toy industry’s idea that ethnically correct dolls serve as a progressive solution to representation and inclusion in toys and children’s lives. The girls in her study subverted the ways in which they were supposed to play with the dolls and modified them to fit their own narratives and experiences. In terms of play with Barbie dolls, Hohmann (1985) studied the play performance of a seven-year-old girl named Jennifer. He notes that Jennifer incorporates other aspects of her life where she is not usually in control but can now control through her dolls. As he observed, Jennifer acted out scenes of her life where her little sister behaves inappropriately and is scolded or punished for it. For Hohmann, Jennifer’s play is significant because through Barbie play Jennifer was able to both learn and demonstrate her knowledge of “an adequate behavior within the social environment of the two sisters” (1985: 116). It also gave Jennifer the opportunity to “express a variety of problems which occur within her family” (1985: 120). Through Barbie play, Jennifer was able to perform a close imitation of her life.

These studies in which children are involved and, more importantly, are provided with a voice offer a window to their lived experiences that is critical to understanding children’s and, more specifically, girlhood culture. Hohmann (1985) took on the role of participant observer, but this was mainly possible because he had been Jennifer’s babysitter in the past, thus they had built trust prior to his study. Chin (1999) had access as an observer because she was part of the community in which she was working, as she lived in the same neighborhood as some of her participants. In my own undertaking, I wanted to understand women’s and girls’ experiences with Barbie in order to understand their interactions with and relationship to Barbie dolls and Barbie play. As a result, I employed the

same methods of data collection for both adults and girls: interviews and artifactual data. Rather than trying to interpret girls' experiences with Barbie through their play, I wanted to have conversations with them about their opinions and experiences with Barbie. In doing so, girls were able to have a more active voice in the study of their cultures and play practices. In some cases, the location enriched the conversation as it allowed girls to not only show me their dolls but also briefly demonstrate how they play(ed) with them. Christensen suggests that "in order to hear the voices of children in the representation of their own lives it is important to employ research practices such as reflexivity and dialogue" (2004: 165). Following the same ideas for the interviews with adults, I asked the girls what they liked about Barbie, what they disliked, and what their overall views were on the doll and other Barbie artifacts. This led to other critical discussions of Barbie through the perspective of girls. The girls were able to voice their own concerns, issues, and opinions about Barbie dolls, which provided perspectives that complemented those of the adults. This project did not solely discuss girls in hypothetical scenarios, but rather invited girls to share their experiences.

I also took into account my position as researcher. I am an adult Puerto Rican woman who is also a former Barbie player. I share parts of my background with some of the participants in this study, but there is a range of differences between us, from slight disparities to major ones. At every step of the research process, I examined my own position as researcher and as participant, my relationship to girlhood (my own and my participants'), and how these affected the study. Finally, my research addressed an important question in girlhood studies: "Whose girlhood?" This study specifically focused on Puerto Rican girlhoods, which is not a singular but rather a "multiplicitous" experience that varies by age, race, class, and location, among others. There were, of course, certain limitations in the participant sample; therefore, my study was not able to account for every type of experience with Barbie among Puerto Rican women and girls.

In my work with adults, I examined childhood from the past and additionally how the experiences from childhood informed women's identities as adults. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) discuss the importance and usefulness of memory-work in research about childhood. Writing on nostalgia and memories of cowboy/cowgirl play and nostalgia marketing strategies of the toy industry and their contribution to memory-work

studies, they explore memory as phenomenon and method of data collection in the context of researching children's popular culture. These concepts and methods are applicable for looking at adults' memories—how they construct and use them both as a way of inquiring and as a method of feminist research. The questions Mitchell and Reid-Walsh pose speak to the complexity of the relationship between the rememberer and the experience being remembered, and also to the complexity of childhood in relation to adulthood. They ask an important question about the validity of working with adults within childhood studies: "Why work with adults if we are really interested in children and childhood?" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002: 48).

Working with adults' memories can be as fraught as working with children, though in different ways (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002). In many cases, despite some participants being able to recall the solicited aspects of their childhood, others could not recall or recalled very little of their childhood play. Nonetheless, they assert, these participants usually had the most to say about their childhood play during discussions. This could perhaps be a result of memories triggered by objects brought up in conversation or by other participants' accounts about their childhoods. To this effect, the combination of the methods of memory-work and interviews (individual and in groups) become greatly useful for my research, as the different conversations can help trigger memories or remind participants of specific events from their childhood. For this research, my participants were encouraged to bring Barbie artifacts to both the individual and collective interviews so we could explore them together. In this sense, group interviews became more helpful with eliciting memories, since we often remember certain aspects of the past when we are reminded of them by someone else's experiences.

Nevertheless, "remembering, forgetting, and even resistance to remembering . . . are all central to the study of memory" (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2002: 56). Furthermore, these different aspects of remembering, not remembering, or resistance can provide even more insight to the person's experiences, in the case of this research, with Barbie. Similarly, participants' rejection or lack of interaction with Barbie (or perhaps choosing not to remember interactions with Barbie) may offer key information about women's perceptions of Barbie, or even themselves both as adults and as children in relation to the doll. In this lies the usefulness of working with adults when researching childhood and, more importantly,

with women's memories to examine their girlhood experiences and to collaborate on how these experiences influenced their identities.

## Meet the Participants

In the brief descriptions that follow, participants have been assigned pseudonyms that will be used hereafter in order to keep their identities anonymous. In describing the location of where my participants grew up or where they are from, I provide general geographic areas rather than specific places. The information provided in the descriptions was gathered through my interviews and conversations with participants. Some of them I had known before, thus my own knowledge of their lives (which I corroborated with them) also contributed to their descriptions. The ages provided are from the time of the interviews, which took place during May and June 2015 and February 2016.

### *Individual Interviews*

**Carla.** Age thirty-three, grew up and still resides in a small town in southwestern Puerto Rico. She describes herself as an artisan, a teacher, and many things at the same time. Carla estimates that around sixty Barbie dolls went through her home between 1987 and 2000. She remembers playing with Barbie until age fifteen.

**Marisa.** In her early sixties, raised in a town in northwestern Puerto Rico. She has lived in the southwest for more than twenty years. The short visit and conversation took place in her house where her daughter's surviving collection, comprising thirty-eight Barbie dolls, is still displayed.

**Alondra.** Age thirty-two, had about fifty Barbie dolls. She spent most of her childhood in northeastern Puerto Rico, but she has also lived in the continental United States and Brazil. Currently, she lives in northeastern Puerto Rico, where she has been for the last ten years. She remembers Barbie as her favorite toy. She believes Barbie play strengthened her skills as a writer and storyteller and that it was a great preparation for her interest in theater. Alondra played until she was about ten years old. Our interview occurred through email communication because we could not travel to meet one another in person. Her written answers were very detailed, and



**Table 0.1.** Table with participants' names and ages.

Gen. Born in the '50s (First Barbie)	Gen. Born in the '60s	Gen. Born in the '70s	Gen. Born in the '80s	Gen. Born in the Early '90s	Gen. Born in the Late '90s to Early 2000s	Gen. Born in the Late 2000s
63 – Lourdes 62 – Carmen 62 – Marisa 59 – Patricia	None	45 – Lisa 40 – Autumn 40s – Susan	32 – Carla 32 – Camille 32 – Alondra 30 – Frankie 30 – Isabel 30 – Jessica 29 – Mariela 29 – Emily 28 – Elsa	25 – Gabriela 25 – Frances	None	11 – K.C. 9 – Annie 8 – Sharon

we followed up with one another a couple of times when I needed more information or clarification.

### ***Group Interviews***

I was a researcher and participant for three group interviews. The first was my family group, composed of my mother, my aunt, and my two sisters. Within this group formation we collectively thought about the ways in which each person's play was different from the others' and how, even among sisters who grew up in the same house, the relationship with Barbie may have been different. The conversations and dynamics that emerged in this group interview inspired my choice to examine and document Barbie's role in familial relationships. This family interview took place in the San Juan metropolitan area. Some participants were present in person—Emily, Carmen, and Lourdes—while Camille and Frances joined via Skype from their respective homes in the continental United States.

The second group in which I took part consisted of two of my childhood friends, with whom I played Barbie multiple times. Because we all knew each other and played together, the conversations and memories ranged from individual experiences to shared experiences with Barbie. The third group consisted of five women, none of whom knew one another during childhood but who became friends as adults. All of the participants in this group are educators. The experiences shared by each participant were individual—their own childhood experiences—yet it was interesting

to realize that some of our experiences were similar. We each explored our individual childhood memories of Barbie, yet as a group of adults we also talked about our perceptions about the doll in the present. The familiarity between the participants, and between the participants and myself, served as an asset to the process. While everyone shared their individual memories, some of the childhood experiences described happened with various members of the groups together. Therefore, in these cases, participants helped one another in constructing collective memories and making sense of both their individual and shared experiences.

Below, I describe the participants from the first three groups (group 1: family; group 2: childhood friends; group 3: colleagues). I was twenty-nine years old at the time of these interviews, and I consider myself a participant in groups 1, 2, and 3.

### *Group 1: Family*

**Carmen.** In her early sixties, lives in a small town in southwestern Puerto Rico. She mainly grew up in the south of Puerto Rico, although she did live in Florida for about two years when she was a child. She is Emily, Camille, and Frances's mother. She owned one Barbie, which she describes as having black hair and wearing a blue-and-red outfit. For Carmen, the greatest pleasure gained from playing with Barbie was being able to sew her outfits and make accessories for the doll. She remembers playing with Barbie and other dolls (such as a Thumbelina and paper dolls) until she was about thirteen or fourteen years old. At some point as an adult her Barbie disappeared, a fact that Carmen still talks about with sadness.

**Lourdes.** Also in her early sixties, Carmen's older sister (the second of three girls). She also grew up in the south of Puerto Rico and spent a couple of her early years in Florida. As an adult, Lourdes moved to the San Juan area, where she still resides. Lourdes is Emily, Camille, and Frances's aunt. Just like her sister Carmen, Lourdes only owned one Barbie doll. She remembers having played with Barbie until she was thirteen years old.

**Camille.** Age thirty-two. She is Carmen's eldest daughter (the second of four children), Lourdes's niece, and Emily and Frances's sister. Similar to her mother and aunt, Camille enjoyed Barbie mostly because of the doll's clothes. The time she spent with the dolls was mostly for playing dress-up.

Although she did not play much with Barbie dolls, she interacted with other Barbie products.

**Frances.** Age twenty-five. Frances is the youngest of Carmen's children and Camille and Emily's little sister. Frances was active in the conversation that took place among the family members mostly by describing how she saw other people play with Barbie and how that influenced her own decisions about playing with the doll. Growing up, Frances did not like Barbie dolls and barely played with them.

### *Group 2: Childhood Friends*

**Jessica.** Age thirty. She was born in the San Juan area and lived most of her life since she was six years old in southwest Puerto Rico. This is where she started playing with Barbie. Jessica remembered that what she liked most was setting everything up under her bunk bed and creating spaces that looked like a house for Barbie. She interacted with Barbie until she was around thirteen years old.

**Mariela.** Age twenty-nine. She spent most of her childhood in the west side of Puerto Rico. It was in fourth grade that she began playing with Barbie. Her play was very imaginative; she adopted objects from around the house to create furniture and other artifacts for Barbie play. Mariela played with Barbie dolls until she was almost fourteen or fifteen years old. She had her dolls until she moved to the San Juan area when she was a junior in high school.

### *Group 3: Colleagues*

**Isabel.** Age thirty. She grew up as the only girl among her cousins in a small western town on the island. Her interactions with Barbie happened through doll play and through other Barbie products. Isabel could not remember when she stopped playing with Barbie dolls, but she has many memories from when she was about eight to ten years old.

**Frankie.** Age thirty. The youngest of four sisters, Frankie grew up in a southwestern town in Puerto Rico, although her early childhood years were spent in the United States. She is the youngest of four sisters. Her

family moved back to Puerto Rico when she was ten years old, at which time she stopped playing with Barbie dolls.

**Lisa.** Age forty-five. Born in New York, Lisa moved to Puerto Rico when she was three years old. There she grew up in two towns on the west side. Lisa stated that her Barbie era was short, possibly between the ages of seven and ten. When she was ten, she preferred playing volleyball and doing more physical activities.

**Elsa.** Age twenty-eight. Elsa was not present for the entirety of the interview, but she contributed some comments that I include in chapter 4. She played with Barbie in her childhood. Elsa was born in Puerto Rico, yet during her girlhood she moved around to many countries, including Germany, Italy, the United States, and finally back to Puerto Rico when she was ten.

The other set of group interviews comprises discussions with mothers and daughters. For these next three groups, my role was solely of a researcher and not a participant, although I interjected at certain points in the conversations. Below I describe each participant in the last three groups (group 4: mother and adult daughter; group 5: mother and child daughter; group 6: mother and two daughters).

#### *Group 4: Mother and Adult Daughter*

**Patricia.** In her later fifties, a retired teacher who enjoys painting and making dolls out of clay. She was born and raised in New York until the age of eleven, when she moved to Puerto Rico. Her parents and family members are Puerto Rican. She is Gabriela's mother and a former teacher. During her childhood she owned a total of about ten Barbie dolls (and friends), though her current Barbie collection contains 233 dolls. She fell in love with Barbie when she was four years old and saw a Barbie commercial. She played for hours in her room every day, and her play with Barbie went on until the age of sixteen. When her husband threw out all of the Barbie dolls and outfits her mother had given her, and which she still kept at age thirty-two, she decided to begin collecting them.

**Gabriela.** Age twenty-five. Gabriela grew up in the south of Puerto Rico. She is Patricia's only daughter. Her mother still keeps Gabriela's old Barbies, which amount to 131 dolls. She indicated that when her mother

would buy her a Barbie, she would use it for a couple of weeks and then grow tired of her. She did reiterate many times during the interview that she loved playing with Barbie. She played with Barbie dolls until she was twelve years old. Gabriela and Patricia's interview took place in their home, where they were able to show me their collections of Barbie artifacts.

*Group 5: Mother and Child Daughter*

**Autumn.** Age forty. She is Sharon's mother. She grew up on the east coast of the United States and moved to Puerto Rico as an adult, about ten years ago. Her family is not Puerto Rican. She works as a professor at a university in Puerto Rico. Although Autumn is not Puerto Rican and did not grow up in Puerto Rico, her experiences from the perspective of the mother of a girl born and being raised in Puerto Rico are important to be considered when talking about her daughter's experiences of girlhood.

**Sharon.** Age eight. She is Autumn's oldest daughter. She was born in Puerto Rico and has been raised in a town in the west of the island. This interview also took place in their home, which allowed Sharon to show me her various dolls and even demonstrate how she sometimes plays with her brother with their different toys.

*Group 6: Mother and Two Daughters*

**Susan.** In her forties, has interacted with Barbie both as a girl playing with the doll and as a mother of two girls: K.C. and Annie. As a mother and educator, Susan had some reservations about the doll; however, she enjoyed her childhood play with Barbie: "I loved them very much, and I looked at them and brushed their hair and kept them well. They were special."

**K.C.** Age eleven. She is Susan's oldest daughter, who is growing up in a southwestern town in Puerto Rico. K.C. was mostly shy and quiet during the group interview, but she shared some of her experiences with Barbie, especially with a book about professions she brought to the interview.

**Annie.** Age nine. She is Susan's youngest daughter and K.C.'s sister. Annie was the more talkative of the sisters, sharing with us her various experiences with Barbie play, her favorite aspects about the doll, and even her concerns about the effect Barbie's body could have on people.

## Overview

*An American Icon in Puerto Rico* explores certain experiences that Puerto Rican women and girls had with Barbie; however, it does not seek to generalize and argue that these experiences are *the* experiences of girls in Puerto Rico or that they are even representative of the population at large. It is important to note, for example, that the participants whose experiences brought this book to life are all cisgender girls and women. Thus, there are certainly experiences that this book could not illustrate and discuss. Rather, this book offers a window into some interactions with Barbie, and especially how they differ and overlap across generations, showing how Barbie's transnationality crossed not only geographical borders but also generational ones.

In chapter 1, "Girlhood, Dolls, and Barbie: Spaces of Innocence?" I lay the groundwork for understanding how dolls, and then more specifically Barbie, serve as sites for interrogating constructions of girlhood and girls' identity formations. Though Barbie was not necessarily conceptualized as an embodiment of childhood (she began as a teenager but was later marketed as a career woman), Mattel pounced on parents' moral panic about girls "growing up too fast" and framed some of their doll lines as the perfect solutions to maintain girls' innocence. The chapter thus examines ideologies around childhood innocence, comparing societal constructions of whiteness as inherently innocent with the adultification of Blackness (Black girls, specifically). The chapter explores definitions of "girlhood" that expand the term beyond particular age ranges and instead posit it as fluid according to context.

Chapter 2, "The Politics of Barbie in Puerto Rico: A New Icon Emerges," introduces readers to Barbie's arrival to Puerto Rico in the early 1960s and the socioeconomic and political contexts that created the "perfect" conditions for her entrance into the island. A system of tax cuts for US companies, cheap local labor, and the United States' strong colonial hold over Puerto Rico contributed to a high influx of imported US products to the island, including Barbie dolls. The chapter moves into examining the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico through the conflicting discourses that arose following the production of the Puerto Rican Barbie in 1997. It situates Barbie's presence in the island and among Puerto Ricans in the continental United States and showcases the conflicting views on the doll. It also compares the responses from adults at the time to responses from those who were girls in the late 1990s.

For some, Puerto Rican Barbie was a symbol of national pride; for others, she was a symbol of colonization. Drawing from the experiences of some of the participants, the chapter ends with an exploration of girls' mobility between Puerto Rico and the United States as part of their identities, and it examines one participant's case in which Barbie was used to negotiate colonizing practices. Barbie's world centers on fashion and luxury. Presenting this from the standpoint of Puerto Rico's sociopolitical status, I explored how girls may use Barbie to dream about upward mobility and how they might see the United States as the only option to attain this. The women in this study, who belong to the generation that grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, owned only a few Barbie dolls and artifacts. This generation also exemplified the historical moment the island was living at the time. From the 1940s to the 1960s Puerto Rico went through what is dubbed the "great migration" due to the economic recession. Their dreams of emulating Barbie and their admiration for her clothes could have been a result of their imagined transnational movement into the United States, the land of opportunity, from where Barbie came.

Chapter 3, "Fashioning a Self: Experiences of Body and Feminine Identities with Barbie," describes my participants' relationship with Barbie. It analyzes the various themes their play involved, the roles they assigned to the dolls and themselves, and other aspects of play. It takes into consideration participants' Barbie artifacts, which included such things as dolls, pictures, and magazines. The chapter examines participants' opinions about Barbie and how Barbie influenced the participants' views of femininity and gender expectations. From some participants' perspectives, Barbie was the ultimate girl, and if you were a girl, you had to have one. This complicated some girls' relationship with the doll, as they felt they did not fit Barbie's constructions of girlhood and femininity. Therefore, identity was also established with the rejection of the doll. Moreover, in this chapter I examine the participants' perceptions regarding Barbie's body, a site of contestation in and of itself, and its effects on their own experiences and interactions with the doll.

Barbie embodies a very specific brand of femininity, which is often held as "ideal." She is an affluent, heterosexual, white woman with an impossible body. As a result, it is difficult for many girls to see themselves reflected in the doll. In chapter 4, "Accessing Barbie: Conversations about Class and Race," I examine how participants talked about race and class through the doll. The chapter begins with a discussion of Barbie, the material girl, and how Barbie is constructed as a symbol of affluent femininity.

This takes place through the wide array of products that girls are encouraged to acquire in order to have a “true” Barbie play experience. Participants in this study identify this issue because they experienced the ways in which Barbie and her products can become explicit markers of class and affluence. The chapter continues with a discussion of racial constructions on the island and the discourse employed to talk about them. These serve as a framework for examining some of the participants’ responses to white Barbie and their interactions with Black Barbie dolls or other dolls of color. In many ways, these participants’ responses were manifestations of the discourses about race in Puerto Rico, which often position Blackness as less beautiful than whiteness. Historically, the Barbie brand has had a problem with racial and ethnic diversity, which I briefly explore in this chapter in order to contextualize how girls and women negotiated Barbie’s whiteness and the ways that Mattel continuously centered the white doll as *the* Barbie, even when the brand included dolls of color.

Drawing from conversations between mothers, daughters, and/or sisters, from ages eight to sixty-two, the final chapter, “All in the Family: Barbie’s Place in Familial Dynamics,” examines familial female relationships in the context of Puerto Rican girlhoods. The chapter presents an analysis of conversations between female family members about their decisions to play with Barbie or not. It pays particular attention to the influence of Barbie’s race and her status as a symbol of femininity in the participants’ decision-making process. It also examines how Barbie helped to foster familial relationships.

Readers of this book can understand Barbie’s position as a transnational object beyond the United States, Canada, and Australia, where much of the research has focused. Its primary goal is to provide a better understanding of some Puerto Rican girls’ and women’s identities in relation to Barbie. What was the impact of Barbie in the girlhoods of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls from different generations? Girls’ individual experiences vary from one another and within their own selves. In other words, one person may experience Barbie in various ways—loving the doll while also hating her, wanting to be like the doll while also feeling shame for this desire, playing with the doll while abhorring her white affluent femininity. Moreover, Barbie’s presence in girls’ lives is also shaped, in part, by girls’ familial relationships. The stories presented in this book show how Barbie can become part of a girl’s life through a parent’s desire to pass down Barbie traditions and, at the same time, how parents’ opinion about the doll can influence how much impact Barbie can have



in a girl's life. Engaging with scholarship in cultural studies and girlhood studies, *An American Icon in Puerto Rico* shows that Barbie's role in Puerto Rican girlhoods was complex and multidimensional.

## Notes

1. I know this from my own experiences hearing people around me refer to the United States as such. Ortiz Cofer also uses this term and explains its usage in her memoir (1990: 14).
2. For the purposes of my research, when I refer to Barbie I am talking about all the members of the Mattel Barbie brand, so when discussing Barbie with my participants in a broader sense I included other Barbie artifacts, such as magazines, books, trading cards, sticker books, fashion plates, etc., in addition to the doll itself.
3. One part of their article "Just a Doll? 'Liberating' Accounts of Barbie-Play" discusses women's confessions to Barbie play. One woman seemed apologetic in her confession, especially because she considered herself to be a feminist but also liked the traditional gender roles (e.g., cooking, cleaning, having children, decorating, and organizing parties); moreover, this confession was made in her women's studies class, making it more difficult to confess. This was a memory that she had buried, yet somehow it surfaced during class discussion; as she noted, "This was the first time I noticed that I did grow up to be somewhat ashamed of such 'girls' culture' items such as Barbies, playing house, and soap operas" (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 2000: 179). The other woman who confessed to playing with Barbies did so by rationalizing her behavior. In her opinion, Barbie can be a good role model for girls: "Barbie today includes doctors, astronauts, and diplomats from all races and nationalities. Barbie today goes on to university to get her degree" (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 2000: 179).