TRACING PUERTO RICAN GIRLHOODS: AN INTERGENERATIONAL STUDY OF INTERACTIONS WITH BARBIE AND HER INFLUENCE ON FEMALE IDENTITIES

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction

by

Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez

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The dissertation of Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh  
Associate Professor of Education and Women’s Studies  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Daniel Hade  
Associate Professor of Education

Christine Marmé Thompson  
Professor of Art Education

Courtney D. Morris  
Assistant Professor of African American Studies and Women’s Studies

William Carlsen  
Professor of Education  
Director of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies, Curriculum and Instruction

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Since her creation in 1959, Barbie has become an icon of femininity and an important artifact in girls’ cultures. The doll has become a great part of children’s lives either through her presence or her absence in their play experiences. Moreover, the feelings and memories she evokes can provide insights to girls’ lived experiences in relation to a number of topics. As a result, Barbie becomes an important artifact of girlhood and an excellent site of interrogation about girlhood. While a large amount of research has examined Barbie’s role in girls’ lives, the scholarship has not included the experiences of Puerto Rican girls.

This study examines the experiences of a group of multigenerational Puerto Rican women and girls who interacted with Barbie dolls during their childhood and the social and cultural implications these experiences may have on their lives in the present. Through qualitative research approaches that included individual and group interviews, as well as artifactual data, this study depicts the narratives of twenty-one participants who recounted stories of how Barbie became part of their childhoods and the meanings the doll held in their lives, showing how different those experiences can be for girls according to their contexts. Based on these stories, this research raised questions about Barbie as a marker of class, accessibility to the doll and her accessories, representations of female body and image, race, and gender.

The findings of this research demonstrate the important role Barbie played in the formative years of many Puerto Rican girls. Participants perceived interactions with the doll, however different, and whether entirely positive or not, as an important part of their
girlhoods and in some cases even their adult lives. They also describe the often-complicated relationship girls and women have with the doll. More importantly, the study highlights how women and girls constructed their own identities in relation to femininity, body image, race, and nationalism through Barbie play.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................... viii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1

Overview and Background ................................................................................................. 2
Statement of the Research Inquiry and Research Questions ............................................. 4
Why Barbie? .......................................................................................................................... 6
Overview of Methodology ................................................................................................... 7
Rationale for Study ............................................................................................................... 9
Organization of Chapters .................................................................................................. 10

PART 1: THEORETICAL TERRAIN ............................................................................... 13

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature .................................................................................. 13

Introduction and Overview ................................................................................................. 13
Whose Girlhood? Who is Girl? .......................................................................................... 14
Girls and their Material Cultures: Girlhood, Dolls, and Identities .................................... 18
  Foregrounding Girls’ Voices: Research with and about Girls ........................................ 18
  Gendering Material Culture: Dolls in Girls’ Play Practices ........................................... 21
  Studying Girlhood through Dolls: Dolls and the Construction of Identity .................... 25
Barbie as a Site of Interrogation ......................................................................................... 32
  Barbie in Dominant Western Culture ........................................................................... 33
  Barbie in the World ......................................................................................................... 38
  Accessing Barbie: Issues of Race and Class ................................................................. 40
Mapping Girls’ Lives and Cultures in Puerto Rico ............................................................. 43
  Girlhood in Puerto Rico: An Emerging Conversation ................................................... 43
  Racial Identity in Puerto Rico ......................................................................................... 50
  Barbie in Puerto Rico ...................................................................................................... 52
Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................. 56

Chapter 3 Remembering Barbie: A Discussion of the Research Methodology ............... 59

Introduction and Overview ............................................................................................... 59
Rationale for Qualitative Research Designs ....................................................................... 60
The Qualitative Researcher ................................................................................................. 65
  Researcher/Participant Dynamics ............................................................................... 65
  Ethical Considerations .................................................................................................. 68
Studying Girlhood(s): Past and Present ............................................................................. 69
  Working with Girls: Possibilities and Challenges ....................................................... 69
  Exploring Girlhood through Adults .............................................................................. 73
Memory-Work Methods ..................................................................................................... 75
Recruitment and Participant Selection ............................................................................. 81
Chapter 7  Growing up with Barbie: Discussion and Conclusions

PART 3: CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Summary and Conclusions ................................................................. 234

Barbie’s Impact on Puerto Rican Girlhoods .................................................. 236
Barbie’s Role in Puerto Rican Women’s and Girls’ Identities ....................... 238
Participants’ Perceptions of their Interactions with Barbie ......................... 241
Gender, Race, and Class in Barbie Play ...................................................... 243
Reflections on my Position as Researcher/Participant .................................. 247
Implications and Suggestions for Further Research .................................... 250
Concluding Remarks .................................................................................... 254
References ................................................................................................................................. 257
Appendix A Informed Consent Form .......................................................................................... 274
Appendix B Informed Consent Form (Spanish) ......................................................................... 276
Appendix C Interview Questions ............................................................................................... 278
Appendix D Consent/Assent Form for Girls ............................................................................... 280
Appendix E Consent/Assent Form for Girls (Spanish) ............................................................... 282
Appendix F Participant Recruitment Flyer ................................................................................. 284
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1: Sears Christmas ad for *El Mundo* newspaper..........................................................54

Figure 2-2: First appearance of Barbie in *El Mundo*. .........................................................................55

Figure 2-3: Picture of Barbie dolls from first appearance of Barbie in *El Mundo*. ............................55

Figure 3-1: A map of Puerto Rico’s 78 municipalities.............................................................................95

Figure 4-1: A letter addressed to Isabel welcoming her to the official Barbie Fan Club.............118

Figure 4-2: Barbie birthday gift for Isabel from the Official Fan Club..............................................118

Figure 4-3: A sample of Gabriela’s dolls (Left). Close-up to one of her dolls from a set.  
(Right)........................................................................................................................................154

Figure 4-4: Specific dolls shown in a homemade catalogue. ...............................................................155

Figure 5-1: A sample of Patricia’s collection of 233 Barbie dolls. .........................................................188

Figure 5-2: A booklet that was included with Barbie dolls during Barbie’s early years.  ..........188

Figure 5-3: Part of Marisa’s collection created for her daughter: Glamour dolls..........................192

Figure 5-4: Part of Marisa’s collection created for her daughter: Dolls of the world...............192

Figure 5-5: Patricia’s catalogue of her daughter’s dolls with the captions “1994” next to one item and “$175.00 1994” next to another. ..................................................194

Figure 5-6: Patricia’s catalogue of her daughter’s dolls with the caption “1995” written next to two items..................................................................................................................194

Figure 5-7: No.1 Barbie, 1959..................................................................................................................196

Figure 6-1: Description of Puerto Rico on the box for Puerto Rican Barbie. ...............................224

Figure 6-2: Puerto Rican Barbie (left) and Miss Universe Puerto Rico Joyce Giraud  
(right)...........................................................................................................................................229
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A girl and her doll

When a girl is small
Her mind escapes her
She looks at the world
as if it were hers to conquer
A nurse, a beautician
Or store clerk at the mall
Whatever she is
She always has her doll
A friend, a playmate;
This is more than a toy
It’s a childhood bond
That brings much joy
Attached by the hand,
The two never part
This doll will always have
A place in a girl’s heart
Somewhere in the world
There’s a girl and her friend
And friends they will be,
Right up to the end.

Author: Annissa Worobec
Chapter 1

Introduction

Those of us who avidly played with Barbie can still remember the feelings of holding the doll, changing her clothes, brushing her hair, assigning her a name, a role, and with it a personality. We created stories that ranged from having fun with friends to family situations, or from mirroring issues happening at school to dramatizing the plots of our favorite TV shows. Other times we were creating our own shows or soap operas with our dolls. These examples are one part of the testimonies from adult women who played with Barbie at some point in their lives, including the various participants of my research and myself.

For a very extended period of my childhood Barbie dolls\(^1\) were my favorite toys. I remember spending hours every afternoon after school creating different scenarios and going through the house to look for objects I could use as accessories for my dolls. Throughout the ages between six and probably eleven I was a rather shy or perhaps private girl, especially when it came to playing with my dolls. Thus, most of my play with Barbie dolls occurred by myself. Although a lot of play with Barbie is comprised of using the doll as a fashion prop – i.e. trying on different clothes, experimenting with her hair, and being a sort of mannequin – Barbie play oftentimes occurs through the creation of scenes and narratives. In my case every day it was a different narrative, with different dolls, and in different settings. At least one of my dolls was a teacher, one was a dancer, and more than one were singers. These were all things I wanted to be when I grew up,
thus, I was vicariously living my dreams through my dolls. Having different outfits and being able to dress them according to the occasion, place, or profession I selected contributed greatly to the play. Other dolls already had a profession and I would play along with these established roles most of the time. The narratives I created were very different and they relied upon my mood or my current interests. Singing was always an interest of mine since I was very little, so it played an important role in my play. However, where things happened and what happened was constantly changing. Sometimes the narrative would take place at the doll’s school, and in this case, since for me all my Barbie dolls were adults, other toys came into play so they could be the students. Other times, there was a wedding taking place. The wedding(s) began to take place when I finally had a wedding dress; however, there were only two Ken dolls, so for many “weddings” to take place, sometimes my dolls were actors in a soap opera. As such, many of the narratives were centered on boy dilemmas, although friendship and family were also included.

Overview and Background

Barbie is a cultural icon that has been present since 1959, and has been a popular toy among girls since then. She has become a great part of children’s culture – be it by the doll’s presence or by its absence in children’s lives (Aguiló-Pérez, 2014). In my conversations with many adult women, as is also apparent in the vast literature about Barbie, I have encountered a plethora of responses to the doll. Some have voiced their love for Barbie because it takes them back to their childhood, when they played with the
doll for hours. Others have admitted they played with Barbies although they would not have told their friends at the time they were doing so because Barbie was “for babies;” in their conversations with me they feel glad to know that I played with them as well, as it provides for them a sense of comfort to know they were not alone in playing with the doll. Other reactions to Barbie are on the negative side of the spectrum. Recently, a friend shared with me through Facebook a news article titled “Barbie Fucks it Up Again,” in which author Pamela Ribon (2014) criticizes a recent book about Barbie.

In *Barbie: I Can be a Computer Engineer* (2010), Barbie is designing a game to show kids how computers work, but she is only the designer, the boys are the developers:

“I’m only creating the design ideas,” Barbie says, laughing. “I’ll need Steven and Brian’s help to turn it into a real game!”

The story continues with Barbie infecting her computer and Skipper’s computer with a virus. While Barbie is a computer engineer, she should be capable of solving this problem. Yet Barbie resorts to asking the boys for help. Ribon (2014) argued that the book continued the portrayal of Barbie (and thus, girls) as not completely intelligent. The book has since been pulled from its publisher’s website, Random House Kids, and Mattel offered a public apology. My friend who shared the article articulated her hatred for the doll and explained that she would never allow her daughter to play with Barbie because the doll sends the wrong message to girls.

Whether women’s experiences with the doll were positive or negative, Barbie generally plays a role in childhood, especially in Western cultures (Driscoll, 2008; Rand, 1995). As such, a number of scholars have written about individuals’ childhood experiences with the doll and their negotiations with how Barbie contributed, and still
does, to their own identities (McDonough, 1999; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Rogers, 1998). In many ways Barbie contributes to women’s identities and how they continue to view the doll, either in relation to their own childhood experiences and/or as adults who do not want to promote Barbie play among their own offspring. For this reason, I wanted to examine individuals’ views on Barbie and their experiences with the doll either currently taking place (girls) or through memories of their play (teenagers and adults). In paying attention specifically to the experiences of Puerto Rican women and girls, I aimed to extend the research on Barbie to places where the scholarship has yet to explore.

Statement of the Research Inquiry and Research Questions

The principal purpose of this research was to study the memories adult women have of their own play or non-play with Barbie dolls and the social and cultural implications these memories may have on their adult lives. In addition, it wanted to continue exploring Barbie’s role in Puerto Rican girlhoods by seeking the perspective of girls who currently play with Barbie, played with Barbie at some point in their lives, or rejected Barbie. I use the term Puerto Rican Girlhoods, as a plural, because I am exploring the individual experiences of various Puerto Rican women and girls from various generations. They do not represent just one type of girlhood experience in the Island, but rather how Barbie played a role in their individual formations.

This study engaged in memory-work with adult women and with girls to examine the interactions between individuals and Barbie and the social and cultural implications
these memories had on their girlhoods and, for the adults, on their adult lives. These interactions included both the presence and absence (the acceptance and rejection) of Barbie in each girl’s childhood. More specifically, based on the memories that emerged during my interviews and conversations with adult women, I looked at the construction and performance of their own identities in relation to Barbie. For the purposes of my research when I refer to Barbie, I am talking about all the members of the Mattel Barbie brand. 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. The questions that guided this inquiry into identity within play experiences were:

1. What was the impact of Barbie in the girlhoods of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls from different generations?

2. How did Barbie become part of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls’ identity?

3. How do women and girls view their interactions with Barbie in relation to their lived experiences?

4. What issues of gender, race, and class were raised through play with and/or discussion of play with Barbie?

To achieve this, I drew from methods of qualitative inquiry, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the various experiences women had with the doll. In order to explore these questions, this study employed methodologies that align to the fields of Women’s Studies and Girlhood Studies.
Why Barbie?

Barbie’s iconic presence in popular culture makes her an excellent artifact to study. The doll has been in existence since 1959 and has been a popular toy among girls since then. For adults, especially feminist women, the doll becomes a subject of internal debate. Women often feel a sense of shame in admitting they had any relation to Barbie. Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000) note that Barbie has always been controversial, and currently her most ardent critics are women. In cultural conversations the doll has occupied a position of contradiction, where women who identify as feminists also negotiate the fact that they played with Barbie. In a way Barbie has become almost an icon that represents anti-feminism, yet also evokes feelings of nostalgia, thus creating an interesting tension that provides a platform to explore and come to understand feminist issues such as sexuality, race, equality, accessibility, class, motherhood or gender roles, femininity, performance, and queer theory, among others. Driscoll (2008) notes:

No product for girls, no dominant toy of any year, no feminist account of popular culture, and no transitionally marketed representation of the body can entirely escape its relation to Barbie in the Western public sphere; nor can any contribution to intellectual inquiry about girls, girlhood, feminism, embodiment, or commodity culture entirely avoid Barbie. (p. 45)

In academic scholarship about Barbie there have both been concerns about the effects of girls playing with Barbie but also enjoyment in the long spectacle of the Barbie archive.

Barbie is a fashion doll. Her purpose, according to creator Ruth Handler, is for girls to dress her up and try on different outfits. This, however, is not the only way girls actually play with Barbie. They create narratives, often complex ones, about a range of topics and situations, often centered on their own lived experiences. Despite being a doll
that was created devoid of any specific educational goal, different postulations on the doll express concern about what girls may learn through their interactions with Barbie culture. The numerous layers of subjects that emerge in the conversation about Barbie and her long-lasting presence in girlhood culture makes her an object that offers insight into experiences of girlhoods worthy of examination.

**Overview of Methodology**

In this qualitative investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), I explored the childhood experiences of Barbie play of eighteen adult participants, who all identified as having played with Barbie, yet the interactions were very different among all. This study also explored the experiences of three girls who currently play with Barbie. By studying the experiences of women and girls from various generations this study was able to examine more in depth the role Barbie played and continues to play in Puerto Rican girlhoods.

My primary method of data collection was interviewing, both individually and in groups. Participants were interviewed once, and interview sessions lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and a half. 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 some cases, the interview took place in the participant’s home, where they still kept Barbie artifacts from their childhood. In one specific case, the artifacts were comprised of a plethora of Barbie dolls that the participant began collecting as an adult. In this case, as will be further explored in Chapter 4, having collected the dolls as an adult was a result of the participant’s experiences with Barbie during her childhood.

I engaged in the study of about 300 Barbie artifacts at the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, NY. Through this research fellowship I examined closely and documented the different ranges of Barbie dolls that have been produced since the doll’s conception up until a decade ago. These Barbie dolls were representative from the different eras of Barbie with which my participants have engaged. I examined the types of dolls produced, the changes she has undergone, the colors of her clothes, the types of accessories and the types of products that accompanied the dolls, among other aspects.

Part of the data was informed by document research. In the time spent at the Strong Museum of Play I also studied various texts about Barbie (Gerber, 2009; Korbeck, 2001; Sarasohn-Kahn, 1996; Tosa, 1998) and original documents (transcripts, photographs, preliminary reports) that accounted for a study about the role of dolls in women growing up in the 1910s and 1930s, specifically mothers and daughters. This particular project provided with models for how to approach and to structure my own study of familial relationships. Finally, I examined newspapers and magazines from 1959-1962 in Puerto Rico to understand the context of the time when Barbie arrived to the Island.
Rationale for Study

When Barbie has been examined in relation to Puerto Rico, it has mostly been about the Puerto Rican doll, which came out in 1997. Aguilar (1997), Navarro (1997), Negrón-Muntaner (2002), and Rivera-Brooks (1997) wrote about the marked divided opinion toward the Puerto Rican Barbie doll at the time it was produced. As they explain, while Puerto Rican Barbie was received enthusiastically in Puerto Rico, it caused a heated debate among Puerto Ricans on the United States mainland. Many of the latter objected, among several aspects, her light skin and the description about Puerto Rico’s history it provided. Puerto Rican Barbie has been one of its kind since it was the first time Puerto Rico was featured in the “Dolls of the World” Barbie line, and she has not been featured since. However, my research seeks to explore Barbie play (or lack thereof) before, during, and after this specific moment when the Puerto Rican Barbie came out, as did the slight scholarship of Barbie in the context of the Island.

There has not been a Puerto Rican Barbie since then, thus she pertains only to a specific generation of girls who grew up with her. In addition, there has not been a study of the experiences with Barbie for those who grew up in the Island. For these reasons, the research questions I presented address girlhood in Puerto Rico and the memories of women and girls’ experiences with Barbie, not confined to the Puerto Rican Barbie doll. Considering Puerto Rican girls’ sidelining in critical studies about Barbie and girlhood, this research aims to bring their experiences and voices to the fore.
Organization of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters that are organized within three main parts: Part 1 presents the theoretical terrains that informed my research. This first part includes Chapter 2 (Review of the Literature) and Chapter 3 (Methodology). Part 2 presents the thematic findings. This part is comprised of three chapters that examine and analyze the data gathered in this study. Part 3 offers the concluding chapter, which situates the findings of this research within the study’s research questions. This first chapter provided a brief introduction to the topic, the rationale for the study, the statement of the problem, research questions, my role as the researcher, and the organization of the chapters.

Chapter two presents a comprehensive review of the literature related to the study of girlhood, dolls, and more specifically Barbie. It provides the necessary background to situate my research within intersecting fields of study, discusses the gaps that exist, and explains how this project intends to fill those gaps.

The third chapter describes the research methodology and methods. It provides a justification for selecting a qualitative methodology that employs various methods of data collection. It offers a synthesis of the different methods and how each contributed to the collection of specific data. The chapter also includes a description of my participant selection and the process of garnering participants using “snowball sampling,” how data was analyzed, the validation strategies used to increase the validity and reliability of the study, and the role of the researcher.

Chapter four presents the findings that describe my participants’ relationship with
Barbie. This chapter pays special attention to interactions with Barbie in both the past and the present through two sets of participants: (1) eighteen adult participants and their memories about their play with Barbie; (2) and three girls’ current experiences 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 dolls, pictures, and magazines, among others. The chapter examines participants’ opinions about Barbie, how Barbie influenced the participants’ views of femininity, and how the doll was used to talk about gender, race, and class.

Drawing from conversations between mothers and daughters (and in some cases sisters), from ages eight to sixty-two, the fifth chapter 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.

Chapter six presents a discussion of Barbie focused on the sociopolitical relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. It situates Barbie’s presence in the Island considering Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth of the U.S. Drawing from the experiences of some of the participants, it explores girls’ mobility between the Island and the mainland as part of their identities. It then presents one case in which Barbie was used to negotiate colonizing practices. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Puerto Rican Barbie, presented through the perspective of women who were growing up during the
time it was produced.

The last chapter presents the conclusions reached through the study, the implications for the field of girlhood studies, suggestions for future research, and the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the references used in all the chapters of this dissertation. There is also an appendix section that includes copies of the informed consent forms in English and Spanish, interview protocols in English and Spanish, and other documents integral to my research.

Note:

1 In this instance and throughout the rest of my dissertation when I refer to Barbie dolls I include Barbie and her friends (e.g. Ken, Skipper, Teresa, Midge, among others), unless specified. I use the name Barbie because she is the most prominent of the dolls and she is the face Mattel® uses to promote this line of dolls.
PART 1: THEORETICAL TERRAIN

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this study, as expressed in Chapter 1, was to explore, through a qualitative approach, the experiences of Puerto Rican women and girls with Barbie and the doll’s influence on the participants’ feminine identities. Through participants’ stories – which were shared through informal conversations, individual and group interviews, email exchanges, and Facebook posts – this study found the various ways in which Barbie has influenced girlhoods in Puerto Rico and her significance in women and girls’ current lives. The methods used to collect these stories are explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

Working with both adults and children, afforded this project a more extensive insight to the experiences of girls from different generations playing or even rejecting Barbie dolls. By doing so, this project describes and interprets the role Barbie play and Barbie culture might play in girls’ identities as well as the meaning those experiences have in adulthood. In order to contextualize Barbie play in Puerto Rico and her influence on Puerto Rican girlhoods, I present here a survey of the literature available on girlhood, dolls, Barbie, and Puerto Rican childhood. This project presents an intersection of these
areas of research to more deeply examine Barbie’s impact on Puerto Rican girlhoods.

I begin by discussing critical work in girlhood studies to lay the groundwork that informs my research, which includes the scholarship about working with girls and for girls and their childhood experiences. I then delineate the scholarship about dolls, doll play, and dolls and identity. This leads to a review of a selection of research about Barbie, which focuses on studies that involve participants of different ages and backgrounds and from various analytical perspectives. The next section explores Puerto Rican girlhoods, where I consider what has been said about girlhood and the existing gaps in the literature. I present the limited research about childhood and girlhood in the Island and present various experiences of girlhood through the memoirs of Puerto Rican women writers. The section continues with a discussion of racial constructions in the Island and the discourse employed to talk about them. Finally, I emphasize the limited research on Barbie in Puerto Rico and offer this study as a significant contribution to the field.

**Whose Girlhood? Who is Girl?**

Before focusing on the rise and development of the study of girlhood and the aspects that are yet to be examined, it is important for me to define *girlhood* and reflect upon who is considered “girl.” Early examinations of childhood tend not to differentiate the gendered dimensions of childhood. Rousseau (1762/1921) argues that until puberty there is very little that distinguishes both sexes: “everything is the same; girls are children and boys are children; one name is enough for creatures so closely resembling one
another” (p.158). Yet the way boys and girls are socialized and the ways they experience certain aspects of life are, for the most part, different. Thus, it is important to acknowledge these differences and recognize that while there is much they share, there are aspects of childhood that belong to boyhood and girlhood separately.

Girlhood is a complex term to define, as noted by Reid-Walsh (2011): “The term ‘girlhood’ has had a history as an ideologically loaded term in Western culture” because “its different denotations and connotations make for a fuzziness of meaning”. (p. 92). The concept has been defined as: “The state of being a girl; the time of life during which one is a girl. Also: girls collectively” (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, Reid-Walsh (2011) explains, the term can refer to a developmental stage but it can also be girls as a collective group. Driscoll (2002) notes that girls are socially constructed as female children or young women.

In my own usage of the word within informal settings I have referred to adults collectively as girls (e.g. a girls’ night out or my girlfriends) or singularly when speaking directly to a friend (e.g. “Girl, you hair looks great today!”). The term girl has also been adopted by adults collectively, especially within groups that foment female empowerment. The Guerrilla Girls, formed in 1985, are a group of anonymous feminists who work against sexism and racism in the art world through activism and the creation of educational material. They appear in public wearing gorilla masks to maintain anonymity. In response to the questions “Why do you call yourselves ‘girls’? Doesn’t that upset a lot of feminists?” the Girls note that they wanted to be shocking: “Calling a grown woman a girl can imply she’s not complete, mature, or grown-up. But we decided to reclaim the word ‘girl’, so it couldn’t be used against us” (Guerrilla Girls, 1995, par.
7). In the early 1990s Riot grrrl culture, an underground feminist hardcore punk movement comprised of various punk bands, adopted and adapted girl to not only identify them as a female movement but also to signify the sound of a growl. Moreover, members of the movement often referred to themselves and women in general as girls. Similarly, the mid-1990s British music group Spice Girls famously embraced “Girl Power!” as their slogan and their primary message to girls. The fact that the Spice Girls were adults adopting the word girl in their name, rather than ladies and in their motto, “Girl Power” rather than “Woman Power” was an act of inclusion toward girls of all ages, not exclusively adults. Not surprisingly, the majority of the fan base consisted of girls. In the implementation of girl among these various female movements, they provided a definition of girlhood that extended to adults.

Driscoll (2002) meaningfully narrates her own negotiations with girlhood, pointing to the fact she was not considered a girl anymore in her thirties, but she might still be called girl or even refer to herself as girl. She adds that her engagement with “girl” things and “girl” behaviors connect her even further to girlhood because girlhood is something that she has experienced and “it doesn’t truly seem to have been completed” because, as she explains, “I’m still not sure when I stopped being a girl, if I did” (p. 2).

In many ways adults continue to actively engage in what is considered girls’ culture, whether they are consumers or producers. Referencing Fuchs (1989), Reid-Walsh notes that, “If participating in the popular culture of girls or in commercialized girl culture is considered an aspect of girlhood, then the age rises even further to include middle-aged women” (2001, p. 93). There are many ways in which adult women participate in the culture of girls. Notably, it takes place within the princess culture
promoted in Disney princess films (Hains, 2015; Pike, 2015) and, more relevant to my research, within Barbie products, especially collectors items. The latter will become more evident in my discussion of two adult participants who own collections of Barbie dolls.

These different categories of girlhood and the variations in age within its definitions were apparent in the research presented in Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls’ Imaginations & Identities (Forman-Brunell & Hains, eds., 2015). Cultural difference plays a critical role defining who is considered a girl and what constitutes girlhood:

An important aspect of this book is that it provides different ranges for what constitutes a “girl” especially according to its cultural context. For instance, Kristen Pike specifies that she employs the term “girl” even though her participants were between 18 and 24 years old because in Arab countries the term “woman” refers to married females. In this context, the term “girl” expands the range to one that is less used in Western scholarly works about girls. This provides an example of the fluidity of the term “girl” around the world. (Aguiló-Pérez, 2016a, forthcoming)

My study highlights the complex and often intersecting definitions of girlhood by examining it in two ways. First, it considers Puerto Rican girlhoods in the past through the memory-work exerted by adult women while examining present girlhoods through the experiences of three girls 8-11 years of age. Girlhood in this study indicates experiences had between the ages of 4 and 16, which cover the age range of Barbie play among my participants. It also takes into consideration women’s engagement with girlhood in their adulthood. Hence, the following sections delineate the scholarship that has aimed to provide insight into the many categories of girl (in various historical and sociocultural contexts) and the work with and about girls that has opened the space to examine girlhood as a social category and as a field of study.
Girls and their Material Cultures: Girlhood, Dolls, and Identities

Foregrounding Girls’ Voices: Research with and about Girls

The course of studies about girls changed thanks to Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s groundbreaking work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which served to guide the research feminists were doing in an attempt to understand how the “culture, fashion, and beauty industries create commodities for and about girls, how girlhood is represented in such products, and how female youth consume them” (McRobbie & Garber, 1991 [originally published elsewhere in 1978], p.14). In the introduction to *Feminism and youth culture: From ‘Jackie’ to ‘Just Seventeen’*, McRobbie (1991) discusses the challenges she faced when she began work in the sociology of the youth. The body of work that was emerging in the 1970s covered questions about how young people “made sense” of the situations in which they were. McRobbie wanted to shift the focus towards how girls made sense of their lived experience and to shift the emphasis away from “an almost exclusive interest in boys” (1991, p. x). Her main reason was to provide a voice for girls; she followed a constructivist approach and allowed girls to create their own meaning by listening to the girls’ own stories of their perception of the world of school, home and the family and the pressures the institutions put on them to follow gender expectations.

The continuing lack of girl-centered research was further acknowledged by Mary Celeste Kearney. According to her, early feminists, in an attempt to demonstrate that women were equal to men, neglected issues about girls, focusing largely on adult-centered feminism. Thus, feminism became about women rather than female figures of
all ages. Most research during the 1980s and 1990s that involved female youth was focused on understanding women more than girls, with only a handful of women doing actual research about girls with girls. She notes that it was particularly Angela McRobbie and a handful of other scholars who “demonstrated consistent commitment to researching girlhood and girls’ culture as unique social formations” (Kearney, 2009, p. 1). There was a pronounced need to study and include girls in feminist scholarship.

Kearney (2009) offers the example of two British girls who in 1982 wrote about the lack of girls’ presence in feminist research. Their writing, published in the feminist journal *Spare Rib* is a direct criticism to the way feminists failed to acknowledge girls’ cultures resulting in an erasure of girls’ experiences and, more importantly, their voice. They note:

> The women’s movement must now come to terms with the contradiction of needing young women to be part of it, and treating us as if we were smaller, inadequate and immature versions of the older women in it. We can never really be together until the oppression of ageism is recognised and worked on. (Sally & Illona, 1982, p.158 as cited in Kearney, 2009, pp. 5-6).

Research for and about girls was also limited because, as McRobbie (1991) notes, historically the study of youth culture has revolved around boys’ and male teenagers’ lived experiences. Kearney (2009) notes that prior to the late twentieth century, girls were mainly domestic subjects, meaning that their lives had centered within the domestic sphere. This posed a difficulty for researchers, especially men, because their access was limited. In contrast, researchers had easier access to boys because they had a greater public presence (their leisure activities occurred mainly outside). Kearney cites: “as Joseph Hawes argues, ‘[t]he main reason why historians and social scientists have neglected female adolescents is because their capacity to threaten the dominant males of
society was much more limited than that of their brothers’ (1985, 51)” (Kearney, 2009, p.3). Girls are part of popular culture, and in some ways, they have created their own cultural spaces and places. For McRobbie and Garber (1991), and for those who were committed to researching girlhood and girls’ culture “as unique social formation” (Kearney, 2009, p. 1), girls’ experiences were worthy of and required study that was separate from the study of boys’ social practices.

The pronounced need for research that justly accounted for and honored girls’ lives, issues, interests, preoccupations, and practices led to the growth of girlhood studies as an important field of study. In the past decades, a host of scholars from an assortment of academic disciplines, institutions, and parts of the world have produced a solid foundation of girl-centered research upon which other scholarship of, as well as significant work with, female youth has developed (Kearney, 2009). According to Kearney (2009), today’s girl-centered sociological research includes:

- girls’ involvement in nondomestic youth cultures (for example, punk, hip-hop, riot grrrl, skateboarding);
- ethnic female coming-of-age rituals (bat mitzvah, la quinceañera);
- girls’ labor practices (babysitting, household labor);
- girls’ school-related social activities (prom, sports, recess play, cheerleading);
- girls’ nonfamilial and noncurricular cultural practices (dance, media consumption, music fandom, beauty pageants);
- and girls’ socialization according to norms of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability. (p. 17)

My research aims to look into girls’ practices, informed in part by girls in the present themselves. It is important for girls to have an active role in the research and literature about them. Although it would have been difficult for girls to carry out part of this research, by taking into consideration their stories and opinions of their own play practices with Barbie this study provides them a voice in this field.
Gendering Material Culture: Dolls in Girls’ Play Practices

When the differentiation between boys and girls as separate entities emerged in the nineteenth century, boyhood (as represented by boys in children’s texts) consisted of being “doers, adventurers, explorers, creatures of action, guile, mischief, intellect, and leadership” (Hateley, 2011, pp. 87). Meanwhile, girlhood was considered to involve little action and more emotion, girls were thought of as docile and unimaginative, and they were mostly perceived (and represented) as domestic beings, raised to become mothers (Hateley, 2011). In his famous work *Emile* (1762/1921), Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered this distinction between boys and girls in relation to types of roles they should enact during their play and in their daily lives:

Boys and girls have many games in common, and this is as it should be; do they not play together when they are grown up? They have also special tastes of their own. Boys want movement and noise, drums, tops, toy-carts; girls prefer things which appeal to the eye, and can be used for dressing-up—mirrors, jewellery [sic], finery, and specially dolls. The doll is the girl’s special plaything; this shows her instinctive bent towards her life’s work. (p.293)

He continues, “Little girls always dislike learning to read and write, but they are always ready to learn to sew. They think they are grown up, and in imagination they are using their knowledge for their own adornment” (Rousseau, 1762/1921, p. 293). These characteristics presented in girl characters across a myriad of children’s literature mirrored the reality of girls’ real lives, which were chiefly limited to the realms of their homes.

When discussing girlhood, de Beauvoir (1949/2009) explains that girls were required to stay home and their few activities outside were closely watched over. Furthermore, girls were not encouraged to organize their own fun and pleasure while
boys were allowed these independent activities. Research on play shows that these characteristics of girlhood and boyhood remain present in the behaviors each gender shows during play. A review of the literature on gender and play shows that, for the most part, girls do most of their playing inside. In addition, it shows that girls’ play tends to be sedentary, quieter, and passive as it involves arts and crafts, playing with dolls, and talking in small groups, often as a result of the gender roles imposed by the adults in their lives (Boyle, Marshall, & Robeson, 2003; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012). This is not surprising since, historically, girls have been assigned domestic roles as part of their “play” or leisure time, to educate them on their female duties. In their play with dolls, even when boys were included, both genders performed their play in socially prescribed ways (Forman-Brunell, 2011). While girls pretended to be little mothers to their dolls, boys often personified more authoritative roles such as doctors or preachers.

As is suggested in this overview of doll play, a major part of girls’ play with dolls situated them in a domestic role, usually that of a mother, as this was the way they were taught to play with them or how girls were depicted in texts that involved doll play. Yet, while these play practices are exhibited in current play, they are not naturally inherent in each gender. Rather, these are the practices that toy creators have produced through their marketing strategies. Moreover, these are practices fostered by parents and other adults to establish different roles for each gender, teaching children that they are expected to have very different societal roles.

Historically, children have often been given gender specific toys, alongside the message that the toy was preparation for the roles they were expected to fulfill as adults:
for girls the role was motherhood and domestic duties (thus their toys consisted of dolls, play cookware, decorating sets, etc.) and for boys the toys were building blocks or cars, sports gear, and building sets (Lipkin, 2009). In nineteenth-century America girls were urged toward usefulness rather than pleasure in their play as natural training in the established values they would need as future wives and citizens (Forman-Brunell, 2011). Most of a girl’s time was spent attending school, praying, and performing nonleisure activities, thus, the time spent with dolls was very limited. Still, this limited time with dolls continued to be educational since dolls served utilitarian purposes: girls would sew clothes for them – learning a valued skill to contribute in the household – and naturally, they played “mother” with them. In the decades following the Civil War, however, dolls gradually began to serve more modern purposes rather than utilitarian ones.

According to Forman-Brunell (2011), doll play at this time emphasized the display of high fashion instead of the practice of sewing skills stressed earlier. In addition, adults expected girls to imitate (female) rituals of high society through their doll play. They were encouraged to reenact housewarming and tea parties, and were urged by adults to recreate funerals. Following this type of play, texts that depicted doll fiction emerged, providing girls with both an outlet and a way of playing with their dolls. These texts, often written from the perspective of a doll who loves her girl owner (friend), also portrayed powerful feelings of love between girl and doll, which bordered between maternal and romantic, and which was reciprocal and passionate. Then, by the early 1890s, “the growing importance of mothering and child study had influenced popular ideas about doll play for girls” (Forman-Brunell, 2011, p.232). From then on, the images that portrayed doll play often depicted mothering love between girl and doll, and girls
cradling their babies with maternal sentimentality. Forman-Brunell (2011) notes that contemporaries rhetorically asked, “Is it not the harmless, childish joy that develops and educates the young girl’s maternal instinct, and in so doing helps to elevate her to the pinnacle of true womanhood?” (p.232).

As objects of girls’ material culture, dolls possess different meanings amongst producers, the adults who purchase them, and the girls who receive them. Producers, parents, and the experts who advise them have long agreed that dolls are designed to provide an important focus for socialization and preparation for womanhood (Fooken, 2012, 73). However, “intention and reception do not always correspond” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 39). Children often employ dolls to practice dramatic play by “Using a variety of props and objects, […] combining multiple roles and themes, […] and creating a pretend scenario” (Leong & Bodrova, n.d., par. 6). Doll play, then, can be looked at through the lens of dramatic play as it occurs as a social practice between doll and player, and at times between player and other player(s). Doll play, including, and more specifically, Barbie play as delineated in this project, includes the aforementioned characteristics suggested by Leong and Bodrova (n.d.). The research on dramatic play mostly refers to pretend play that involves at least two parties. For instance, Marsh (2008) notes that, “play can be an individual practice but often the impetus for playful activity in childhood is social” (p. 4). Drawing on the argument that play is fostered by the desire to engage with the community, Pelletier (2008) suggests that:

Rather than being removed from real life, secluded within a ‘magic circle’, play is ritualistic, concerned with establishing and maintaining social norms and policing borders between social inclusion and exclusion. It is used to frame play as a social practice, embedded in social rituals, with its own ‘instrumental’ behaviors, and within the broad functioning of society. (p. 4)
While the roles and themes, conflicts, and negotiation to solve arguments during doll play can take place between the players, dolls play in my participants took place mostly as an individual and private activity. Thus, within my research, these characteristics surfaced in the actual play among the dolls and objects themselves rather than between the players. As will be illustrated in Chapter 4, I drew from these standpoints on play to understand the relationship between girls and Barbie, to examine the meanings they placed on their interactions with the doll, and to recognize how doll play with Barbie, mostly dramatic, allowed girls to explore their identities.

**Studying Girlhood through Dolls: Dolls and the Construction of Identity**

Forman-Brunell (2012) notes that some scholars argue that dolls reinforce normative notions about gender and femininity. Social constructions of girlhood (and femininity) suggest that females belong to the domestic sphere – more specifically the role they are supposed to fulfill as adults is motherhood. These constructions are inherent, and often overtly depicted, in the merchandise for girls (and boys), advertisements, literature, and toys (Lipkin, 2009). Weida (2011) states, “Advertisements and television programming centered on dolls and action figures often poses narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood to young people” (p.2). For a long time advertisements for children toys have, for instance, delineated the play spaces that children can inhabit and the objects with which they can interact. Girls are mostly portrayed playing with dolls, kitchen sets, and cleaning supplies, to name a few. In contrast, boys are mostly depicted with tools, cars, guns, and sports gear.
Yet, scholars also “point to the ways in which dolls and the girls who play with them negotiate, revise, and disrupt the cultural categories of girlhood” (Forman-Brunell, 2012, p. 4). For instance, Weida (2011) suggests that, “play enables children to reconfigure meanings and iconography different from those intended by the marketers and/or feared by parents, demonstrating that what is intended may not ultimately designate those messages and images ultimately constructed by young people” (p. 2).

Many girlhood studies scholars support studying gender issues through material culture, especially through dolls (see Driscoll; Forman Brunell; Hains; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell). As the scholarship about dolls evidences, in girls’ lives dolls are not simply mere objects of play that come in contact with girls as symbols of femininity. They serve as spaces where a diverse set of meanings emerge according to how girls interact with the dolls. Further, they become spaces where girls negotiate and perform their own ideologies about girlhood and femininity.

An important reason that supports the study of girlhood through dolls is the central function these objects have in children’s lived experiences. As Lloyd (2015) suggests, “Dolls tell the historical narrative of everyday life, of political and social attitudes, and of the role of the sexes” (p. 37). They can contribute to the construction of feminine identity, but they can also serve as an outlet for anger and violence (Aguiló-Pérez 2016b, forthcoming). As I noted in my review of Dolls studies: The Many Meanings of Girls’ Toys and Play, dolls can be used “in subversive, dark, and even sexualized ways to push against patriarchal ideas of femininity and constructions of gender roles” (see Bernstein, 2015; Lloyd, 2015) (in Aguiló-Pérez, 2016b, forthcoming). Girls, for instance, may change their dolls’ appearances to look “less feminine” or they
may imagine sexual scenarios between dolls of the same sex in order to resist ideas of heteronormativity.

Wagner-Ott (2002) highlights the importance of studying the objects that are deeply embedded in children’s culture, such as dolls and action figures, making the argument that, “the critical analysis of the characteristics between girls and dolls/action figures provides valuable insights into the continuities and changes of gender identities in American cultures” (p. 246). From an early age gender roles and gender identities are made clear to children through the use of toys and the categorization of toys for girls and toys for boys. One way in which girls are indoctrinated and trained for their future domestic roles is through the use of dolls, specifically baby dolls (de Beauvoir, 2009; Lipkin, 2009; Forman-Brunell, 2011). Yet, with the creation and popularity of the fashion doll, especially Barbie, the “training” offered by baby dolls changed.

An important aspect of this study was to identify girls and women’s construction of their own feminine identities through their experiences of play with Barbie dolls. Barbie dolls have usually been the center of great criticism due to their appearance. As many have argued, the dolls’ so-called perfect body poses as a negative influence to little girls who presumably grow up wanting to look just like the doll, creating or at least making girls more susceptible to body issues and low self-esteem. Cultural-studies scholars, such as Lord (1994), Rand (1995), DuCille (1994, 1999), Brady (1997), Steinburg (1997), Gilman (1998), and Lipkin (2009), among others, argue about the detrimental effect Barbie, fashion, baby, and toddler dolls have on girls in relation to gender identity. Lipkin (2009) notes that in doll play, domesticity is pervasive — “girls have the option of a multitude of dolls to choose from…but preparation for motherhood
is a central tenet: Dolls are made to be fed, have diapers changed, are in need of strollers, bibs, high chairs, and more. Girls are taught to take pride in nurturing at this early age, and that this is their expected role” (p.9). Conversely, Barbie doll is marketed as a young woman who can do anything on her own and who can achieve any goal she establishes for herself. When comparing Barbie dolls to baby dolls as role models in girls’ lives, Rogers (1999) cites Darlene, a professional librarian at a university library: “Baby dolls, which had encouraged us all to be and stay in the image of motherhood, may have been replaced with Barbie, the career girl” (p. 16). Here, it becomes clear that Barbie sends a message that is very different from that which baby dolls send. While baby dolls encourage girls to delimit their goals to domestic roles – taking care of babies, completing chores around the house, serving as wife and mother – Barbie may show girls that their goals can be found outside the domestic. Girls can have careers just as Barbie does, serving as a more positive role model for girls. However, Darlene also finds Barbie problematic as she may send the message that girls can be “anything-else-that-you-wantta-be-as-long-as-you-are-an-anorexic-and-sexy-girl” and she questions whether this has “sent a better or worse message to our children” (as cited in Rogers, 1999, p.16).

Wohlwend (2015) notes the different ways in which the player, which in most cases are girls, constructs identities through doll play:

Dolls elicit performances of imagined characters for doll players in relation to the doll (e.g. baby dolls elicit pretend mothers). But dolls can also be proxies that allow children to pretend an imagined self through the doll (e.g. Disney Princess dolls elicit portrayals of players as princess characters). (p. 92)

As the brief account of my own play experiences presented in Chapter 1 described, girls have used Barbie dolls to pretend an imagined self through them and to construct an
identity of who they see themselves to be, or who they would like to be. This is not exclusive to my own experiences with Barbie, as will be further explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Through Barbie play, many of my participants were able to create a self, to explore who they were, and even navigate complex topics that were not being discussed with them.

The idea that girls perform an imagined self and create identities through doll play has been adopted by Mattel, Barbie’s producer, in many of their advertisements for the doll (for example, the “We Girls Can Do Anything” campaign in the 1980s). More recently in a commercial titled Imagine the Possibilities, Mattel employs this idea by capturing through hidden cameras “real reactions to girls imagining everything they might one day become” (YouTube Video). The girls imagine themselves as professors, veterinarians, soccer coaches, and businesswomen, revealing at the end that they were imagining themselves through Barbie play. Many of my participants and those who knew about my research shared this video with me through social media platforms, stating that they identified with the message of the commercial, as they experienced imagining what they could be through their own play with Barbie.

In the essay “Barbie Culture,” Driscoll (2008) briefly discusses the history and influence of the Barbie doll. Barbie was introduced by Mattel, Inc. in 1959, and was initially considered innovative for being a “teenage” doll. However, it was not truly representative of a grown-up infant figure. She appeared in the wake of the popular concretization of the idea of the teenager, teenybopper, and the teen. According to Driscoll, Barbie was never just a fashion doll. Although fashion was part of her life, it usually functioned in terms of Barbie’s career, which in some cases was in fact fashion
itself. Finally, Driscoll (2008) discusses the importance of Barbie in scholarship. She notes that no other toy has generated so much media interest. Barbie has become “a standard for scholarly discussion of the relations between popular culture, dominant ideologies, and childhood development as much as she has always been a centerpiece for the popular media” (p. 45). In academic scholarship about Barbie there have both been concerns about the effects of girls playing with Barbie but also enjoyment in the long spectacle of the Barbie archive.

Cox (1977) comments that “[i]f Barbie has indeed provided a behavioral model for a segment of the population, the values instilled by her miniature utopia will play an increasing role in the lives of those children who buy her version of the American Dream” (p. 307). Despite her many flaws, Barbie can be used in a more positive and progressive way to instill other values to girls. Barbie can serve as a model of independence, autonomy, assertiveness, and choice. Since the doll has been so influential for so many years, it is important to apply her influence in a different form: instead of only emphasizing her troublesome figure and the message it might instill, the focus should be shifted to the possibilities Barbie creates for girls, and how these may inform girls better about the roles they can have in society. While a vast number of scholars have condemned Barbie for “educating” girls to be obsessed with looks and depicting a mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity, Tosa (1998) argues that it is society what shapes a doll’s role and the messages it transmits to girls:

The doll’s role in the game of life is merely reflective of the society that produced her. A doll has no pretense of her own. She is not ‘born’ autonomous and whole. She is our puppet, passive, accepting, content to be shaped and molded in our hands as we imitate gods in the rites of creation. Thus, we really cannot accuse a doll of being ‘non-educational;’ she is the product of the same culture of which
she is a mirror, along with countless other toys and games of questionable educational merit. (p. 22)

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (1997) also shift the conversation about Barbie toward a more positive one, arguing that, “Barbie exists as a perfect cultural site for interrogating the margins, borders, and contradictions of our lives as girls and women” (p. 87). They acknowledge the usual negative connotations that accompany Barbie, especially in scholarship, yet what they want to do is provide Barbie as a cultural site “in her own right.” In this paper, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh focus less on the doll itself, and more on the texts about her that include print and play paraphernalia. They ask the following question: “What do these artifacts mean in the development of the nineties’ girls who will become young women at the turn of the century?” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 1997, p. 91). The authors view these Barbie texts as ways to offer a challenge to both feminists and their daughters in terms of interpretations. As they note, Barbie has always been controversial, and while in earlier years these critics were men, now their most ardent critics are women. However, although the doll has occupied a position of contradiction, the authors suggest she can also be positioned as Barbie-as-interrogator thanks to the texts. They ask: “What does it mean that Barbie exists as feminist historian through collector cards that allow girls and their mothers to ‘recover’ women’s history? What does it mean that Barbie addresses eating disorders, or makes it possible for a daycare centre to be enlarged? How do little girls connect these texts?” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 1997, p. 98). They argue that by extending the text of Barbie to include other artifacts that define Barbie as a cultural text, Barbie is moved towards a site of interrogation.
Barbie as a Site of Interrogation

There is a vast literature on Barbie, that ranges from blog posts to newspaper articles, from quantitative to qualitative research about Barbie play, from textual analysis of Barbie books to artwork and photography projects of Barbie, among the many Barbie-related works that can be found. Yet, for the parameters of this project, in order to contextualize my research and the methods I employed, I selected to review the seminal works of Barbie research where there are participants involved. In other words, I have not included research that performs textual analysis on Barbie books (or other texts), blog posts about Barbie, or news articles about Barbie merchandise, among others. By discussing this selection of works, I offer a selective overview of the research that has been executed – what has been done, how it has been done, and where it has been done – and how my research fits into the field, covering a niche that had not yet been fully addressed.

The works presented in this section offer a range of approaches to studying Barbie. Many have drawn from their own lived experiences to critically examine Barbie’s role in their lives and how those experiences may represent the experiences of many women and children with the doll. When it has involved adults’ memories, some of them have written about their own experiences (see DuCille, 1999; McDonough, 1999; Rand, 1995) while others have written about other people’s experiences gathered through interviews and informal conversations (see Lord, 1994; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Rogers, 1998). When Barbie research has involved children, the approaches have included interviews and conversations (see Chin, 1999), questionnaires
(see Kuther & McDonald, 2004), or focus groups (see Collins, Lidinsky, Rusnock, & Trostrick, 2012; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006), while also gathering information through observations of Barbie play (see Engin, 2013; Hohmann, 1985).

**Barbie in Dominant Western Culture**

Lord (1994), McDonough (1999), Rand (1995), and Rogers (1998) have published extensively on Barbie and the various problematic aspects the doll presents. Their work draws from a variety of sources that include interviews and informal conversations with adult women who used to play Barbie, girls, educators, toy producers and marketers, academics, observing and interacting with Barbie collectors, and authors’ reflecting on their own experiences, among others. In *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*, Lord (1994) offers a detailed account about the creation of the Barbie doll. Lord chronicles Barbie’s history and her relevance as a cultural icon. She draws on interviews with toy-makers, an eclectic group of Barbie collectors, visual artists, and feminists who disagree on Barbie’s impact on young girls. The author sees Barbie, who has had a myriad careers, as a female role model. Similarly, Rogers (1998) in *Barbie Culture* presents extensive research on Barbie and the culture that surrounds her. The author presents diverse (and often opposing) opinions about the doll given by adults who used to play with them, and also offers the opinion of educators who have experienced Barbie culture in their own classroom.

In *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty*, McDonough (1999) collects an eclectic Barbie literature that comes from a variety of authors. The
contributions in this anthology discuss a range of topics, such as: puberty, sexual awakening, body image, torture play, boys playing with dolls, breast cancer and its influence on a girl’s view of Barbie’s breast, race and lack of diversity in Barbie dolls, and the embrace and rejection to the doll, among others. Some of the work it offers includes critical essays that reflect on each author’s own experiences with the doll, research on Barbie in terms of race and gender roles, and even creative non-fiction such as poems about Barbie. Some of the key authors that I use in my analysis of the participants’ experiences are: Pamela Brandt, Yona Zeldis McDonough, Anna Quindlen, Ann duCille, Jane Smiley, Erica Jong, and Meg Wolitzer.

Rand’s (1995) critical work in *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* explores various topics of feminism in relation to Barbie, including class, race, and gender. She takes a look at the corporate marketing strategies used to create Barbie’s versatile, yet predominantly white image. Rand (1995) compares the values inherent in the Barbie life – for instance heteronormativity – as well as her unattainable body figure against the naked, dyked out, transgendered, and trashed versions created and favored by many young owners and collectors of the doll.

A vast amount of the criticism on Barbie focuses on the aspects of the doll’s appearance that have been or are potentially problematic, especially in their influence in girls’ self-esteem. As many have argued, the doll’s so-called perfect body poses as a negative influence to little girls who presumably grow up wanting to look just like the doll, creating or at least making girls more susceptible to body issues and low self-esteem. This is an issue that Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006) address in their study of 162 girls, age 5 to age 8. The participants were exposed to images of either Barbie dolls,
Emme dolls (U.S. size 16), or no dolls, and then completed assessments of body image. Girls exposed to Barbie reported lower body esteem and greater desire for a thinner body shape than girls in the other exposure conditions. However, this immediate negative impact of Barbie doll was no longer evident in the oldest girls. The authors suggest their findings imply that, even if dolls cease to function as aspirational role models for older girls, early exposure to dolls epitomizing an unrealistically thin body ideal may damage girls’ body image, which would contribute to an increased risk of disordered eating and weight cycling.

Other studies focus on the perceptions, rather than the actual effects, girls have about Barbie. These include a range of topics such as children as consumers and also Barbie’s image. For instance, Engin (2013) addresses how pre-teen girls interact with and within the world of Barbie. Her data was gathered through participant observation in girls’ games. She analyzes Barbie in children’s culture, aiming to answer questions like: How much do children follow cues from Mattel as they play with and think about Barbie? To what extent does Barbie’s popularity come from the doll itself rather than from Mattel’s successful marketing strategies? She suggests that Mattel’s strong marketing strategies have made Barbie one of the rare exceptions to the idea that “nothing lasts forever” (p. 36). She argues that while Barbie has been criticized for the negative ideologies she embodies and for perpetuating hegemony in multiple ways, she will continue to do so because “She is the perfect doll for the all consuming-global kid/citizen and moves with a snowball effect in penetrating the households with young children” (p. 36). Kuther and McDonald (2004) present two qualitative studies with young adolescents that gather their experiences and perspectives about the doll. The first
study, which involved focus groups with twenty 6th-grade girls, suggested they have ambiguous feelings about the doll and the feminine sexualized image Barbie represents. The second study gathered essay responses from fifty 7th- and 8th-grade boys and girls about their experiences with, and opinions on Barbie dolls. The participants reported both positive and negative feelings toward the doll and its influence on girls’ development. Finally, Collins et al. (2012) discuss the outcomes of “Reinventing Barbie,” a workshop they designed for middle-school girls to discuss, critique, and reflect on the construction of female bodies and feminine identities in popular culture by remaking Barbie dolls. The girls reconstructed Barbies based on their reflections, and then they came together to discuss their dolls as expressions of their visions for transforming the feminine.

Other scholars have focused on issues of race and ethnicity since there is a lack of realistic representations of non-white bodies among the Barbie line. Despite efforts to bring ethnic variety to the Barbie brand, the central figure in everything that is related to the doll is Barbie – the white, tall, blue-eyed blonde girl. In addition, the multiethnic dolls in the Barbie line still present problems of representation. DuCille (1994), for instance, offers a critical look at Barbie and issues of race, multiculturalism, and capitalism. Drawing on research and her own experiences, DuCille questions Barbie’s position in these issues and Barbie as a commodity. She argues that Mattel has made Barbie’s multiracialism a commodity, describing the colored Barbie doll (i.e. Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Mexican, and Native American Barbie, among others) as “carbon copies of an already grossly stereotypical and fantastically female original, … a sterling example of the universalizing myopia of mass production” (p.115). As will be apparent in my discussion of race, this was an aspect of Barbie that some of my participants noticed.
They pointed out how all the dolls looked the same, even if there was a variation in the color of their skin and the ethnicity they were representing. However, some participants negotiated white Barbie’s place as the central figure (and the mold for all other dolls) by changing the doll’s looks. Chin (1999) offers examples of how girls subvert Barbie’s whiteness by modifying her appearance to meet their needs. In this research, Chin (1999) also discusses why, even though Mattel created a line of exclusively black dolls, these still presented problems of representation.

Although these issues may be present in Barbie and other dolls, as has been addressed in the majority of studies, research has also shown that Barbie play (or doll play) can serve as a site of research that liberates females. Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000) focus on the accounts of former Barbie players as they discuss what it means for them now as adults to think of themselves as former Barbie doll players. The doll has been highly criticized and considered an antifeminist toy mostly because of its physical attributes, and it has been considered responsible for girls’ body image issues. Some of the women they discuss argue that Barbie is not to blame for these issues, but rather criticism should be placed upon the way girls are raised and the values they are taught at home. For two women, for example, playing with Barbie consisted of inventing lives and situations, making outfits, and being what they wanted to be through their dolls. For them, the focus was not on the doll’s body but rather on the choices the doll presented for them.
Barbie in the World

While the previous review discussed a sample of the vast literature on Barbie research available and some of the topics the research covers, I find that there is more that can be discussed. One important aspect of the Barbie research is that a significant majority of the work mainly focuses on the experiences in the global north. In this sense, the research is limited, since Barbie is a global phenomenon that has traversed borders and is present in many parts of the world. It is more recently that there has been a growth in studies that examine Barbie in a global context, either by placing the research in a location outside the U.S. or Canada, or by focusing on the multicultural line of Barbie dolls “Dolls of the World.”

Magee (2005) offers a new perspective on the study of Barbie dolls as she extends her research to the “Dolls of the World” line and focuses her analyses on Mattel’s Ghanian Barbie and other “Dolls of the World” in a post Cold War American world. She notes that while many scholars have commented on the ideologies that Barbie exemplifies and promotes, few have given attention to this specific line of the Barbie brand, and those who have, focused on how these dolls promote American-like consumption in other parts of the world. Magee (2005) asserts that the largest market for the Ghanian Barbie and other dolls is in the U.S., therefore, her work addresses this gap through an examination of their American consumption as well as commenting on the complex issues of ethnicity and nationhood that the dolls raise. Thus, her work is not outside the U.S., but covers a new aspect of Barbie that has not received much attention. Other works, however, have studied the Barbie phenomenon outside the U.S., in places
such as Pakistan, India, and Mexico. For instance, Sohail, Naz, and Malik (2014) address the problematic whiteness and the beauty standards Barbie poses especially in a different culture. Their study explores Barbie phenomena in a Pakistani Urban context with a postcolonial perspective to find out the ways through which Barbie impacts female Pakistani children. They worked with 30 young girls 8 to 11 years old and 30 parents presenting them with a survey as well as interviews and questionnaires. According to Sohail, et al. (2014) the doll is idealized and is liked by much of the population and concluded that there is a strong impact of a doll having blond features and representing Western culture along with serious threats of health issues on the young minds of female children as they idealize their doll and develop low self-esteem.

Hegde (2001) presents a critical look at Barbie as a commodity, which stemmed from her experience at an airport store in India, where she noticed a selection of Barbie dolls “shimmering in fantastic gold and tinsel exotica” (p. 129). She draws examples from the play experiences of her 14-year-old daughter and the complications of Indian Barbie presented in her play scenario. Hegde (2001) suggests that global circulation of products like ethnic Barbie creates a transnational space of contestation over questions of consumption, identity and cultural authenticity. Mattel’s version of global representation only serves to confine and demarcate cultural boundaries in girls’ local world of play and friendship. Barbie survives as an icon of whiteness and femininity wherever she travels. Macdougall (2003) also looks as Barbie as a commodity in the context of Mexico. She notes that despite efforts by Mattel to blanket diverse markets by adapting Barbie’s skin color and clothing, the changes that she has undergone in the hands of non-Western consumers remain striking. Research regarding the reception of transnational products in
the Yucatan region of Mexico reveals that Barbie has been reformulated by Mexican
consumers to represent local identity rather than emulating the meanings and values she
was attributed by Mattel.

**Accessing Barbie: Issues of Race and Class**

Race and social class play a chief role in delimiting who has access to Barbie or
who plays with her. Compared to other dolls such as the American Girl line, which sell
for over $60 each, Barbie is considerably less expensive and accessible. The dolls are
sold in stores such as Wal-Mart as opposed to exclusively in their own store, as happens
with American Girl. Still, much of the appeal of Barbie comes from the seemingly
endless panoply of accessories that serve to enhance the play with her. This is where
accessibility becomes more limited since many low-income families cannot afford to buy
numerous amounts of Barbie clothes, Barbie’s car, or especially her Dreamhouse.

As Hohmann (1985) notes in his play interaction with Jennifer, for a middle class
girl it is difficult to have a great number of pieces of clothing and other accessories such
as furniture. However in this case, through her imaginative play, Jenny was able to make
up for this lack in her own Barbie world. Jennifer was inventive in how she created
furniture for her dollhouse; for instance, she used pieces of cardboard to create the closet
and also the refrigerator while an ashtray served as a bathtub. But girls are not always
open to dressing-up their dolls with clothes made by their mothers or grandmothers, as
these indicate a low social status. Rand (1995) points out that in the child’s world,
custom-made originals usually had less value than the clothes Mattel produced. Clothes
not manufactured by Mattel signal a class status and often remind girls that they cannot afford “real” Barbie clothes. She elucidates this through the example of Georgia, whose mother used to make her Barbie clothes and who remembered how enraged she was that she could not have store-bought Barbie clothes: “I didn’t want to take Barbie in her homemade clothes around kids who had the store-bought stuff. I tried to compensate quality with quantity… but it didn’t really work” (Rand, 1995, p.97). The Mattel brand confers value, but not everyone can afford it, thus not everyone has access to playing with Barbie, and if they do, there may be limitations to how they play with her. Barbie, some have argued, is a representation of capitalism because the American ideology places value on money, successful careers, material objects, and physical beauty – all things that the Barbie doll and the Barbie brand embody (see Morgan, n.d.).

Of equal importance in accessibility to Barbie is the lack of ethnic variety that existed back when Barbie was created. As previously presented, one of the major critiques Barbie dolls have received from multiple sources is their representations, or lack thereof, of race. Despite efforts to bring ethnic variety to the Barbie brand through the creation of Hispanic, Native American, and Black dolls, among others, the central figure in everything that is related to the doll is Barbie – the white, tall, blue-eyed blonde girl. Barbie has more friends who come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, but they usually play a secondary role, and this has great effect in girls who could potentially play with them. In another informal conversation about Barbie play an African-American woman told me her mother did not want her to play with Barbie or other dolls (except for one specific doll) because they were white.
Sometimes mothers are the ones who keep their daughters from playing Barbie, but there are situations in which girls decide not to play with Barbie because of race issues or a specific doll appeals to them because of her color. Rand (1995) for instance discusses the problem Rebecca faced: she was half Native American and half white and when she used to play Barbie with her friends (most of whom were Latino and black) none of them wanted to be “that blonde Barbie” and she did not want to be the blonde Barbie either. However, Rand (1995) notes, that Rebecca liked her Barbie better than her Cher doll, which was Native American just like her. Rand (1995) also presents the case of Lisa Jones, a black journalist, who remembered that, before black Barbie or Barbie’s black friends came out, she wanted Barbie enough to buy two blonde ones, cut their hair, dress them in African fabric, and set them off to live with black G.I. Joe. However, after an incident at school, where all the girls looked like Barbie and none of them looked like her, she severed her ties with her dolls. As mentioned before, despite the creation of multicultural Barbie dolls (who carry different names), the central and more prominent figure is the white blonde doll. If a child who wants to play with a doll with which she/he can identify has difficulty finding one, it might drive the child to reject the doll and end up not playing with it. Therefore, ethnic diversity plays an important role in providing accessibility to the doll and in turn, offering a site where girls learn there are more options outside the domestic sphere. In this sense, girls from lower classes may have fewer opportunities to explore through doll play the professional world and independence, an issue that concerns feminism as it seeks equality. Parents’ involvement in girls’ doll play and doll selection, as well as how girls perceive and negotiate Barbie’s race will be presented in chapter 4 and further discussed in chapter 5.
Mapping Girls’ Lives and Cultures in Puerto Rico

**Girlhood in Puerto Rico: An Emerging Conversation**

In the prologue for the 2004 book *Nuestros Niños Cuentan* (Our Children Count), supported by the Puerto Rican chapter of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the authors discuss that “children do not always receive the attention they deserve in the research and public policies” (Pérez & Rivera-Hernández, 2004, p. ii). Their report contains a collection of data on infants, children, and teenagers in Puerto Rico, mainly focusing on issues like number of births within a time range, poverty rate, children whose parents work, and death rate, among others. More relevant to the examination of girlhood in the Island, the report presents data about the number of female youth in the population between July 1990 and July 2000 and number of births among female adolescents between the same years.

Girlhood is often viewed as an era of innocence and bliss, where girls are free to play and enjoy activities without the worries and concerns that often burden (and are attributed to) adults. Yet, it is important to remember that girlhood, in every sense of the multiple definitions given to the word, is profusely layered with complexities and difficulties ranging from changes in the body to confronting racism. The majority of the data on girlhood (mainly childhood) in Puerto Rico speaks to the most difficult aspects of childhood – those who live below poverty levels and have little to no access to health services and education, and the lack of healthy and informative sexual education.

According to the 2000 Census, 58 percent of children (this includes male and female) under the age of 18 live in poverty (Pérez & Rivera-Hernández, 2004, p. i). Pérez
and Rivera-Hernández add that, “a recent analysis demonstrated that 59,000 children between the ages of four and 17 suffer some type of mental health condition” (2004, p. i). Similar data are reflected in Kids Count 2015 Data Book: State Trends in Child Well-Being. Their research found that 463,000 children in Puerto Rico lived in poverty, amounting to 57 percent of the children population (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count 2015, p. 42). The numbers are disconcerting and provide an indication of the unforgiving circumstances in which a great part of the population experiences childhood. Taking into consideration that a major part of the population lives in poverty one needs to reflect on the implications of this issue in other important aspects of childhood and development. Living in poverty likely means limited access to education and basic needs such as healthcare, food, water, and appropriate living conditions. These are perilous conditions to experience the already difficult phase that is childhood development.

These issues are complicated when concerns about matters related to girls are involved. Pérez and Rivera-Hernández’s report informs that unplanned pregnancies among single female adolescents are a source of concern in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, they note that the probabilities that adolescent mothers and their children will spend most or part of their lives in poverty are high. They are also concerned with the number of births among girls under the age of 15, which increased from 350 in 1990 to 444 in 1994, although they had decreased by the year 2000 (Pérez & Rivera-Hernández, 2004, p. 40). As these data suggest, girlhood often involves a number of situations that add to the complexities and difficulties of navigating this phase of life. While my participants did not discuss these topics, it was important to provide the information in order to offer a more complete picture of what some childhoods, and therefore some girlhoods, may look
Besides this data and the statistics about childhood in general and the research about children and education, girlhood in Puerto Rico has remained unexplored. The research that exists focuses primarily on studying Puerto Rican girlhood in the U.S. rather than in the Island (see for example Lobenstine et al., 2001). As could be surmised, the experiences in each place – while possibly similar in some aspects – are often different, beginning with the most basic reason: that in the Island Puerto Ricans are the majority population when in the U.S. mainland Puerto Ricans are considered minorities. Some of the experiences of growing up in a Puerto Rican household, however, can be very similar between the population in the Island and the U.S. Lobenstine et al. (2001) present a study in which mothers and daughters collaborated in order to examine their experiences of possible selves. Whilst the project’s aim was not to study Puerto Rican girlhood specifically, a majority of participants were born in Puerto Rico or were of Puerto Rican descent. One participant offers an account that, though not illustrative of every Puerto Rican girl’s experience, describes part of the experience of being a girl in a chiefly patriarchal society:

I was born in Puerto Rico, moved to the U.S. at the age of five. I grew up with a very traditional, strict macho father. Talking about sex, drugs and alcohol was very simple, “never do it.” Things were hidden well in the home front […] So I grew up very ignorant in these topics. My dad was a machista, he would say, “Women should stay home take care of the children, clean the house and have food ready for him.” I knew I didn’t want this in a marriage or in my life. Even though my dad was strict and harsh, he was very loving and caring. My dad was my inspiration; I learned a lot from him. (Lobenstine et al., 2001, p. 7)
The constant back and forth movement between the Island and the mainland is a central part of Puerto Rican identity (Duany, 2002). Hence, transnationality often defines what it means to be Puerto Rican.

While I have reviewed data that discuss childhood in Puerto Rico, and in some cases, issues that are specific to girls, it is difficult to map the experiences of being girl in the Island when the scholarly work on the topic has been so limited. Yet, girlhood experiences have been documented in literature through memoirs produced by a number of female writers. They are an important source to begin mapping the experiences of Puerto Rican girls and I consider them critical to the study of girlhood. Therefore, I discuss in the following section the experiences of girlhood presented in memoirs and personal accounts produced by Puerto Rican female writers Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer. These accounts focus on other issues often encountered in their 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.

It is important to keep in mind the reliability of memory. As I expand in chapter 3, memoirs or any work stemming from memory should not be taken at face value. Once an experience is in the past, our minds rework it and revise it, thus what we remember may not be exactly what happened in reality. Judith Ortiz Cofer, one of the writers that follow, speaks about this very subject in the preface for her memoir. Recalling what Virginia Woolf had stated about writing from memories she explains, “in writing about one’s life, one often has to rely on that combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in ‘poetic truth’” (Ortiz Cofer, 1990, p.11). The purpose of working with
memory is not to obtain the “truth.” Instead, the value is placed on the significance those memories have on the person, whether a child or an adult. The memoirs these women writers have constructed represent the way they, as adults, remember experiencing childhood in the same ways that my adult participants have constructed their own memories of childhood experiences. Whether the memories are completely accurate or not, or whether participants can remember every detail or not, is not being evaluated in this study. Rather, it is important to consider the how women choose to narrate their own experiences and how they choose to represent themselves through the narratives they choose to share.

Adding to the already difficult experiences and biological changes in a girl’s life, Santiago (1993, 1999) and Ortiz Cofer (1990) – as well as 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 Macúin, a barrio in Puerto Rico, and moving to Santurce, PR. The latter was closer to the Island’s capital and was developing as a metropolis, which was a stark contrast from Macúin. Moving to this new environment made Santiago (1993) an object of jokes among her more “sophisticated” peers who considered her a jíbara for the dialect she used, for never having heard of Santa Claus, for not “knowing how to use the pencil sharpener screwed to the wall of the classroom” (p. 39). The term jíbaro usually refers to the people of the interior mountainous regions of Puerto Rico. Occasionally the term also has a negative connotation, as it can refer to someone who is considered ignorant or uncultured due to a lack of education. It is in this way that Esmeralda Santiago experienced being called a jíbara.
Her second memoir, *Almost a Woman*, begins with her experiences being 13 years old and 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 Santurce, but to much greater degrees. 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, prevented from crossing over by her family’s conservative traditions.

In *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, speaking from the point of view of her child self, Ortiz Cofer (1990) negotiates two different cultures: her homeland, Puerto Rico, and her host city, New Jersey and the experiences of migrating from one place to the other constantly. Her experiences resemble those of many Puerto Ricans who spent their childhoods migrating between the Island and *Los Nueva Yores*, Puerto Rican’s way of referring to the U.S.⁷ Some of my participants experienced this movement during their childhoods; they spent 1-3 years in the U.S., though most of their childhood occurred in Puerto Rico. Among many things, Cofer Ortiz (1990) had to negotiate her identity in both places; she was too *gringa* when she spoke Spanish and too Latina when she spoke English. 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 to 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 various important women in her life – her mother, her Mamá (grandmother), 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 and in a very patriarchal society 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) discovers, through the stories about other women, what it means to be a (good) girl and later a (good) woman. She learns quickly that white Americans’ only exposure to Puerto Rican culture is *West Side Story*, where a girl has the option of being bad, like Anita, or good, like Maria. The same binaries appear in her own culture, where her mother urges her to live carefully so she is not too loose but 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, p. 15).

No matter the context the experiences of girlhood are multiple, complex, and fluctuating for each individual that is traversing through them. What I offered in this section was an overview of Puerto Rican girlhood experiences recorded in the memoirs of a select group of female writers. Their lived experiences, while similar in some ways among themselves and to a number of Puerto Rican women and girls, do not represent Puerto Rican girlhood in its totality. My research study certainly cannot address all the gaps or answer every question about girlhood in Puerto Rico. Yet, it does provide new insights into the various experiences of girlhood in the Island, especially by offering a
multigenerational project. By including multiple generations of women and girls, it can examine and compare the differences and similarities in the lives of girls growing up in Puerto Rico.

**Racial Identity in Puerto Rico**

There is a famous phrase that is commonly used in Puerto Rico to remind people where they come from racially: ¿Y tu abuela a’onde está? By asking, “And where is your grandmother?” there is an invitation for the recipient of the phrase to reflect about Puerto Rican racial heritage and to examine the person’s ancestry, where at varying degrees there is African blood. Having been taught in school that the Puerto Rican race was born through the combination of three races – Spanish, African, Taíno (our indigenous peoples) – many Puerto Ricans choose to self-identify as white (2010 Census).

Discussing her experience being the first black Puerto Rican to win the Miss Universe Puerto Rico beauty pageant, Alba G. Reyes delineates how various terms are used to almost erase blackness. She explains, “it is very common to use terms like *mulato, trigueños, moreno* for people who, due to a lighter skin tone, are not considered black, but they are also not white” (Reyes, 2015, par. 3). Kinsbruner (1996) notes that in Puerto Rico there was a historic disassociation from African and Afro-American roots since the Spanish colonization until the Island’s occupation by the U.S. in 1898. Loveman and Muñiz (2007) provide insight into the “whitening” of Puerto Rican’s racial identification, explaining that:

In a census taken by the U.S. Department of War in 1899, a year after the island came under U.S. dominion, 61.8 percent of Puerto Ricans were classified as
white. By 1950, census enumerators classified 79.7 percent of the Puerto Rican population as white—just shy of the 80.5 percent of Puerto Ricans on the island who self-identified as white in the 2000 US Census. (pp. 915-16)

To further extend the problem of “whiteness” in Puerto Rico, Negrón-Muntaner (2004) and Ferrer (2016) point out how the population’s history of *mestizaje* or mixture has led to discourses of racism. *Mestizaje*, which is the blending of the three races – blanca, india, y negra, is what “causes Puerto Ricans to believe that we all are racially mixed the exact same way therefore there can be no ‘true’ difference” (Ferrer, 2016, par. 3). The white blood that heads the list of *mestizaje* is given a greater value and “allows for a larger number of ‘mixed-race’ people to qualify as blancos” (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004, p. 212). At the same time, Negrón-Muntaner (2004) explains, Puerto Ricans of African descent are socially encouraged to seek upward mobility by tuning out their black blood furthermore in each next generation. They are encouraged to “mejorar la raza” or improve the race by further mixing their black attributes – skin tone, thick lips, nose, wideness, and hair texture – with whiter ones.

Currently, there is a growing movement within the Puerto Rican population of the Island to highlight and proudly self-identify as Afro-Boricua (Boricua being the term Puerto Ricans use to refer to themselves and Afro meaning they have African ancestry).

In many instances Puerto Ricans use skin color and other physical characteristics to identify themselves in terms of race (Peña-Pérez, 2016). At the same time other aspects considered for racial identification are color, class, facial features and texture of hair (often referred to as *pelo malo*—bad hair), thus resulting in a variety of racial classifications that are not recognized in the North American society. While Afro-Boricuas have appropriated these characteristics to empower and demonstrate pride of
their African roots, historically the majority population has used them with negative connotations. Moreover, in the discourse about blackness, the word “black” is often followed by a modifier that seems to serve the purpose of “making it better.” Reyes (2015) illustrates this through an example from another contestant in the beauty pageant who was told by a member of the judge panel, “You are a beautiful Black [woman].” The author comments that this remark expresses something beyond just telling the participant she is beautiful; it is “as if that was something exceptional, out of the norm, that is it suggests in a subtle way that she is beautiful, for a Black woman” (Reyes, 2015, par. 8)

Barbie’s White (and blonde) image constantly entering girls’ play spaces, especially girls of color who do not look like her, creates a space of contention and tensions where girls may not identify with the doll. At the same time, as will be presented in the findings, there is a tendency for some participants to view themselves as white and identifying mostly with white Barbie. Because the characteristics of race in Puerto Rico are not limited to solely skin color, it is critical to take into consideration both the doll’s and the girls’ physical characteristics that go deeper than skin, if they pay or paid attention to overt differences, and how they negotiated them. Descriptors such as, hair color and texture, and facial features, and the color of the skin will be used in my discussion of the participants’ encounters with race within Barbie.

**Barbie in Puerto Rico**

During my research I gathered document data by examining newspapers from Puerto Rico published between 1959 and 1963 in order to understand the context of when
Barbie arrived in the Island. Reviewing issues of the daily newspaper at the time, *El Mundo*, I focused on finding articles or advertisements that presented Barbie, who was a new doll during those years. There was very little mention of the doll, and she was not present even in Christmas advertisements that fervently urged parents to buy toys (including dolls) for their children. Even in the advertisement included in the same issue where the first mention of Barbie appeared in an article, Barbie was not offered as a toy option for Christmas gifts (Figure 2.1).

In the December 1, 1962 issue of the newspaper, the same date the Sears ad appeared, an article discussed an exhibition in Paris that featured 3,000 dolls (see Figure 2.2). Barbie was among the dolls, which came from around the world including Japan, Ireland, Ghana, Madagascar, and the U.S.A. The picture included in the article shows three Barbie dolls with a caption that reads: “‘Barbie’ is a doll born in the United States which incarnates the silhouette and style of the young north American girl of our times” (see Figure 2.3). The way the caption was written, as if to inform readers of this new and unknown doll, suggests that at the time Barbie had not gained notoriety in Puerto Rico.

The memories of two of my participants, whom I had interviewed prior to my examination of *El Mundo*, confirm my supposition about two facts related to Barbie’s arrival to the Island. The first supposition was that it occurred later than it did in the U.S. While in the present products from the U.S., such as toys and movies, arrive to Puerto Rico around the same time, during the 1950s – 60s the process was longer and thus, products arrived at the Island even some years later. The second supposition was that she did not become a favorite toy immediately. Perhaps due to economic restraints, a limited quantity of products, or because it was a different type of doll that invited girls to play
differently than they were used to, I found through my review of the newspapers and through the stories of my participants that Barbie did not gain overnight fame in Puerto Rico. When trying to remember exactly the year they received their Barbies, the two participants pointed out that they probably became available in 1961 or 1962, and that Barbie “wasn’t very known in Puerto Rico either” (Carmen and Lourdes, Group 1 Transcript). Progressively, though, Barbie has become and continues to be a highly sought-after product among Puerto Rican (as well as world-wide) girls. Data from the Pan-Latin American Kids Study 1997 demonstrates that “24 percent of all Latin American girls said that they own a Barbie doll” (Soong, 1998, par. 4). The researchers note that while Barbie’s penetration into Latin America differs by country, at the time of the study, the highest penetration occurred in Puerto Rico, with 72 percent of girls owning Barbie dolls (Soong, 1998).

Figure 2-1: Sears Christmas ad for El Mundo newspaper.
Figure 2-2: First appearance of Barbie in *El Mundo*.

Figure 2-3: Picture of Barbie dolls from first appearance of Barbie in *El Mundo*.
In terms of girls’ and Puerto Ricans’ reception of Barbie, Aguilar (1997), Navarro (1997), Negrón-Muntaner (2002), and Rivera-Brooks (1997) wrote about the marked divided opinion toward the Puerto Rican Barbie doll, which came out at the time. As they explained, while Puerto Rican Barbie was received enthusiastically in Puerto Rico, it caused a heated debate among Puerto Ricans on the United States mainland. Many of the latter found her objectionable on several counts, from her light skin to her colonial-style tiered dress.

Notably, in the debates and conversations about the Puerto Rican Barbie the voices of girls, those who played with the doll at the time, were missing. In one Facebook conversation with a participant, she found an article about this debate and stated, “but when we were playing we never noticed this.” This was echoed by other women, even those who as adults are critical of Barbie and who identify as feminists. This discussion is further explored in Chapter 6. Because this research examines the role of an object of play that is made for girls, but which is so contested by women, I believe it is important to always maintain girls’ voices at the forefront of my study and to consider women’s accounts twofold: their experiences as girls and their views as adults.

**Chapter Summary**

The review of the literature cited in this chapter unifies the different perspectives through which I examined Puerto Rican women and girls’ interactions with Barbie. In this chapter, I presented a sample of the research about Barbie that has already been done, including the very limited work on Barbie in Puerto Rico. By doing so, I have situated
my research within the scholarship about Barbie and illustrated the contributions this project will make. This chapter also considered the importance of foregrounding girls’ experiences by including them in the research about their cultures. In the specific case of my research, their experiences with dolls and the ways dolls foster the construction of identity are at the center of inquiry.

I continued my discussion of the literature by acknowledging the lack of research about girls in the context of Puerto Rico, which is the focus of this study. By drawing from the limited scholarship available and from memoirs written by Puerto Rican women authors, I aimed to begin mapping Puerto Rican girlhoods. The void I have identified through my review places my research as an important contribution to a more concrete study of girlhood in the Island. By discussing the study of children’s play practices, identity formation through doll play, and the discourses on race in Puerto Rico this chapter presented the conceptual framework that guided this study.

Notes:


2. For instance, the Summer 2012 issue of the *Girlhood Studies* journal was entirely devoted to the study of dolls and their roles in girls’ lives. For the most part, dolls have been examined from the perspectives of play studies, girlhood/childhood studies, childhood psychology, and material culture, to name a few. Yet, dolls have progressively become a site of examination, giving way
for the establishment of Dolls Studies as an interdisciplinary field of research of its own (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). While they are closely linked to girlhood and girls’ culture, the growing scholarship focused on intersecting dolls with other areas of study has solidified their importance as sites of interrogation. This became one of the main reasons for the compilation of essays that formed Dolls studies: The Many Meanings of Girls’ Toys and Play, which was a continuation of the work already established in the “Dolls” issue of Girlhood Studies.

3 The Barbie collector cards, Barbie and Barbie Fashion comic books, Barbie, The Magazine for Girls, and the Barbie game “We Girls Can Do Anything.”

4 The authors describe each text and the type of information each one contains. For instance, the collector cards are designed as baseball cards and they contain information about important women in history (all portrayed by Barbie). In the comic books fashion is a concurrent topic, however, Barbie also discusses important personal and social issues such as eating disorders. In the game, girls are offered a variety (though not infinite) of professions Barbie can be, including: an actress, a ballerina, a pilot, a doctor, a musician, or a fashion designer.

5 I have translated this and subsequent quotes from Nuestros Niños Cuentan from Spanish to English.

6 Possible selves is “what we might become, hope to become, and fear becoming” (Markus & Niriuss, 1986 cited in Lobenstine et al., 2001, p. 2).

7 I know this from my own experiences hearing people around me refer to the U.S as such. Ortiz Cofer also uses this term and explains it usage in her own memoir (p. 14).

8 In most cases, history is sanitized to appear as if the mixture of these races occurred willingly and peacefully.

9 I have translated this and subsequent quotes from Reyes’s “Ser negra en Puerto Rico” from Spanish to English.

10 White (from Spain), indigenous (from the Taínos), and black (from Africa). In school we learn that these are the races that make up our Puerto Rican “race,” and we generally learn them and list them in that same order.

11 The term Boricua stems from the Island’s original Taíno name- Borikén.
Chapter 3

Remembering Barbie: A Discussion of the Research Methodology

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences Puerto Rican women and girls had and continue to have with Barbie dolls and the social and cultural implications these interactions may have had in their construction of self. By studying adults, this study seeks to investigate the memories adult women have of their interactions with Barbie dolls. In addition, it wants to continue exploring Barbie’s role in Puerto Rican girlhoods by seeking the perspective of girls who engaged with Barbie dolls in various ways.

In order to further explore these experiences, the project addressed four research questions: (1) What was the impact of Barbie in the girlhoods of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls from different generations? (2) How did Barbie become part of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls’ identity? (3) How do women and girls view their interactions with Barbie in relation to their lived experiences? (4) What issues of gender, race, and class were raised through play with and/or discussion of play with Barbie?

This chapter will discuss various qualitative feminist methods that were employed to answer these questions about Puerto Rican women and girls’ interactions with Barbie. It will present a breadth of scholarship that considers different methodological approaches to working with adults to examine their memories and constructions of self.
The chapter begins with a rationale for selecting qualitative methodologies and a
description of my role as a qualitative researcher. It continues with a discussion of the
approaches to studying girlhood employed in this study, which include working with
adults’ memories and exploring current girls’ experiences. This is followed by a
discussion of memory-work with adult women, which was the primary approach for
studying past experiences with Barbie in this project. The chapter concludes with a
description of my methods for recruiting participants, as well as an overview of my
research design, data collection methods, and approaches to data analysis.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research Designs**

The aim of my study was to identify ways in which interactions with Barbie
contributed to girls’ and women’s girlhoods, and what these experiences implicate in
their lives. More specifically, it explored questions of race, gender, class, and body
image, among others. To achieve this, I drew from methods of qualitative inquiry, which
allowed for a deeper understanding of the various experiences women and girls had with
the doll. In order to explore these questions, this study employed qualitative
methodologies that align to the fields of Women’s Studies and Girlhood Studies.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) assert that qualitative research involves multi-methods
of focus and can provide a basis for interpretation within the field “guided by a set of
beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (p.
13). While traditional scientific methods advocate for more empirical and objective
approaches, qualitative methods provide ways of examining phenomena, context,
interactions, and other social situations that contribute to the findings and would not be
possible within a more traditional framework. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) support
the thoroughness of qualitative approaches explaining that, “Qualitative research may be
more descriptive or more explanatory, but it always aims to demonstrate the complexity,
texture, and nuance involved in how individuals and groups experience themselves and
their worlds” (p. 17). Working within these postulations, I was able to approach my
research topic asking “what” and “how” questions that would allow me to explore the
nuances in my participants’ experiences with Barbie. Sprague (2005) explains that while
the same strategies employed in qualitative research (e.g. in-depth interviewing, field
observation, analysis of historical documents, among others) could be used in
quantitative research as well, what makes their use qualitative is how they are employed.
She notes, “Qualitative approaches emphasize interpretation and nuance; researchers
address interviews, texts, and observation with intensive focus, seeking a detailed
analysis of process and/or meanings” (Sprague, 2005, p. 119). It is how the researcher
looks at the data what makes it qualitative.

The dynamic approach of qualitative research (Lichtman, 2009) is also an
important aspect because it provides researchers with opportunities to modify methods
and procedures as the project unfolds and the research context begins to be understood in
new ways. The ability to modify methods and procedure in qualitative research appealed
to me because it provided flexibility in the design and development of my own
approaches. During the interview phase of this project I was able to modify my plans,
questions, and methods of data collection in accordance to my participants’ needs. For
instance, when it was not possible for participants to meet with me in person they agreed
to share their stories in writing via email. In instances where participants had experienced Barbie together in their childhoods, either because they were related or because they had played together, they agreed to have group interviews rather than individual ones. The shared experiences and collective memories offered more depth into their experiences. These and other changes in location and interview formats did not negatively affect the research process thanks to the flexibility afforded in a qualitative research design.

Studies that employ qualitative approaches interpolate textual, testimonial, and visual data to answer questions related to human experience. Such data include participant observation field notes, informal interviews, conversations and cultural artifacts. Wilkinson (1998) advocates the need for more socially situated methods, and argues that group interviews, or focus groups, are of particular value in conducting and developing feminist research. Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, and O’Connor (1993) suggest that in many ways, focus groups and in-depth interviews can be equally effective in answering certain research questions. Yet, Wilkinson notes that a key difference between interviews and focus groups lies in the social elements of focus groups and how meaning can be created in a social context: “while interviewers have historically been able to assert that their data are decontextualized and have an existence independent of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, focus group researchers have typically been forced to recognize the fundamentally social nature of talk” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 121). Employing both methods in my research provided both breadth and depth in contextualizing my participants’ and my own experiences. Feminist researchers have been employing a combination of both in order to illustrate the nature of conversations and how identities develop through a shared experience.
While interviews can provide in-depth information about individuals they also present challenges for the research. Feminist researchers have expressed many concerns about the ethical issues involved in one-to-one interviewing, particularly in relation to the unequal nature of the interaction in which the researcher controls the process, manages the conversation, potentially reveals minimal personal information, and may impose her own framework of meaning upon participants (Wilkinson, 1998). In this sense, in feminist research, group interviews are recommended since they avoid focusing on the individual, and the dynamic between participants and researcher are less hierarchical (Crabtree et al., 1993). In fact, throughout the process of listening to and transcribing group interviews I noticed four types of dynamics emerge: (1) Participants becoming the researchers by asking initial and follow-up questions, (2) participants remembering one another’s memories vividly, (3) participants helping each other reconstruct memories, (4) and memories being elicited by someone else’s comments or experiences.

The relative power possessed by research participants at the data collection stage of groups, compared to individual interviews, is not simply an ethical issue. It can also improve the quality of the data: “Many researchers have also commented on the extent to which interaction between participants leads to the production of high quality data. Participants ask questions of, disagree with, and challenge each other” (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 117). The interactions among participants in a focus group is a critical part of the examination of how they discuss the issues as they offer insight to how they respond to certain topics, what questions they ask, what experiences they add to each others’ conversations, and what topics may potentially present difficulties. Even so, there may be topics that could be easier to discuss and information that may be easier to access when
the participant is not in the spotlight and may feel more comfortable when they know others have had similar experiences. Morgan and Krueger (1993) suggest using groups to learn more about “the range of opinions or experiences that people have […] when you need a research method that is respectful and not condescending to your target audience” (pp. 17-18). The exchanges among participants in a group interview can help clarify themselves, without the need of the researcher’s own interpretation of it at the moment, thus gaining insights to both the range of opinions participants have and the circumstances that will lead to one response over another. Moreover, by creating an atmosphere that supports meaningful interaction, “groups convey a humane sensitivity, a willingness to listen without being defensive, and a respect for opposing views that is unique in these emotionally charged environments” (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p. 18).

As presented at the beginning of this project the topic of Barbie is one that produces a range of opinions, often charged with emotions, which could become conflicting if they happen in environments where differing views are not welcome. In my development of group interviews I deferred from statements such as “I agree” or “I disagree” in order to offer a space where different opinions could be expressed. As a researcher, I kept in mind Barbie’s role and significance in my own life, making sure it did not bias my work in how I: (1) described my own experiences; (2) interpreted my participants’ experiences; (3) depicted and analyzed the doll itself; and (4) carried out the interviews and focus groups. From the researcher’s standpoint, a successful focus group can help forge a human connection between those who direct a study and those who serve as participants (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).
The Qualitative Researcher

Researcher/Participant Dynamics

My approach to the researcher/participant relationship in this study was to foster an interactive dynamic. The primary aim for my role as researcher was to break the oft-constructed dichotomy of researcher-subject, where there is a clear hierarchy of power. Aligned with feminist methodologies (Crabtree et al., 1993, Wilkinson, 1998) and girl-methods (Hains, 2012; McRobbie, 1991; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008), I wanted to establish dynamics of collaboration between researcher and participant, with the goal of providing a voice to the participants. The result was a great number of engaging interactions where participants felt comfortable asking questions and guiding the direction of the conversations.

My role at times also became that of a participant, as I simultaneously remained the researcher, allowing me not to be perceived by my participants as an authority figure or an outsider who was examining them. I was a participant in three of the group interviews I carried out: one with my family, one with childhood friends, and one with colleagues. In the first one the goal was to compare the varying experiences of Barbie play among the women in my own family. Thus, I included myself in the group interview as we shared our experiences with one another. The second group interview was comprised of two of my childhood friends and myself. In this instance I became a participant because our stories of Barbie play often occurred with each other, so while we shared experiences of individual and private Barbie play, we also talked about those
episodes in which we played together. In the third, I shared experiences that were similar to those being shared by others in the group.

I also became part of the conversations at times to create a bond with my participants. While the participants did most of the talking, my interjections about my own play experiences with Barbie helped build rapport and trust between us. This offered a space of trust to my participants and also trust among themselves, affording us an open discussion about our memories and identities in relation to Barbie. In the interviews with girls I found that having played with Barbie as a child and also having the mothers present sharing their stories helped girls feel comfortable talking about their experiences with Barbie. Furthermore, while I asked the questions listed in my interview schedule, I allowed girls to guide the conversation and tell the stories they wanted to share with me at the time. This provided a space of freedom for them where they did not feel intimidated by someone continuously asking them questions.

As a researcher I am aware of specific privileges that granted me access into Puerto Rican women’s experiences with Barbie and furthermore, allowed my own participation in the conversations. These were my gender, ethnicity, and language. Identities are intersectional – meaning that we have fraught, coinciding, and even contradictory identities that situate each of us in our daily lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). On their own each characteristic may have granted me entrance to certain aspects of my participants’ experiences, but their intersections were crucial in gaining access and acceptance, or “insider status,” from all the participants that were part of the project.

Ostensibly the most notable characteristic that helped establish trust and granted access to participants was my gender. I self-identify, and am conceivably identified by
others, as female. Being a study that focuses solely on female experiences with an object that is mostly identified as feminine, my gender most likely helped participants feel comfortable sharing experiences about their own feminized spaces—play with Barbie. Chapter 2 presented a review of seminal works about girlhood, dolls studies, and Barbie research, all of which were conducted by women. The exception was Delf Maria Hohmann (1985) a man who, as will be discussed later, gained access to a girl’s Barbie play because he was her babysitter. I presume that, while not impossible, being granted entrance into women and girls’ experiences with Barbie may have been more difficult for a male researcher.

Ethnically I identify as Latina/Hispanic, and more specifically I am Puerto Rican. These identities are very important more so because my study explores girlhoods that are specific to Puerto Rico. Further than being Puerto Rican (which could mean that I am of Puerto Rican descent), I was born and raised in the Island, as many of my participants were. Upon reflecting on my positioning within the study, I find this aspect of my identity to be crucial in gaining trust. As an icon of American popular (girlhood) culture, Barbie is already an outsider embraced by numerous girls in Puerto Rico, as will be examined in Part 2 of this dissertation, but she also represents whiteness. For a study to explore Puerto Rican women and girls’ experiences with Barbie in which they discuss race among other topics, my locus as an “insider” was vital. I did not represent the threat of being an “outsider” (i.e. a White American) looking into this group. Moreover, by being Puerto Rican, I shared many experiences with my participants.

While many of my participants were bilingual (Spanish and English), all interviews, with the exception of one, were conducted in Spanish. The ease of
communicating in what is the majority’s first language allowed my position to be of a peer to my participants, for they felt comfortable talking to me. Reflecting upon my own use of both languages in my daily life, I acknowledge how important and how much easier it is for me to communicate in Spanish when I speak about feelings and emotions, and especially when I speak about events and situations that are specific to Puerto Rico. Considerably, the same can be said about my participants, who were speaking about personal experiences and, at times, situations specific to Puerto Rico.

**Ethical Considerations**

As a researcher I also needed to consider my approach to examining the data and the bias and subjectivity I would potentially bring into the study. While in research oftentimes total objectivity is highly encouraged, Glesne (2011) explains that complete objectivity is “neither possible nor desirable” in qualitative research (p. 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 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.

**Studying Girlhood(s): Past and Present**

**Working with Girls: Possibilities and Challenges**

Giving girls a voice is an important aspect of girlhood studies, as noted by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2008) in their article titled “How to study girl culture.” This can be achieved by employing “girl-method,” which is “the range of methodologies and techniques for gathering and analyzing evidence in girl-centered research” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008, p. 17). There have been studies that involve girls who play(ed) with Barbies or other dolls, which have provided a voice to the little girls who interacted with them at the time when the research was being conducted. A sample of the scholarship on doll play available was mainly done through observations. While there are various research studies that involve children’s play, I herein briefly discuss three that serve to elucidate the gains and challenges of working with children in the context of doll play.

Hains (2012) conducted research with about 30 girls whose ages ranged from 8 to 10 years old to examine their play with Bratz dolls. Her methodology consisted of dividing the girls into three groups, each meeting at a different location. She operated each group as a video club (modeled after book clubs) where they watched videos together and discussed them. She videotaped each session; sometimes the camera was located in a place where it wouldn’t obtrude, but in the particular case she narrates, one of
the girls was holding the camera and served as the “interviewer” to the others. During this play session she was able to witness girls addressing race during their play narrative. Through her research, she provided agency to girls by allowing them to take control of the lens through which they were being examined. The girls also showed agency by playing with the dolls in the way they decided to, without focusing on what the producers of the toy designed as the focus of the dolls.

This level of agency within girls’ interactions with dolls is the foci of Chin’s (1999) ethnographic work with ten-year-old, poor and working-class black children in New Haven, Connecticut. In her work she contrasted a case study of Mattel’s Shani dolls – which were the answer Mattel offered for the lack of diversity within the Barbie line – and an ethnographic look at race and commodities among the children in New Haven. 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. Chin (1999) notes: “The children had very few ethnically correct dolls. Instead, girls had white dolls that they brought into their worlds through styling their hair in ways racially marked as black” (p. 305). The girls in both studies subverted the ways in which they were supposed to play with the dolls and modified them to fit their narratives and experiences.

In terms of actual 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, p. 116). It also gave Jennifer the opportunity to “express a variety of problems which occur within her family” (p. 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, they are provided with a voice, offer a window to their lived experiences that is critical to understanding children’s, and more specifically, girlhood culture. It is important to note that Hains (2012) was able to witness girls’ plays and narratives, mostly because, by acting as a peer to the girls, she was able to gain their trust, and as a result the girls felt comfortable addressing these issues in their play. Similarly, 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 this becoming a 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 (Chin, 1999, p. 313).

In this project I wanted to understand women’s and girls’ experiences with Barbie in order to understand their interactions 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, the aim of this project was to have conversations with them about their opinions and experiences with Barbie. In doing so, girls were able to have 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 (2004) 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” (p. 165).

Following the same ideas for the interviews with adults, with girls we talked about what they liked about Barbie, what they disliked, and their overall views on the doll and other Barbie artifacts. This led to other critical discussions of Barbie through the perspective of girls.

I aligned my approaches to working with girls with the main four principles of “girl-method” delineated by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2008):

1. Working with girls (participatory), for girls (advocacy), and about girls
2. Taking into account who the researchers are (and what their relationship to girlhood is)
3. Including the girls themselves as participants (so that they are agents and not subjects)
4. Addressing the cultural contexts of the girls in terms of race and class: whose girlhood? (p.17)

As a girl-centered researcher, I addressed the first item by working with girls to discuss Barbie play through conversations about their interactions with dolls. Within the affordances of interviews and working with children I aimed to allow them to voice their own concerns, issues, and opinions about Barbie dolls, which provided a perspective from girls in complement with the perspectives from adults. Having girls as participants also aligned with item number three of this list, which stipulates that girls should be part of the research rather than subjects at the margins. This study did not solely discuss girls, but it also allowed girls to share their experiences. As noted before, I took in to account my position as the researcher (item number 2). I am an adult Puerto Rican woman who is
also a former Barbie player. In some ways I share parts of my background with some of the participants in this study, but there are also slight and major differences between us. 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 item number four, which asks, Whose girlhood? This study specifically focuses on Puerto Rican girlhoods, which is not a singular but rather a “multiplicitous” experience that varies by age, race, class, and location, among others. By bringing participants from an assortment of ages and location within the Island, participants from a mix of races (self-identified) and from other diverse backgrounds, this study will be able to answer in part the question of whose girlhood I describe. This is not without certain limitations in the participant sample, which will be further described in Chapter 7, where my study was not able to account for every type of experience with Barbie among Puerto Rican women and girls.

Exploring Girlhood through Adults

A valid question that could be raised in a study about girlhood is: “Why work with adults when one of my aims to explore childhood experiences?” Yet, my research questions also aimed to explore adult women’s identities – both in their past and in their present – constructed through Barbie. In my work with adults I examined childhood from the past and additionally how those 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 in the context of researching children’s popular culture. These concepts and methods are applicable for looking at adults’ memories – how they construct them and how they are used 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 & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 48).

The same question could be posed in relation to my research: Why work with adult women’s experiences with Barbie if my interest is in the study of girlhood? They note that working with adults’ memories can be as fraught as working with children, though in different ways (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002 p. 55). In many cases, despite some participants being able to recall the solicited aspects of their childhood, there were as many participants who could not recall or recalled very little of their childhood play. Nevertheless, they assert, these participants were usually the ones who, during discussions, had the most to say about their childhood play. This could be perhaps 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 the interviews, both individual and collective, to 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 & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 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, their rejection or lack of interactions 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 children in relation to the doll. In this, lies the usefulness of working with adults when researching childhood; more importantly, the usefulness on working with women’s memories to examine their girlhood experiences and to collaborate on how these experiences influenced their identities.

Memory-Work Methods

Memory-work was developed by German feminists and socialists Frigga Haug and others and published in Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory (1987). According to Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, and Benton (1992), “the 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” (p. 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 (2002) explain, “the person remembering is the one who ‘works back’ or ‘works through’ the memory” (p. 62). In this “exercise” the person remembering is willfully pulling out memories and questioning them, so that the goal is not to find out how it was but why 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. (1992) 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. (p. 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; it is not just about “what?” but more importantly the “how?” and “why?” The exploration of the “how?” and “why?” is precisely what is seen in the memory as phenomenon and method approaches of a variety of (feminist) researchers working in the area of memory-
work. 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: “if we search instead for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our own past experience, then the usual mode of social-scientific research, in which individuals figure exclusively as objects of the process of research, has to be abandoned” (Haug et al., 1987, p.35). The basis for knowledge is the women’s everyday experience. Accordingly, the researcher positions herself as part of the group, she becomes “researched” as well, while the participants become researchers, “thus eliminating the hierarchy of ‘experimenter’ and ‘subject’” (Onyx & Small, 2011, p. 775). In addition, Ingleton (1995) notes, memory-work requires an environment that is open and where the participants feel safe sharing their memories, where they can trust those around them (in O’Reilly-Scanlon & Dwyer, 2005). Thus, just like most feminist and girlhood research, the building of rapport between researcher and participants is imperative.

Memory work is often used 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. For instance, O’Reilly-Scanlon and Dwyer (2005) employed the research method of memory-work to interrogate their identities related to their tween experiences. As they explain, “memory work methodology promotes self-reflection and discovery” (p. 81). Both Megan Sullivan
(2008) and Molly Brookfield (2012) have also employed memory work in their research, providing insight into their own and other women’s childhoods.5

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.6 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 that some of the women shared 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 & Mitchell, 2000, p.186). This was a significant aspect of my research, which was dependent upon the questions I asked participants. Some of my participants had an idea of the type of issues their Barbies had, 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, my participants provided an insight to how these experiences contributed to their sense of self, both as children and as adults.

Jackson (1998) discusses the possible uses of biographical narratives as a basis for feminist research and theorizing while she poses questions about the relationship between
narrative, experience and subjectivity. She suggests that by treating remembered experience as a narrative construction rather than as a “true” reflection of past events the person constructs a sense of self, at least in part, through the stories the person chooses to tell about herself. Jackson notes, “one of the purposes of subjecting our own memories to critical scrutiny is to understand how we come into being as subjects” (1998, p. 50).

As previously mentioned, memories can be deemed unreliable for various reasons. Sometimes our memories can stem from a re-working 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 (1999) admits, “my memory and subjectivity reformatted that memory, letting it work within my internal narratives of subject formation” (p. 4). Nevertheless, whether his memory was accurate or not, whether he was remembering an actual event or a re-working of a memory, he understood that he needed that memory to be part of his self (Muñoz, 1999, p. 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. Haug (1997) explains that, “A theoretical prerequisite for the work with memory is the assumption that we know much more about ourselves than we normally assume. Many things have been censored out of our self-image because we deem them not essential, too painful, or too chaotic” (p. 4)

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 which could have happened slightly differently; yet, what is important to take from them 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 (1997) suggests participants should avoid sequences or biographical stories as they allow the author to “reconstruct herself” (p. 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?” That is, if we think of memories as exclusively carrying or being a product of nostalgia, and at the same time associating 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 attached to them (see Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1990; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Rand, 1995). Atia and Davies (2010) propose that, “nostalgic thinking can be a force that complicates, rather than one that simplifies” (p. 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, Mitchell, Allnutt, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2013, p. 5).
Recruitment and Participant Selection

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the interactions with Barbie in Puerto Rico and the doll’s influence on multiple generations of girls, this study includes participants from the ages of eight to sixty-two. By incorporating girls and adult participants, I am able to compare and contrast the various ways in which Barbie came in contact with girls in Puerto Rico, her role in their lives as well as the roles girls gave her, and the issues that came up through Barbie play, all across several generations of women and girls. In the context of my research, the method of memory-work consisted of studying narratives presented in doll play in the past. Therefore, I selected a group of women from Puerto Rico who used memory work to talk about how they used to play with Barbie dolls. Some of the questions I gave the participants to trigger their memory were: How many Barbie dolls did you own or play with? Who did you play with? How did you play with your doll? (i.e. Did you play dress-up or did you create narratives?). I also selected a group of girls to whom I asked about the ways in which they come in contact with Barbie. Though girls in the present were a smaller group than adults, they offered important acumen about Barbie’s role and influence in girls’ lives.

The sampling strategy used in this research was a non-probability sample because my research aimed to study a specific group – Puerto Rican women and girls – with the knowledge that they do not represent the wider population and I would not make generalizations based on my findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 113). Within the realms of non-probability sampling, three different types were employed simultaneously. The first was purposive sampling because my research is exclusively
focused on studying women and girls’ experiences of Barbie, therefore, I knew what type of participants were needed and were selected for a specific purpose. Purposive sampling involves, not exclusively but in most cases, handpicked cases based on the researcher’s judgment of “their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 115). There were three characteristics required of my participants: (1) to be Puerto Rican; (2) to be female; (3) to have had any experience with Barbie (this even included not having played with Barbie). The second type was convenience sampling. As Cohen et al. (2007) explain valid reasons for choosing convenience sampling include that “researchers simply choose the sample from those to whom they have easy access. As it does not represent any group apart from itself, it does not seek to generalize about the wider population; for a convenience sample that is an irrelevance” (p. 114). While I traveled to various parts of the Island to meet with participants and conduct interviews, I am aware that most of them took place in locations that were more accessible to the participants and me. What this means for the research is that it does not include women or girls who live in harder-to-reach places such as the municipalities located in the center of Puerto Rico. Finally, I employed snowball sampling, which involves researchers identifying a small number of subjects who possess the characteristics they are interested in. These individuals then are used as informants to put researchers in contact with other individuals who can serve as participants as well (Cohen et al., 2007). This was the main strategy used. By employing this type of sampling I was able to reach more participants, some of whom I did not know personally, but who learned about my study through mutual friends.
Brookfield (2012) gathered her participants through a Facebook status that read, “I’m preparing to do some research on childhood nostalgia. If I wrote about American Girl (AG), how many of you out in Facebook would be willing to talk to me about it?” (p.57). As a result, she got many friends and co-workers excited about her research and to be part of it. I found this approach very interesting because in my case, as soon as I decided I wanted to study Barbie dolls (and without yet having read this article), I sent a Facebook message to my sisters, my best friends, my mother, and some of my college professors/friends asking them about their experiences with Barbie dolls and if they would be willing to be part of this. I received immediate responses and very helpful information through this medium that perhaps otherwise would have been more difficult to receive. Rand (1995) discusses how her topic afforded her a vast number of willing participants, some of which she did not have to set out to find because they volunteered their stories to her. Due to people’s knowledge of my interest in researching Barbie play some often approach me to tell me their own stories. Rand (1995) acknowledges that this is how she often received information on people’s play stories for her research.

Once I received IRB approval to conduct interviews with adults I began recruiting participants by posting a flyer about my research on Facebook before traveling to Puerto Rico (Appendix F). I immediately received various responses from people who wanted to share their stories. In addition, following the idea of the snowball sampling, some of the respondents suggested people they knew who would be interested in participating. At least ten of my Facebook friends shared my flyer through the social network, providing an ample audience and more possibilities for participants. The same process took place for my recruitment of girls. Once I received IRB approval for working with girls between
the ages of four and seventeen, I advertised my project on Facebook. Using the same flyer as before, I specified that this round of interviews would focus mainly on girls and mother/daughter pairs:

*I am going to Puerto Rico again to collect data. I will be there from February 2 until the 11th. I have IRB approval to interview girls and adolescents. I would also like to interview mothers and daughters about their experiences with Barbie (either if they played, or they didn’t like the doll, or they considered her somewhat problematic). You can write to my inbox or to my email for more information. Thank you so much!!!!* (Facebook post, translated from Spanish, 21 January 2016)

Thirteen people shared the post, and many adult women contacted me to participate. Since they would be busy during my visit, they decided to answer questions via email. At the same time I received messages from women whose daughters wanted to participate and others from people who shared the information about my research with their family and they wanted to participate. As often happens not everyone was able to participate due to scheduling or other unforeseen conflicts. Yet, snowball sampling through Facebook allowed my study to gain one adult participant and three girl participants with their mothers. In addition, one post about my study reaped a conversation between several women who shared their stories about Barbie and who granted me permission to use their experiences as data (which will be explored in Chapter 6).
Research Design

Data Collection Methods

*Interviews.* The primary method of data collection for this project consisted of interviews, which were conducted both individually and in groups. Most of the interviews happened in person; yet, for time and scheduling reasons, some participants preferred answering questions via email, Facebook, or phone. At times part of the data was collected through informal venues with participants in the form of Facebook posts, messages, or personal communication. By being comprised of multiple generations of participants including women and girls, there were two important goals for this project. The overall goal of the interviews with adult participants was to work through their memories and reconstruct their childhood experiences with Barbie to find out the ways Barbie influenced their girlhoods and their adult selves.

Working with girls, the goal of interviews was to learn about their experiences with Barbie, how they played with the doll, and to know their opinions about her. By including a range of generations that experienced Barbie in different ways, I was able to better assess Barbie’s influences on Puerto Rican girlhoods. My interview prompts and questions were intentionally aimed at eliciting the reconstruction of participants’ narratives with Barbie during their childhood play and their self-reflection about Barbie’s role in their childhood and their adulthood (when it applied). Interviewing women and girls enabled me to engage in comparisons between both groups when appropriate.

In this project I interviewed each of my participants one time using a digital audio recorder and taking pictures of objects to document our meetings. The interviews were
scheduled based on the participants’ availability. I informed them that interviews could take between 30 and 90 minutes, but that ultimately they determined the length of their interview. They were given the consent forms, where participants could choose their pseudonym to be used in the study, and they could agree or disagree to participate in follow-up interviews or conversations if needed. Before each interview began I reminded participants that they could stop the interview at any point and that they did not have to answer anything they did not feel comfortable answering. The majority of the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. During individual and group interviews participants were asked 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 paraphernalia.

The interview format used could be described as informal conversational interviews, or unstructured interviews (Lichtman, 2009; Patton, 2002). While I prepared a list of questions to ask participants (see Appendix C), in order to prompt participants’ stories, most of the time the conversations emerged organically. I often began the interviews by saying, “Tell me about your experiences with Barbie.” Beginning the conversations with “tell me” rather than a direct question can be a fruitful tool to elicit stories without making the respondent feel pressured to provide “right answers” (Chambers, 1996). Informal conversational interviews allowed me to use my own judgment to respond in meaningful ways to participants’ comments, ask them pertinent follow-up questions, and to let participants lead the conversations. If there were specific questions I wanted to ask that had not come up in the conversation, I waited until there was a period of silence to bring them up. Allowing the information to come up
organically and waiting for the right moments to ask certain questions granted me the opportunity to explore more in depth the various nuances of the participants’ experiences.

Because my study required participants to reconstruct past and present lived experiences, I prepared myself to be sensitive to the emotions that memories may trigger and to respond accordingly. To do so, I drew from methods and approaches employed in examining and eliciting memories (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992; Haug et al., 1987; Mitchell & 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 moved 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 rather than eliciting talk about specific subjects like race, gender, body image, just to answer my 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 where 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 them to choose a location that was convenient for them. This was of utmost importance for me as it further developed a trusting relationship between my participants and me. 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 commonly practiced 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 for the study to include 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 these were placed within the home, and to get a sense of where play happened.

As each round of interview concluded, I transcribed and translated the audio recordings to English using participants’ pseudonyms. These were either chosen by each participant or assigned by me if a name was not provided.

Artifactual data. Participants’ experiences were also studied through visual and artifactual data in the form of participants’ personal artifacts. For my project, participants were encouraged to bring Barbie artifacts with them. By inviting them to share any personal Barbie items they felt were significant to include I was able to better understand my participants’ experiences with Barbie in more tangible ways than through solely verbal communication. In many ways objects and visual images illustrate intimate...
personal experiences (Brown, 1998; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2011; Reid-Walsh, 2013). Brown (1998) and Reid-Walsh (2013) speak about the stories that objects can often tell about their owners or the individuals who interacted with them. They can tell, for instance, if the objects had a series of owners throughout time, how the owners were interacting with the objects, or how they made artifacts their own by making some modifications. Because there are additional stories that can be drawn from our childhood objects, Barbie artifacts from my participants’ and my own childhood were considered as venues that provided stories about our pasts that needed to be examined.

Some methods of artifactual memory that contribute to the study of productive memory include using objects as memory prompts: “These may range from photographs to ticket stubs to pill boxes to ATM machines to spark the participants’ ability to engage in and navigate through their memories in a productive manner. Here the objects themselves seem to function as catalysts to the human rememberers, but remain still and quiet themselves” (Reid-Walsh, 2013, p. 199). When used as prompts for memories, it is the person who tells the story that the objects prompt to remember rather than the object itself telling the story. Pahl and Rowsell (2010, 2011) also describe the usefulness of working with artifacts. The concept of artifactual literacy comprises “an approach that combines a focus on objects, and the stories attached to them, with an understanding of how different stories have different purchase in particular locations” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p.129). They further elucidate what can be found within everyday storytelling: “Everyday objects, which we call artifacts, can be critical in supporting this process and creating a space for storytelling” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011, p. 130). These artifacts can be an assortment of objects, which can be understood as texts and cultural artifacts that can
be connected to children’s social worlds, which include their play practices (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010).

Objects can be biographical (Hoskins, 1998) and evoke powerful emotions and relationships (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). They can link to stories (Hurdley, 2006) and carry ideas (Turkle, 2007), as well as signal status (Shankar, 2006) (in Pahl and Rosswell, 2011, p. 136). Barbie, the doll itself, can signal socioeconomic status when, for instance, girls own homemade Barbie clothes instead of Mattel-produced clothes (Rand, 1995). In addition, Barbie – as an object and as performative play – elicits stories of race, gender, identity, socioeconomic status, and sexuality, among others (see Chin, 1999; DuCille, 1999; Eilers, 2012; Rand, 1995).

In this sense, as proposed by Brown (1998), Pahl and Rowsell (2010 & 2011), and Reid-Walsh (2013), the objects and artifacts from our childhoods may greatly contribute to our production and understanding of memories, and thus, our childhood experiences. Additionally, not only are the objects themselves telling about their owners’ lives, but they can also serve to prompt the telling of stories by the person herself. This spectrum of stories serves to expand the understanding of what our childhoods contribute to our adult lives.

These objects served the important purpose of telling parts of the stories about participants’ interactions with Barbie. Participants held 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 brought pictures of their Barbie dolls, Barbie houses, and other Barbie objects, while other 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 the interviews with girls that did not take place at their home 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 girls 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. In interviews with adults, many of these artifacts were not in their possession anymore, but there were pictures of them. These pictures provided 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.

Artifactual data was also gathered through my close study of Barbie dolls and Barbie objects created between 1959 and 2010. Through a two-week research fellowship in August 2015 at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, NY, I examined approximately 300 Barbie objects that included a fascinating variety of dolls, houses and play sets, fashion garments, trading cards, music recordings, and computer games, among a plethora of other artifacts. The materials from The Strong helped further inform the data
gathered from my participants’ experiences. Even though the artifacts from the museum collection and the artifacts of play that belonged to my participants were similar objects, they had a different use in my research. These artifacts examined at The Strong provided information about the different generations of Barbie – from her creation to the present. These artifacts, as opposed to the ones belonging to my participants, did not tell a specific story that was relevant to this project. While they reminded me of certain dolls I owned and taught me about Barbie’s history, the value was different because there were no stories or memories involved. Rather, they helped me, as the researcher, to become more familiar with Barbie dolls and objects outside of the range with which I interacted as a child.

Because this study includes multiple generations of Puerto Rican women and girls ranging from 1959 – when the first Barbie appeared – to the 2010s, The Strong Research Fellowship allowed me to examine closely and document the different ranges of Barbie dolls that have been produced since the doll’s conception up until a decade ago. These Barbie dolls were representative of most of the different eras of Barbie with which my participants engaged. During this phase of the research I examined the types of dolls produced, the changes she has undergone, the colors of her clothes, the types of accessories, and the types of products that accompanied the dolls, among other aspects.11

Approaches to Data Analysis

This research, while not an ethnographic study, borrowed from ethnographic approaches to gather and analyze the data. The aim of this study was not to state that
something “is” a certain way; i.e. it did not want to claim that the experiences of Barbie in Puerto Rico are exactly like my participants’ experiences. Neither did it want to claim a homogeneous experience. Moreover, it sought to explore the meanings attached to Barbie once the doll came into contact with participants. I did not seek to examine Barbie as a “text” on its own, but rather what she became for girls and how adults remembered her as an object of play. Hence, I drew from Fiske’s strategies of ethnography and textual analysis, which suggest that popular culture exists not in texts but in practice; that is, the meanings of texts are understood if we understand how the texts are used and “the part they play within the cultural process that relates meanings both to social experience and to the social system in general” (Fiske, 1998, p.98). Ethnographic approaches employ “thick description” (Geertz 1994). He explains that in order to understand the meanings people attach to certain objects, events, situations, etc. in a specific context, ethnographers need to know underlying meanings people share. To do so they engage in the process of describing thoroughly and contextualizing the subject of study (Geertz 1994). It was important for me to always maintain the experiences expressed by participants connected to the context where they occurred. During the process of listening to the audio recordings, reading the interview transcripts, and analyzing the data, I kept in mind the connections between the participants’ experiences and the meanings they had in the specific context of Puerto Rico.

After transcribing interviews, I began the process of formal data analysis by reading through my entire interview transcripts one time to get a general sense of the data overall and then reading it carefully to parse out the various emerging themes. In my analysis I began identifying common themes among my participants’ experiences and
themes that were related to the overall questions that guided this research. Having said that, I did not have pre-determined “codes” that I was seeking to find in order to fit my research questions. Rather, I wanted the themes to emerge organically and find out how they were relating to my questions. In allowing the themes to form as I was analyzing the data, it gave way to the inclusion of sections and narratives that I had not intended to find (for instance the section “More than a Doll: Barbie’s Significance in Girls’ Lives” in Chapter 4, which I explain further in my reflections as a researcher described in Chapter 7). In my presentation of the data, I follow feminist ethnographic traditions that foreground women’s (and in this research girls’) voices, allowing their responses and conversations to do most of the talking (Abu-Lughod, 1993 cited in Hains, 2015). Therefore, I quote their words amply followed by my own comments on what the conversations present or prefacing pieces of conversations with contextual information.

**Description of 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 map of Puerto Rico (P.R.), which is shown in Figure 3.1, points out the different municipalities where my participants either grew up or currently reside. 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 the months of May and June 2015 and February 2016.

![Figure 3-1: A map of Puerto Rico’s 78 municipalities.](image)

**Individual Interviews**

**Carla.** Age 33, grew up and still resides in a small town in Southwestern Puerto Rico. She described herself as an artisan, a teacher, and many things at the same time. Carla estimated that around 60 Barbie dolls went through her home between the years 1987 and 2000. She remembers playing with Barbie until age 15.

**Marisa.** She is in her early sixties and was raised in a Northwestern town of Puerto Rico. She has lived in the Southwest for more than 20 years. The short visit and conversation took place in her house where her daughter’s surviving collection, comprised of 38 Barbie dolls, is still displayed.

**Alondra.** Age 32, had about 50 Barbie dolls. 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 10 years old. Our interview occurred through e-mail communication.

**Group Interviews**

Earlier in this chapter I briefly discussed my role as a researcher and participant of three group interviews. The first was my family group, comprised of my mother, my aunt, and my two sisters. Within this group formation we collectively think about the ways in which each person’s play was different from everyone else 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 document and examine Barbie’s role in familial relationships, which is the premise of Chapter 5. This family interview took place in the San Juan area. Some participants were present in person – Emily, Carmen, and Lourdes – with Camille and Frances joining via Skype from their respective homes in the U.S.

The second group of 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 of which I was part consisted of five women, none of whom knew one another during childhood but became friends as adults. All 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. While we each explored our individual childhood memories of Barbie, as a group of adults we also talked about our perceptions about the doll in the present. Below I describe the participants from the first three groups (Group 1- Family, Group 2- Childhood Friends, and Group 3- Colleagues).

**Emily.** (Groups 1, 2, and 3) At the time of the interviews where I participated I was 29 years old. I was raised all my life in a town in Southwestern Puerto Rico called Cabo Rojo. As I have stated in the introduction to this study, Barbie dolls were one of my favorite toys growing up. When I first started playing with Barbies, I did not have a great number of accessories or “Barbie artifacts” although I did inherit most of my older sister’s Barbie paraphernalia. I also inherited more clothes and a car when one of my friends moved away and she gave me some of her accessories. I played with Barbie dolls until I was around 14 or 15 years old.

**Group 1: Family**

**Carmen.** Carmen is in her early sixties and 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 little. She is Emily, Camille, and Frances’s mother. She owned one Barbie, which she described as having black hair and being dressed in 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 13 or 14 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, Lourdes is 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 Carmen’s sister and Emily, Camille, and Frances’s aunt. Just like her sister Carmen, Lourdes also only owned one Barbie doll. She remembers having played with Barbie until she was 13 years old.

**Camille** Age 32. 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 25. 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 30. She was born in the San Juan area, she lived most of her life since she was six years old in the Southwest area. This is where she started playing with Barbie. Jessica remembered that what she liked the 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 13 years old.

**Mariela.** Age 29. 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, adopting objects from around the house to create furniture and other artifacts for Barbie play. Mariela played with Barbie dolls until she was almost 14 or 15 years old. She had her dolls until she moved to the San Juan area when she was junior in high school.

**Group 3: Colleagues**

**Isabel.** Age 30. She grew up as the only girl among her cousins in a small western town of 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 8 to 10 years old.

**Frankie.** Age 30. The youngest of four sisters, Frankie grew up in a southwestern town of P.R. although her early childhood years were spent in the U.S. She is the youngest of four sisters. Her family moved back to Puerto Rico when she was 10 years old, at which time she stopped playing with Barbie dolls.

**Lisa.** Age 45. Born in New York, Lisa moved to Puerto Rico when she was 3 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 7 and 10. When she was 10 she preferred playing volleyball and doing more physical activities.

**Elsa.** Age 28. 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, and she loves anything related to the movie Frozen. Elsa was born in Puerto Rico, yet during her girlhood she moved around to many countries including Germany, Italy, the U.S., and finally moving back to P.R. when she was 10.

The second set of group interviews is comprised of mothers and daughters. For these three group my role was solely of a researcher who, while interjecting at some points of the conversations, was not a participant. Below I describe each participant in the last three groups (Group 4- Mother and Adult Daughter, Group 5- Mother and Child Daughter, and Group 6- Mother and Two Daughters).

**Group 4: Mother and Adult Daughter**

**Patricia.** Patricia is in her later fifties and is 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 4 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 16. When her husband threw out all of the Barbie dolls and outfits her mother had given her, and which she still kept at age 32, she decided to begin collecting them.
**Gabriela.** Age 25. 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 her mother would buy her a Barbie, she would use it for a couple of weeks, and then would 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 12 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 40. She is Sharon’s mother. She grew up in the U.S. East Coast 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 8. She is Autumn’s oldest daughter. She was born in Puerto Rico and has been raised in a town in the west of 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 is in her forties and she 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 11. 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 9. 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 raised some concerns about the effect Barbie’s body could have on people.

Chapter Summary

In this review of the methodology I have explored a breadth of scholarship that considers different methodological approaches to working with adults to examine their memories and constructions of self through Barbie. After reviewing a wide range of the literature on Barbie research, I examined the primary methods I employed in my research in order to answer questions about women’s and girls’ experiences with Barbie dolls.
These involved interviewing Puerto Rican women and girls either individually or in
groups to explore and critically examine their experiences with Barbie.

While I chose to work with girls and women from Puerto Rico to provide a
sample of some of the experiences women and girls have had with Barbie and employ
memory-work to further examine their recollections of Barbie experiences, by no means
do I consider this study to be an absolute representation of all Puerto Rican girls’
experiences with Barbie. The participants, though, were eclectic in that they had a variety
of experiences and opinions about the doll. Despite their knowledge of my own mostly
positive childhood experiences of Barbie play, they voiced their perspectives, including
ones in which they viewed Barbie as a negative part of childhood. The use of individual
and group interviews framed by memory-work helped bring up important questions,
critical analyses of situations, and valuable outlooks on what the influence of Barbie in
Puerto Rican girlhoods is and how the doll contributes to women’s and girls’ identities.

Notes:

1 Some were born in the United States of America and moved to Puerto Rico (P.R.) at an early
age. Others lived in the U.S. for a short period of their childhoods, but mostly lived in P.R.

2 When trying to understand why and when children do something, a helpful approach is to
observe children (Sharman, Cross, & Vennis, 2004). They add that “observation is an
important tool for [the researcher] to see in practice what [she] has learned from the theory”
(Sharman et al., 2004, p. 2). With observation as a tool the research can meet the needs of
children, and it can explore some of children’s ideas and practices as they occur. In participant
observations of children, the researcher establishes her interest in the children’s own perspectives
on their lives and can provide them with the tools to express those perspectives. It would be
interesting to observe girls in their actual play with the doll to examine what types of narratives
they are creating and whether their experiences with Barbie are positive or negative. This would
also contribute to understanding how girls construct their identities through Barbie or in relation
to Barbie. This could be achieved by following the methodological approach used by Hains
(2012): creating a play group with a small group of girls where I could get a firsthand look at how
girls play with Barbies and the narratives they create.

3 Hains’ research involves the Bratz dolls, which have been controversial due to their sexy
clothes, considered inappropriate for the age group they are directed to. As Hains explains,
“scholars and critics writing for the popular media have expressed concerns about Bratz and sexualization” (2012, p. 124). They have also been concerned with the issues of race that the dolls raise, arguing that race is used as an accessory (Guerrero, 2009) or that “the stereotypes of the overtly sexualized woman of color” become well-established in the dolls (Orr, 2009). There was, however, a lack of scholarship that featured the girls’ voices, which Hains found problematic because this lack of this type of scholarship “reflect[ed] a broader pattern in the field of girlhood studies: scholars often criticize popular culture targeting girls without attending to real girls’ voices” (p. 125).

Contrary to what most critics and scholars have addressed about the dolls (the issues of being too sexualized), the girls did not address this in their narrative; in fact, the girls pretended the dolls had other clothes on. Hains (2012) does not argue against what critics or scholars have already stated, but although she agrees that the dolls are too sexual, she also acknowledged girls’ ability to create their own narratives without using this trait as a factor. In this case, the girls were able to creatively play with structured dolls, paying little to no attention to what the creators intended the dolls to be.

For Sullivan, her own childhood experiences inadvertently informed the way she analyzed several texts, and after revisiting her writing she observed she had employed critical apparatuses from Girlhood Studies without realizing she was doing so. As she quotes, “The personal is political,” explaining that these words remind us that our own experiences are purposeful, relevant and have value in scholarship. She suggests that similarly in Girlhood Studies we should examine our childhoods for insight into different constructions of gender. Sullivan (2008) uses a memoir about her childhood to illustrate how her experience of illness informed her analysis of the texts she analyzed and her scholarship as an adult.

Brookfield (2012) used memory work in a different way for her research on nostalgia and American Girl (AG) dolls. Instead of using just her own childhood, she examines different women’s memories of their interactions with American Girl dolls and the brand in general. She studies how former AG players – either who played with dolls or consumed the books – deal with the representations the dolls present, “how they reminisce about them, and what role they think the dolls play in their adult lives” (p. 58). The participants’ responses were reflective, critical, and self-aware, allowing Brookfield to observe that there is ambivalence in the women’s memories and how they construct identities around positive and negative feelings towards AG.

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 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” (p. 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 to university to get her degree” (p. 179).

In addition to interviews and personal communication, I created a Pinterest board where my participants could comment on pictures of Barbie I posted or they could also contribute their pictures, websites, and other sources and accompany their posts with memories of their own experiences with Barbie. While participants were not active in this platform, many of them continuously shared articles, pictures, videos, and other texts about Barbie through other social
media and emails. Many of these sharings were accompanied by the participants’ comments about their own experiences or explanations about why they were sharing the texts.

8 Reid-Walsh provides the example of a book that had a repeated handwritten phrase on the back cover. This suggested that the owner might have been practicing her writing. This is something I have found in my own childhood books as well (2013, p. 200).

9 Reid-Walsh (2013) discusses a case where the owner of a paper doll book added a new character and verse to the narrative (p. 204) and another case where a boy modified toy theater sheets to create his own play (p. 206). Both cases can tell plenty about each child’s play practices.

10 Though extensive textual analysis of the plethora of Barbie written texts could be employed to examine the themes and topics presented to girls through this medium, this study examined text in a different manner. Rather, I considered Barbie artifacts to be read, examined, and analyzed on their own in the context of the location as well as in relation to the experiences females had interacting with them.

11 I surveyed the artifacts and examined them in various ways. I measured the artifacts, examined the descriptions on the packaging when available, paid attention to the colors used throughout the years, observed the different styles of clothes and accessories given to the dolls, and looked closely at the props that accompanied the dolls and other artifacts. By doing this I gained invaluable knowledge about the range of dolls and other Barbie objects with which my participants interacted in their childhood.

At The Strong National Museum of Play I also engaged in archival research. The documents I reviewed served to provide an ample and deeper context of Barbie’s history, from before her creation to the present. It is important to note that these documents were not the main source of data and that they did not undergo analysis on my part. Rather, I examined documents as support in two forms. The first was to contextualize the primary data gathered through interviews and artifacts by understanding Barbie’s story. In the time spent at the Strong Museum of Play I made use of a number of materials from the Brian Sutton-Smith Library to study various texts about Barbie. These included Barbie catalogues, biographies, histories of the creation of Barbie, and doll research. The second was to learn about various approaches to studying the role of dolls in girls’ lives. I attained this by studying original materials (transcripts, photographs, preliminary reports) from a doll history project conducted in the 1980s about the role of dolls in the life of girls who grew up in the 1910s and 1930s. The study was comprised of mothers and daughters who shared their experiences of doll play during their childhoods. Some features of the Doll Oral History Project, such as asking participants to bring their childhood dolls to the interview in order to prompt their memories, were similar to what my research aimed to achieve. This was an important source to model my own research, specifically, for my focus on how the various generations of Puerto Rican females, including mothers and daughters, played with Barbie dolls.
PART 2: DISCUSSION OF BARBIE IN PUERTO RICAN GIRLHOODS

Chapter 4

Barbie in Intergenerational Puerto Rican Girlhoods: Individual Experiences

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore Puerto Rican women and girls’ experiences with Barbie dolls and other products through their play practices during childhood. With the inclusion of both girls and adults my research aimed to examine Barbie’s impact in Puerto Rican girlhoods and how girls constructed their identities around her. Moreover, by including participants from a wide range of ages, the study aimed to trace Puerto Rican girlhoods through experiences with Barbie from the perspectives of multiple generations. By including women’s perspectives this study also aimed to describe the meaning childhood experiences hold in adulthood.

The thematic findings to be presented in this chapter explore the ways in which each of my participants experienced Barbie. I begin the discussion with the participants’ narrations about their play with Barbie, which include how they first came into contact with the doll, how they played with her, and the types of artifacts that became part of their interactions with Barbie, among other stories. The chapter continues with an in-depth discussion of each major theme about identity formation that emerged from my conversations with women and girls: femininity, body image, and race. Each section,
which discusses these themes, presents the perspectives of the different generations that participated in this study – the women (who were the girls in the past) and the girls in the present – and also offers my discussion of each theme. This discussion is situated within the scope of the literature on Barbie, girlhood, and dolls studies reviewed in Chapter 2, as well as the literature referenced in subsequent chapters.

Lastly, I reflect upon Barbie’s significance in my participants’ lives based on the testimonies they offered often unprompted. As I explain in more detail in the concluding chapter, this last section titled “More than a Doll: Barbie’s Significance in Girls’ Lives” came to life as I noticed a pattern of narratives where my participants considered Barbie a friend and companion.

Performing an Other: Participants’ Narrations of their Experiences with Barbie

One of the main motivations for studying different generations of Puerto Rican women and girls who interacted with Barbie was to explore the similarities and differences in the range of interactions. By studying various generations I wanted to find out what has changed and what has remained the same through the years. This section presents narratives my participants shared about how they came in contact with Barbie, how they played with her, what roles they assigned, and other aspects of Barbie play. The stories presented throughout the chapter represent five generations of Puerto Rican women and girls. The interactions with Barbie they narrated often included other products besides the doll, and for some participants the interactions occurred in private, where they could let their imagination run without any outside judgment. I begin with the
experiences of the first generation of Barbie doll players, those who were growing up when Barbie first arrived.

Carmen and Lourdes, two sisters in their sixties, only had one Barbie doll each. As a result, they resorted to creativity in order to produce their play. Carmen asserts, “Because it was only one doll, everything else was… What happens is that times come for… Emily for example you didn’t have just one Barbie, you had five because you had to have the doctor, the nurse… And for us, you could do everything with just one Barbie” (Carmen, Group 1 Transcript). This creativity extended to their imaginative play with Barbie when no other doll was involved. When playing “wedding” Carmen enjoyed creating dresses for Barbie and turning objects into something new, like using sewing pins as earrings. Furthermore, her Barbie would marry an imaginary boyfriend because she did not own a Ken doll. Lourdes and Carmen mostly interacted with Barbie through her nature as a fashion doll. They enjoyed changing the doll’s clothes and creating more outfits for her. Based on my participants’ stories, in the generations that grew up in the ’60s one of the most notable commonalities is that their experiences of Barbie play revolved around playing dress-up with the doll. As described various times by sisters Carmen and Lourdes, and also expressed by avid collector Patricia, the point and the fun of playing Barbie for them was dressing Barbie in her high fashion clothes. In addition, Patricia’s play also incurred in some fantasy where she assigned Barbie different roles. She explained:

That was you would dress them up and you would dream that you were a model, a teacher, or a nurse and that was your imagination. I’m sure that many girls became nurses and doctors by dreaming about that. I was a teacher […] I didn’t even study [when I was little]. I would come home and run to play with them. I mean, I would go into that world. That was my world. I would go into my room
and there they would get married, have children, go to parties. I would go into my word of fantasy with my dolls. (Patricia, *Group 4 Transcript*)

Part of the appeal of Barbie play is the opportunity it provides girls to become other people, imagine aspects of adult life they have yet to experience – such as having a job – and appropriating the doll to become exactly what they want them to be. In Chapter 2 I briefly explained how Mattel has adopted this idea in various advertising campaigns for Barbie. The company presents Barbie as a tool to imagine and to dream. Several of my participants remember playing with Barbie in precisely this way.

Lisa (Age 45), for example, used Barbie dolls to engage in conversations when she was alone. She had one brother and no sisters, thus playing was often a solitary activity, and when she played by herself she created dialogues with Barbie dolls. Inspired by her grandmother who was a seamstress, Lisa also kept herself entertained by sewing doll clothes. More vividly, Lisa remembered creating stories in her head:

> I would get home from school and I would play. I would make a lot of stories in my head, like the *telenovelas* (soap operas) because my grandmother watched a lot of *telenovelas* [Laughs]. So I had Barbie. I did like dressing her up and taking her on a stroll. Sometimes I’d even take her on my bicycle. My bicycle had a little basket. I do remember a lot making up things. I would entertain myself with my imagination because we didn’t have a lot of distractions at that time. You had to make up your own game. So, because my grandmother watched a lot of *telenovelas*, I would make those stories in my play. I also watched *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie’s Angels*, so my Barbies and dolls were them. And so, I made a lot of stories, I take the dolls out, and I made them clothes. […] But the memories I have were—I don’t remember playing Barbie with other girls. Barbies were my friends. (Lisa, *Group 3 Transcript*)

Comparable to Lisa, girls from the generations that followed hers also found inspiration from and created stories akin to those they would see on TV. For instance, Alondra (32), who grew up in the ‘80s, remembered her episodes of Barbie play being “pretty normal, taken from everyday life and from television” (Alondra, *e-mail Interview*). Her dolls had
boyfriends, worked, went to the store, and had a family and friends. Jessica (30) and Mariela (29) also used TV shows as inspiration for creating stories, although Jessica noted that her play with Barbie did not incorporate as much storytelling and imagination as Mariela’s.

Jessica: I liked games that used a lot of imagination, but sitting down with Barbie and imagining things like you two [Mariela and Emily], no. It was like more basic.

Mariela: No, I used to do a lot of soap operas. In fact, I would begin a game on Friday, continue it on Saturday, and if I could, I would keep it going on Sunday. And I could spend the whole weekend inside my bedroom playing with Barbie. I would get out to eat and come back in again. And I would play the whole day. It was a routine, and I would imitate an adult’s daily life.

Emily: If something happened at school, for example, did you include that in your game?

Mariela: I don’t think so.

Emily: I can’t remember exactly what my games were about.

Mariela: I never related it like that. The names I used were from telenovelas, like Alondra. I never interpreted, I mean, I never took the game to reality. Even if I was mad at something from school, I never related it. (Jessica and Mariela, Group 2 Transcript)

In this part of the conversation Mariela explained how she used Barbie play to imitate and imagine what adults’ daily life was like. Most of the references came from watching and creating situations like the ones she would see on Hispanic soap operas. Just as Mariela’s example elucidates, part of the scholarship on Barbie discusses how girls play with the doll to both imagine themselves being adults (e.g. having jobs or having children) and incorporate moments of their own lives. Hains (2012) and Hohmann (1985) examined girls’ use of dolls to recreate, negotiate, or even change the outcome of real events from their lives. Some girls used their dolls to reenact moments of racism they had experienced at school (Hains, 2012) while in another case a girl used Barbie as a device to imagine having control over her own lived experiences – for example, taking on the
role of a mother who disciplines a child (Hohmnn, 1985). This was one of the ways Carla (33) engaged in Barbie play during the early years of her childhood.

Carla used her dolls oftentimes to recreate scenarios of movies she loved, but more importantly, to express herself in ways she did not think she could or was allowed to as a child:

When I was little there were two movies that I liked a lot. They were *Pretty Woman* and *Lambada*. So because I knew the dialogue [Laughs] of the movies, well I would use the dialogue from the movies and scenes from the movies. Also a lot of times it was improvised, made up. I also remember that other times it was like including everyday life, like situations that happen, I remember. I remember I used Barbie a lot when I had things that I wanted to say that, you know, sometimes when you’re little no one wants to listen to you. So like, “No one loves me…” So a doll would be Barbie’s mom and be like, “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay.” And she would pat her in the back. You know? (Carla, *Interview Transcript*)

When children play they may be imitating what they see others, especially adults, do. In dramatic play the child may dramatize events where she is not a direct participator, for instance, by recreating scenes from a TV show (Hughes, 2002). These were the forms of dramatic play many of the girls – Lisa, Mariela, Carla, and even I – were having with Barbie. Yet, there are instances when the doll is used to more deeply explore the events girls are experiencing, such as how Carla used Barbie. When children engage in dramatic play they are also representing in their own way their understanding of the experiences, rather than simply imitating what they see others do. They use objects, actions, and storylines to symbolize the topics that concern them (Leong & Bodrova, n.d.). For Carla in particular Barbie became the vehicle through which she could express feelings she would not express otherwise. She gave Barbie the role of a mother when it was needed in order to appease and console another doll – this was representing something she wanted
in real life, but which was not happening. As she stated, playing like this with Barbie was a form “of relief, channeling, in a way that a child could do it” (Carla, Interview Transcript).

For various reasons dramatic play with Barbie in my participants’ experiences often transpired in privacy, while playing with Barbie by themselves. As some of them pointed out, creating complex narratives that were often dramatic was not something they necessarily wanted to share with others. In studying girlhood McRobbie and Garber (1991) encouraged researchers to consider the domestic sphere as a primary site for youth recreation. Generally Barbie play occurs in private – mainly in the child’s bedroom. Bedrooms, according to Adams (1995), “were where children nurtured their own individuality by spending time alone-playing, reading, or simply thinking” (p. 173). During the pre-teen years bedrooms become, as Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) note, “increasingly a private play zone” especially for middle class children (p. 124). Mariela and Jessica discussed their own play practices as something that was private, which allowed for their play to manifest without any outside interruptions:

Mariela: I remember that I made a house, a whole neighborhood in my bedroom. The main house or the house where I participated was behind the door, and no one was allowed to enter my bedroom, it was forbidden.

Jessica: You know, I liked more playing by myself because I dared to think, to imagine, and there wasn’t anyone bothering me. Being by myself I would let my imagination go. I liked being alone more

Mariela: Me too. I would lock myself for some hours. […] I would really make a soap opera.

[…]

Emily: [To Jessica] I don’t know if I played Barbie with you. I remember that with Mariela I would go to her house on Saturdays and I brought my bag full of Barbies. […] I remember that I liked to play alone in my bedroom and I would spend hours there. And with my sisters, Camille says we did play a little, but for me it was like that.
If I was very creative I didn’t want anyone to make fun of me or for anyone to know what I was saying. (*Group 2 Transcript*)

When I was little I shared a bedroom with my two sisters. It was not a very big room, so it was often uncomfortable and crowded. I used the moments of solitude when my sisters were not in the room to play with my dolls. Out of the three of us I was the one who played with Barbie dolls the most. Playing with Barbie dolls (and other toys) was a time for being by myself and creating different scenarios with them. I never wanted to be bothered and did not want people to see me playing. My interactions with Barbie, as well as Jessica’s and Mariela’s, were mostly private because we believed the presence of outsiders would hinder our creativity, limit our imagination, or would make us feel judged. The only people with whom I felt comfortable playing were those who created dramatic scenarios like mine, for instance Mariela.

Carla’s play also took place mostly in her bedroom, although in her case it was not about maintaining privacy or being afraid of receiving judgment. While she enjoyed play by herself and also with friends, it transpired in the bedroom because that was the area designated by her mother.

Carla: [Barbie play happened] in my room. Yes, I didn’t take that out. I didn’t dare. My mom didn’t let me. It [Barbie] was sacred.

Researcher: Was it because you were embarrassed?

Carla: No. When I was little I was never embarrassed. It was when I was older, when I was about 12 or 13. So in school some girls, there were some that at 13 were already going out and drinking at pubs. So I wasn’t going to say, “I’m playing with Barbie” when one girl would arrive drunk to the 9th grade. No! I wasn’t going to say that! [Laughs]. But no, it was that my mom was very protective of my toys, and she said it was better in the bedroom. (*Carla, Interview Transcript*)
More than following her mother’s instructions, Carla kept her play private once she entered her teenage years because it was an activity in which very few of her friends participated. According to Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002):

There are some tastes that children cannot reveal in public. If a girl still plays with Barbie at age ten and none of her friends do then there is no way she can easily express this in a group. […] By contrast – behind closed (at least partly closed) doors – bedroom-as-playrooms offer possibilities for exploring popular culture artifacts in ways that are less socially governed. (p. 118)

Once a teenager, Carla kept Barbie as something even more private because it was not something she could do freely in front of her peers. In Carla’s perspective her interactions with Barbie served to keep her away from behaviors, such as drinking, in which her peers were engaging. The contrast between her peers’ more “adult” activities and her play with dolls, which was viewed as a “child’s” activity became embarrassing for her and thus something she could not share with all of her friends. Many researchers had described girls’ bedrooms as “[‘passive space[s]’ ... associated with minimal physical activity’]” (Steele & Brown, 1995, as cited in Kearney, 2007 p. 131). Kearney questions these assumptions, arguing that girls have agency even in their bedroom culture. What these examples demonstrate is that girls use Barbie play to negotiate, or push against, and to come to terms with different ideas. Because Barbie play was mostly taking place in the girls’ bedrooms, these examples show that the bedroom becomes a place of agency for girls and Barbie becomes a vehicle to achieve it.

Girls may also negotiate, resist, or come to terms with lived experiences through other Barbie products and artifacts. Interactions with Barbie occur not only with the doll, but also through other products that carry the “Barbie” name. Every year the cornucopia of Barbie products that extend girls’ play interactions with the icon – books, magazines,
computer games, board games, bicycles, trading cards, movies, and music cassettes, to name a few – continues to grow, providing more spaces for Barbie to be part of girls’ lives. Many of my participants identified other Barbie products that they owned during their childhood or with which they interacted in some way. In some cases the interactions with these products were more common than the interactions with the actual doll, as in Camille’s case for instance. For others, these products would sometimes become part of the play with the doll, where girls could continue or expand the exchanges that occurred through doll play onto new forms. The following examples illustrate Barbie’s great impact on girlhoods, Puerto Rican girlhoods in this case, by becoming part of girls’ lives through other means beyond doll play. Camille (32) did not play much with Barbie, but she remembered interacting with other products, for instance, a Barbie sticker book. During the interview she was also trying to figure out if she owned a Barbie head whose purpose was for girls to practice makeup and hairstyles. Camille recalled having interacted with it and always wanting it because what she enjoyed the most was “doing things with the [dolls’] hair” (Camille, Group 1 Transcript). Carla, who is the same age as Camille, owned some of the same Barbie artifacts as Camille, including a pair of roller skates “that said ‘Barbie’” (Carla, Interview Transcript). Carla also owned Barbie VHS movies and a fashion book with stencils with which the player could create many outfit combinations. Just like Camille, Gabriela (25) also had Barbie sticker books, one of which still survived during my visit to her house. She also played Barbie computer games, used Barbie notebooks for school, and owned the Barbie Nutcracker movies.

In my case the interactions with Barbie extended to a wide variety of products. I remember having a Barbie Halloween costume, a Barbie exercise video (Dance! Workout
with Barbie), a Barbie Power Wheel car, miniature Barbie dolls from the McDonald’s Happy Meal, a set of binoculars, and a camera, among possibly other products. I remember that the binoculars came with a miniature set for the dolls¹ and that the Barbie camera was possibly my first real picture camera. Isabel (30) was a fan of Barbie as well, and her interactions were not limited to just the doll. During our group interview she shared pictures of two other Barbie artifacts that were part of her experiences with the doll: a Barbie Power Wheel car, like the one I had, and a certificate of her membership in the Official Barbie Fan Club (Figure 4.1). Her mother subscribed her to the official Barbie Fan Club after seeing it advertised in one of the dolls. Being part of the club provided Isabel an interaction with Barbie that differed from all the other participants. In addition to “authenticating” Isabel as a fan of the doll, it offered more products that expanded her encounters with Barbie:

They sent me Barbie bracelets, they sent me letters, for my birthday they sent me a card. They gave me the I.D. They sent me pictures of Barbie, like this one which they sent me for my birthday. [The birthday card can be seen in Figure 4.2] (Isabel, Group 3 Transcript)

The previous examples from my participants’ interactions with other Barbie products illustrate Barbie’s strong presence in girls’ lives and how she becomes part of their identities even through other means. The level of interactions varied across participants, as some of them had more additional products than others. In addition, these products differed in what their purposes were – while some of them were other types of toys, some were products that invited a different type of interaction (e.g. the Barbie Fan Club). Among my participants, one of the most elaborate play experiences that occurred with
other Barbie artifacts was Carla’s, who used the content of the Barbie magazine to develop a play practice different from what she had been doing before:

After about age 12 I didn’t play Barbie with anyone else anymore. What happened was that after – when I turned 10 I saw the Barbie magazines for the first time. So when I was 10 that modality of Barbie magazines featuring photomontages as if they were comics. So they would put Barbie with her house, and then they took pictures of that and they added dialogue and it was like a comic. So that for me completely changed the method, like the game modality. When I saw the magazine I transformed my play with Barbie to make the comic. […] So I remember that I did that and I had my 35mm camera and I would my Barbie in the tree or with the car with Ken and I would take pictures. […] So that’s when the whole dynamic of the game changed when I was a pre-teenager. It wasn’t so much like in the beginning when Barbie and Ken were like [makes kissing sound], and Barbie and Teresa were like talking. […] But that’s also why I changed the whole dynamic [with Barbie] because there came a time when it truly bored me. It bored me to change their clothes so much, it bored me that only she had a boyfriend, it bored me that all her friends were in love with her boyfriend. Like there was a point when reality crashed with the imaginary world of Barbie. And I played with Barbie, but secretly I hated Barbie. Because she was independent, she was a doctor, she was an astronaut, she was a lawyer, she was like 70 years old and looked 25. [Laughs] And she had a younger sister and she played with her. And so I was little and my parents didn’t play with me. It’s like a lot of stuff from when you’re little and so at one point I said, “Let’s play but in a different way.” (Carla, Interview Transcript).

Through the images Carla saw in the Barbie magazine, she began changing the way she interacted with Barbie dolls to create her own product. Although the photographs she took of her dolls did not survive to the present, Carla remembered the process of taking pictures of her dolls to create a sort of scrapbook that resembled a comic book, and enjoying that aspect of Barbie play more than merely changing their clothes and creating dramatic scenarios. More importantly, in her account Carla describes all the ways she used Barbie as a girl to create, challenge, and question her identity. Her views on Barbie were continuously shifting – from admiration to jealousy, from love to hate – just as her type of play with Barbie also changed. Once she entered her teenage years, Carla became
bored from the way she was expected to play with Barbie and she grew tired of Barbie being the central figure while the rest of Barbie’s friends were supposed to desire what Barbie had.

Figure 4-1: A letter addressed to Isabel welcoming her to the official Barbie Fan Club.

Figure 4-2: Barbie birthday gift for Isabel from the Official Fan Club.
Despite girls creating their own scenarios and assigning their own roles to Barbie, as demonstrated by some of the participants previously mentioned, in Carla’s understanding Barbie play consisted of making blonde Barbie the protagonist, Ken her object of affection, and the other dolls secondary actors. After all, this was how Mattel generally presented the dolls in the Barbie line. All the interactions with Barbie led Carla to develop a love/hate relationship with the doll. Barbie was everything that Carla admired – an independent career woman – and had everything Carla wanted – a sister or someone with whom to play and undying youth. Thus, Carla’s interactions with a different Barbie product allowed her to adapt her play practices and engagements with the doll to fit her needs and interrogate her own identities.

In the present, girls continue to experience Barbie not only through the dolls but also (and sometimes more often) through other products. The three girls that participated in this study and who currently play with Barbie illustrate Barbie’s continuing presence in girls’ lives beyond doll play: through books, DVDs, shows on Netflix, and videos on YouTube. Two sisters, K.C. and Annie, who are 11 and 9 years old respectively, talked about the various media they use to interact with Barbie stories. They particularly enjoy interacting with a book in which Barbie shows different careers that girls can aspire to be and explains what each career entails.

K.C.: This is a book about Barbie about what I want to be when I grow up. There is a cheerleader, a veterinarian, a racecar driver, a ballerina, chef, rocker, and a wedding planner.
Emily: So with this book, which has different careers, when Barbie and the others play, do they also have careers?
Annie: Yes. Like, for example. She has to go to work. Like one is a veterinarian, one is a chef…
Emily: So, they had their jobs.
Annie: It’s like they are real people. (K.C. and Annie, *Group 6 Transcript*)

The sisters’ interactions with this book allowed them to explore certain careers that Barbie has had throughout the years. As Annie pointed out, sometimes they incorporate these into their play with the dolls because they use the dolls to imitate what “real people” do. Moreover, this Barbie product and the doll itself inspired K.C. to imagine the possibility of becoming a fashion designer. She expressed during the interview that she loves to draw and she wants to be a fashion designer. In fact she has already drawn various designs. Sharon, who was 8 at the time, also interacted with Barbie through videos and movies and, like K.C., she is interested in design. Her mother described Sharon as someone who is artistic and who loves fashion. Sharon draws and creates her own fashion designs and uses her knowledge to repurpose objects and turn them into accessories or outfits for her dolls (for example turning a hair scrunchie into a shrug). Describing her interest in fashion, Sharon said:

I have my little diary of fashion things that I do not let anybody look at. […] Sometimes—I have three dolls and I have two that I like to play and design because this part is like all stuffing. So I kinda like use them like pincushions and put the clothes on them to like have a place like they’re sturdy. And then at the end I sew them. I made them both bathing suits. (Sharon, *Group 5 Transcript*)

K.C.’s and Sharon’s experiences resemble that of many girls including some of the participants in this study, – Carmen, Patricia, Camille, Isabel, and Emily – who expressed that at some point during their girlhood they dreamed of becoming a fashion designer.

Mattel’s presentation of Barbie and related products as vehicles through which girls can imagine, create, dream, and become someone/something else was illustrated through the narratives my participants shared about their play with Barbie. Girls in the
present, exemplified through Sharon, K.C., and Annie continue to use Barbie dolls and products to explore their identities either by following or rejecting Barbie’s ideas of femininity or by assigning roles to the dolls through which they can explore them. Their practices support what the scholarship about girls and identity construction suggests: that girls often use dolls to reconfigure meanings and ideas inscribed by society about what it means to be a girl (Weida, 2011; Wohlwhend 2009, 2015). Some of the aforementioned stories depict moments in which girls used Barbie dolls and products to create their own stories about girlhood and to dream about becoming someone else. With this in mind, the next section expands on girls’ and women’s use of Barbie to talk about, explore, create, or question their identities and presents my participants’ encounters with three important aspects of Barbie culture: femininity, body image, and race.

**Fashioning a Self: Participants’ Experiences of Identity with Barbie**

The stories of girls’ experiences with Barbie described in the previous section begin to showcase Barbie’s influence on girls’ lives. Through their interactions with Barbie culture, my participants constructed ideas of how they envisioned themselves and who they wanted to be. As previously explained, it is common for girls to use Barbie to construct identities, to question them, to negotiate them, and to encounter issues that are important to them. At the same time, these issues may not be so apparent to them during their girlhood, but become critical to their identities once they become adults. The second chapter of this dissertation highlighted some of the work that has identified key aspects within the culture of Barbie, specifically femininity, class, body, and race. In many
instances these issues can present problems of accessibility to Barbie. I explore then, how my participants confront and talk about these issues and what role the issues played in their identities. These were topics that emerged in many, though not all, of my conversations with participants, and which they experienced in very distinct ways.

Teaching to be a Girl: Barbie as the Epitome of (Affluent) Femininity

Many girls learn that in order to be “a girl” they must like Barbie. In the conversation with my family, my aunt made an observation that summarizes Barbie’s role as the epitome of femininity and as marker of normative girlhood: “It’s just that at that time [the 1960s], a girl could not be without a Barbie” (Lourdes, Group 1 Transcript). Lourdes, however, was not the only participant who identified Barbie as an artifact that girls had to have. According to Jessica, she never experienced opposition from her parents to play with Barbie because the doll was held as the “classic” girl object. She perceived how everyone believed that, “If you’re a girl, you have to like Barbie. And it was like automatic. Every Christmas you’d get one” (Jessica, Group 2 Transcript).

Carla stated that she used Barbie because “all the girls played with Barbie” (Carla, Interview Transcript). The idea these and other participants received from those around them was that if you were a girl, you needed to have a Barbie doll. Notably, for most of the participants Barbie was also an artifact they desired and enjoyed, but their assertions elucidate Barbie’s status as the epitome of femininity and the quintessential “girl” toy. In response to this idea, some girls preferred not to interact with Barbie. Elsa (28), who participated briefly in a group interview, remembered having received Barbie dolls as
birthday presents, but never paying much attention to them. As she explained, “My mom knew that I did not like them so she didn’t buy them, but other people would give them to me for my birthday, but I didn’t pay much attention. […] It’s just that I saw them so plastic, I don’t know. I didn’t see myself in Barbie” (Elsa, Group 3 Transcript). Her disassociation with Barbie came as a result of not seeing herself reflected in Barbie, not so much in the doll’s physical appearance, but rather in the ideas of femininity it represented.

Girls also learn to be girls through Barbie when they receive messages about femininity embodied in the image created for Barbie, for example that femininity is almost exclusively about fashion and beauty. In her description of Barbie, Barbara Coleman notes that, “In all her manifestations, Barbie reveals American cultural ideals of femininity, beauty, and gender roles” (2001, p. 64). The brand of femininity that Barbie promotes is very specific: affluent White heterosexual femininity. Before discussing how girls experienced Barbie’s middle/upper-middle class femininity, I present the ways in which the construction of girlhood was presented to them.

Throughout the group interview between colleagues (Group 3) participants Lisa and Frankie constantly identified as “tomboys,” especially during their childhoods, while Isabel participated in “tomboy” activities. Lisa remembered playing Barbie for about three years of her childhood and then becoming more interested in playing sports and “playing in the streets.” She added, “I was very ‘tomboy’ too, always climbing up trees and lampposts” (Lisa, Group 3 Transcript). Frankie also identified as a “tomboy” and remembered that once she moved to Puerto Rico, she exchanged her Barbie play for mostly outdoor activities. Isabel made clear distinctions between how she would behave
according to the type of play at hand: “I could play like a tomboy, very rough with my cousins, and when I played with the Barbies I could be very delicate and I took care of them” (Isabel, *Group 3 Transcript*). In some ways Isabel was learning how to be a girl through Barbie by adopting the “appropriate” behavior when she was interacting with the doll. While the doll was not created as an educational toy – something creator Ruth Handler made clear (Gerber 2009) – the doll became an educational toy that taught girls how to be girls. According to Gerber (2009), Handler once told a reporter that Barbie “is a very educational product: the children learn color coordination, fashion design, good grooming, hair styling, good manners, and people relationships – they interrelate through social situations” (p. 150). Despite the criticism that Barbie promoted a sexist view of women, Gerber (2009) notes that mothers were seeing Barbie’s value as a tool to educate girls: “‘She was such a tomboy before,’ one mother wrote. ‘Now I’ve been able to get her to wash her face and comb her hair’” (p. 113). Thus, the doll did serve an “educational” purpose by teaching conduct and how to be a proper lady, by teaching girls how to be a girl. In Isabel’s case, she knew that her behavior while interacting with the doll should be different from her behavior while playing with her cousins.

Girls also learn what it means to “be a girl” as soon as they are born and sometimes even before. Lipkin (2009) writes that in American culture, “the pink cap is put on [girls] shortly after birth” (p. 1). Even before birth, babies are already assigned colors according to their gender – blue for boys and pink for girls. In the hospital children will be coded and gendered either blue or pink. A girl will be brought home from the hospital and her room will be decorated with different shades of pink, she will find that mostly the clothes available to her are pink, and she will know which aisles in the toy
store are for her based on the predominant color, pink. These practices are no different in Puerto Rico, where baby showers, children’s birthday parties, children’s bedrooms, and toy aisles are generally coded either blue or pink. Ostensibly, these practices are a result of the influence from U.S. culture into the Island due to its position as a U.S. territory. In Isabel’s experience, she was introduced to pink as soon as she was brought home from the hospital: “When I was born the first thing they did was paint my whole room pink. All the walls were pink! Even the ceiling was pink!” (Isabel, Group 3 Transcript). While there is a push toward changing this marked use of colors to immediately impose gender identities to children, the binary still exists. Some of my participants brought up conversations about the color pink and Barbie and how they related to them. Alondra (32), for example, noted that she was not a fan of Barbie merchandise other than the toys, mainly due to the predominant use of pink in most of the products:

I think I didn’t even like the clothes, or the coloring books, or the decorations for girls’ bedrooms. I didn’t like that the predominant color was pink. That’s why I fell in love with the motorhome, which was purple and blue. And I played hard with the hospital, which was blue. (Alondra, e-mail Interview)

Similarly the girls in the present recognized the almost exclusive use of pink in the products that feature Barbie, and some of them even expressed a strong dislike of the imposition of this color as the color for girls. The following is an exchange with Sharon, who expressed a desire for more color options in the Barbie merchandise:

Emily: Are there things that you don’t like about Barbie?
Sharon: Yes. She’s always dressed in pink!
Emily: And you don’t like pink all the time?
Sharon: No. I like blue. I love blue! That’s what I liked that for a change she wore purple. I made her a blue dress but it’s not that pretty. It was like a set that you could make and put stickers on it.
Emily: So you wish there would be more colors for Barbie?
Sharon: Yes. (Sharon, Group 5 Transcript)
Like Sharon, whose favorite color was not (exclusively) pink as is assumed for all girls, K.C. and Annie also liked other colors. When K.C. described the Disney princess doll Tiana as her favorite, one of the reasons she provided was that the doll’s dress was green, which is her favorite color.

Historically, Barbie products were not always pink and pink was not always a “girl” color. In fact, in 1920 pink was considered a masculine color (Adams 2009). Adams also points out that “Since World War II, the use of gender-coded décor (especially pink and blue) has been unchanging in children’s bedrooms” (2010, p. 60). In the present cultural associations of girls with the color pink remain strongly ingrained in our ideas of gender identity. Through my research at the Strong Museum of Play I had the opportunity to examine a wide array of Barbie products, including the first Barbie dreamhouse, whose façade was painted blue. The colors inside the first Barbie house were varied, bright, and possibly not what culturally would be considered now “girly,” or at least they were not overly saturated with pink. The walls were bright yellow with bright red accents, the furniture resembled wood, the pillows and other accessories were dark blue, and the carpets were yellow and red. Her house was mostly decorated with primary colors as opposed to the overpowering of pink that is used in the present. While she is a fashion icon, her first house was not entirely about fashion, like modern Barbie houses are. In her living room there was a TV, a couple of magazines on the coffee table, and shelves with books that were not about fashion. In my conversation with Isabel and Frankie, I noted that Barbie was not always associated with pink, but that there was a time when suddenly “everything that was for girls had to be pink, and it still is that way
now” (Emily, *Group 3 Transcript*). Frankie suggested that, “it’s also a phase because even though I played with Barbies and everything was pink, I didn’t want to be a Barbie. I did want a boyfriend like Ken, but the expectations were too high to be a Barbie” (Frankie, *Group 3 Transcript*). Frankie did not adopt pink as a color that defined her identity, but she also did not identify with the doll, which could have served as the entry point into the color pink. Frankie’s comment also highlights an important aspect of girls’ identities in relation to Barbie: perceiving the doll as the model of what girls should dream of becoming and then learning that this is almost impossible to achieve. Barbie’s model of femininity may prove difficult for girls to attain because it involves very specific characteristics. The most notable is the doll’s physical appearance, which I discuss in the next section. This, however, is not the only unattainable aspect of Barbie’s femininity that scholars have identified. According to critics, the doll’s life centers on being a consumer – of fashion, of cars, of houses, and of a luxurious lifestyle (Forman-Brunell, 2002; Hades, 2001; Morgan, n.d.; Rand 1995, among others).

Scholars have argued that Barbie presents femininity as something to be consumed, and as a result, girls have to become avid consumers of everything that Barbie offers. Barbie invites its player to become a consumer in various ways. The doll is known for her extensive and expensive wardrobe, which grows larger every year as Mattel continues to produce new designs. Clothes are an essential part of Barbie’s life and the image she promotes, as she is after all a fashion doll. Hence, the doll is perceived as a “fashion leader” (Morgan, n.d.) because Barbie is always up to date with and even sets the current fashion trends. Some of the participants, especially those who were the first generation of Barbie players, talked about loving Barbie precisely because of her fashion.
The first generations of Barbie dolls were about depicting sophistication or as Lourdes and Carmen described it, “She was never a doctor or a nurse… she was always high fashion, a model” (Lourdes, Group 1 Transcript). Patricia, who owns a collection of more than two hundred dolls, remembered vividly why she began collecting. As other participants expressed, Barbie’s clothes were fascinating to her and they were the objects of her desire. Yet, because they were so expensive, even more expensive than the doll, her mother could not afford them or would not spend money of them.

Yes, sometimes I would make the clothes, but I wanted her clothes. And that’s what I have been collecting, her clothes, which I could not have when I was little. And so as an adult, whenever I saw a little dress, I’d buy it. And I have been putting money together to complete them. I see the books with the dresses. That one came with the book². That little book is what would sell the doll because one would look at the book and begin to dream. (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

Forman-Brunell notes that in the post-war years, when the doll was created, “Though dressed in her foundational bathing suit, Barbie’s extensive wardrobe exemplified the ethos of an expanding consumer culture where spending replaced saving. While thrift and frugality had prevailed among Depression and war-time generations these were no longer valued; Americans were encouraged to find fulfillment in goods and gadgets” (Forman-Brunell, 2002, par. 4). Barbie’s clothes are not the sole example of Barbie’s luxurious life. With so many houses (beach houses, Dreamhouse, and mansions) and vehicles (Corvettes, campers, motorcycles, and airplanes), a real person would have to be a millionaire to afford them (Morgan, n.d.). Currently, it is not the doll and play sets alone that invite those who play with her to be consumers; Barbie electronic games, fashion plates, and even books constantly remind the audience – the consumer—that it is important to buy. In his examination of how children’s books have become venues for
corporations to produce profit and to capitalize from children’s culture Hade (2001) argues that, “children today are viewed by the large corporations who make children’s books not as readers of books, but as consumers of ideas” (p. 164). The same can be said for toys, as big corporations and producers of toys view children as the main group of consumers of the ideas their toys promote. Rather than playing with toys for the sake of playing, corporations see in children an opportunity to promote certain ideas; with Barbie, those who play with her are presented with ideas that value beauty and luxury, having an extensive wardrobe, cars, and living a life of leisure.

Beyond the values and ideas of femininity that the doll promotes through her products, many of my participants encountered Barbie’s embodiment of affluent femininity in the limited access they had to some of these products. Carmen and Lourdes emphasized many times how expensive Barbie’s clothes were at the time they played with the doll during the early 1960s. Without being prompted to talk about class or the prices for Barbie artifacts, the sisters talked about, numerous times in our conversation, the accessibility to Barbie paraphernalia. As they described their love for Barbie because of her fashion and their own love for high fashion, they stressed this point:

Carmen: We arrived to Puerto Rico in 1960. Barbie came out in ’59. And it was like a novelty. And so our parents would give us a little bit of money and, like Lourdes said, we would go buy them clothes, which were really expensive. At that time Barbie clothes were like $6 or $7.
Lourdes: The money Carmen and I saved was for Barbie clothes. But it was expensive clothes.
Carmen: They were expensive, but fashion.
Lourdes: It wasn’t like today’s clothes.
Carmen: And it was satin.
Lourdes: And what was made of leather, it was real leather.
Carmen: And we didn’t buy more because it was really expensive. (Carmen and Lourdes, Group 1 Transcript)
Patricia, who also grew up during the ‘60s, discussed how the prices of Barbie clothes posed a limitation in her access to the doll’s accessories:

My mother would buy me, well these. Those that are over here. Every time new outfits came out, I asked for them for my birthday, for Christmas. And she didn’t like them because they were really small clothes and really expensive. So she saw them as little. But I, I wanted Barbie and the clothes cost more than the doll.

(Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

This is not new in the study of Barbie culture and it is not exclusive to Puerto Rican girls. As noted in the review of the literature that informed this study, many low-income and even middle-class families cannot afford the plethora of products that are supposed to accompany the doll in children’s play with Barbie, especially if they have to be the “real thing.” As Rand (1995) points out, “Barbie’s status often depended on the brand name as well as the product. Early Barbie commercials direct viewers to look for the Mattel tag to make sure of getting authentic Barbie products” (p. 96). While many of my participants did not mind having homemade clothes or creating their own objects of play to use with Barbie (like using shoe boxes as bed), they were well aware of the significance the presence of the Mattel name had in the quality of the product. The Mattel brand bestows a certain value to the product that identifies it as “authentic,” but those who cannot afford the “real” product may feel like their play cannot be complete without it. Jessica, for instance, always longed for one particular play set that she never received because it was not affordable for her family.

And if I can tell you something that they never gave me, and that made me mad because that was something I did want, it was when the Barbie store came out. It was like a clothing store set, like a fashionista. It was like a platform with fitting rooms, but my parents never bought it. It was too expensive (Jessica, Group 2 Transcript)
For Susan (40) not having a Barbie at a specific point of her girlhood created a feeling of shame because she could not become part of what was assumed was part of every girl’s experience.

Susan: [...] But Barbie for me, I mean if I can say something. There’s something I don’t like about Barbie. Well, two things that are really important for me. First, that, at least during the time I grew up, because now mothers make any sacrifice possible to buy their children what they want. But they were really expensive, and not every girl had access. On one occasion, I was in the fifth grade, a teacher told all the girls, “Bring your Barbies to class,” assuming that everyone had a Barbie. I didn’t have a Barbie. So I was really “happy” [said sarcastically], you could imagine. Those are things that… I am a teacher, and I am very careful about that because of the experiences I have gone through.

Emily: Yes, because one cannot think that all students have access to everything. So what did you do?

Susan: Nothing. I don’t remember because I always remember that after that happened my mother bought me a Barbie. With a lot of sacrifice. And she gave it to me and I always remember that doll was one that a girl brought to class when the teacher asked for them. It had a nightgown and a teddy bear. (Susan, Group 6 Transcript)

Jessica’s, Susan’s, and other participants’ experiences show how capital and socioeconomic class create certain affordances – physical and social – that impact the kinds of play opportunities that are available to children when they interact with Barbie. Furthermore, Susan’s childhood experience illustrates the way that Barbie can become a signifier of class and of affluent femininity. Susan’s teacher’s assumptions that every girl had a Barbie doll speak to the doll’s status as the epitome of femininity, as an object that all girls must have (as perceived by many participants), and to the limited interactions some girls may actually have with her.
A Plastic Supermodel: Relating to Barbie’s Impossible Body

A related aspect of Barbie play that many girls experience is identifying or not identifying with the doll due to her physical characteristics. According to various sources (Lord, 1994; Rand, 1995; Wood, 2002), the doll’s physicality was based on a character from a popular German comic strip. This character’s name was Lilli, and her appeal was more for adult men: she is often referred to as a prostitute. Participant Carmen noticed Barbie’s sexualized body when she was a girl playing with the doll. When describing Barbie’s arrival to Puerto Rico, Carmen and Lourdes remembered her as a novelty because it was a different type of doll from what girls usually owned. It had much to do with her body, which unbeknownst to Carmen and Lourdes – and possibly many girls at the time – had such controversial origins.

Carmen: She was also a novelty because she was a doll that had a body, breasts, and that was something that… also a waist.
Lourdes: It was something that you didn’t see in a doll at the time.
Carmen: It was the first doll, at least that I knew about that was like… it was almost like pornographic to have her naked. You couldn’t have her naked or anything because imagine that, she had a body and all.

(Carmen and Lourdes, Group 1 Transcript)

Since Lilli served as the inspiration for Barbie, it is not surprising that her proportions are somewhat exaggerated, which perhaps causes girls to not be able to identify with her, or worse to go to extremes in order to look like her. The fact that Barbie was produced as a fashion doll contributes to her unusual proportions, which have usually been the center of feminist critique. These “unusual proportions” have been researched and argued to be impossible for real women. For instance, studies made by the Wellness Resource Center at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee confirmed that a human version
Barbie’s body proportions, the message girls receive from Barbie’s figure, the effects girls’ interactions with the doll may have on their self-esteem, and other issues related to the body have been at the center of Barbie criticism (see for instance, Dittmar et al., 2006; Lipkin, 2009; Quindlen, 1999; Rand 1995). According to Gerber (2009) in the 1960s, “Ruth roundly rejected criticism of Barbie as encouraging a sexist view of women or as harmful to young girls’ view of themselves” (p. 113) and “had never understood or agreed with the criticism of Barbie as somehow damaging to girls’ image of themselves” (p. 250). Ruth Handler saw the toy as exactly that, and she had no interest in dictating the fantasies that girls played out through Barbie. As the stories already described in this chapter suggest, a girl can experience Barbie in very different ways compared to another girl. Interactions with Barbie are not one-dimensional, and the messages that girls receive from the doll and other products can vary according to the specific context and situation where they take place. Not all participants of this study discussed their perceptions of Barbie’s body or their own experiences of body image. However, among those who addressed the topic the responses and perspectives were varied. For some of the participants in this study their interactions with Barbie, and Barbie’s body, did not pose any issues about their own body image. In contrast, for some, it was difficult to ignore Barbie’s unattainable body and not compare it to their own.
These complex interactions with Barbie are explored in this section, beginning with my own.

Growing up with Barbie I never felt that I had to look like her – to have a body like hers, her hair, her eyes – or at least I do not remember having experienced those thoughts. I do remember dreaming of developing breasts at some point, and stuffing my bra to imagine how it would look. This was something most of my friends did as well, but I never linked it to my interactions with Barbie. However, as the literature on memories suggests, sometimes we misremember or reconstruct our memories to create an image of our own selves (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Muñoz, 1999). Perhaps I have forgotten about moments when I wanted to look like Barbie or wanted to have her body.

Similarly, other participants did not remember having encountered issues with the doll’s proportions. Alondra (32), for example, indicated that she did not remember paying attention to Barbie’s body. From Alondra’s perspective, the criticism about Barbie places too much responsibility on the doll and not so much on the circumstances surrounding the girls who are affected:

For me Barbie was pretty, but I never noticed her body was unrealistic. [...] Every time I read the criticism on Barbie I think that the majority of girls recreate life and circumstances similar to theirs in their play, and that she’s not the doll responsible of any insecurity or complex. Instead, it’s the environment and the education that surround the girl or the boy. (Alondra, e-mail Interview)

Commenting on the topic of body image and people who change their appearance because of unrealistic beauty standards, Susan, who is a mother of two girls, believed these issues are a direct result of a lack of education to children. She said,

I also think there is a lack of education to our children. Because if you teach children values, to love themselves the way they are, the way God made them, then they wouldn’t have reason to wish to be like others. And then, if there is a
pretty doll, that’s good, there’s diversity. We can be a little fat or a little thin, and we are pretty and we are loved the same way. But they don’t teach those things to children anymore. Now it’s like, “You have to be like this. Don’t eat because you’ll get fat. Girl, your cheeks are too big! Look at those big legs!” None of that matters! (Susan, Group 6 Transcript)

While some scholars have highlighted the influence the child’s environment has on the messages they receive from Barbie dolls (McDonough, 1999) or that Barbie’s messages are not solely negative (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell 2000), others have found that Barbie dolls have a certain degree of influence on girls’ self-esteem. Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive (2006), who worked with girls of different ages, argue that while dolls do not have so much influence on older girls (teenagers), an early exposure to dolls can influence girls to desire an unrealistic body, which could contribute to a risk of developing self-esteem issues.

Participants Patricia and Gabriela did not view Barbie as an object that could send distorted ideas of body image to girls who came in contact with her. Both participants claimed that they never desired to look like Barbie and that her figure was not problematic, though their thinking showed more complex negotiations:

[…]

And what people say about the body…well, I had four children, and I was always thin. You know, because they say that Barbie dolls don’t have a realistic body, and that’s not true. It is real. It’s real because I was always thin. And I had four children and I stayed thin.

[…]

But I identified a lot with her [Barbie]. I always tried to dress like her, to stay thin. It’s just that you have to take care of yourself. Look, I’ve seen women whose faces are pretty, but they start eating and eating… they lose their beauty. If they only knew how beautiful they are! That beautiful face, they would stop eating, but no! […] (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

Patricia’s recounting of her experience with Barbie suggested that there was no influence from the doll on her own views of beauty. From her standpoint, she wanted to
emulate Barbie’s elegance by trying to dress like her, taking care of herself, and staying in shape, but she did not perceive it as a negative influence from the doll. However, in saying that Barbie had no influence and immediately denoting that Barbie’s body is real because it was similar to her own, Patricia may serve as an indication that there is a degree of influence by the doll, even if it is unnoticed by those who play with Barbie. It is interesting to notice Patricia’s own notions about Barbie precisely because she appears to have internalized certain beauty ideals without realizing where they may have originated. Similarly her daughter Gabriela (25) attested that she never experienced thinking she had to be perfect like Barbie was: “I liked them. And I never felt like, ‘Oh, I have to be perfect like Barbie’.” (Gabriela, Group 4 Transcript). Patricia agreed to this statement and commented on how women often have a pretty face, but they let themselves go by eating too much and then “lose their beauty” (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript). She continued describing a specific case of a woman she knew who was pretty, but, according to Patricia, had let herself go by eating too much.

Look, I knew a woman who was a teacher, a precious woman, blonde hair, blue eyes. But she was overweight. And I guess everyone told her, “You’re so beautiful,” and she lost weight. I don’t know what she did, but she lost weight. And she got pretty again. Well, even her husband left her because he had married a beautiful woman. (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

Patricia’s unexamined ideological assumptions that emerged through her opposing statements specifically illustrate one of the ideals about beauty that critics argue Barbie promotes: that in order to be beautiful you must have the perfect looks. These looks, based on Barbie and based on Patricia’s description involve being thin yet busty, having the right curves in the right places, and having a pretty face. (Note that a pretty face consists of blue or green eyes, like Barbie’s eyes. This particular characteristic
described in Patricia’s statement is examined further in Chapter 5). Her comments about the body and ideal beauty are not exclusive to her individually; rather, they are a product of our culture. In Puerto Rico women are constantly told that they have “Una cara bonita, pero…” or “A pretty face, but…” When Patricia talked about body image, she expressed certain ideas that are very ingrained in our culture – the idea that if you are not thin, you are not beautiful; or in other words, “She has a pretty face, but…”. It is interesting that this notion is propagated so much in a culture that exhibits such pride in having curvy and voluptuous women, famously worldwide Jennifer Lopez and more locally Iris Chacón. As Negrón-Muntaner (2004) proposes, “for boricuas the big rear end acts as an identification site for Latinas to reclaim their beauty” especially in the U.S. (p. 240). This is an intriguing aspect of the values of beauty woven into the cultural fabric of Latino populations, Puerto Ricans in this case. It holds curvy women in high regards but also asks them to watch their figure. It is a culture that reveres the voluptuous body while it simultaneously values the more American ideal of beauty promoted in various media, including Barbie dolls.

It is no surprise then that the names “Barbie” along with the doll’s male counterpart “Ken” have become synonymous to beauty. Lipkin (2009) notes that the mention of either name evokes the images of “women and men who emulate or resemble the dolls’ physical presentations and, correspondingly, a kind of vapid look that both dolls share” (p. 55). A short conversation between Lisa (45) and Frankie (30) reveals the meaning of the name Barbie in relation to beauty ideals in addition to more negative connotations:
Frankie: There’s still that concept of looking like Barbie or being like a Barbie.

Lisa: And in movies they make reference a lot to looking like Barbie. Also when they’re a bimbo. I just remembered the movie *Legally Blonde* in the second part when they call her a “Malibu Barbie.”

Frankie: It’s also used in a derogatory manner. They use it to call someone dumb or clueless. (Frankie and Lisa, *Group 3 Transcript*)

Being called “a Barbie,” according to both participants can be in reference to a person’s looks, mainly taken to mean that the person is beautiful (and possibly white and blonde) and that they have a “perfect” body. However, it can also refer to the person’s intellect, suggesting that they are dumb, airhead, and not intellectual at all. The notions about the “perfect person” that the dolls’ names raise are further propelled through the lessons about heteronormativity girls learn through them. Frankie, for example, shared that she “always wanted a boyfriend like Ken” (Frankie, *Group 3 Transcript*). When Jessica (30) encountered Barbie’s and Ken’s bodies she learned that she needed to look like Barbie if she wanted to find someone who looked like Ken. After all, he was the male version of Barbie.

I thought I had to look like her. Yes, because it was like that’s how you’d find the perfect boyfriend, which was Ken. Which is also an ideology about how a man should look. If I see a man like that, I’d be like, “There’s nothing down there!” [Laughs] (Jessica, *Group 2 Transcript*)

Thus far I have mostly described my participants’ experiences of Barbie’s body as something that did not completely affect them or how they perceived it as something that had no negative effects. What Jessica’s observation suggests is that some girls feel pressured to look like Barbie in order to fulfill the heteronormative expectations of finding a suitable man. Carla’s experience with Barbie saw her identifying the doll as “frenemy,” mainly because Barbie embodied everything that Carla was not.
You know me since I was little. You know that I was always a little fat. So, for me Barbie was a “frenemy.” Barbie for me was a friend because I played with Barbie, but Barbie also represented everything I was not. And sometimes what we would like to be, a little bit, like very deep inside. But when you’re a child you don’t know how to channel that. Everything for you is anger and ire and sometimes even a little bit of jealousy, when you’re a child. You know? And you channel that the way a child does. (Carla, Interview Transcript).

Carla viewed and still views Barbie as a “frenemy,” a term she used during the interview various times and which refers to a friend that is also an enemy. Her experience serves as an example of how complex girls’ interactions with Barbie are and how their perceptions of the doll can be conflicting. Carla considered Barbie a friend because it was one of her favorite toys and one with which she played regularly. However, that was not Barbie’s only role in Carla’s life. The doll represented an ideal that Carla did not think she could achieve. When Carla looked at a Barbie doll she did not see herself reflected in it. This provoked emotions of anger, of jealousy, and of frustration toward the doll. Interestingly, as described earlier in this chapter, it was through the doll that Carla often channeled her emotions. Thus, the very artifact that sometimes caused her pain was the artifact that helped her work through it. Moreover, in this description of Carla’s perception of Barbie I noticed a sense of shame, like many women who have played with Barbie demonstrate, as noted by Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2000). When Carla was telling me that, “Barbie also represented everything I was not. And sometimes what we would like to be, a little bit, like very deep inside,” the tone of her voice changed. Despite being the only two people in a room of a library, Carla said the last piece in a quieter voice, as if she had been somewhat embarrassed for ever wanting to be like Barbie, even if it had been “a little bit.”
Mariela (30), in contrast, did not remember encountering many issues with Barbie’s body when she was playing with the doll. She did identify one particular issue that made her envy Barbie’s body.

Well, what frustrated me… My main thing with the body was that I always wanted to have big and perky breasts, just like she had. They were like very spectacular, but that never happened. But that was, about Barbie’s body, the only thing. The rest, well—because Barbies had flat butts and their small waist didn’t cause me stress because I was thin at that time. Not in the beginning. In the beginning when I was little I probably didn’t have that malice. At the end, when I was 12 or 13, that’s when you start to imitate her, wanting to look like her.

(Mariela, Group 2 Transcript)

The interest Mariela showed in having breasts like Barbie once she became a teenager was similar to my own experience, and possibly that of many teenagers who are entering puberty and already want to have the body of an adult. Author Pamela Brant writes precisely about the attention teenagers pay to Barbie’s breasts: “We weren’t interested in any other part of the anatomy but Barbie’s breasts. […] Their stability and solidity were impressive” (1999, pp. 53-54). In contrast to the experiences documented in some of the research about Barbie, Mariela’s only issue growing up was about wanting to have breasts like Barbie, rather than everything else in her body. This was because Mariela viewed her thin body as similar to Barbie’s, but also because there was nothing else about Barbie’s body she considered worthy of envy (notably the fact that Barbie’s butt was too “flat” in Mariela’s opinion). Despite not having encountered many issues with Barbie’s body during her girlhood, in the present as an adult and a mother, Mariela felt differently:

Look, after all the polemic, scandals, and everything that’s happened with Barbie, which they’ve looked for ways of making different models, I keep seeing the same reality. I don’t notice much difference, but they have come out with versions that are more flat-chested, with a less defined waist, and I think that’s good. But their publicity should be based upon not giving much importance to looks, something that educates. If Barbie is already an educational tool, the tool for
entertainment for girls, they should make a campaign based on how to educate for good self-esteem and that person can grow up appreciating what she has. I don’t see that happening much in reality. And so, from my part, it’s not something I would deny my daughter, but it’s also something that I won’t force, that she has to play with Barbie. […] (Mariela, Group 2 Transcript)

Mariela saw Barbie as an educational tool, whether the inherent purpose of the doll is to educate or not. She understands Barbie as a toy that sends a message to girls, and girls receive those messages according to their own lived experiences. Barbie is also, in Mariela’s opinion, a tool to entertain girls, so girls are often in contact with the doll. As a result, she stresses the importance of Mattel shifting the message and the marketing campaigns toward focusing on girls’ self-esteem and moving the attention away from the doll’s looks. This is something that Mattel has done through various campaigns that attempt to highlight Barbie’s careers and the possibilities that girls create through Barbie, for instance with the “We Girls Can Do Anything ” campaign in the ‘80s and ‘90s and the “Imagine the Possibilities” ad in 2015. Nevertheless, critics point to the continuous focus on the physical and that “the majority of Barbies and her female friends have activities and accouterments that emphasize the body” (Jones, 1999, p. 94).

The girls that currently play with Barbie did not indicate that Barbie’s body has negatively affected the views about their own body image. In fact, neither Sharon (8) nor K.C. (11) discussed Barbie’s body proportions, nor did they mention their own perspectives about body image. Out of the three girls I interviewed, Annie (9) was the most vocal about Barbie’s body. Yet, girls made observations about the differences in the bodies of their various dolls. During part of the conversation with sisters K.C. and Annie the discussion turned onto a doll called Nancy. The girls talked about the differences between this doll and Barbie, and according to them, the Nancy doll is an adult like
Barbie, but her body proportions are nothing like Barbie’s. This one, they said, has a rounder figure, has chubbier legs, and wears tennis shoes. “She’s like us!,” added Annie. When I followed up on her comment by asking, “Do you think Barbie is not so much like you? When you look at Barbie you don’t think she is like you?” Annie responded, “No, because not all women are that thin” (Annie, Group 6 Transcript). Annie’s comments about how the Nancy doll is more “like us” and Barbie in contrast does not look like her are important aspects of her own identity. Annie did not express any discomfort with her own body, but she understood that her body was very different from Barbie’s. In her observations of both dolls, there was a clear identification with the doll that had a rounder figure and looked more like her and a disassociation from the doll that looks like a model.

Annie was also the one who brought up an important issue about Barbie’s potential influence on girls’ and adults’ identities. For some scholars and critics, not only is the doll’s image problematic for girls’ self-esteem and views on body image as they are growing up, but these views may transfer into adulthood. Women wanting to resemble Barbie dolls have gone to the extent of undergoing surgery in order to look like a life-size version of the doll. Such are the cases of Cindy Jackson, who by 1993 had undergone nineteen operations (Lord, 1994), and more recently Valeriya Lukyanova (also known as “human Barbie”) who claims her striking resemblance to Barbie comes from genetics and make-up tricks, denying she has undergone surgery (Beck, 2012). Yet, her Barbie-like figure does provoke the opinion that there has been some surgery involved. A brief conversation between mother Susan (40) and daughter Annie (9) discussed precisely the extremes to which people go in order to look like Barbie and even Ken.
Annie: Now I’m going to tell you something that happened with a woman and a man. First, the woman had so many operations done, this was a long time ago. She had so many surgeries done that she turned herself into a Barbie. And she was the same, blue eyes and blonde.

Susan: That is not normal because if we look at Barbie on a real scale, you are not going to find a woman who looks like that. Unless it has been done through surgery, like that woman. But in terms of the size of her breast which is what Annie was saying, it’s exaggerated. The woman’s. It’s that she did not do it like Barbie’s. She made it bigger than Barbie’s. A friend of ours was telling us about the Puerto Rican Barbie and Ken – no, the Barbie and Ken is the Puerto Rican one, she isn’t.

Annie: The Ken is Puerto Rican, but he did not look like Ken at all, only when he cut his hair.

Susan: By the way, he died.

Annie: When he was 20 because he had so much plastic in his body, and he wanted to have plastic wings and…

Susan: There were complications during his operation and – apparently there were other health issues, but he had many surgeries done. On his lips, his eyes, his nose, all over his body. He exercised a lot. And in reality, he didn’t look like Ken. But he said he was the Ken. (Susan and Annie, *Group 6 Transcript*)

In this conversation we see the perspectives of both an adult and a girl who think Barbie’s body is an exaggeration. Furthermore, they think it is dangerous that sometimes people want so much to look like Barbie or like Ken that they undergo dangerous surgeries. Annie, along with her mother Susan, was well aware of the dangers posed when a person overvalues Barbie and Ken’s bodies to the point of altering their own.

Thus, while Annie may not receive negative messages from Barbie or she may not internalize those messages, she brought up how other people have been influenced by the dolls to the point of changing their physical appearance. In a precarious developmental phase such as girlhood, internalizing messages that prompt girls to view themselves negatively can be dangerous.
This section highlighted how the girls who played with Barbie encountered Barbie’s infamous body. Their experiences, which were varied and complex, depict the wide range of interactions girls may have with the doll and how the experiences are closely tied to girls’ lived experiences and their worldviews. Some of the participants attested to having never received any damaging messages from the doll, while others encountered difficult and sometimes-conflicting interactions with Barbie. The opportunity to identify with the doll either physically or through her lifestyle can serve as venues for girls to see themselves reflected in their toys. Yet, at times the combination of her body shape and other aspects of Barbie’s physical appearance may deny girls the opportunity to identify with the doll. As the beginning of the next section elucidates, girls may look at Barbie’s body and feel that it’s impossible to achieve it, while simultaneously there is nothing else with which they can identify (for example, her hair). The following discussion begins with such aspects of Barbie’s appearance and continues with a discussion of color, not only in Barbie’s hair but more importantly, her skin. The discussion highlights women’s and girls’ encounters with race, and also points out the discourse participants, including myself, used to talk about race.

**Colors of the (Barbie) World: Encountering Race and Ethnicity**

When working with girls’ construction of identity through dolls one of the most important aspects is being able to see themselves reflected in the doll (Chin, 1999; Hains, 2012; Rand 1995). While the previous section addressed issues of identity in relation to Barbie’s presentation of body image, in this section I shift the focus towards Barbie’s
representation of race. Contextualized in the experiences of Puerto Rican girls and women, these two aspects of identity have much in common. As I mentioned before, Puerto Rican (and Latino) culture cherishes both the curvy body and Barbie’s voluptuous yet slim figure. The curves and buttocks that are highly venerated are closely tied to race. As Negrón-Muntaner (2004) explains, “A reference to this part of the human anatomy is often a way of speaking about Africa in(side) America” (p. 233). Moreover, she adds that when it comes to racial identity and encountering Barbie’s race, it is the hair that plays a central role. After all, playing with Barbie’s hair is reportedly one of the (if not the) favorite activities girls engage in while playing with the doll. In part of the accounts that follow in this section, Barbie’s hair was a chief player in girls’ encounters with race.

Sarasohn-Kah (1996) delineates Mattel’s attempts at addressing diversity among the Barbie products so they reflect the growing diversity in the population in the U.S.

Growing ethnic diversity in the U.S. has played a role in the design of Barbie dolls since the mid-1960s. In 1967, ‘Colored Francie’ (#1100) was presented as the first Black doll in the Barbie product line. Francie was the first so-called ‘colored’ friend of Barbie (which is the way her ethnicity is treated on the doll’s packaging). In 1968, Mattel introduced two additional Black dolls to Barbie’s world: Talking Julia (#1128) and Talking Christie (#1126). […] In 1977, Mattel presented Hawaiian Barbie (#7470), a new ethnic variation…” (p. 143)

It was not until 1980 that Black and Hispanic dolls named “Barbie” were introduced into the Barbie line. It is important to note here that carrying the actual name “Barbie” as opposed to Christie, Francie, or Teresa, among others legitimates the dolls as the Barbie. While the other names represent Barbie’s friends or family members, being Barbie means being the central figure. Nonetheless, as will be discussed through the perspectives of some participants, this does not always hold true. Mattel’s efforts to diversify Barbie and address the concerns about race materialized in the creation of the “ethnically correct”
fashion doll Shani and her friends Asha and Nichelle in 1991 (Chin, 1999). Mattel saw these dolls as the answer to major criticism about their Barbies of color. These new dolls were not like other dolls Mattel had produced as they came in light, medium, and dark skin tones and their faces were sculpted differently from Barbie dolls, “purportedly based on real African American faces” (Chin, 1999, p. 305). This line was discontinued in 1999, although the head and body molds kept being used for other dolls in the Barbie line.

Despite these efforts, the experiences my participants shared described the limited availability of Barbies of color and the continuous placement of white Barbie as the true Barbie doll. Jessica and Mariela, for example, complained about the lack of diversity in Barbie dolls and how they were not able to completely identify with Barbie as a result.

Emily: Jessica, you were saying that you were tired of the blonde ones.
Jessica: Yes.
Emily: Did you want her to look more like you?
Jessica: Yes. I mean, I say that I was never a typical girl who played with Barbie. But I used to say, “Why do they have to be blonde?” Because I was not blonde, I didn’t have blue eyes. You know? I never had a body like Barbie’s. And I think that’s why there came a time that – I stopped playing when I was 13, but since a little before I had lost interest. Because I couldn’t find any similarities with me.

Mariela: You couldn’t identify. The same happened to me. That’s why I liked Teresa more because she looked more natural than the typical blonde Barbie. (Jessica and Mariela, Group 2 Transcript)

“Racial” identification in Puerto Rico, Negrón-Muntaner (2004) explains, “is partly determined by a combination of phenotypical factors,” one of which is hair texture, and I add that in relation to Barbie hair color as well. Jessica and Mariela’s conversation describe the main physical features that girls notice about Barbie’s ethnicity and race: she was blonde and had blue eyes. Neither of them identified with the doll because their eyes
were not blue and their hair was not blonde. Barbie’s hair, as came up during a number of the interviews, was an important characteristic for girls who wanted to identify with the doll. Patricia shared that she always wanted the doll with darker hair color. Despite having a vast collection of Barbie dolls with a variety of hair colors, as she held one of her dolls she reminisced about when growing up it was the one with dark hair that she liked.

Mine was always brunette. Since I had black hair, I identified with her. […] I didn’t like the blonde one, you know why? Because it was blonde, but her skin was like “trigueña” and it looked bad. When I chose my Barbie, I had the blonde one in my hand. It’s just that it didn’t match because the skin was “trigueña” and the hair was blonde, and it didn’t look good. I chose the one with black hair. (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

Patricia noted that she saw herself in the brunette doll because her own hair was black, therefore she could identify with Barbie. Moreover, she did not like blonde Barbie, not necessarily because the doll’s hair color was different from hers, but because Patricia could not conceive a person with darker skin color being blonde. In her opinion, a person could not possess those two physical traits. Mariela and Jessica talked about their favorite Barbie dolls and the ones they wished they could have.

Mariela: I only have three surviving Barbie. Three survivors because they had an emotional meaning. […] I have one from ‘87 the gipsy girl from The Hunchback of Notre Dame that has black hair, and Teresa who had brown hair and was my favorite. That was me.

Emily: I liked that one too. Why did you like her?

Mariela: Maybe because she was not blonde like all the others and her skin was more “quemaita” [more tanned].

Jessica: I remember that I asked for one – I didn’t want blonde Barbies because I was tired of them. And I still keep this one, it is the one that is in the best conditions. It was Teacher Barbie, which came with two children. She was black, black Barbie, and that one is in its original state because for me she was… I kept her well. But it was so stupid, why did Barbie have to be blonde?
Emily: I remember that I liked the ones that were not blonde a lot, although I think I had many of blonde ones because I inherited a lot of my dolls. But I liked Teresa a lot, and I always wanted one with red hair, but I don’t think I ever had one.

Jessica: Mine were the black one, a blonde one, and one with brown hair, nothing else. (All participants, Group 2 Transcript)

As illustrated above, both Mariela and Jessica favored Barbies of color over white Barbie. Furthermore, out of all the dolls Mariela had in her childhood, only three survived into her adulthood because they were the dolls that held an emotional meaning for her, while she gave away the rest. These “surviving” dolls were her favorite dolls because they were not white and blonde. Jessica grew tired of Barbies with blonde hair and thus Barbies with dark hair or dark skin colors became her favorite ones. Similarly, Alondra’s favorite Barbie dolls were the ones with dark hair. Moreover, Alondra was the only participant who described (or remembered) changing her dolls’ ethnicity to transform them into Puerto Rican characters, using household items to create Puerto Rican food their dolls could eat, and constructing play scenarios that took place or were about Puerto Rico.

The Barbie, Ken, and other dolls I used had to have brown hair, or in its defect, red. The blonde ones, although they were the majority of the dolls, were secondary characters or I would lend them to other girls. I didn’t pay attention to the skin color. I don’t think I ever had a black Barbie. My Barbies were Puerto Rican and the scenarios of play were about/in Puerto Rico. It is possible that at some moment I created a foreign character, but I don’t remember it with exactness. I do know that they ate rice and beans. I would put out a little plate (from the Picnic set) with dry grains of rice and achiote seeds, which became the beans for the rice. (Alondra, e-mail Interview)

Alondra’s play with Barbie pushed against Mattel’s lineup that highlighted blonde Barbie as the main character. By mostly playing with dolls that did not have blonde hair, she provided them with protagonist roles in her play and in her life. Blonde Barbies, as a
result, were moved to secondary roles, if any, or they were simply given to other people for play. This exchange in the roles the dolls were assigned subverted Mattel’s continuous promotion of white blonde Barbie as the central figure. Moreover, she reversed the marketing strategy in her play and created her own Puerto Rican doll.

As noted in the review of the literature, a number of scholars have criticized the lack of realistic representations of people of color in the Barbie doll line. More notably is that even with the inclusion of non-white dolls, the central figure of the doll line and any other product within the Barbie brand (e.g. video games, notebooks, the official Barbie website, and girls’ clothes) continues to be the white, blue-eyed, blonde doll (DuCille, 1994, 1999; Rand, 1995). Barbie’s ethnically and racially “diverse” friends are generally assigned a secondary role in the Barbie line of dolls and other products including TV shows, which critics see as a potential harm for girls of color who may see themselves as second-class citizens (DuCille, 1999). Alondra’s case, however, serves as a point of contention to the notion that Barbie’s friends as opposed to Barbie being the racially and ethnically diverse characters could potentially affect girls who play with them. By deciding that white blonde Barbie would become a background character in her play and by assigning protagonist roles to the other dolls, Alondra was playing against the dominant narrative created by Mattel that positioned white Barbie as central.

Even though the introduction of the first Black Barbie doll and the first Hispanic Barbie doll in 1979 and 1980 was a step toward racial and ethnic diversity in the Barbie collection, their “sameness” was very problematic. Scholars have pointed out that these and other ethnic dolls are simply a copy of White Barbie colored in various shades (DuCille, 1994, 1999, 2003; Rand, 1995). There are, for the most part, no other changes
to, for instance, her hair texture, her facial features, and her body type, to name a few.

While Mattel has continued working on these issues, girls who interact(ed) with Barbie are aware of these problems with the doll:

That, during the first years, [Barbie’s race] was not relevant. That became relevant when I was more an adolescent. That was something that did go through my mind, but it was during the last years when I played with Barbie. Because she was always Barbie, she was unique. I became confused when Teresa entered the picture and the “morenita,\(^9\)” whose name I can’t remember. I know that it wasn’t until someone gave me Teresa and the “morenita” that I said, “Oh shoot! Barbie also comes in black and comes as a Latina!” But then when I see the name I realize that it’s not Barbie. It’s Barbie’s friend. It’s a completely different person with the same body, same eyes, same dimensions. The only thing that changes is the skin color and hair color, but nothing else. Because they were the same. So then, why aren’t they Barbie as well? That was my inquiry. Why do they have other names if they are the same? Why don’t they want Barbie to be black or to be “morena”? Why does Barbie have to be white? And the Latina [has to be] Teresa? If you can clearly see that they are the same doll? So yes, that to me—but it was when I had more mentality to understand that it was the same doll with a different color and a different name. And [to question] why it is that Barbie has to be white, blonde, and with green eyes. (Carla, Interview Transcript)

Carla describes precisely what Ann duCille has argued about Barbie dolls of color: that they are mere carbon copies of white Barbie, clad in blackface, different yet the “same” (1994, 1999). Carla’s account positions her as a girl who suddenly encountered two aspects of Barbie’s race. On the one hand, she realized after a long time of Barbie play that there were other dolls that were not white and blonde like the Barbie with which she had mostly interacted. On the other hand, this encounter came with the realization that the dolls looked very similar to each other, yet those that were not white were not supposed to be called “Barbie.” Thus, she questioned, “Why does Barbie have to be white […] if you can clearly see that they are the same doll?” These are questions that girls today have about Barbie and her friends. They certainly notice the difference in the dolls’ positions within the Barbie line: the Barbie is white and blonde. Anyone else is Barbie’s friend, but
not the Barbie. Such was the case during a short exchange between Annie (9) and her mother Susan, when I asked about two dolls she brought to the interview:

Emily: Oh! You have the same one in different colors. Are they ballerinas?

Annie: Yes. But in reality they’re not the same because if you see, she is white and she is “negrita” (a little black). One has blonde hair. That’s Barbie, pure Barbie.

Emily: And what is this one?

Susan: That one is also Barbie.

Annie: Yes, I know. But this one is the same as Barbie. She’s blonde, white, pink. [Laughs]

Annie acknowledged the differences in her two dolls’ skin color and hair. Moreover, she identified White, blond, pink-wearing Barbie as the Barbie. No matter what other dolls come out, the only “true” Barbie continues to be the White blonde one. This is something that Carla questioned when she was a teenager still playing with Barbie and is something that girls notice in the present, despite Mattel’s efforts to diversify. Yet, if their attempts are only about creating more dolls, but not about placing other dolls at the center, some girls may continue to see white Barbie as the “true” Barbie doll. Girls have found ways to negotiate White Barbie’s place as the central figure (and the mold for all other dolls) by changing the doll’s looks. Chin (1999) notes that the girls of color “tended to have white dolls that they tended to bring into their own worlds, often through styling their hair” (p. 306). Such was the case of another participant in this study, Sharon (8), who also noted that white blonde Barbie was the central figure of the doll line, a fact that caused her much frustration. To appease her dislike of certain Barbie dolls with blonde hair, she took coloring markers and painted one of her dolls’ hair. She said, “I painted her hair with markers because she looked pretty with them, but then my mom said my dad was gonna be angry so, she’s at the bottom of my toy box. […] She has pink, blue, green, yellow,
red [hair]” (Sharon, *Group 5 Transcript*). When I asked why she came up with the idea of painting her hair, Sharon explained, “I just thought that blonde wasn’t really the color that I liked for hair. Also I like cutting the Barbie’s hair.” She also painted another doll’s hair half blue and half pink, and added that while she likes experimenting with Barbie’s hair, she never experimented with one of them because she thought “she was beautiful the way she was” (Sharon, *Group 5 Transcript*). In Chapter 5, I position Sharon’s negotiation with the lack of diversity in relation to her parents’ opinions about the doll.

The encounters with race my participants experienced were not only about racially identifying with Barbie or noticing the lack of diversity among the dolls from the Barbie line, but also about the way that we talk about race in Puerto Rico. The examples that follow illustrate the ways that negritud or blackness can be constructed as something ugly and shameful. When the conversation with Group 3 turned to diversity and race within the Barbie line, Frankie remembered that she never had a black Barbie doll, but that her niece had, and she learned to see the doll as ugly because of the discourse used around it. Frankie said, “I never had a ‘negrita’ Barbie, but someone gave one to my niece, and my great-grandmother was a little racist. She would tell my niece that the doll was ugly. So then my niece began saying that that Barbie was ugly (Frankie, *Group 3 Transcript*). The case of Frankie’s niece reveals an important part of how girls (and children) learn what to love and what to hate about themselves. Just as some participants claimed that girls receive messages about their bodies not only through Barbie but also through what the people around them say, Frankie’s niece learned that blackness equaled ugliness. Citing the famous study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s and replicated by Darlene Powell-Hopson and Derek Hopson in 1990, DuCille (1999)
notes that girls may see black dolls as “bad” and ugly and reject them. This seemed to be the case with Gabriela, who was the only participant who openly stated her dislike of black Barbie dolls.

Gabriela: I didn’t like the black ones, I hated them. One time someone gave me a black one and I started to cry, right Mom? But I always wanted one that was Latina. One that was like me, white with curly hair. All of them were white and blonde.

Emily: And the Latinas were more “trigueñitas.”

Gabriela: Always, there’s never one that looks like me.

[…]

Gabriela: So, I don’t know why I hated the black one. I don’t know why.

Emily: But what about other colors, like brown?

Gabriela: For me, they had to be white. It’s not that I’m racist! But I don’t know, when I was little I liked the blonde, white ones. To me those were prettier. […] If they asked me to choose between a “trigueña” or a white one, I chose the white one. Unless it was from a movie or if they came in sets. For example, this one had the same doll in different colors, so I wanted all of them, except the “negrita.” [See Figures 4.3 – 4.4 on the next page]

Emily: I never had the black one or the Asian one. I always wanted one. And I liked Teresa a lot for her skin color because I saw her so different from the others. I liked the dolls with dark hair, I think because most of mine were blonde, so I wanted ones that were different. (Gabriela, Group 4 Transcript).

There are many things happening in this conversation between Gabriela and I. To begin, Gabriela attested not only dislike, but also hatred toward black Barbie dolls. Moreover, if she had the options of choosing either white Barbie or black Barbie, she would choose the white one. This response from children was recorded in both the study by the Clarks in the 1940s and its replication in 1990. One notable difference is that Gabriela’s skin color is not black, as opposed to the children in the studies. More notably, Gabriela repeatedly stated that her dislike of black Barbies was not caused by racism. While this might be true, there are ways in which people internalize what is “beautiful” not only in what a girl’s body shape should be, but also in what bodies are valued (i.e. white bodies).
As DuCille (1999) noted, these responses do not always represent how one feels about race, but rather the knowledge one has about societal attitudes toward the racially marked. In Gabriela’s interactions with Barbie we mostly saw a rejection of Black Barbie dolls and in turn, perhaps a rejection of blackness. What Gabriela’s response to black Barbie may illustrate is the valorization of whiteness in Puerto Rican cultural ideologies.

Figure 4-3: A sample of Gabriela’s dolls (Left). Close-up to one of her dolls from a set. (Right)
From the exchange between Gabriela and me it is important to also examine my own discourse on race. DuCille (1999) discusses the exotization of Barbie when she is seen as an “Other”, a Barbie of color. In my own experience I was always attracted to Barbies with dark hair, darker skin, different facial traits (from the “standard” Barbie), Barbie with red hair, and dark eyes, in sum, anyone who was not the White blonde Barbie. Primarily this attraction was due to their rarity, their “otherness”. They were not the common and typical blonde style of Barbie, and I liked that. Thinking more critically about this, I realize that I was exoticizing these dolls, and while I may belong to these “other” bodies, the exotization stems from my own perceptions that my skin tone was not bronze and tanned, as a Latino body is typically depicted. While I lived surrounded by the beach in a tropical island, my status as a jincha (a generally demeaning term to refer to people with really pale skin in Puerto Rico) made me see dolls of darker skins color as “others” and exotic. When I said, “And the Latinas were more ‘trigueñitas’” Gabriela
replied that it was always like that, that “there’s never one that looks like me.” I could understand her position of seeing her skin color as white. The same way that Gabriela saw herself as a white Puerto Rican and thus wanted a Barbie that looked like her (a Latina doll with lighter skin and dark curly hair), I viewed myself as a very light-skinned or white Puerto Rican\textsuperscript{10}. Yet this also begs the question about Puerto Ricans’ practice of whitening their race.\textsuperscript{11} As Negrón-Muntaner (2002) notes, “Whereas one drop of ‘black blood’ makes you African American in the United States, one of ‘white’ can have the opposite effect in the Island, where a person does not need to claim exclusively European lineage to access the benefits of whiteness” (p. 43). As a result, this allows more mixed-race people in the Island to qualify as “white.”

In the conversations about race that transpired with my participants it is important to note not only what they talked about in relation to their experiences with race, but also how they talked about them. As I transcribed the audio recordings I encountered the different terms my participants were using to talk about blackness. Furthermore, I realized I was using those same terms when I either commented on something participants said or when I described my own experiences with Barbie. The terms used – morena/morenita, quemadita, trigueña/trigueñita, and negrita – assign a different degree of blackness than what the word negra or black would. In transcribing and translating I had to think about how I would present these terms in English and how/why the participants and I were using it. I asked myself, \textit{How do I translate all the different words Puerto Ricans (and other Spanish-speaking peoples) use to talk about race and blackness?} Addressing how Latinos talk about race, Godreau (2008) explains:
It is a well-known fact among scholars of race relations in Latin America that racial terminology is highly situational and intimately linked to context of usage. Negro, for example, often carries pejorative connotations because of its association with slave status. Yet, [...] it can also be used to mark racial solidarity or “sameness” among those who openly identify themselves as black. Nonetheless, in other instances, the use of negro or its diminutive form negrito (or negra, negrita) may communicate affection and intimacy regardless of the skin color of the person to which it refers, but not regardless of the relationship between the speakers. Which meaning is to be ascribed depends on who says it, when, and how. (p. 6)

We have these various words that refer to blackness, but they are different shades of blackness, and they are also sometimes used as terms of endearment, but also to avoid using the word negra, which is the direct translation of “black.” To address my question about how I could translate the different shades of blackness in the various terms used, I decided to leave all terms in their Spanish form instead of attempting to translate them. By leaving them as the participants said them, I aimed to remain true to their expressions and descriptions about Barbie’s race. The only word I changed into English was negra, which directly translates to and carries the meanings of the word “black.” In my perception of how participants and I sometimes used the terms, it seemed to be done in order to avoid sounding racist, the same way that people are often afraid to refer to a person as “black.” Yet, in my own case, I noticed I used the word negra or negrita to refer to black Barbie dolls and trigueña or trigueñita to refer to brown Barbie (or Teresa).

This section highlighted important conversations about and responses to race that originate during play with Barbie. The stories presented here illustrated the different views about race participants had in relation to Barbie and to their own identities. Some of the participants lamented the lack of diversity in the line of Barbie dolls and pointed out how, even in its attempt to diversify, Mattel continued depicting white Barbie as the
signature Barbie. While some of the participants expressed an aversion toward white blonde Barbie (e.g. Jessica, Mariela, Sharon), one participant loved this particular model of the doll. Her preference for the white doll and her hatred toward the black one exemplified the cultural notions about race, which often classify racialized bodies as “bad.” Finally, this section paid attention to the discourse adopted not only by my participants but also in my own discussions of race. It pointed to the different terms we have learned to use to talk about race and the different meanings each term carries.

**More than a Doll: Barbie’s Significance in Girlhood and Womanhood**

One theme that emerged when some of the participants examined their views on Barbie as adults and reflected upon them was the realization that in some ways they did not identify with Barbie. Despite having played with the doll, liking the doll as girls, and mostly viewing their interactions with Barbie as positive, participants commented on the ways in which they could not identify with the doll. When asked about their opinions of Barbie now that they are adults, Isabel and Frankie could not help but laugh nervously. Once I assured them I wanted to hear any type of opinion, good or bad, they opened up to share their current perspectives on the doll:

Isabel: I would have liked to be able to identify more [with Barbie], and now that one can see other things and understand other things, that Barbie wouldn’t always be driven to everything pink, and other things. I know at least I didn’t watch TV about Barbie and I didn’t see the plot there used to be for Barbie. For example, I would create my own plot. But I don’t like the plot and I don’t like the stereotype of Barbie that she’s airhead, that she’s always beautiful, and that she’s always fashionable. 

[…]

[158]
Frankie: But now that we’re adults we think differently. It used to be that Barbie was everything for us. Today it is more like, “Barbie who?” (Isabel and Frankie, Group 3 Transcript)

Carla also noted that as a girl and through her Barbie years she “never identified with the doll” because Barbie was her “frenemy.” In some ways Carla felt that playing with Barbie was an obligation she had because she was a girl and because family and friends continued giving her Barbie dolls. During part of her childhood, Carla stated, “it was like, ‘I have to play with you because you’re there and because they bring so many of you, and I have to accept you, but I also accept you because everyone else does because you’re pretty, because you’re fun.’ But it was always with some jealousy. I used Barbie, but it was always with some jealousy” (Carla, Interview Transcript). However, as Barbie held the status of “frenemy” through Carla’s girlhood, she clarified that as an adult, there were certain “abstract aspects” about the doll with which she identified.

Like I am independent. Barbie was independent. On that aspect, within my tastes, I am fashionable, and Barbie is fashionable. I am social. You see? In that aspect I can say that I identify with Barbie and that maybe they are personality traits that I obtained from being exposed to the doll for so long. Maybe it was from that or maybe not. (Carla, Interview Transcript)

Jessica viewed her years of Barbie play as a learning experience that allowed her to understand the realities about the expectations for girls and women. In some ways, having a doll that represented the cultural ideologies about female beauty resulted in a positive experience for her. At the same time, these expectations and ideologies about femininity are points for criticism and aspects about Barbie that Jessica would like to see change.

Well, something positive in the sense that, speaking philosophically, it allowed me to understand and accept that not all women have the same body. You know, because you start growing up in that ideology that every woman has to be a
certain way. And when you start facing reality and your daily life, you realize that not every woman is going to be blonde, not all women will have perfect breasts. And that’s the most positive I could have gotten from her. But if you ask me something that I could criticize it’s the illusion the doll creates, the false expectations toward people, toward girls. (Jessica, *Group 3 Transcript*)

Interestingly, Carla, who had a very complex and multidimensional relationship with Barbie, described her overall experience with the doll as a positive one.

Yes, yes, I remember Barbie in a positive way. I remember the game of Barbie as something, well, as an experience that a child that… your parents present the toy to you and as a child you make of your toys whatever you want. So I look back and see it as positive. Even though there were internal conflicts, she was never a trigger for something bad or something negative. Like for example, girls who have eating disorders because they see themselves in Barbie’s image and they can never see themselves like her within that expectation. Or the issue about the physical appearance, or the issue about economic independence, you see, that have marked other people. Personally maybe at that point in my life, maybe I had some complex because of Barbie, but it wasn’t something that transcended to my psyche, that transformed me and messed up my life. No. Because I always knew she was a doll, something to play with. [I knew] that she was too perfect and was… well yes, but nothing that I could tell you deeply affected me emotionally or frustrated me. No, no, no. (Carla, *Interview Transcript*)

For other participants their memories about Barbie in their childhood were about the relationship they fostered with the doll and how the doll served as a companion. In the first section of this chapter, I presented Lisa’s memories of Barbie play. Lisa (45), who only had a brother and didn’t have many friends to play with Barbie, remembered much of her interactions with the doll having taken place by herself. Moreover, she pointed out that, “Barbies were [her] friends.” Likewise, Isabel, who was the only girl in her family, felt that Barbie became at certain points a companion and friend. For her, Barbie “was also company. Yes, because for example I grew up with all boys, so once in a while playing with Barbie was like there was another (girl) friend. And the Fan Club too because I knew there were other girls there” (Isabel, *Group 3 Transcript*).
If certain arguments call for Barbie to be seen as just a toy where the messages she is said to transmit are actually placed upon her by adults and cultural ideologies, there is also an argument to be made about Barbie’s role as more than a toy, as more than a doll in children’s lives. For many girls, myself included, Barbie was a friend who invited us to her world to become all the characters we wanted to be. In these cases Barbie’s role as more than a doll was not about the messages she promoted and how girls received them, but rather about the meaningful bonds girls created with her. For some of my participants Barbie was there when they most needed a companion. Gabriela remembered Barbie as more than just a toy. In addition to the connection it brought between her and her mother, Barbies were her only friends for a long time: “My Barbies fought, were friends, hung out, everything. If I didn’t have any friends, Barbies were my friends” (Gabriela, Group 4 Transcript). Alondra remembered Barbie as a favorite toy that kept her company during a time of difficulties in her health, when there were no other people with whom she could spend time:

> I spent a lot of time sick with a cardiac condition when I was little. I was an only child and did not have cousins, and that’s why I did not play outside frequently and did not practice any sports. I spent much time playing passive and solitary games. I lived with my grandmother until I was 7 years old, and during that time I did not have many interactions with other children. From then on, I went to live with my mother, and then I could share this and other games with other girls and boys in my new neighborhood. Barbie was my favorite toy, my most favorite. (Alondra, e-mail Interview)

When I asked 59-year-old Patricia if her daughter Gabriela created dramatic scenarios with Barbie, she remembered that she, herself, used to do some role-playing with the doll, but now as an adult, “I dress them, brush their hair, bathe them, but play like before, you kind of lose that” (Patricia Group 4 Transcript). Perhaps the testimony
where Barbie’s influence and significance became the most notable was Patricia’s. When I asked if her experience with Barbie has always been positive and if she had always liked the doll, Patricia opened up about the ways in which her immersion in Barbie’s world during her girlhood was essential. “Yes, all my life,” she responded about whether she had always liked Barbie and added:

[…] My parents got divorced and I was left orphaned when I was 9. I came [to Puerto Rico] with my grandmother and they stayed over there [in New York]. So I came here with my grandma, and all that pain and all that stuff, I would just focus on her [Barbie] […] And then, you know, all of that mess from when they were getting divorced and of coming here alone with my grandma and cousins, this helped. For me, Barbie helped. Because I was in her world, not in the world I was living. It helped me a lot. So, I didn’t even realize what was happening. I would lock myself in my bedroom, and if my parents fought, I was just playing with her. (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

Having created a collection of 233 Barbie dolls, it is evident that she is passionate about Barbie. Yet, she is not just a collector. Gathering and taking care of Barbie is her way, it seems, of saying “thank you” to the doll that accompanied her through difficult moments in her life especially her parents’ divorce, which forced her to move to Puerto Rico with her grandmother at age 11. Her story, as those of Alondra, Lisa, Gabriela, Isabel, and I, showcase how influential Barbie can be in the formative years of girls.

These stories of friendship and companionship with Barbie suggest an impact on girlhood that is separate from the messages girls receive from the doll. While critics of Barbie as well as many who played with Barbie have pointed out the doll’s flaws, these meaningful experiences of friendship offer an angle that highlights how important Barbie was, has been, and continues to be for many girls. Furthermore, Barbie’s influence can transcend into adulthood. Despite being considered a “toy for children” Barbie can be impactful in women’s lives, as were the cases of Carla and Jessica, for they look back on
their years of Barbie play to understand how the doll contributed to shaping who they are as adults.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusions**

I began this chapter by illustrating, through my participants’ stories, the means through which Barbie becomes part of girls’ lives, how girls construct(ed) narratives with Barbie dolls, and how girls experience(d) interactions with the doll. As the different stories illustrated, girls experienced Barbie through the production of artifacts (such as clothes), the dramatic play that happened with Barbie to imagine more possibilities and assume different roles, and the interactions with Barbie that went beyond the doll (such as belonging to a Fan Club).

The next section of the chapter presented the discussions of identity formation that emerged during the interviews and conversations with and among the participants of this study. It presented Barbie as a symbol of affluent femininity that is promoted through the plethora of Barbie products that girls are invited to obtain and the prices for each of them. This was an issue that a number of participants raised because they experienced how Barbie can be a marker of class and how difficult it can be to access the doll and her products. Her lifestyle invites to consume, to spend, and to live luxuriously. For many girls, especially those from the first generation of Barbie, access to the doll was limited, and Barbie represented a fantasy of luxury and high fashion that they desired. The clothes themselves were expensive, as elucidated in Carmen’s, Lourdes’s, and Patricia’s testimonies. Many participants also pointed out the use of pink as the main color for
everything and anything related to Barbie, which conceives the idea that in order to be feminine (and to be a girl), girls *must* like pink. This is a result of years of marketing and gendering colors, which have established that pink is a feminine color while blue is a masculine one. Moreover, several participants noted that they either believed or were aware others believed that *every girl should have a Barbie*. The idea that to be a girl you must have Barbie turns the doll into the epitome of femininity. Many girls, however, do not identify with the ideas about femininity that Barbie presents. We saw the cases of Lisa, Frankie, and Isabel at times, who identified as “tomboys” more than “girly” and as a result did not always see themselves in the image of girlhood created by Barbie. Seeing themselves as “tomboys” did not deter them completely from interacting with Barbie. Yet, as will be presented in Chapter 5 through the examples of differences among family members, girls may also reject Barbie because they reject the ideas of femininity she embodies.

The chapter continued by highlighting girls’ perceptions of Barbie’s physical appearance and how they contributed to their identity formation. It presented a brief overview of how Barbie originated and how her voluptuous body was inspired by an adult cartoon. This moved the discussion into how the proportions of Barbie’s body have been received by the girls and women who shared their stories of Barbie play. In some cases Barbie’s body did not present any negative effects, but for some of the participants, her figure was very notable and it caused tensions between the girls and the doll. As some of the participants expressed, Barbie can give girls the idea that their bodies have to look a certain way, that way being like Barbie’s body. Furthermore, if girls internalize those ideals of beauty they could be compelled to go through extreme body alterations,
something that Annie pointedly noted. The experiences and perspectives provided by the girls and women suggest that when girls notice such a stark contrast between Barbie’s body and their own, it becomes difficult to identify with the doll.

The chapter continued examining girls’ identities by exploring their encounters with Barbie’s race and ethnicity. It brought up participants’ specific views on race and the terminology used to have these conversations. It also highlighted girls’ perspectives on the limited choices Mattel offer girls to play with dolls of color. Through some examples from participants’ experiences, this section illustrated how girls pushed against the continuous use of white blonde Barbie as the main representative of the brand by altering either the doll’s physical appearance (Sharon) or assigning dolls an ethnicity closer to that of the player (Alondra). Through the conversations that were brought up, participants also articulated their own preferences in the type of doll with which they wanted to play. While some participants preferred Barbie dolls of color, whose skin tone and hair more closely resembled their own, others completely rejected such dolls.

Furthermore, in examining my own doll preferences I found that my fascination with dolls whose skin was dark (or darker than mine) was a way of using the doll to be something I was not. At the same time, my fascination with these dolls could have been the dolls because they were rarer than white blonde Barbie caused me to almost exoticize them as I was seeing them as “others.”

Finally, the chapter described the views women have about Barbie in the present when thinking about her presence in their girlhoods. It first discussed examples of women who played with Barbie and enjoyed the doll during their childhoods, but who look back on the experiences wishing they could have identified more with the doll. For some
women, however, the experiences with Barbie, despite how complex it may have been, had ultimately been positive. I then presented examples of the meaning that Barbie can have in a girl’s life by becoming their friend. For a number of my participants who grew up as the only girl in the family (Lisa, Isabel, and Gabriela) or who went through difficult moments (Patricia and Alondra) Barbie went beyond simply being a doll and became a friend.

By examining the individual experiences of Barbie play among the participants of this study, I explored the four research questions that guided this study. The narratives about Barbie play, about Barbie’s representation of femininity, the doll’s body and race, and the significance of the doll in girls’ lives presented in this chapter addressed: (1) Barbie’s impact in Puerto Rican girlhoods, (2) How she became part of some of the participants’ girlhoods, (3) How women and girls view their interactions with Barbie, and (4) The issues of gender, race, and class the participants raised. Chapter 5 continues the exploration of the research questions and the experiences of girlhood through Barbie and presents them in relation to familial dynamics. The chapter describes different and similar interactions with Barbie among family members as well as the ways parental involvement influences girls’ experiences with the doll.

Note

1 My memories of them include using them to play “Baywatch” (both in my pretend play and my Barbie play) since the lifeguards used binoculars to watch the waters. Some time after this I actually got the Baywatch Barbie, which included binoculars, a Frisbee, visors, the red bathing suit, a dolphin, and of course – the one item I really wanted – their red life savers.
2 Barbie dolls used to include a small manual that contained instructions and information about the doll.
3 As someone who played so much with Barbie, even when I was confronted with the research regarding Barbie’s damaging messages of body image, it was difficult to understand how a doll, a toy, could have so much influence on a person’s identity. Yet, it does in many ways, as I have discussed thus far and as I continue to explore in this project. By reading the extensive research
about Barbie and as I conducted my own, I was able to see how some girls experience Barbie in these ways, and how important it is to acknowledge those experiences of identity construction that take place because of despite Barbie.

4 Iris Chacón is a singer, dancer, and “showgirl” from Puerto Rico who was famous for her voluptuous bottom.

5 During Ken’s creation, Ruth Handler was aware of the fact that he was missing a critical part of his body. Gerber (2009): “Ruth felt the design team lacked ‘the guts’ to give the Ken doll even the suggestion of male sex organs. She saw herself as ahead of her time, arguing that there should at least be a bulge that would suggest realism…Despite ordering prototypes with varying degrees of bulge in the crotch the male designers resisted all but the barest hint of a penis” (p. 142).

6 It is in fact more like the girls. After learning about this doll I looked it up and found that the doll is almost a mix between a Barbie doll (tall and fashionable) and the American Girl doll (which is supposed to be a girl, not an adult).

7 This real life Ken they were discussing was from Brazil, and he died of Leukemia, which had been discovered five months prior while being treated for infections caused by a product called “hydrogel.”

8 Achiote is a spice made from the red seed of the annatto tree (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The seeds are red, which can make them look like miniature beans.

9 While the English translation of “morena” is brunette, brunette often refers only to the hair color. In Puerto Rico “morena” is used to talk about a skin color that is dark, but it’s not quite black. The closest translation would be olive-skinned. As explained in the discussion at the end of the section, there is always an apprehension to use the word “negra” which means black to talk about skin color.

10 Still in the present, when I was looking for a Barbie doll that looked like me, I selected one with dark hair and white skin. Growing up I loved the doll Teresa, which is Barbie’s Hispanic friend. For me, Teresa represented what I wanted to look like. I wanted to be able to tan so that my skin looked bronze and glowing, instead of becoming extremely red at the slightest contact with sunlight.

11 Even in my position as a minority in the U.S., knowing that I am Hispanic and that Hispanics are considered people of color, whenever I am going to refer to myself as a person of color I debate it. I wonder if people will actually believe that I am a person of color even if my skin is lighter than the common idea of what Hispanic or Latino skin is. I wonder if they will think I am using the “person of color” label to reap certain benefits. But now, I also wonder if the traces of colonization and the notions of mestizaje have been ingrained so much that I always perceived my skin as white.
Chapter 5

All in the Family: Barbie’s Place in Familial Dynamics

Introduction and Overview

The official lore about Barbie’s creation narrates how in 1959 Ruth Handler, wanting a toy with which her daughter could play, and which did not require girls to assume the role of a mother, produced an adult fashion doll through which girls could live and become their dreamed selves. Barbie is a cultural icon that has been present since 1959, and has been a popular toy among girls since then. While Barbie doll’s creation emerged from a mother’s desire to provide more options for her daughter, the relationship between mothers and Barbie has often been tumultuous and complicated – with some mothers rejecting the doll (Quindlen, 1999; Rakow & Rakow, 1999) and others embracing it (McDonough, 1999).

In my conversations with many women, as is also apparent in the vast literature about Barbie, I have encountered an array of responses to the doll. Some have voiced their love for Barbie because it takes them back to their childhood, when they played with the doll for hours. Others have admitted they played with Barbies although they would not have told their friends at the time they were doing so because Barbie was “for babies.” In their conversations with me participants felt glad to know that I played with them as well, as it provided for them a sense of comfort to know they were not alone in playing with the doll. Other reactions to Barbie are on the negative side of the spectrum.
Recently, a friend of mine articulated her hatred for the doll and explained that she would never allow her daughter to play with Barbie because the doll sends the wrong message to girls.

Whether women’s experiences with the doll were positive or negative, Barbie generally plays a role in childhood, especially in Western cultures (Driscoll, 2008; Rand, 1995). As such, a number of scholars have written about people’s childhood experiences with the doll and their negotiations with how Barbie contributed, and still does, to their own identities (McDonough, 1999; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000; Rogers, 1998). For instance, Yona Zeldis McDonough’s *The Barbie Chronicles: A living doll turns forty* (1999) presents a series of short anecdotal writings, essays and poems, by a number of women who experienced Barbie, either positively or negatively. Some of the authors express their fascination and love for Barbie, while others firmly offer a critical view on the message Barbie provides girls, mainly through her 11-and-a-half inch body. Parents’ perceptions of Barbie and their involvement in their children’s play is recurring theme in the vast literature about Barbie (McDonough, 1999; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2000).

In many ways Barbie contributes to women’s identities and how they continue to view the doll, either in relation to their own childhood experiences and/or as adults who may not want to promote Barbie play among their own offspring. Author Meg Wolitzer, for instance, talks about her own experiences, both as a child and as a mother, with parental involvement in Barbie play. She explains that her mother did not allow her or her sister to have a Barbie, but she did allow Skipper. Similar to my friend’s views on Barbie, Wolitzer (1999) affirms that if she had been a mother of girls, she would be scared that
Barbie’s presence in the girls’ lives would send them wrong messages. Yet, she did allow her sons to play with Barbie. I questioned why she thought Barbie, as an object, was okay for boys but not for girls. Wolitzer provides her rationale later on the same page:

But as far as my two boys go, I don’t need to worry unduly about the political “message” aspect of Barbie, because, for the most part, neither of my sons dwells on her anatomy or wardrobe or vacuous, made-up face... No, for them Barbie is merely another thing to be played with, manipulated, occasionally talked to [...] (Wolitzer, 1999, p. 208, original emphasis)

These are just some examples of the many ways Barbie contributes to women’s identities and how they continue to view the doll, either in relation to their own childhood experiences and/or as adults who do not want to promote Barbie play among their own offspring. In my encounters with some preliminary participants—before the decision to focus on Puerto Rican women and girls was made – I learned about various ways in which parents intervened in girls’ play, even before the object of play was acquired. This motivated me to inquire further about parental influence on Barbie play and how the doll affected familial relationships, chiefly mothers and daughters. Since much had been written about mothers’ perceptions about Barbie in contexts such as the U.S. and Canada, my aim was to investigate if the same happened in Puerto Rico and how.

The thematic findings discussed in Chapter 4 pertained, for the most part, to the individual experiences my participants had with Barbie play. This chapter continues to address the research questions about Barbie’s impact on Puerto Rican girlhoods and her influence on girls’ identities seeded in collective experiences. Drawing from the interviews with women and girls between the ages of 8 and 62 conducted throughout this study, this chapter examines familial female relationships in the context of Puerto Rican girlhoods. It describes Barbie’s place in the dynamics between family members,
especially between mothers, daughters, and sisters, and presents a discussion of their conversations about their decisions to play or not play with Barbie. In some particular cases brothers and fathers were involved. While the men were not interviewed (in order to remain true to the experiences of girls), these brief stories are offered through the voices of girls and women to account for their own experiences of girlhood.

The Mother and Daughter Relationship

“What mother doesn’t love sharing with her daughter, enjoying when we wear the same size and like the same things?,” asks Amy Newmark (2012, p. xi). There is a strong bond that often (though not always) grows between mothers and daughters. As Newmark observes, little girls emulate their mothers by dressing like them and wanting to be like them. At the same time, she says, “Over time, we mothers find ourselves emulating our daughters too. I always tell mine, employing a technology-world term, that she is ‘Version 2.0’ – me, but much improved. I learn so much from her – not only about how to dress, but about fitness and nutrition, current events…” (2012, p. xii). While the little girl often emulates the mother, there are moments, especially during specific life stages, where the girl longs for separation. In a moving piece about her transition from being daughter to being mother Therese Guy illustrates these shifting stages:

I’m five and my mom is everything […] I’m twelve and now she is embarrassing […] I’m seventeen and all I can manage is an eyeball roll at her antiquated lectures […] I’m twenty-one and she seems a little smarter now […] I’m thirty-seven and my fourteen-year-old daughter yells at me for emerging from the car when I pick her up at the dance […] I’m fifty and my daughter is expecting. It is a girl. As I hold my hand against her protruding belly the baby kicks. My daughter smiles and says, ‘I think I understand you better now, Mom.’ […] (2012, p.109-10)
By virtue of being female (at least in the biological sense but oftentimes in terms of gender) mothers and daughters share important life experiences. These can foster essential understandings about what it means to be girl and lead to collaboration between mothers and daughters to further explore these meanings and experiences.

Working with mothers and daughters Loberstine, et al. (2001) “saw mothers as important cultural messengers, and … wanted to examine the mother’s role in shaping her daughter’s possible selves” (p. 2). They found many similarities between mothers and daughters’ answers. A testimony written by one of the mothers participating in the project, in which mothers and daughters collaborated to examine their experiences of possible selves (as discussed in chapter 2), reveals that she thought the age difference between her and her daughter and their different upbringings would result in different likes and dislikes. However, she was surprised to find they had much in common: “Here are two women who grew up in different environments (culture) but yet want so much of the same things” (Lobenstine, et al., 2001, p. 7). Comparably, my examination of mothers and daughters’ (as well as sisters) experiences with Barbie revealed to share similarities within each family group. At the same time, as a testament to each person’s individuality, the distinctions between each member were clearly marked. Moreover, in Puerto Rican culture the relationship between mothers and daughters involve the transmission of stories from older generations to new generations that teach girls how to be women. Santiago (1993, 1999) and Ortiz Cofer (1990) offered examples of learning through their mothers and grandmothers about how a girl should behave, the values she should seek, and the dreams she should have for the future. Based on this important dynamic between
matriarchal figures and girls in Puerto Rico, the dynamics between mothers and daughters – as well as between sisters – become an important part of Barbie play to examine.

What follows are accounts from a selection of my participants that provide insight to the types of relationships fostered through and the different dynamics that emerged from play with Barbie. Specifically they bring light to how different yet similar the experiences among women within a family group can be. Moreover, they serve as examples of the varying levels of parental involvement in girls’ Barbie play and the rationale behind the allowance or disapproval of play with such a contested doll.

“I hated her, she loved her!”: Similar and Different Experiences of Barbie Play

The most interesting part of interviewing women and girls from a range of generations is that I was able to learn about so many different experiences with Barbie, some similar to my own, but others very contrasting. It was especially illuminating to learn about how girls related to Barbie in the past, when she had just been “born.” The journey into the multiple generations of girls that played with Barbie began with a conversation with my own family – a conversation with which I begin this section. Within this specific group interview there were two family generations – two sisters and the daughters of one of the sisters – who were born in various decades: two were born in the ‘50s, two were born in the ‘80s, and one was born in the beginning of the ‘90s. Their own experiences and views about Barbie provided a preview of what the rest of my participants may have experienced and what their thoughts on Barbie may have been. In
I presented some of these generational differences in relation to all participants of the study. I now present the differences and similarities in the play experiences within a family group.

The lived experiences within a family can be very similar, not only between mothers and daughters, but also between sisters. Sharing a space and oftentimes sharing the same toys may lead to disagreements and fights between siblings, but they can also lead to collaboration. As illustrated by Lourdes and Carmen, two sisters in their sixties, who belong to the first generation of Barbie players, Barbie can serve as an object and a play space that creates bonds in female relationships:

Lourdes: The fun was...how we played with them, or at least how I played with her wasn’t so much that she was a doll... it was the fashion, what we bought for her which cost a lot of money at that time. We would stop buying other things so we could buy clothes for Barbie, but it was like designer clothes [Carmen, her sister, says this at the same time], upscale, like, if they were hats they had leather.

Carmen: I mean, they were like they clothes that we would see...let’s say, artists [wearing].

Lourdes: They were fashion... that we would have liked to have, but obviously didn’t have the money to have them.

[...]

Lourdes: [...] And we spent money. Our dad would scold us for spending so much money – 4, 5, 6 dollars in that era in dresses for...some dolls, but really what we enjoyed, at least I did, what enjoyed more than the doll itself was changing her clothes. [Carmen agrees] Those clothes like high fashion, the style of Audrey Hepburn. You know, changing them, those blouses...

Carmen: And the little heels and the purses. Almost everything came... in a big carton. And then, additionally I liked, I tried to sew and I would make her the same design that I would make with all the scraps of fabric I’d find. And I would make her little necklaces and little chains and whatever I found. That was the fun, I mean it wasn’t having a lot of dolls, it was having one and dressing her [Lourdes says it at the same time]. It wasn’t having her and
playing with her. The fun for us was having that doll that we could
dress the way we would have wanted to dress and for me, because
I liked to sew, making her things, you know, and be entertained
with that.

(Lourdes and Carmen, *Group 1 Transcript*)

It is interesting how the memories are so shared and the experiences of these
sisters so similar that, at many points during their parts of the conversation, they would
say the same words at the same time. Despite the fact that their play with Barbie did not
always take place together, they enjoyed the doll for the very same reasons.

As the sisters’ conversation suggests, they avidly interacted with Barbie. Their
play, though, differs from the experiences of many of the participants who created
complex narratives through the doll (most of the time using more than one doll). Lourdes
and Carmen experienced Barbie as the very same role she had been assigned by her
creator Ruth Handler: that of a fashion doll. Their play with Barbie consisted of having
only one doll each with a variety of outfits so they could change the doll in and out of
them. Our mother was always fascinated by Barbie’s wardrobe, especially the high-
fashion of the earlier iterations of Barbie, in the 60s, when my mother played with her.
For her, the pleasure of Barbie play stemmed from the creation of clothes and accessories
for her doll and Barbie’s space for fantasy, as my mother could live a more fashionable
life through her doll.

Within the same family there were different levels of interactions as well.
Carmen’s three daughters – Camille, Emily, and Frances – were never discouraged from
playing yet never obligated to play with Barbie. They all had access to Barbie dolls,
accessories, and other play materials such as sticker books and Halloween costumes.
Nevertheless, each sister experienced Barbie very differently from each other.
The oldest of the three, Camille, experienced Barbie in ways that mirrored our mother’s and aunt’s, specifically in the confection of Barbie clothes and the admiration for Barbie’s astounding wardrobe.

Well I do remember having played with Barbie, but I think I played more when I was with someone. I never played alone, I don’t think so. But I do remember having tried to sew some clothes for her. I always remember that I made at least one skirt. [Laughs] And it was by hand because what I saw was by hand. Well I made a skirt, but also what I liked the most were her clothes because whenever we went to Toys R Us I wasn’t interested in the dolls… unless they were the collectors Barbies. What I liked was looking at the clothes because I wanted all those clothes for me. I always said I was going to buy them so I could make the pattern for myself and sew them in my size. (Camille, Group I Transcript)

While Barbie play was not a main activity in Camille’s life, she imagined herself through the doll. In similar ways as our mother, Barbie served as a model of feminine beauty, not necessarily by wanting to physically look like the doll, but chiefly by admiring her sophisticated sense of fashion and dreaming of wearing her elegant clothes. Camille also took up for a while the practice of sewing simple outfits for the dolls. It was through this small practice that she also exercised her desire to become a designer. More than anything, Camille longed to dress the way Barbie dressed.

Camille’s play was very different from mine. As I introduced earlier in Chapter 4 my play was mostly private and occurred by myself, with only a few specific friends with whom I liked to play. Moreover, the delight in playing with Barbie came from more than simply changing her clothes. My play, as that of many of my participants, was performative; it was deep play with Barbie where we created many scenarios of lived experiences using the dolls. As I have expressed before, Barbie was an important part of my girlhood. My overall experiences with dolls were very similar to my mother’s. We both loved baby dolls and paper dolls to the point that I realized we both had created
dresses for our own paper dolls. We both liked to use objects from around the house or our environment to include in our play. One difference was that my mother’s interactions included sewing clothes for Barbie, something that I was never able to do because I was not good at sewing. The number of Barbies we each owned marked another difference between us. Since my mother only had one doll, her play was significantly different from mine. That single doll provided hours of stimulation and imaginative play for her. I, on the other hand, had more than one doll including Ken, which allowed me to create a variety of scenarios that required more than one doll.

My younger sister’s experience did not resemble anyone else’s. Frances’s interactions with Barbie are a stark contrast to her mother’s, Carmen who loved the doll. Her experiences also differed from our aunt’s, our older sister’s, and certainly mine. We could say that her experiences and mine were the most divergent. In one extreme there was me, obsessed with Barbie and playing with the doll almost everyday. In the other extreme, Frances overtly hated Barbie and barely ever played with her. I found Frances’s experiences the most fascinating within our family because of her overt rejection of the doll. She remembered a birthday when she almost cried because all of the presents were Barbie dolls:

With the only one I remember playing… I remember my birthday that, I think was when I was in Kinder or first grade and it was in McDonald’s, that basically all the presents were Barbie. I was almost crying because I didn’t like her. […] But with the only one I remember playing at least one or two times, was with the Sea World Barbie. Because it was water… like it changed colors in the water. But it is the only one that I remember playing with, and I didn’t change her clothes. No… I didn’t play. (Frances, Group 1 Transcript)

When I asked if she remembered why she did not like Barbie dolls and why she virtually never played with them, only once or twice with her SeaWorld Barbie, she
recalled that perhaps the fact that doll play required creativity steered her away. She concluded: “Because… No, I don’t remember why I didn’t like them. What I can think now is that it required too much creativity… And I didn’t like that. I preferred a Nintendo game… […] Mr. Brainy, something that didn’t require imagining and creating conversations with myself” (Frances, Group 1 Transcript). Frances’s memory of rejection draws from her observations of my own play, where I created complex scenarios and conversations that almost resembled telenovelas. Girlhood in Puerto Rico is often learned through telenovelas, or through the binaries that commonly frame telenovela plots: the good girl versus the bad girl. A telenovela is a Latin American soap opera. As discussed in Chapter 2, both Ortiz Cofer (1990) and Santiago (1993, 1999) learned the opposite binaries of being woman: you were either a good girl or you were bad. They learned there was no middle ground or no continuum; you were either or. While I did not watch many telenovelas because they were not encouraged at home, I was familiar with this duality of womanhood they often depicted. Moreover, although I cannot remember specific episodes of my own play, I do remember having included at certain points of my play the plot of good girl Barbie versus bad girl Barbie. Perhaps Frances’ rejection of Barbie was perhaps also a rejection of this binary that she witnessed in my performative Barbie play.

Having more background knowledge about her helped me further interpret certain aspects of her relationship with Barbie. In contextualizing I am not attempting to overpower Frances’s or anyone else’s voice, but rather inquire further into her rejection. As Frances’s sister I remember her preference for Nintendo games and brain games, such as puzzles and Sudoku. Growing up she was also never into fashion, makeup, shopping –
all of which are often termed “girl” activities. In her discussion of her relationship with Barbie, Frances does not link Barbie’s embodiment of a homogenous femininity with her own rejection of the very same idea. However, I think there is a relationship between her rejection of Barbie as an object of play and her rejection of “feminine” activities. If what Barbie was selling was the idea that girls thrive in activities related to fashion – such as shopping, playing dress-up, makeup, and wearing heels – Frances wasn’t buying it. She preferred the physical and often coded “unlady-like” activities of basketball, riding a scooter, wearing tennis shoes, etc.

Talking among the siblings in the conversation we also realized the different dynamics of play that existed in each of our individual and collective experiences. Lourdes and Carmen played together, mostly undressing and dressing Barbie, but they could spend hours doing so. They never played with their older sister, who did not have a Barbie doll, perhaps because she had already surpassed the age of doll play. My experience with my sisters was different. We knew for certain that neither Camille nor I had played with our youngest sister Frances because she never enjoyed Barbie. Yet, we went back and forth trying to figure out if we had played together. Camille, who is the oldest of my sisters, noted that the few times she and I played, the interactions consisted mainly of changing Barbie’s clothes and brushing her hair, since she did not enjoy creating dramatic scenarios or conversations with the dolls. Moreover, she pointed out that because she did not do dramatic play, this might have been the reason why I would go play so much with our neighbor – from whom we inherited a great number of Barbie dolls and accessories. My older sister’s memories of her play include very few episodes where she played with a neighbor and me: “But when I played it was with you Emily and
our neighbor, but not by myself’ (Camille, *Group 1 Transcript*). Yet, in my own memories of Barbie play I never saw myself having played with my older sister. During this part of the conversation I was trying to remember instances when she and I had played. Although I could not remember specific episodes, after the conversation I did realize that at least one time we had played together with our neighbor. My sister added: “Yes, we did play, but you know…[…] but usually I played for only a little bit and then I stayed by myself because the two of you got too involved [in the play] and I just stayed there in a corner playing” (Camille, *Group 1 Transcript*).

As a participant in this group interview, at the moment of the conversation, I engaged in our attempt to find out what had happened back then and what had not. As a researcher listening and reading the conversation my focus shifted towards the actual dynamic that was taking place among all sisters. Together we were engaging in collective memory-work (Haug et al., 1987) by trying to reconstruct each other’s memories and to remember how we interacted not only with Barbie but also with each other through Barbie play. Despite the three of us not having played Barbie together, that night we helped each other remember details about our girlhoods that we had forgotten. Even though we did not all partake in Barbie play together we remembered or tried to remember how each other person played. The dynamic displayed during this interview where both groups of sisters either shared memories or helped each other remember, elucidated Morgan and Krueger’s (1993) argument in favor of using group interviews in order to learn more in depth about participants’ experiences. Furthermore, what I found fascinating in the conversation among the women in my family (particularly my sisters and I) was the very distinct way in which each one of us, despite having grown up in the
same household with the same opportunities for play with Barbie, interacted with the
doll. Whilst my mother and her sister experienced Barbie in such parallel ways, my
sisters and I did not: one liked the doll, one was obsessed with the doll, and one
completely rejected the doll.

In a different group interview, one participant, Frankie (age 30), briefly talked
about her own play experiences with her sisters. Though her sisters were not part of the
interview, Frankie’s description of their overall dynamics serves as a point of contrast to
my own experiences with my sisters. Firstly, all sisters liked Barbie and interacted with
the doll one way or another. Secondly, their play always occurred together, despite the
differences in their age. Thirdly, she recalled the play spaces they would use around their
house and the dynamics that surfaced during Barbie play:

We had a closet when we lived in the United States, a large closet and there we
put everything that was for Barbie and the four of us played. We spent hours
playing there. My sister [the oldest] was always the one that gave commands, she
would tell us what we had to do. [...] We always had to play together because my
older sister took hold of the Barbies and wouldn’t give them to us unless she was
playing. We had to play together. (Frankie, Group 3 Transcript)

As briefly illustrated by the range of experiences among the women in my family,
interactions with Barbie may also differ between mothers and daughters. The
generational differences and the objects of play available to girls during each era
contribute to the diverse experiences with Barbie among my participants. Within my
family, the generational divide was marked by the amount of Barbie dolls used for play:
the older generation engaged in play using only one Barbie doll and no Ken dolls while
the younger generation used many Barbie dolls and at least one Ken. As Carmen
expressed, the fun of it was having only one doll and many outfits. Susan, who played
with Barbie during the ‘80s, remembers how important it was to have not only a Barbie
doll but also a Ken:

> During our times there were other dolls like Ever After or Monster High. And
> [Barbie] was the main one. I mean, if you didn’t have Barbie, you were out. And
> you could have ten Barbies, but if you did not have a Ken, you didn’t have
> Barbie. And we didn’t have Barbie, much less Ken. And Ken sometimes was even
> more expensive than Barbie. But we did play. (Susan, *Group 6 Transcript*)

This is a generational difference from the girls who grew up with the first iterations of
Barbie. In those previous generations, Ken was not a necessary of Barbie play, and his
presence was not essential. Yet for Susan’s generation, in her experience, having a Ken
was not only necessary, it was required.

### Creating, Collecting, and Curating: Mothers Pass Down Barbie Traditions

The similarities and differences in the play practices and the types of interactions
encountered with Barbie can also appear when mothers become collectors and curators of
Barbie for their daughters. The access to Barbie fostered by mothers often reveals the
ways in which they lived their childhood dreams vicariously through their daughters. For
some who as girls never owned or played with Barbie, the acquisition and collection of
the doll presented a space to look at the dolls and dream of the possibilities.

Patricia, for example, loved Barbie so much that she wanted to pass down the
traditions to her daughter Gabriela. Patricia remembers that whenever she bought a
Barbie for Gabriela she would also buy one for herself. Moreover, when Gabriela grew
up and wanted to throw out or give away her Barbies, her mother did not allow her to do
so.
Gabriela: Well, I always saw all those Barbie dolls on television and I said to her, “Mom, I want to buy them.” We would go to the mall every week and they would buy me one doll.

Patricia: When she behaved well I gave her an allowance. And if she got good grades, then I would say to her, “Do you want that one?” and if she got good grades I would buy her the doll.

(Gabriela and Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

As a mother Patricia felt a genuine love for Barbie that she wanted to share with her daughter as much as she could. She saw herself in her daughter and wanted to give her the opportunity to play with Barbie and immerse in her world. The way she spoke about Barbie, the passion for getting Barbie artifacts, even today when she no longer is or has a little girl, illustrates her deep longing for girlhood and her good memories with Barbie.

For Gabriela, her mother recalls, Barbie also served as motivation to study hard and receive good grades.

I gave her [Barbie] as a prize; it was like a prize. After a while there was a time when I didn’t have to sit down with her to study, and she was [her GPA] 4.0 all her life. And whenever she got good grades, the grades in December and May, I always gave her a prize, right? I always gave her a surprise or something. I gave her $10 for each A in a class. And she would study to earn those $10 per class! [Laughs]. The B’s were $5. But she would sweat those A’s to earn the $10 and she would earn them and say, “Look, mom!” (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

With this interaction, then, Patricia was providing opportunities for Gabriela to interact with Barbie in meaningful ways. Gabriela knew that if she worked hard, she would be rewarded with money that she could use to acquire more dolls.

There are other means through which mothers pass down the traditions of Barbie play or owning Barbie artifacts: through creative productions. Though the most common form of creation pertaining dolls is when mothers design and sew dresses for their daughters’ dolls, it is not the only one. The stories I gathered through my interviews extended my ideas of how mothers create and pass down traditions to their children. I
present here creative production through the confection of artifacts (such as clothes and accessories), creative production through the collection of Barbie dolls and artifacts, and creative production by curating these artifacts (mothers choosing how to display dolls and why).

In my own experiences with Barbie, before I started buying clothes for my dolls, my mom would make some for them. As she had told me, this is how she used to play with her Barbie doll; she would take different scraps of fabric and make different outfits for them, and that is what she did for my dolls. I most vividly remember two pieces my mother made using scraps of fabric from our old school uniforms. One of the pieces was a maroon tube maxi dress for Barbie and the other one a maroon pair of shorts for Ken. I remember incorporating those outfits into my play as if they were outfits produced by Mattel, and I especially liked having more options for Ken since I did not buy a lot of clothes for the Ken dolls.

Some of my participants also remembered having clothes made by their mothers, or sometimes their aunts or grandmothers. For instance, K.C. and Annie (11 and 9 respectively) showed me a doll that was dressed in clothes their aunt had made for them. Annie said she loved the dress, but she did not like that her aunt glued the dress to the doll because she could not change the doll’s outfit. Autumn (40) also talked about the outfits her mother made for her Barbie dolls:

When I was thinking of you coming over today I was remembering that my mom when I was the age of Sharon made Barbie doll clothes, like by hand. Well, with sewing machines and everything. And she, and so my Barbies had this amazing wardrobe of clothes, and she would sell them at flea markets. And I wish, of course now, that I had one of everything and I wish I had all my old stuff, but you know, it’s all gone and lost along the way. (Autumn, Group 5 Transcript)
When I asked her if having mostly homemade doll clothes embarrassed her, she said it never happened. In fact, she explained that for her, the clothes her mother made were the “most awesome looking clothes.” She added:

I had some real clothes, I remember specifically I had a Pretty In Pink Barbie, which was, she had like a beautiful cape with like pink fur around the edges and stuff. But all my other clothes were homemade, but they were spectacular. Like my mom, I still remember like, velvet capes and very detailed bridal dresses. (Autumn, Group 5 Transcript)

Her mother also made underwear for all of her Barbie dolls, so this was an additional detail that made Autumn feel like her dolls were special since Barbie dolls usually do not include underwear. In the present Autumn likes to sew, and from time to time she tries to make outfits for her daughter Sharon’s dolls. Experiencing this made Autumn appreciate even more her mother’s work in sewing Barbie outfits: “When I think about, ‘cause I sew, but when I think about how tiny Barbie clothes are, I think, ‘Wow, these are hard to sew in a sewing machine!’ But yeah, she had everything” (Autumn, Group 5 Transcript).

Unlike the experiences of some women for whom “custom-made originals frequently had less value than clothes off the Mattel rack” (Rand, 1995, p. 96), for some of my participants having clothes and accessories made by their mothers meant they had one-of-a-kind pieces. At the same time, several of these homemade pieces were created by the girls themselves, as were the cases of Camille, Carla, Carmen, and Lourdes. Yet, some participants, including those who loved their homemade outfits and those who were creating outfits as well, expressed preference for the Mattel-made accessories because they fit the doll better and were the “real deal.” In addition to the economic factors that may contribute to the need for homemade materials, the significance of mothers designing and sewing outfits for their daughters’ dolls underlines a labor of love. It
creates a connection between the past and the present – between the ways the past
generation may have interacted with Barbie and new ways for the younger generations to
relate to the doll. Within the context of my participants, this labor of love was also
manifested through the collection of Barbie dolls, especially from two mothers.

In 1991 Mattel shifted its marketing strategy to specifically target adult collectors
(Sarasohn-Kahn, 1996). According to John Amerman, Mattel’s CEO at the time, “the doll
was previously ‘undermarketed’” (Sarasohn-Kahn, 1996, p. 54). According to Sarasohn-
Kahn (1996), “The average American girl has an estimated eight-plus Barbie dolls in her
collection […] However, Mattel recognizes that both children and adults are consumers
of Barbie dolls and related products” (p. 1). This shift in the marketing acknowledged an
important consumer of Barbie – adults, who driven by nostalgia were beginning to collect
the doll. Nostalgia produced by memories of their childhood play with Barbie is what
drove thousands of women to the (Barbie) Doll Museum in Quebradillas, P.R., where
owner Luis Felipe Orama exhibits about 850 Barbie dolls. During my visit to this
museum he explained that many of the visitors that used to frequent the place where
women, who either wanted to take a look at some of the dolls they used to have as girls or
wanted to buy dolls to add to their collections. Nostalgia certainly emerged during my
visit as I walked through each aisle and recognized the dolls from my childhood.

This sense of nostalgia and longing for her childhood was influential in one
mother’s creation of her collection of Barbie dolls. To the date of our interview in May
2015 Patricia had collected an assortment of 233 Barbie dolls. Her collection grows each
and every day, and is comprised of Barbie and friends, old and new, some of which were
like the ones she owned in her childhood, and the rest are dolls with which she has fallen
in love. Some of the dolls in her personal collection on display in her home include Barbies from the 1960s to the present and her friends Ken, Allan, Mitch, Midge, and Skipper, to name a few. It also includes dolls for play and dolls from collector’s and designer editions, such as the Holidays edition, Bob Mackie dolls, and Christian Dior designer dolls (See Figure 5.1 for a sample of Patricia’s collection). Patricia began collecting as a result of the joy brought upon the memories of Barbie play and the sadness of not having her dolls anymore because she gave some away and because her husband threw out the rest when they moved.

Patricia: So I was 4 years old. I saw that doll and I became fascinated with her. So my mother, these are mine, bought me a Barbie but I gave her away [later on]. And I missed her so much. So I began collecting. Since I was 4 I began… I fell in love with her. And then I began. I had my little group in a suitcase, and couldn’t throw them out, but then my niece came around and I gave her my Barbie. 

[…]

Gabriela: That was the [book] she used to have, and my dad threw it out. 
Patricia: In fact, when we bought this house, he threw all of it out. […] And I have been buying everything he threw out. I had the house, clothes. I had this little book that came with the doll and there I would spend time dreaming that I wanted that dress. I would spend much time looking at that book. So then, little by little, I have bought almost everything on eBay. [See Figure 5.2]

(Patricia and Gabriela, Group 4 Transcript)
Figure 5-1: A sample of Patricia’s collection of 233 Barbie dolls. Top left: Classic dolls (Barbie, Ken, and others). Top right: Holidays Barbie and Twilight movie dolls. Bottom left: Classic Skipper dolls. Bottom right: Bob Mackie Queen of Hearts Barbie doll.

Figure 5-2: A booklet that was included with Barbie dolls during Barbie’s early years. This one is similar to the one Patricia’s husband had thrown away.
Yet collecting was not only about her own childhood memories. Patricia continues to search for dresses and dolls that she would like to add. For her, buying a Barbie doll or a dress is more enjoyable than buying a dress for herself, and she even admitted that she’d rather buy a Barbie than buy herself a dress. As she did when she was little, she still asks for Barbie dolls and outfits as presents. She stated that her goal in collecting Barbie dolls and outfits was not so much about acquiring a certain number of dolls or about the size of the collection, but rather she said, “My goal was to buy what I desired when I was little” (Patricia, *Group 4 Transcript*). What is interesting in this case is how the mother/daughter dynamic shifts from the norm. While her daughter asked for Barbie dolls during her childhood, in the present it is Patricia who asks for Barbie dolls whenever there is opportunity to give her a present. Her daughter Gabriela admits that she does not like getting her mother any Barbie artifact as gifts:

Gabriela: She asks for Barbies as gifts. I don’t give her [Barbies], only my brother does.
Patricia: Yes, my boy gives them to me.
Gabriela: And at night she goes onto ebay and she continues looking.
(Gabriela and Patricia, *Group 4 Transcript*)

While her collection of 233 dolls belongs to her and are displayed in glass shelves as if they were part of an exhibition, Patricia also acquired dolls for her daughter when she was growing up. At the present, these 131 dolls are still well kept in their house, looking almost exactly as they did when Gabriela was a child. These dolls were kept in a box, just as they had been during Gabriela’s girlhood (Figure 4.3 in the previous chapter shows Gabriela’s dolls from her childhood).

In similar ways Marisa, a woman in her fifties, created a collection of Barbie dolls. Marisa is a long-time friend of my family, and her daughter is a few years younger
than I am. Though our conversation was not long because she never played with Barbie when she was young, and her daughter does not live in Puerto Rico anymore, I wanted to talk to her about the doll collection she still has in her house. I have many memories of visiting her house when I was younger and admiring the vast collection of Barbie dolls she had. The collection was comprised of collector’s edition Barbie dolls, limited editions, and dolls from the Barbie “Dolls of the World” line with a total of 38 dolls. Her daughter had a different set of Barbie dolls she used exclusively for play. The collection just like Patricia’s, was also kept on shelves, displayed as if in a museum. I asked Marisa if any of the dolls were hers or if she had acquired some of them for her own pleasure. She explained: “No, all of the dolls are hers. I never had any. But she had a lot because everyone knew she liked dolls, and she had all kinds of dolls” (Marisa, Interview Transcript). Marisa never played with Barbie, so while the dolls in the collection belonged to her daughter, it seemed this collection was as much for her as it was for her daughter. The collection that survives is there because both mother and daughter like to admire the dolls. I think for Marisa especially it is a way of having what she did not have growing up. As her daughter grew up and grew out of her doll play phase, they both began getting rid of what Marisa called the “normal Barbie dolls.” These were the ones with which her daughter had played and which were not special editions of Barbie or were not expensive. Sarasohn-Kahn (1996) explains that, “Given [the] large volume [of Barbie dolls], collectors can shape their collections based on themes of dolls. While some collectors choose to acquire examples from every category available, others choose to focus their collections on a particular theme” (p. 92). Specifically for the collection that was displayed in their living room, Marisa was very certain of the dolls that would
remain in the collection: expensive collector’s edition dolls and Barbie “Dolls of the World” dolls.

I kept the ones that were expensive and the ones from different countries. But we had to throw out some of the Barbie dolls, for example, some of them got mold and we had to throw them out. (Marisa, Interview Transcript)

Looking at Marisa and her daughter’s experience through the lens of the mother and daughter dynamic, we can see how the collection of Barbie brought them together. Moreover, Marisa enabled her daughter’s contact with Barbie by providing a prominent space in the house for her daughter’s doll collection. She carefully arranged the dolls in order to be viewed and admired by anyone who walked through their home. Additionally, together mother and daughter decided which dolls would become part of the collection and which dolls were objects for play. Marisa’s decision about the dolls she would include and how they would be displayed shows an additional aspect of creating a collection, which is the third creative production I explore in this section: that of curating doll collections.

As Sarasohn-Kahn (1996) observed, those who collect dolls usually create their collection around a theme. Because the Barbie line is so extensive, people may choose to collect, for example, a line that is made specific for collection (like the Holidays line or the Barbie “Dolls of the World”) or they choose to create their own “line” of collections. Since the dolls Marisa’s daughter received were often gifts from others, the way Marisa became a curator of the collection was by choosing how to display the dolls. Each shelf of the armoire displayed about five to six dolls, being held up by their stands, and grouped by categories. Some shelves, for example, showcased some of the Barbie “Dolls of the World,” including Puerto Rican Barbie (Figure 5.4). Other shelves displayed
glamorous dolls (Figure 5.3) while another displayed Hollywood dolls (I Love Lucy, for instance) that remained in their boxes.

Figure 5-3: Part of Marisa’s collection created for her daughter. This part of the collection is comprised of glamour dolls.

Figure 5-4: Part of Marisa’s collection created for her daughter. This part of the collection is comprised of dolls from around the world. Pictured in the center is the Puerto Rican Barbie.

The curating part of building a collection was a fascinating part of Patricia’s interactions with Barbie, not only for her own collection of dolls but also for the vast
number of dolls her daughter had. With her own collection Patricia divided dolls according to their year and their name. For instance, as was shown in Figure 5.1, Patricia tries to keep all the “classic era Barbie” together (top left), all the classic Skipper dolls together (bottom left), and the Holidays editions as another category (top right). For the most part this is the type of categorization evident in the display of her dolls. At the same time, due to lack of space and the continuous growth of her collection, these divisions by categories are not always possible. I perceived Patricia’s curatorial thinking in the careful thought and consideration behind her displays, but even more in her cataloguing of dolls.

During one portion of our conversation Gabriela looked for a notebook that she wanted to show me. At first I thought she wanted me to see that she still had other Barbie artifacts like this Barbie notebook she was showing me. However, the important aspect of this Barbie notebook was that it was full of pictures of an array of Barbie dolls. Gabriela’s mother, Patricia, had cut out the pictures from the boxes or toy catalogues of all the dolls Gabriela had when she was little. As they acquired each doll, Patricia would glue the pictures on a page in order to keep a visual record of all of Gabriela’s dolls. The purpose of this notebook, Patricia explained, was so she could look at the pictures when Gabriela finished playing and she could put the outfits back on exactly as they were and onto the correct doll. Figures 5.5 and 5.6 present examples of the pages from the catalogue Patricia created. As can be seen in some of the pages, she added information about the dolls, mainly regarding the year the doll came out for sale and their price.
Figure 5-5: Patricia’s catalogue of her daughter’s dolls with the captions “1994” next to one item and “$175.00 1994” next to another.

Figure 5-6: Patricia’s catalogue of her daughter’s dolls with the caption “1995” written next to two items.
From a researcher’s standpoint Patricia’s catalogue, which served as a visual guide at the time she created it, becomes an important artifact of study. This notebook showed me every single one of Gabriela’s dolls, ostensibly in chronological order or in the order in which they were acquired. From my perspective, the artifact illustrated how Patricia’s mind worked to create collections in different forms – not only with her actual dolls but also in creating a catalogue of her daughter’s. At the time when she created the catalogue she had not officially begun her own collection. Yet, through the creation of this artifact she was already learning how to be a collector and how think like a curator.

By the time she began collecting her own dolls and throughout the continuous process of acquiring more dolls, Patricia’s curatorial knowledge grew.

Prior to my research fellowship where I studied more closely Barbie dolls from 1959 until the early 2000s, I could not clearly distinguish between the first Barbie doll and the subsequent iterations, which were very similar with just a few slight differences. This interview took place three months before my fellowship, thus when Patricia showed me the doll that was the same as her first one I thought it was the very first Barbie that came out in 1959. After all, it had the same hairstyle, same bathing suit, and overall same look as Barbie No.1. Yet Patricia’s interest in collecting and curating her dolls drove her to study Barbie dolls more in depth.

Patricia: I thought it was the first one, but it wasn’t the first. Studying and such [the Barbie lineage], it was about the fourth. […] But I always thought it was the first one, but studying more, it wasn’t.

Emily: That’s what I thought about my mother’s too. I thought she had the very first one, but the clothes the doll had…But that one with the bathing suit wasn’t the first one? [I point to another doll with a black and white swimsuit]
Patricia: No, that was number 5. I also bought it on eBay. She looks a lot like the first one. The first one is very white because she has lost color. (Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

She was right. The first one as well as the second and third do look whiter because the material was different, therefore, they have lost their color (Figure 5.7).

Meanwhile, Patricia’s doll, which looked similar, had the more tanned color that is so recognizable in Barbie. The knowledge Patricia had about this and other details of Barbie demonstrate her passion for the doll and the curating process that goes behind creating an ample collection.

Figure 5-7: No.1 Barbie, 1959. Picture taken by me at The Strong National Museum of Play during my research fellowship.

What is seen in these two cases of mothers creating and curating collections, either or both for themselves and their daughters, is an interest in passing along Barbie traditions. In Marisa’s case, while she did not play with Barbie as a child, she wanted her daughter to be able to interact with the doll. In allowing this interaction, which often came thanks to friends and family members gifting her daughter with Barbie dolls, she
was able to live vicariously through her daughter. As a mother Patricia felt a genuine love for Barbie that she wanted to share with her daughter as much as she could. She saw herself in her daughter and wanted to give her the opportunity to play with Barbie and immerse in her world just like she had done. However, this is not always the case.

“Don’t play with this one”: Parental Control of Barbie Play

Erica Jong advocates for Barbie as something that everyone needs, even adults, just as they need books of fantasy, to let their imagination be creative. In order to achieve this, she says, adults should not be involved in their child’s play. Jong (1999) provides literary stories of adventures as examples in which “magic happens when the adults aren’t looking” and reiterates that “adults have to be banished for the childhood magic to occur” (p.202). While I concur that children should be allowed their space for play, the stories of my participants’ experiences also suggest that parents and children can work in tandem to create fruitful and meaningful play. At the same time, too much involvement or control could become restrictive and hampering for the child. In this sense, Jong’s advocacy for an adult-free play space is highly valid.

One type of parental involvement that could become restrictive and could obstruct the adventures and the magic of play relates to mothers’ own desires to keep Barbie dolls intact. These restrictions may represent the parent’s own childhood desire to collect Barbie dolls. Patricia, who as an adult began collecting Barbie dolls and whose passion for Barbie shows in her continuous acquisition of dolls for her daughter Gabriela, at times
restricted her daughter’s interactions with Barbie by guiding how she could play with the doll.

Gabriela: I could not cut their hair or anything.
Emily: Oh, I was going to ask you that, if you did something different to them.
Gabriela: She didn’t let me. Well, behind her back. She didn’t let me cut their hair. I messed up one doll’s hair. I flat ironed her hair. And then my mom was trying to make the hair better, but she didn’t let me. I couldn’t break them, no. They’re still identical [to when I got them].
Patricia: They all even have their shoes and everything, well kept. I would take their shoes off. Gabriela would ask me, “Mom, can I cut their hair?” and then I would put them away. I would take their shoes off—
Emily: Because shoes are the first things to get lost?
Patricia: I took the shoes off so she wouldn’t eat them either. I have all of the shoes with all the outfits and all of her stuff. Everything is there. (Gabriela and Patricia, Group 4 Transcript)

My older sister, who was pregnant at the time but did not know the gender of the baby, talked about how she would handle having a daughter who wanted to play with Barbie. Her views on how she envisions interactions with Barbie could become restrictive, but not in the same ways that the literature about Barbie has documented. She expressed no qualms against the doll, and she would not object to buying Barbie dolls for a daughter (or son) if the child asked for them. Yet, in the way that her vision could become restrictive is in controlling what the child could do with the doll and how the child could play with it. It sparked a constructive conversation between all the women in the family, from different generations, about the usefulness of delineating how a child can play with a doll.

Camille: If I have a daughter and she asks me for Barbie, I will get them. Now I think about whether I would let her play with them or if I should keep them in their boxes for her to look at them [Laughs].
Carmen: No!
Lourdes: If you’re going to buy them for the box, don’t buy them. Don’t waste money.

Frances: If I had a daughter who asked for a Barbie just to keep her safe and look at it, I would only buy one and that’s it. I don’t know, when I asked for all those Barbies and I never used them—

Carmen: I just gave them away.

Frances: Exactly. That’s the same thing I would do. If she asks for a Barbie, okay. She doesn’t want to play with it? Then no more Barbie for you.

Camille: But they look so pretty in their boxes.

Frances: No! They look pretty taking up space?

Carmen: Toys are for playing.

Camille: Anyway, I’m going to let my daughter play as long as she does not damage them.

Emily: And what is “damaging” for you?

Camille: Writing on them. I know all children do this because I did it too.

Emily: I was going to say, what if she cuts her hair?

Camille: Then I have to teach her how to style it. [Laughs]

Carmen: Not writing on it. I had my Thumbelina [a baby doll] and I played with her, and a cousin of mine wrote on her. She wrote on her forehead. I never wrote on her, never mistreated her. (All participants, Group 1 Transcript)

Whether the parental control was enacted (as in the case of Patricia) or was presented as hypothetical (as in the case of Camille), these views about dolls’ place in the household are common, especially with a doll such as Barbie. The plethora of versions of Barbie dolls, some of which are actually collectors’ items, invite girls to desire play with her and adults to collect them. The previous section described the ways in which mothers collect Barbie for their daughters but also for themselves. This in itself is not restrictive, but when girls are not allowed to touch their dolls or their interactions are being policed, their agency with the dolls is taken way. Carla offered an example of her childhood friend who owned about 25 to 30 Barbie dolls, albeit, she was never allowed to play with them:

And my friend, her mom would buy her [Barbie dolls] and then put them up in her dresser. And then she had all her Barbies, about 25 to 30 in their boxes. And
that girl was so miserable. So then she would go to my house, she played with my Barbies, my shoes, she would take them, borrowed them, she played with them because I had bins full of Barbies and all their stuff. (Carla, Interview Transcript)

In these cases, the parental control is about conserving Barbie in pristine conditions perhaps as a result of rectifying the ways they interacted with their dolls during childhood. Yet, this presents restrictions to how the child may interact with a toy. It is a way in which parental involvement results in the loss of the magic to which Jong (1999) referred.

Parental involvement and control over Barbie play mostly occurs in response to the issues they find in the doll. These issues, which I discussed in Chapter 4 from the individual perspectives of my participants, are related to Barbie’s controversial body and her race. What the conversations outlined in this part reveal is the often-conflicting views and ambivalence parents have toward Barbie and their children’s ways of negotiating the issues parents fear will negatively affect them. Parents’ perceptions of Barbie and their involvement in their children’s play is a recurring theme in the conversations about the doll. Anna Quindlen (1999) and Jane Smiley (1999) claim the doll has a big influence on girls while Yona Zeldis McDonough attributes that role to the real women who surround girls. While McDonough argues that, “Girls learn how to be women not from their dolls but from the women around them. Most often this means Mom” (1999, p.112), Smiley asserts that she did not believe to have an influence on her own daughters. She states, “[…] if my daughters were to learn certain Hollywood-inspired essentials of American womanhood, it wasn’t going to be from me, it was going to be from Barbie” (Smiley, 1999, p. 190). The comments from two of my participants, who are mothers of girls,
concur with McDonough’s views about how much influence Barbie really has on girls and how much it comes from the women around girls.

For example, Susan’s views on Barbie’s influence on girls, which I presented in chapter 4, point to the responsibility parents have of educating children about values and self-love. During the conversation about a young woman and a young man who changed their appearances to look like Barbie and Ken, Susan, a mother of two girls I interviewed, argued that those actions are a result of “a lack of education to our children” and that if we teach children to love themselves, then having a pretty doll should not have an effect on them. Carla (age 33), a mother of two girls who due to conflicting schedules I was not able to interview, spoke about how children depict through their play what they have learned. She highlights that it is what they learn from their homes, not what they learn from their toys. As she explained to me, she remembers her Barbie days fondly because they were “beautiful moments, opportunities of play that maybe children today don’t have” (Carla, Interview Transcript). She added:

Everything today is so sexualized. [...] Believe me, girls today play with Barbie in ways that are different from how you and I played. And I have babysat girls who play with Barbie and Barbie rapes Ken! And that is not about the game. It is a reflection of what is happening inside the child’s head. So then you could that the game of Barbie and Ken— it is not the game of Barbie and Ken. It is, first of all, what you teach your children, what you let them be exposed to, and then based on that it’s how your child will react to the rest of her environment. I am very aware of that. (Carla, Interview Transcript)

At the same time, some of the participants debated whether giving their daughters Barbie dolls would be the best idea. Barbie has often been labeled as a projection of a sexualized body: she is an object that portrays “perfect” looks and who leads to unrealistic expectations of body, causing issues of body image to young girls. This was a
concern for Moore-Henecke (1997) who admitted that, “Like most feminists, I have been
less than enthusiastic about Barbie. When asked to purchase Barbies for my nieces, I
have wondered if this was really the best gift to give them. Would I be contributing to
their eventual battles with bulimia?” (p. 1). Based on issues of body image often mothers
do not want their daughters to play with Barbie. For instance, Riddick (2001) explains
that many mothers see Barbie as a negative influence because they believe the doll
teaches girls that they have to be blonde and beautiful to get a boyfriend or a career. As a
result, some women do not allow Barbies into their homes to prevent their daughters
from learning this. These negative views on Barbie have an effect on women who used to
play with the doll when they were younger but have now grown up to consider
themselves feminists. It creates an internal debate of whether Barbie is a good toy for
little girls and even makes women feel ashamed to admit they played with the doll; even
more, they feel ashamed to admit they still like the doll, as documented by Reid-Walsh
and Mitchell (2000). An example of this internal debate came from Carla, who as a child
and teenager played with Barbie and who suggested that the influence of the doll is
dependent upon the education that is given to girls about certain topics. Carla examined
her own prejudices against Barbie as someone who used to play with the doll, but who
also does not want her daughters to play with her.

Emily: So, why do you say that you’d prefer your daughters played with
something more realistic?

Carla: Because… You know, when I think about it I don’t even know
why. Like, I don’t know, I don’t know. Like I prefer they played
with a toy that resembles reality more. I don’t know. I think I’m
frustrating them big time because children need to be children and
they should use their imagination, and now I’m realizing my
stupidity. Thank you. [Laughs] But I don’t know. It seems like it
might be because of my own prejudice or discrimination, maybe
because *I* felt in some ways inferior to Barbie or to any girl who could look like Barbie, maybe I think that my girls could feel the same. It could be that. I think I’ll run to the mall to buy them a Barbie. (Carla, *Interview Transcript*)

Her love/hate relationship with Barbie gave Carla certain prejudices about how good the doll really is. However, she also admitted how much she enjoyed the doll during her childhood, despite Barbie’s position as her “frenemy” and she questioned why, if she had educated her daughters well, she still thought they should not have contact with the doll. Carla’s moment of deliberation and debate is interesting because it provided insight to the contesting views many women, including those of us who loved Barbie as children, have about the doll. In this case, this deliberation occurred at the moment, as the questions that came up during the interview invited Carla to really engage with her own memories, experiences as a child, and her perceptions as an adult. She realized that perhaps, if she believed that it is not about the game and the toy but about what children learn from their environment, then she should not prohibit her daughters from playing with Barbie.

In contrast, for one daughter and mother pair in my research Barbie was never out of the question. The mother, Patricia, who had played with Barbie and remembered those times with fondness, wanted her daughter to have the positive memories she had about Barbie play. For Patricia and her daughter Gabriela, Barbie was simply a doll through which they could act out their fantasies, mainly about being someone different every day. In their opinion, Barbie did not promote unrealistic ideals about body image, therefore, Patricia never forbid Gabriela from playing with the doll. As I presented in the previous chapter, Gabriela (25) attested that she never experienced thinking she had to be perfect
like Barbie was: “I liked them. And I never felt like, ‘Oh, I have to be perfect like Barbie.’” (Gabriela, *Group 4 Transcript*). Her mother agreed and commented on how women often have a pretty face, but they let themselves go by eating too much and then “lose their beauty” (Patricia, *Group 4 Transcript*).

Look, I knew a woman who was a teacher, a precious woman, blonde hair, blue eyes. But she was overweight. And I guess everyone told her, “You’re so beautiful,” and she lost weight. I don’t know what she did, but she lost weight. And she got pretty again. Well, even her husband left her because he had married a beautiful woman. (Patricia, *Group 4 Transcript*)

In Chapter 4 I examined this quote in relation to issues of body image. Patricia’s contradiction illustrated the very ideals about beauty that Barbie promotes: that in order to be beautiful you must be thin yet busty, white, blonde, and have blue or green eyes. Yet, this is a complex anecdote that also raises issues about race. Patricia’s comments about her friend’s eyes give light to the discourse around race that is often propagated in Puerto Rican culture. She described a lady who was beautiful, as she was blonde and blue-eyed. Patricia had so internalized this particular ideal of beauty that she did not examine why she specifically used her friend’s blue eyes and blonde hair as markers of beauty. This description of beauty is not exclusive to her. As Negrón-Muntaner (2004) pointed out, consistently Puerto Ricans, especially dark-skinned ones, are told to marry someone with lighter skin tone, perhaps with light eye color too, so that they can improve the race—“para mejorar la raza.”

Historically the majority population has used color, class, facial features and texture of hair (often referred to as *pelo malo*—bad hair) with negative connotations. Reyes (2015) elucidates the array of characteristics and descriptors negatively given to her as she became the first black Puerto Rican beauty queen: “I was described as ugly,
my nose as a bicycle seat, among others, I remember receiving recommendations about how to whiten my elbows and knees because they were too dark” (par. 1). Reyes (2015) uses the term sillín de bicicleta or bicycle seat because it is a common descriptor used in Puerto Rico to refer to a nose that is wide (with the connotation that it is ugly). For one participant, 30-year-old Isabel, these characteristics of blackness were valued not only by her, but mainly her parents. So much that she remembered vividly why none of her dolls were white: “My dad would buy me the black Barbie and he’d tell me that, to him, she looked more like me than the blonde one. And I liked the black one more as well” (Isabel, Group 3 Transcript). It is important to note that it was her father who provided Barbie for her. For Isabel’s dad, it was important to show her that beauty was not limited to whiteness, and by providing access principally to black Barbie, he gave Isabel the opportunity to see herself reflected in her artifacts of play.

Barbie is a symbol of American culture, whiteness, and (heterosexual) femininity. These different levels of identities are in tension in the experiences of some Puerto Rican girls, who may not fit Barbie’s mold in one or more of these categories. While some may look like Barbie, she is not a representation of a majority of Puerto Rican girls, yet they are held to beauty standards posed by Barbie’s white, blonde, tall, and thin figure—the American ideal of beauty. The idea that beauty is only represented in whiteness, blondness, and blue eyes is exactly what motivated Autumn, a 40-year-old White woman (my only non-Puerto Rican participant) and her Puerto Rican husband, to keep their 8-year-old daughter away from Barbie. Since Autumn had played with Barbie as a child I was interested in finding out if that was something she wanted to pass onto her daughter. She said, “You know, truthfully, not really. I really didn’t want the princesses thing, I
didn’t want the overly pink Barbie, especially ‘cause she’s blonde and blue-eyed” (Autumn, Group 5 Transcript). Her daughter Sharon responded by complaining about the lack of Barbie variety or the saturation of white, blonde Barbie: “I know! All the Barbies are blonde, well almost all. I saw in the store like a Barbie that was the friend of her in the movie of the ballerina slipper thing, and I saw the reddish hair one and the brown hair one, but they wouldn’t get them for me!” (Sharon, Group 5 Transcript). Autumn continued explaining that they had wanted to keep princesses and Barbies away for a long time, but when they were trying to get Sharon off her pacifier, they told her she could have whatever she wanted. “She picked a Barbie. And so that’s when she got her first Barbie,” Autumn explained, “but when I think back about my experience with Barbie, I have a lot of great memories playing with my sister and other friends with our Barbies. I especially… the white blue-eyed thing that was my whole problem with most of the princesses, you know with all that. So that’s what we were trying to kind of avoid” (Autumn, Group 5 Transcript).

Even though this mother, and the father as well, wanted to keep the girl away from Barbie and princesses because of the messages about femininity they promoted, they also did not control their daughter’s choices and honored her wish to have a Barbie only when she had expressed interest in her. To Sharon’s credit, her interactions with Barbie did not ignore the problems she presents and which have been so vastly identified by scholars. Instead, Sharon was critically engaging with a product the she understood was problematic. She identified the need for diversity in the Barbie products, and she expressed her frustration with blonde white Barbie being the central figure in the doll line. As presented in the previous chapter, this is something she also manifested by
coloring her Barbie’s hair with red, blue, green, and orange highlighters. Although you can find many girls’ tutorials on YouTube where they use markers and highlighters to color Barbie’s hair, they do so as fashion statements. In contrast, Sharon’s alteration of Barbie’s hair was an act of subversion and protest against the doll’s ideals of beauty. According to Brown (1998) objects become what their subject wants them to be: “the subject reconstitutes the object”; as a result, the object can tell us about the person who interacted with it. In many cases, such as the examples Brown provides, the object is used in subversive ways in which they were not intended to be used. This is a very common practice described in the literature about Barbie play, where the owners often made modifications to the dolls to adjust them to their play practices (see for example, Chin, 1999; McDonough, 1999; Rand, 1995). Pike (2015) suggests that, “media narratives are best understood when the pleasures and possibilities they offer to girls are considered alongside criticisms of their textual limitations” (p.154). Sharon serves as an important critic of an object made for girls, made for her. And while she enjoyed the pleasures of Barbie play she maintained a critical perspective of Barbie’s limitations and what they mean for girls. More importantly, in the exploration of familial relationships, Sharon’s critical view of Barbie would not have occurred if her parents had completely controlled her interactions with dolls and Barbie culture. By allowing her to interact with the object of their derision, her parents opened the space for Sharon’s practice of critical thinking, able to draw her own conclusions about Barbie, and to explore the various issues inherent in the doll.

Similar to Autumn, Susan admitted she did not feel comfortable with her daughters playing with Barbie, despite having played with the doll during her childhood.
As an adult, she recognized that certain aspects about Barbie were problematic, especially in relation to class as discussed in the previous chapter. As a mother at times she considered not letting her daughters play with Barbie: “Of course. Of course I thought about it. And I’ve never given Barbie to these girls. All those Barbies you see there have been gifts from my sister, my friends, their grandmothers” (Susan, *Group 6 Transcript*).

She continued:

> To answer your question, no. I never bought them because there were like, the white one was the refined one. [...] And God made us the way we are and all of us need to respect each other, and each person has value, and each person is useful, and each person is. But that was something I did not like a lot, that they were so like cutesy. (Susan, *Group 6 Transcript*)

Despite her views on Barbie and the fact that she was not the one providing access to the doll, Susan, just as Autumn, was also not restricting the girls’ interactions with her. She understood that her daughters could play with the doll and enjoy her the same way they enjoyed other dolls (for example, Monster High dolls, Ever After High dolls, and even Bratz) while simultaneously remaining critical of the issues that were present. Moreover, she understood that her daughters could use the dolls as a play object that enabled them to live vicariously and to assume the roles *they* decided to assign.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, I presented three ways in which Barbie has a role in the familial dynamics between mothers and daughters, but also between sisters. The first section provided examples of the differences and similarities in play practices with Barbie that take place within a family group. By presenting the examples of two sisters who played
together and in similar ways, then three sisters who had three very different experiences, and a girl who played with her three sisters constantly, I was able to provide an ample view into the variety of interactions that girls have with Barbie. In addition, this section also illustrated the ways in which mothers and daughters may also have similar yet very distinct experiences with Barbie.

I continued the chapter with a section that described three means through which mothers continue or pass down Barbie traditions onto their daughters. The first discussed mothers creating artifacts, especially clothes for their daughters’ Barbie dolls. The second described the creation of doll collections to be admired by both mother and daughter. The collections were often a result of mothers wanting to relive their girlhoods or living their dreams through their daughters. The third one explored the curating process and knowledge that goes behind creating and displaying a Barbie doll collection.

The last section in this chapter addressed one of the major topics found in the scholarship and literature about Barbie: mothers’ interventions in their daughters’ play with Barbie. Mothers (and fathers) sometimes want to control how their children play or with which toys they can play. As shown in the first part of the section, sometimes the control stems from a desire to keep toys undamaged and in good conditions. As I continued the section I examined other issues that make parents question how much their girls should interact with Barbie. Mainly these reasons are rooted in the problematic issues Barbie presents, such as her body shape, and as was mainly examined here, her whiteness.

By examining Barbie’s place in familial dynamics I was able to further explore three of the four research questions that guided this study, particularly within collective
experiences of play or interactions with Barbie. The events, relationships, and dynamics presented here addressed: Barbie’s impact in Puerto Rican girlhoods (research question 1), how she became part of some of the participants’ girlhoods (research question 2), and issues raised in the play with or discussions about the doll, especially those related to race (research question 4).

The differences and similarities in the experiences between mothers and daughters attest Barbie’s versatility to produce a range of experiences that depend mostly, though not exclusively, on who interacts with her. The similar interactions illustrated in some participants’ dynamics denote Barbie’s power to create bonds between mothers and daughters (and other types of relationships) who share certain ideas about femininity or who remember the doll differently according to their own individual interests. Yet, the differences open the space for a more critical look at the doll to understand that femininity is not a singular, homogenous experience. In addition, seeing Barbie’s offerings and limitations bring up specific issues about the messages she embodies which can motivate mothers and parental figures to limit or eradicate girls’ interactions with Barbie culture.

A number of adult participants noted that Barbie still appealed to them and they would share Barbie with future generations, although they qualified this by explaining that they are also more critical of Barbie products and overall Barbie culture now because they are older and understand the various problematic layers of what the doll represents. It is hard to exactly pinpoint how much of the influence on girls comes from Barbie and how much comes from mothers. Perhaps it is a combination of both; perhaps there needs to be a combination of both in equal parts so that play with Barbie can become fruitful.
By taking away or denying Barbie to girls because they might “dwell in her anatomy” as Wolitzer (1999) suggests, we are giving little credit to girls’ abilities to be critical thinkers and to engage with Barbie in meaningful ways.

Listening to my participants’ very diverse experiences gave me insight into the fascinating ranges of interactions that are afforded through Barbie, and the ways in which each family approached Barbie. There were mothers who held Barbie so dearly in their hearts that they wanted their daughters to experience Barbie in positive ways. Conversely, there were mothers who were apprehensive about allowing their daughters to be in constant contact with the doll. Then there are the many different interactions within the same family nucleus. In my house, our mother enjoyed Barbie in her childhood, but she neither made us play nor restricted our play with Barbie. What resulted were three very distinct interactions with Barbie within the same household: one daughter who somewhat played, one who obsessively played, and one who completely rejected Barbie.

Moreover, I was able to witness how two sisters who are now growing up with Barbie and other dolls interacted not only with each other but also their mother. In this case, they both enjoyed playing with Barbie and other dolls, and at the same time they were keenly aware of the issues Barbie presents. Their mother played an important role in this awareness. While she did not discourage her daughters from playing with Barbie, she complemented their play with conversations about body image, race, and gender. This edification helped her daughters understand that, while they can take pleasure from the dolls with which they play, these dolls should not be seen as role models for them. The conversations happening alongside Barbie play resulted in the doll becoming an instrument through which important topics could be discussed.
Chapter 6

Puerto Rican Barbie, Barbie in Puerto Rico: An American Icon in the Colony

Introduction and Overview

So far in Chapters 4 and 5 I have presented the ways through which girls in Puerto Rico came into contact with Barbie, how Barbie influenced girls’ identity, the issues raised through interactions with Barbie, and the overall impact of Barbie in Puerto Rican girlhoods. I did this first by examining the individual experiences of my participants who are part of different generations. Then I presented experiences with Barbie woven within familial relationships. This chapter continues to examine Barbie’s impact on Puerto Rican girlhoods, how she became part of girls’ lives, and how she influenced girls’ identities. More specifically, this chapter examines these topics in the context of Puerto Rican identity and the sociopolitical relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States of America. The topic of Puerto Rico’s status as a colony of the U.S. and Barbie’s position in that relationship was not necessarily raised in the conversations with my participants. However, some of their experiences of play with Barbie illustrated the various ways in which interactions with the doll could represent or enable connections with the U.S. and its culture. These experiences also illustrated ways in which colonialism was enacted in the home and how Barbie served as a space to resist it.

I begin the chapter by briefly discussing examples of transnational experiences from my participants and introducing Barbie as a vehicle for transnational imagination. The chapter moves on to provide a brief overview of Puerto Rico’s history as a colonial
territory and examine one case of Barbie play where a girl negotiated impositions that were a result of colonialism. The narrative this participant recounted presents an example of the importance of language in Puerto Rican identity and, particularly, how the participant used Barbie to preserve that aspect of identity. Finally, the chapter revisits the debate about Puerto Rican Barbie, which I originally presented in Chapter 2. In revisiting this issue, I position girls’ voices at the forefront of the debate. The goal of this chapter is to begin laying down the groundwork for further research that examines Barbie in Puerto Rico more closely in relation to the Island’s sociopolitical status with the U.S.

**Between two Lands: Transnational Movements of Doll and Self**

Many Puerto Ricans’ experience can be described as a *vaivén*, a coming and going, a back and forth between the Island and the United States. The concept, Duany (2002) explains, “implies that some people do not stay put in one place for a long period of time but move incessantly, like the wind or the waves of the sea, in response to shifting tides” (p. 2). The movement, as connoted by the metaphor of waves, is not always permanent, but rather it may occur as a transient flow where populations are in constant movements. This experience was illustrated by some of the participants whose childhoods were spent shifting from one place to another until there was a more permanent, though not necessarily finalized, settlement. As seen in the stories of Judith Ortiz Cofer (1990) and Esmeralda Santiago (1993, 1999), many Puerto Rican girlhoods take place in this movement between the Island and the U.S. mainland. Among the participants of this study, five experienced the *vaivén* from Puerto Rico to the United
States or vice versa during their childhood years. Sisters Lourdes and Carmen, for instance were born and lived a few years in the Island before moving to Key West, FL. After a couple of years there, they moved back to Puerto Rico. This was happening while they were little, when Carmen had not started school yet. Patricia on the other hand, had lived in New York with her parents, until their divorce forced her to move to Puerto Rico with her grandmother at the age of 11. Lisa was born in New York but her family moved to Puerto Rico when she was 3 years of age. Frankie was born in Puerto Rico, but her parents moved the family to the U.S. until she was 10 years old, when they returned to the Island. Most of the migration movements between the two lands are caused by economic necessities, as populations from the Island move to the U.S. in search of better opportunities to thrive financially. In this sense Puerto Ricans have become transnational subjects of two lands.

In the case of my participants, not all transnational experiences took place by physically moving from one place to another. For some girls, transnationalism transpired in their homes in the form of Barbie. As Negrón-Muntaner (2002) notes, “Barbie is one of the most globalized toys in history […] as well as the most transnational of American icons” (p. 39). Carla, specifically, remembered how Barbie came into her life as a transnational object. Her mother used to go to the U.S. and buy them and she would also ask Carla’s aunt from New York to send or bring some dolls. Having this movement of the doll from the U.S. directly into her house provided Carla with an sense of exclusiveness because she had access to dolls that not everyone around her could access: “Many Barbies would arrive to my house that weren’t available in Puerto Rico because my mom would ask my aunt to get them in NY. And when my mom would go to
California for work, she would return with two or three Barbie dolls” (Carla, Interview Transcript).

Transnationalism with Barbie did not need to take place only through the movement of the doll or by having access to exclusive versions that were only available in the U.S. As I previously stated Mattel markets Barbie dolls and related products as vehicles through which girls can imagine and dream of becoming someone else. This was illustrated through some of the narratives my participants shared about their play with Barbie and which I discussed in Chapter 4. By becoming someone else through Barbie play, many girls can create an imaginary transnational movement in which they are granted an imagined upward mobility. Morgan (n.d.) argues that the Barbie doll is a medium of communication that instills capitalist American values to those who play with her by placing importance on money, beauty, and upward mobility. Looking at these values from the standpoint of Puerto Rico’s sociopolitical relationship with the United States Barbie can be seen as a vehicle through which American cultural values are transmitted and as a medium for Puerto Rican girls to dream of the possibilities they could be afforded through the “American Dream.”

It can be said that Barbie’s message that “you can be anything” and her ability to have many professions and live in luxury represent the American dream, where anyone can be anything as long as they work hard in the “land of opportunities.” Times of great economic recession have led Puerto Ricans to move to the United States in search of better opportunities to thrive economically. The 1950s, when Barbie first came out and when the first generation of Barbie players were growing up, saw the biggest migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. take place. In the present, the economic recession that began
in 2005 has led Puerto Ricans to leave the island for the mainland in numbers not seen since the 1950s\textsuperscript{2}. Barbie serves as a (false) model of how to achieve success and upward mobility to fully live up to the American Dream. Through her, girls can envision the life that could be attained through hard work in the U.S. and what the rewards of their work could be.

**Playful Transactions: Negotiating Colonialism through Barbie**

During an informal conversation with a Puerto Rican professor she shared with me that Barbie was never allowed in her house because the doll was a product of the U.S. Her family, who are actively involved in the movement for Puerto Rico’s independence from the United States, did not allow Barbie in the house because of what it represented. She was not a participant of this study, and I was not able to interview her about this topic. Examples of experiences like hers did not come up during the interviews and conversations with the participants of this study. However, this does not indicate that people have not experienced similar situations as the ones the professor experienced\textsuperscript{3}. In my analysis of each participant’s experience, I paid attention to whether their comments or experiences suggested that they perceived Barbie as a symbol of colonization. Despite having described encounters with Barbie’s whiteness and the representation of race in the doll line, none of the participants examined Puerto Ricans’ position as colonial subjects and Barbie’s position as an American icon. Yet, although this specific situation did not take place for any of my participants, there was one specific case in which traces of colonialism entered the Barbie play space. Originally I was examining this aspect through
the lens of Barbie as colonizer. What I did not realize, however, was that a completely different transaction was presented in one of my participant’s experiences, one in which Barbie became an instrument of resistance against colonizing practices.

This section explores said transactions as one participant, Carla, negotiated her experiences with language and U.S. culture through Barbie play. Carla, who in the present is very actively involved in the pro-independence movement did not grow up in a household that rejected Barbie because it represented the colonizer. During our interview Carla maintained that she did not buy Barbies for her daughters; however, it had more to do with the messages about the body that her daughters could receive from the doll and less about the doll’s status as a symbol of American culture. Moreover, although Carla described her relationship with Barbie during her childhood as one of a “frenemy” (a friend who is an enemy at the same time), the enemy aspect came from the differences in their looks as opposed to Barbie’s representation of the U.S. Yet, Carla grew up in a house where her mother almost imposed American culture onto the children.

Mom was… she exposed us to American culture a lot. So much that to this day – because I am married to a gringo all of my artisan colleagues call me gringa, we are the gringos – none of them believe that I am a jibara from here. Because they hear me talking to other gringos and the accent with which I speak Spanish. And I am not gringa. It’s simply that my mom is gringa, she imposed a gringo culture in our house. Not everyone knows this but in my house it was English all the time. We couldn’t watch telenovelas. I had to watch X-Files, I had to watch Oprah, I had to watch Days of our Lives because English was fundamental. She paid for cable TV so we could learn to speak English, not for us to be watching Telemundo or Wapa.5 So in that aspect, [Barbie] was not a cultural shock because I learned about Puerto Rican culture when I was already older. In my house that cultural patriotism, like I am teaching my children now, that wasn’t there. Because it was all Bon Jovi, it was Thanksgiving Day Parade, and the most culture-related thing I may have had was the Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York and the “fiestas patronales.”6 So for me it wasn’t a cultural shock because in reality I was already inside American culture in my house. (Carla, Interview Transcript)
Having a Puerto Rican mother, who grew up in the U.S. and whom Carla described at various times as a *gringa*, meant that Carla was very familiar with American popular culture. In the excerpt above Carla begins by describing her contact with U.S. culture as something that happened through exposure: she affirms her mother exposed her and her brother to music, TV shows, and the English language, to name a few examples. However, as Carla continues unfolding her memories she begins describing this contact more as an imposition. She *could not* watch *telenovelas* but instead *had to* watch American soap operas such as “Days of Our Lives,” she *had to* watch *X-Files*, she *had to* watch *Oprah*; she simply *had to*. Carla’s obligatory exposure to TV shows and traditions from the U.S. immersed her in a culture that was somewhat different from her own.

According to Carla, because of her immersion in American culture her interactions with Barbie did not bring up cultural clashes. Although Barbie was part of that culture, Carla did not perceive her as an imposition or as an outsider who was not part of Carla’s cultural knowledge. Instead, what brought Carla more of a clash and difficulties in her own identity was the imposition of English as her primary language.

All the shows Carla *had to* watch and the traditions in which she *had to* participate were not only from the U.S., but more importantly, they were in English. As she stated, her mother paid for Cable TV, which gave them access to American TV networks, so the children could learn English. Additionally, the language that Carla was almost required to speak in the house was English. When playing with Barbie, however, Carla used Spanish. In this way Barbie became an outlet to push against the imposition of the language that represents the colonizer. Carla’s play with Barbie, or perhaps the language in which she engaged with Barbie, became a decolonizing practice. According
to Carla, “My games [with Barbie] were in Spanish because Mom made us speak English, but I was always a little bit of a rebel about that and so when I was home alone in my room with my dolls, I always spoke Spanish” (*Interview Transcript*).

Like most of the countries in Latin America and some Islands in the Caribbean, the language spoken by the majority of the population in Puerto Rico is Spanish. When the U.S. took control of the Island, a military government was established in order to support an Americanization project that would transform the island into a model of democracy in the Caribbean (Grosfoguel, 2003). At the time, Puerto Rico was coming out of its colonial status under Spain. As a result, the Island was entering a new colonial relationship with a country whose language and cultural practices were entirely different. In colonial relationships, the colonizer often dismisses the local cultures of the colony by silencing their languages (Grosfuguel, 2003; Memmi, 1965; Mohanty, 2003). As a result of being dehumanized by the colonizing forces, the colonized tends to accept and adopt the new ways of being in order to become more like the colonizer. What we can witness in the practices Carla’s mother exerted in the household is the valorization of American culture over the local. Carla’s mother required them to become familiar and immersed in the U.S. cultural practices so they could become Americanized, i.e. to become more like the colonizer. These practices went beyond simply “learning about” U.S. culture through TV shows and traditions. Carla was required to use the new colonizer’s language as her main form of communication.

Language is ostensibly the greatest symbol of Puerto Rican identity, despite its rootedness in colonization. While Spanish was the language imposed during the Island’s first colonial encounter with Spain, and while its imposition eradicated the use of other
languages and vernaculars (for example the Taíno language), Puerto Ricans have adopted Spanish as the language that represents their identity. Moreover, constant changes in language laws and policies in schools resulted in English and Spanish being in constant competition. The many attempts to impose English as the language of instruction in the Island solidified the U.S., and therefore its language, as a symbol of colonization and imposition. This led Puerto Ricans to value Spanish as the language that represented national identity. At the same time Spanish became the language of resistance against English, even if it had been the language of the first colonizers.

Anzaldúa (1987) writes about how language can be used as a form of oppression – by silencing, limiting, and creating fronteras that delineate where one language can be spoken and where it cannot, people become oppressed. This belittles or makes the oppressed feel belittled, unimportant, useless, and wrong. She describes her experiences with language: not being able to speak Spanish in school, her mother wanting her to sound American (no accent) and even in college having to take speech classes in order to get rid of her accent. By having to do this, pieces of her identity were being taken away from her. In a similar manner, Carla’s mother delimited which language should be spoken and the appropriate places for doing so and she was imposing the use of English perhaps for her children to become “more American.” Carla, then, adopted Spanish as the language of resistance against the imposition of English. Just as a large part of the population in Puerto Rico, Carla was perceiving English as an imposition, and thus, as a colonizing practice. Notably, in Carla’s experience it was the language rather than the doll itself that was seen as a threat to her own cultural identity. Furthermore, it was through her doll play that Carla fought against this imposition by adopting Spanish as the
language for doll play.

Carla’s use of Barbie doll to subvert the imposition of English in her house illustrated another way in which girls encounter their identities by appropriating objects in order to negotiate those identities. Even more fascinating is the fact that Barbie, the white blonde American Barbie (Most of Carla’s Barbie dolls were of this kind), became the vehicle through which a girl exerted resistance towards the very same culture the doll represented. It is important to note that Carla’s use of Spanish is not an exception in the play practices of Puerto Rican girls. Just as Spanish was the language in which most my participants communicated with me during our interviews, most girls in Puerto Rico would play using Spanish, which is the majority of the population’s first language. Yet, what is special about Carla’s situation, which may be the case for more girls in the Island, is that English was the language spoken in her house. Hence, the use of Spanish helped Carla challenge the imposition of the “other” language and to construct her own cultural identity through Barbie play.

The experience Carla shared with me was particularly enlightening, especially since I had been approaching issues of colonialism from a completely different standpoint. My original approach had positioned Barbie as a representation of the colonizer (U.S.), thus I wanted to find out if girls and women had rejected Barbie because of her position. The example presented through the informal conversation with the professor whose parents did not allow Barbie because she represented the U.S. serves as an indication that this does indeed happen in Puerto Rican households. However, it was not something that took place in any of my participants’ experiences. When my approach shifted, due to a moment of realization about the role of language in Puerto Rican
identity, I uncovered a different trace of colonization in Barbie play. In Carla’s experience Barbie was not a symbol of the colonizer and her presence in the girl’s life was not perceived as colonizing. Instead, it was Carla’s mother that was bringing traces of colonialism into the house by imposing English as the primary, often exclusive, language. More importantly, Barbie served as a vehicle of resistance and became a space where Carla could push against colonizing impositions.

Revisiting Barbie in Puerto Rico: Puerto Rican Barbie through Girls’ Eyes

In Chapter 2 I presented the very limited research available about Barbie in Puerto Rico. Through original document research I was able to begin mapping Barbie’s arrival to the Island, which was supported by information provided by some of the participants who were growing up at the time of her creation. In my discussion of the scholarship about Barbie in Puerto Rico I pointed to writers who documented the pronounced division in the reception of the Puerto Rican Barbie doll between the population in the Island and Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (Aguilar, 1997; Navarro, 1997; Negrón-Muntaner, 2002; Rivera-Brooks, 1997). What the criticism about Puerto Rican Barbie was missing were the perspectives from girls. This was a poignant observation made by a group of women during a conversation about Puerto Rican Barbie that came up on Facebook, and which I discuss in this section. As pointed out in the notes for Chapter 3, it is problematic to present criticism of artifacts of girls’ culture without attending to girls’ voices (Hains, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative to revisit this literature with the addition of the very important perspective of those who actually interacted with the doll as girls at the time.
The colonizer/colonized relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico became the framework for the heated debate about the Puerto Rican Barbie. In 1997, the year of its production, this Barbie became “the latest sounding board for Puerto Ricans to examine their political and cultural relationship with the mainland” (Aguilar, 1997, par. 1). As briefly pointed out in Chapter 2, Puerto Rican Barbie was met with much excitement in the Island but much opposition by Puerto Ricans in the United States on account of her looks and how she was presented. One objection to this new iteration of Barbie was the history excerpt written on the back of its box. Rivera-Brooks (1997) explains that this depiction of Puerto Rico’s history “ignore[d] the indigenous population” (par. 10). The box provided only one aspect Puerto Rico’s “origin story”: *My country was discovered in 1493 by Christopher Columbus who claimed it for Spain.* By providing only this part of the history, “Mattel and its allies connote that all Puerto Ricans are fundamentally Europeans and banish the influence of Natives and Africans to the back of the bus,” argued Negrón-Muntaner (2002, p. 42). Moreover, critics objected Mattel’s description of the Island’s relationship with the United States, which stated in part that “Puerto Rico was granted permission to write our own constitution in 1952, and since then we have governed ourselves” (Navarro, 1997, par. 4). Navarro cites the opinion of Gina Rosario, a 46-year-old school art director who was of Puerto Rican descent and lived in the diaspora. Rosario said about the doll: “She looks very, very Anglo, and what was written on the package was very condescending: ‘The U.S. Government lets us govern ourselves.’ If you’re going to represent a culture, do it properly. Be politically honest” (in Navarro, 1997, par. 5). The description of the box suggests a lack of autonomy from Puerto Rico, who had to be “allowed” to govern itself
in 1952. Yet, the Island in fact had little political autonomy before then. Since the U.S. took hold of Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American war in 1898, previous governors and political leaders had been appointed by the President of the United States. It was in 1952, with the first Puerto Rican governor elected Luis Muñoz Marín, that the Island became a self-governing commonwealth of the U.S. Even in the present, while Puerto Rico has autonomy in certain political aspects, the Island’s status as a commonwealth (read colony) of the U.S. comes with certain restrictions as well.\textsuperscript{8} It is important to also note that at some point, perhaps as a result of the heated debate, parts of the descriptions on the box may have changed. The description on the box of my own Puerto Rican doll (Figure 6.1), as well as the one I examined at the Doll Museum in Quebradillas, P.R., does not include the comment about Puerto Ricans being “allowed” to self-govern.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{puerto_rico_doll_box.png}
\caption{Description of Puerto Rico on the box for Puerto Rican Barbie.}
\end{figure}

The example of Gina Rosario also suggests that the Puerto Rican Barbie appeared to be, for those who opposed her, too Anglicized. “Some also found Puerto Rican Barbie’s skin too white, her features too Caucasian, her hair too straight, and her clothing
too suggestive of colonial oppression,” Rivera-Brooks pointed out (1997, par. 11). As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, hair (texture and color) and physical features (nose, eyes, thickness of lips) are racial identifiers in Puerto Rico. However with the exception of two girls who loved Puerto Rican Barbie’s dark hair because it looked like theirs, these traits did not play a key role in how the girls related to the doll. Instead, as the conversations that follow suggest, it was her nationality that resonated with them.

While Puerto Rican Barbie was not a focus of my study, her name came up in some of the conversations with participants because they had interacted with the doll. I, for example, remembered when the doll came out and the excitement I felt seeing a doll with my country’s name and flag decorating its box. Other participants such as Isabel (30) and Gabriela (25) also remembered owning a Puerto Rican Barbie and playing with her. Participants Patricia and Marisa, who were already mothers when this Barbie came out, had Puerto Rican Barbie as part of their (or their daughters’) Barbie doll collections. Isabel did elaborate on her relationship with the Puerto Rican doll through personal communication with me:

I loved that Barbie. For me she was precious because she was different. When I was in the fourth grade I was dressed as a jíbara for a contest of traditional costumes for my school’s Noche Puertorriqueña [Puerto Rican Night]. They put a flower on my head. My mom made the costume. I won first place and I was very excited. I loved the doll’s flower on her hair and her long skirt with lace. I’ve always admired our culture and perhaps, unconsciously, I admired that about the doll and I identified with her. Once in a while I’d take her out to play, but most of the time I kept her in her little collection box, decorating my bedroom. (Isabel, Personal communication)

At the time of the interviews I did not think of asking further questions about participants’ experiences with the Puerto Rican Barbie, precisely because she was not the focus of the research. Yet, the disputes about Puerto Rican Barbie came up on Facebook,
when a friend of mine who was advertising my research, posted an article about the divided reception of this particular doll.

One important aspect of this conversation was that it highlighted the contrast between the opinions adults had about Puerto Rican Barbie and how girls received the doll. Navarro (1997), for example, presented the opinions of two people toward the Puerto Rican Barbie: and adult woman and a girl. As previously discussed, the adult (Gina Rosario) avidly opposed to the doll because she looked too American and the history that accompanied her was condescending toward Puerto Ricans. The girl’s opinion, however, contrasted from that of 46-year-old Rosario: “‘She’s pretty,’ Krista, 9, said. ‘She’s different. She has a Puerto Rican dress. She’s the Puerto Rican Barbie and all the others are not’” (par. 2). What this example shows is the excitement and sense of pride girls felt by seeing a Barbie doll from their country, which the other Barbie dolls were not. This was an observation that one of the women in the Facebook conversation made: “What I found funny was that the girls, for whom the dolls are made, were very happy” (Woman #2, Facebook Conversation). The women in this conversation were about 8 to 11 years of age at the time when Puerto Rican Barbie was produced. Their voices and their experiences were not taken into consideration by those who offered criticism about the doll. This small sample could potentially be representative of many other girls from the Island who interacted with Puerto Rican Barbie during their girlhoods. The conversation between the women, which happened mostly in Spanish and I have translated, went as follows:
First thread originated by Woman #2 by advertising my call for participants:

[...]

Woman #1: I also remember that, even though I didn’t play so much with them anymore, I was obsessed with the Barbie from Puerto Rico. I bought her and left her in the box, not for collection but because I was amazed to see a Barbie like that. I handed her down to my little cousins because it wasn’t available anymore and they deserved to see themselves there.

Woman #2: hahaha! In the United States people got offended. I posted the link. We didn’t even find out at the time.

Woman #1: No, man. I’m going to read that because to me it was so special to see a Barbie with the clothes that you only wear during the Semana de la Puertorriqueñidad lol.

Woman #2: READ IT. It’s good!

Second thread originated by Woman #2 by posting an article about the Puerto Rican Barbie:

Me: Thanks!! I was 7 years old when she came out.10 I never saw it as controversial haha, but I loved her because she had dark hair like me. Looking for information about PR and Barbie I have found several articles about this. It seems that what has been mostly said is about the Puerto Rican Barbie. I hope to contribute some more with my research.

Woman #1: I read it and truly I could say soooooo much about that dilemma. The reality is that for teenagers in a world without Internet like today, seeing such a recognized doll with your same nationality it was more than enough to make us feel patriotic and proud. That’s why I handed her down because I wanted my little cousins to feel like I did.

Woman #3: What is fascinating for me is the note about how in 1997 there were 4 million inhabitants in the Island, vs. 2.8 million in the U.S. In 20 years the figures have inveresd almost exactly. Now there are more Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. than in the Island. Everything else is the same shit people complain about Barbie. I had Barbies all my childhood and I didn’t develop weight
problems, or body image issues. Well, the only thing is that I wanted to be taller than the 5’4” I was given, but whatever we make do.

Woman #2: Nah, nothing like that. What I found funny was that the girls, for whom the dolls are made, were very happy. And I’m also 5’4”, but that’s what platform shoes are for.

Both Isabel and Woman #1 loved the clothes Puerto Rican Barbie wore. Her jibarita dress resembled the type of costumes some students were asked to wear for school during the weeklong celebration of Puerto Rican culture (*Semana de la Puertorriqueñidad* or *La Semana Puertorriqueña*). During these celebrations children are assigned roles related to Puerto Rico’s history centered on the Island’s first colonization. As a result, some students dress as Taíno Indians, others as African slaves, others as Spaniards, and others as jíbaros, which were the representation of the Puerto Rican – the person whose race was a mixture of the three races. While Barbie’s colonial attire was also the focus of criticism (by being a light-skinned jibarita, Barbie was stripped of any indications of race and thus became neutral), it was this piece of the doll’s accessories that made it clear for girls she was a Puerto Rican doll. Because many girls usually dressed up in similar attires to the one Barbie was wearing, they further saw themselves reflected in the doll. (This was solidified even further when the representative for Puerto Rico in the Miss Universe pageant, Joyce Giraud, wore a similar dress and looked very similar to Puerto Rican Barbie during the traditional dress portion of the 1998 pageant in Hawai’i. Figure 6.2 shows a comparison of Giraud to the doll.)
Parts of the conversations, and Isabel’s memory of Puerto Rican Barbie, tap into girls’ identities focused on Puerto Rican national identity. While Puerto Rico is not a nation-state with complete economic and political freedom, and while it is not a free country, national identity plays an important role in Puerto Ricans viewing ourselves as separate. Negrón-Muntaner (2004) elaborates on this issue, explaining that “the most patent sign of Puerto Rican specificity is that the high-flying flag of boricua pride does not represent a sovereign nation” (p. 1). Being a commonwealth of the United States means that Puerto Rico does not have complete political and economic autonomy. As a result, Puerto Ricans have developed a cultural nationalism that renders the population culturally distinct from the nation to which it belongs (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). While being a U.S. territory and having a population that has American citizenship rather than their own, Puerto Rico gets to show cultural national pride, for example, when it sends representatives to worldwide beauty pageants, such as Miss Universe, and to sports events such as the Olympics. What the Puerto Rican Barbie represented then to the girls who accepted her was a symbol of nationality, or being our own nation with our own

Figure 6-2: Puerto Rican Barbie (left) and Miss Universe Puerto Rico Joyce Giraud (right)
culture, not someone else’s. The doll gave girls a feeling of national pride by seeing themselves represented in a famous icon such as Barbie. Furthermore, one of them even passed her doll onto her cousins because she wanted them to have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in a Barbie doll. Puerto Rican Barbie gave her such a sense of pride, that she wanted future generations to enjoy her the way she did.

What the conversations reveal is a stark contrast between adults who were looking at Puerto Rican Barbie through a critical lens and the girls who were actually playing with the doll. Girls received the doll with open arms because for the first time in their lives they were part of the Barbie doll line. In Chapter 4 I presented the experiences of girls who felt they could not identify with Barbie dolls because they did not look like the dolls (for instance, Jessica, Mariela, and Isabel). Puerto Rican Barbie presented a space for representation, and even if the girls did not look like this new Barbie, knowing that it was from Puerto Rico was enough to identify with her. Despite the political issues embedded in the presentation of the doll, girls – who at the time did not have such easy access to images and role models closely related to them (as Woman #1 pointed out) – were happy to finally be able to identify with their dolls. When the women in the Facebook conversation learned about the debate this doll caused they were surprised and also dismissive of it. For them, it was the same as usual: there’s always something to criticize about Barbie. Instead, they felt that their case was “nothing like that,” that this Barbie was simply a symbol that represented their own nationality and that gave them a deep sense of pride.
Chapter Summary and Conclusions

The discussions provided in this chapter began considering the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. more closely in relation to Barbie play. While the discussion about Puerto Rico and its status as a commonwealth of the United States had emerged in 1997 with the arrival of the Puerto Rican Barbie, not much else had been said about the topic in the context of Barbie play. This chapter, then, aimed to begin the conversation and provide the much-needed but often-forgotten experiences of girls. The small but significant findings presented here suggest that girls can find ways to use Barbie against colonizing practices (as the example of Carla showed) and that they welcomed any indication of Barbie’s inclusion of Puerto Rican identity.

The first section of this chapter briefly described transnational experiences and provided examples of how Barbie serves as a tool for transnationalism. The chapter continued with a description of the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico and the key role language plays in Puerto Rican’s construction of identity. As I explained, the attempts at imposing English as an exclusive language drove Puerto Ricans to more firmly adopt Spanish as part of their national identity. This was elucidated in the practices Carla employed through Barbie play against her mother’s own imposition of English as the required language at their home. Carla’s experience showed how a girl adopted Barbie, a quintessential American icon, to exert resistance against colonizing practices. Finally, this chapter revisited the debate about the Puerto Rican Barbie, which I had introduced in the review of the literature. In revisiting the topic, I included the perspectives of women who interacted with this specific doll during their girlhood years.
Their opinions about the doll and the ways they experienced this Barbie presented a great contrast against the criticism it had received from adults back in 1997. The doll presented an opportunity for girls to see themselves represented in the Barbie doll line and to feel proud of their culture. Moreover, some girls who had not been able to identify with Barbie before, were finally able to with this doll.

By examining Barbie within the context of colonialism and Puerto Rican identity I was able to further explore one important research question that guided this study: How Barbie became part of some of the participants’ girlhoods and their identities. As seen in the example of Carla, Barbie further helped her construct her identity. Previously I had discussed Carla’s perception of Barbie as a “frenemy” with whom she could identify in certain respects but from whom she was also very different. Yet, with Barbie play, Carla was able to construct part of her identity in relation to the impositions her mother exerted. Through subversion with Barbie, Carla “broke” the rules and fashioned her own cultural identity (Puerto Rican). Similarly the Puerto Rican Barbie provided a space for Puerto Rican girls to form a national identity. For participant Isabel, as well as the women in the Facebook conversation, the doll that provoked such a heated debate about Puerto Ricans in two lands, was the very same doll that ignited a deep sense of pride and love for their culture.

Notes:

1 According to data from the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, “Over 4,200 individuals were estimated to have arrived in the United States each year in the period between 1946 and 1956” (Korrol, par. 1).
2 According to the Pew Research Center, “U.S. Census Bureau data show that 144,000 more people left the island for the mainland than the other way around from mid-2010 to 2013” (Cohn, Patten, & Lopez, 2014, par. 2)
3 In the future, this is an aspect of the experiences of Puerto Rican girls with Barbie I plan to investigate more in depth.
Carla’s mother was born and raised in the U.S., but she is Puerto Rican (or Nuyorican). While the term “gringo” is typically used to refer to white people, which her mother is not, Carla’s usage of it referred to her mother’s immersion in U.S. culture.

Telemundo and Wapa are two of the Puerto Rican local TV stations/channels.

*Fiestas patronales* is the festival each municipality of Puerto Rico holds to celebrate their patron Saint.

For example by 1900 the strategy for assimilation exerted by the U.S. was to impose English as the only language in schools. At the same time, it also prohibited national symbols such as the Puerto Rican flag (Grosfoguel, 2003). The imposition of English and Puerto Rican identity has been the subject of study for many researchers in the Island, especially in the context of English education (see Algren de Gutierrez, 1987; Barreto, 2001; Pousada, 1996; Torres-Gonzalez, 2002, for example).

For example, Puerto Ricans vote for their own governor, mayors, senators, etc. but even as U.S. citizens, they do not vote for the President of the United States. Moreover, the Jones Act of 1917, which granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans also restricts Puerto Rico’s trade by requiring the acquisition of goods “from an American-made ship with an American crew” (Bury, 2015).

I have memories of playing with the doll despite the fact that it was a special edition doll. It was the only time my mother had bought a special edition Barbie doll, and she did not want anyone to play with it. In my memories, there were two of them in my house: one for play and one for collection. While I never found the one that supposedly was for play, my mother found the one for collection, still intact inside its box.

I mistakenly wrote that I was 7 years old, but in reality I was about 11 years old when the Puerto Rican Barbie was created.
PART 3: CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 7

Growing up with Barbie: Discussion and Conclusions

At the beginning of this dissertation I asked the following questions about Barbie’s role in Puerto Rican girlhoods: (1) What was the impact of Barbie in the girlhoods of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls from different generations? (2) How did Barbie become part of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls’ identity? (3) How do women and girls view their interactions with Barbie in relation to their lived experiences? (4) What issues of gender, race, and class were raised through play with and/or discussion of play with Barbie? This final chapter offers discussion of the themes that emerged in relation to how they answer the study’s research questions. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Barbie dolls in Puerto Rican girlhoods by examining Puerto Rican women and girls’ experiences with Barbie within the contexts of their childhood play. By studying adults, this study sought to investigate the memories adult women had of their interactions with Barbie dolls and the meanings these interactions had in their adult lives. Through the experiences of three girls in the present, this study also explored the role of Barbie in Puerto Rican girls’ current lives. The inclusion of five generations of women and girls provided an intergenerational and broader perspective about Barbie’s impact on Puerto Rican Girlhoods.

In this the chapter, I first discuss the findings that emerged in this research outlined
in Part 2 of this dissertation (Discussion of Barbie in Puerto Rican Girlhoods) situated within the research questions that guided this study. The findings presented in Chapters 4 through 6 outlined the themes that emerged during participants’ interviews and which I examined through the conceptual framework that brought together dramatic play, identity formation through doll play, and race in Puerto Rico. In Chapter 4 I examined how participants interacted individually with Barbie, the issues of femininity, class, body image, and race that participants encountered, and how adult participants viewed their childhood experiences with Barbie. In Chapter 5 I continued examining participants’ experiences with Barbie within the context of familial relationships. In said chapter I explored how women and girls from the same family groups related to Barbie individually and in relation to their family. I also explored how Barbie becomes part of girls’ lives through mothers’ influence, or in contrast, how parental figures may control girls’ interactions with Barbie. Finally, in Chapter 6 I presented a smaller sample of experiences with Barbie that signaled the construction of Puerto Rican identity. I examined examples of Barbie’s role as a transnational toy that resembled or allowed for girls’ mobility between the Island and the U.S. mainland. In addition, I presented an example of Barbie play that served as a vehicle of resistance against colonial impositions, specifically language. I ended the chapter by revisiting the conversation about Puerto Rican Barbie and including the voices of girls from that generation. This chapter continues with my reflections on my position as researcher and participant. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of this research and my suggestions for future research. Finally, I offer concluding thoughts about my study.
Barbie’s Impact on Puerto Rican Girlhoods

The first research question asked: *What was the impact of Barbie in the girlhoods of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls from different generations?* Barbie’s impact on Puerto Rican girlhoods was complex and multidimensional. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, 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 the doll, wanting to be like the doll while also feeling shame for this desire. This adds to the dimensions of Barbie’s impact in girlhoods. Moreover, in Chapter 5 I presented how Barbie’s impact goes beyond the individual experiences and is formed in part by girls’ familial relationships. The stories presented there showed how Barbie can become part of a girl’s life through her mother’s desire to pass down Barbie traditions. Yet, at the same time, parents’ opinion about the doll can influence how much impact Barbie can have in a girl’s life. The chapter also discussed the different experiences girls may have with Barbie even if they grew up in the same household.

“All the girls played with Barbie,” Carla expressed. “At the time a girl could not be without a Barbie,” Lourdes remembered. There was a similar sentiment expressed by number of my participants: that every girl had/needed to have a Barbie. While some of them actually believed so (e.g. Lourdes), others felt like that was the reality at their time growing up because they saw most of their girl friends with Barbie dolls as well. For one participant the experience was different and left a negative memory of Barbie. Susan’s memory of a teacher that presumed every girl had a Barbie was an example of how the idea was so embedded in the popular consciousness, yet she was a girl who did not have a
Barbie, so in her experience this statement was not true. Moreover, she felt at the time and now as an adult that it was a damaging assumption.

Perhaps the chief indication of the degree to which Barbie made an impact in the lived experiences of multiple generations of Puerto Rican girls was in their avid consumption and enjoyment of various Barbie products. The infiltration into girls’ lives took shape not only through the doll and the accessories that are “necessary” to play with her, but also through other media, such as notebooks, magazines, sticker books, cars to be driven by girls, movies, storybooks, and even by being part of her “exclusive” fan club. While a small number of participants only owned Barbie products related to doll play (dolls, clothes and accessories, house, car), the majority owned multiple of other products, allowing for further interactions with Barbie happening through other products as well. Thus, Barbie impacted Puerto Rican girlhoods in ways that mirror what the Barbie scholarship has suggested. For girls in the present, these same artifacts in tandem with new media such as YouTube and Netflix, provide even more options for Barbie’s constant presence in girls’ lives.

A notable fact about girls’ play with dolls in the present came about in my conversations with either the three girls I interviewed or with adults who are mothers of girls. In the past, during the childhoods of the women interviewed and my own, Barbie was the “it” girl, she was the doll to have. This was mostly because there was no other fashion doll like her, and most other dolls were baby dolls, which invited girls to care for them rather than become them. Present generations, however, have more options from which to choose, and girls are making choices beyond Barbie. These choices include Bratz dolls, Monster High dolls, and Ever After High dolls. What this could mean is that
Barbie’s influence in Puerto Rican girlhoods, whilst on a high level for past generations, may be beginning to decline for the current (and possibly future) generations.

**Barbie’s Role in Puerto Rican Women’s and Girls’ Identities**

The second research question addressed Barbie’s introduction to Puerto Rican girls’ lives and how she became part of their identities — *How did Barbie become part of a group of Puerto Rican women and girls’ identity?* Barbie became part of girls’ lives through gifts from family and friends, through hand-me-downs, through mothers passing down traditions of Barbie play, through hard work in school that was rewarded, and through transnational movements of the doll, just to name a few examples. The three chapters of findings highlighted the various ways through which girls come into contact with Barbie. Interactions with the Barbie are varied; there is no one single way to experience Barbie. The interactions occur through the doll as well as other artifacts, they happen individually and also collectively, with friends, with family. The interactions may be an embrace to Barbie, but they may also serve to negotiate certain aspects of the doll. In these ways Barbie becomes part of girls’ and women’s identities.

Girls may see the doll as someone to emulate, not necessarily in achieving her “perfect” unattainable body, but often her essence of femininity. This occurred especially for the first generation of girls who played with Barbie. As explained in Chapter 4, the first iterations of Barbie centered about what Carmen and Lourdes called high-fashion. For them, was a symbol of elegance, and as a result they wanted to emulate this characteristic of the doll. Similarly, Carmen’s daughter Camille was more interested in
Barbie for her fashion sense, for she saw the doll as the essence of what she wanted to be like.

For a number of participants, their passion for Barbie was about more than collecting her or being like her. As we saw in Patricia’s case, for example, Barbie played a significant role in her girlhood. With the divorce of her parents and having to move to Puerto Rico with her grandmother, Barbie was the only constant presence in her life. So great was Barbie’s significance that having given her first doll to her cousin is still a painful memory for her. Moreover, once her husband threw out her Barbie dolls, she committed to collecting Barbie. She wanted to share Barbie with her daughter and give her the opportunity to live vicariously through the doll, the same way she did.

For some participants, the relationship with Barbie was full of tensions. Carla, for example saw Barbie as a friend and enemy, with whom she could identify in some aspects, but could not see herself reflected in others. Carla’s complicated relationship with Barbie elucidates why Barbie is such a fraught object. As a girl Carla did not see herself reflected physically in the doll; they were complete opposites, and that resulted in Carla perceiving Barbie as an enemy. At the same time, Barbie was independent, confident, sociable, and fashionable, all characteristics with which Carla identified, and as such Barbie was her friend. Furthermore, Barbie served as the vehicle through which Carla fought back against impositions, channeled her emotions, and recreated aspects of her life that she wanted to change.

In Chapter 6 I briefly showed how the Puerto Rican Barbie specifically was important for girls’ identities. Despite the inclusion of a Hispanic Barbie (Teresa) in the main Barbie line, for some girls this was not enough to feel that they identified with the
The introduction of Puerto Rican Barbie in 1997 offered Puerto Rican girls, for the first time, the opportunity to be part of the Barbie family. This doll was from Puerto Rico and no matter what her looks were, for girls this was someone with whom they could identify because they came from the same place and wore clothes similar to the ones girls would wear when celebrating their Puertorriqueñidad. Moreover, the doll helped establish a strong feeling of Puerto Rican pride among girls who interacted with it, to the point of wanting to pass it on to future generations of Puerto Rican girls.

Identity was also established with the rejection of the doll. For example Frances, whose story I described in Chapter 5 did not see Barbie play as something interesting or fun. She preferred brain games and outdoor activities. As a result, Frances overtly rejected Barbie, even if it was supposed to be the doll that all girls had to have. As another example, Frankie, did play with Barbie dolls during her childhood, although Barbie play could only take place with her sisters. Although she participated in Barbie play, Frankie usually played Ken because none of her sisters wanted to be him. Furthermore, she firmly stated that she did not want to be Barbie because the “expectations were too high.”

Other products that carry Barbie’s name also become instruments for girls to construct their identities. Many of the women in this study recounted their use of other Barbie products to continue the narratives they created through doll play (Emily for example), explored their own dreams through other products (for instance Isabel who wanted to become a fashion designer), or negotiated aspects of their identities (notably Carla who used Barbie magazine to produce her own artifact of play). In the present, girls continue to use Barbie doll and other products to explore their identities. We saw in the
examples of Sharon, K.C., and Annie how they use these products to negotiate ideas of femininity and to assign roles through which they could explore how they perceived themselves.

Participants’ Perceptions of their Interactions with Barbie

The third question that guided research inquired about how participants experienced Barbie and their interactions with the doll and how they perceive those interactions. How do women and girls view their interactions with Barbie in relation to their lived experiences? For the most part women and girls perceived their interactions with Barbie as positive in relation to their lived experiences. Even those who presently as mothers had some reservations about Barbie, still viewed Barbie play in general as a positive part of their girlhoods. For example Susan, whose initial access to Barbie was limited and who pointed out certain problematic characteristics of Barbie, still viewed her experiences with Barbie as good ones. Though it was not discussed in the findings, Susan even bought herself a graduation Barbie doll when she graduated college in 2003. Other participants, such as Isabel, who wished she could have identified more with Barbie, talked about her Barbie years as happy because she was able to create different play scenarios. Participant Autumn shared that she loved Barbie when she was little and that she remembers those years as positive. Yet, when she became a mother Autumn did not want her daughter Sharon to play with Barbie dolls or to become too invested in the princess and pink culture of dolls. Thus, despite her own positive experiences, she was apprehensive to introduce her daughter to the culture of Barbie and other dolls.
Nevertheless, when Sharon showed interest in Barbie, Autumn and her husband acquiesced and allowed Barbie dolls in the house.

To further elucidate how women perceived their interactions, I point back to the section “More than a Doll: Barbie’s Significance in Girlhood and Womanhood” in Chapter 4, in which I described the significance Barbie held for some of the participants. Participants Jessica and Carla looked back on their experiences with Barbie to recognize the doll’s contributions to shaping who they became as adults. Jessica, for instance, acknowledged how the ideologies of beauty Barbie embodies can be problematic, but at the same time having a doll that represented these ideologies was positive for her. As she stated, her interactions with Barbie Jessica served as learning experiences about the expectations for women and girls. For Carla, who had a complicated relationship with Barbie, her experiences did not leave any negative remnants. On the contrary, any negative aspects of Carla’s relationship with Barbie did not transcend into adulthood, and thus, she viewed Barbie play as a positive experience.

For other women Barbie was a friend and a loyal companion. Whether girls felt lonely because they did not have many friends or they were the only girl in their families, Barbie took on the role of the much-needed female friend. Yet, more than just a friend for other girls she was a truly needed companion. As Alondra and Patricia shared, they went through difficult situations during their girlhood years. Whether they were health-related or painful family dynamics, they both needed a friend to help them live through their difficult experiences. Barbie was that friend they needed, and for that reason, they viewed their experiences with Barbie as very positive. These meaningful interactions illustrated how important Barbie can become in girls’ lives and how they transcend into adulthood.
While other participants, such as Carmen, did not have many Barbie dolls during their girlhoods, their experiences and memories of play were joyful. In Carmen’s case she remembered the doll as a beautiful doll, whose elegance she wanted to emulate. Moreover, when Carmen had daughters she did not present any restrictions to their interactions with Barbie precisely because her memories were so positive. This provided me, one of her daughters, with the opportunity to play extensively with Barbie and create my own memories with the doll. My own memories, as I have presented, are happy. I never saw Barbie as a negative figure, and I do not remember receiving any negative messages from her. For me, Barbie play was such an exciting activity that I could spend hours creating different scenarios and imagining being many different things. Such was the impact of Barbie in my life that I decided to dedicate an extensive part of my life as a doctoral student researching the doll and the culture she created.

**Gender, Race, and Class in Barbie Play**

This study also aimed to examine three important issues that have been identified in the literature about Barbie: *What issues of gender, race, and class were raised through play with and/or discussion of play with Barbie?*

Some issues of gender and class that my participants raised were tightly related to one another. In Chapter 4 I described 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. We saw the case of Susan who felt humiliated as a child when her teacher asked all the girls in the classroom to bring a Barbie doll, but Susan did not have any. In addition to these experiences of inaccessibility to Barbie and/or her products, Barbie embodies affluent femininity by inviting girls to consume through the lifestyle she leads. Barbie’s world centers on fashion and luxury. Her extensive wardrobe, the variety of homes she owns, the numerous vehicles she drives, and her overall lifestyle gives girls the idea that this is the type of lifestyle they should desire and work hard to attain. Presenting this from the standpoint of Puerto Rico’s sociopolitical status, I explained in Chapter 6 how girls may use Barbie to dream about upward mobility and how they may see the U.S. as the only option to do attain this. The older generation, at the time of their girlhood, owned only a few Barbie dolls and artifacts. This generation also exemplified the historical moment the Island was living at the time. The women in this study who belong to the first generation, grew up in the ‘50s and ‘60s. 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 U.S., the land of opportunity, from where Barbie came.

Even if class was not explicitly discussed by my participants, or even if it did not become a topic in their Barbie play, certain aspects of their play practices can serve to illustrate how class could be a factor in the access to and the types of interactions incurred with Barbie. Their use of vivid imagination and creativity to make clothes, the use of everyday objects, the desire to have her clothes, the discussion of how a father would scold them if they spent too much money on Barbie, are all examples that illustrate
how Barbie can be a marker of class and also how women, either in their youth or their adulthood, understood Barbie’s message of consumption.

In terms of gender many participants pointed out that Barbie is the quintessential girl toy. *Every girl should have a Barbie* or similar phrases were echoed throughout the interviews. What girls learned, then, was that if you wanted to be considered a girl, you must have a Barbie. However, many girls reject Barbie for various reasons, but they still want to be considered girls. Whether some girls preferred to engage in “tomboy” activities, did not have economic access to the doll, were not interested in fashion, or simply were not interested in Barbie’s culture, there were many reasons for not closely identifying with Barbie. Yet, the perceived obligation that to be a girl you have to have Barbie can become unfavorable to girls’ ideas of femininity and girlhood.

An important aspect of gender issues that participants raised was Barbie’s body. In some cases, while participants identified Barbie’s exaggerated body, they did not receive it as a harmful message about their own bodies. Yet, for other participants, her body was an important part of growing up with the doll. As some of the participants expressed, Barbie can give girls the idea that their bodies have to look a certain way, that way being like Barbie’s body. Among the girls who presently play with Barbie, this was not an issue that emerged in our conversations, with the exception of one piece of information Annie brought up. As her dialogue with her mother Susan examined, if girls (and boys) think they have to look like Barbie or Ken, they may go to extreme lengths to alter their appearance. This can be very dangerous because they may go through numerous surgeries that could become fatal, as the case of the “real” Ken. While his death was not exactly cause by his surgeries, Annie brought up his example because she
wanted to note how dangerous wanting to look like Barbie could be. Other participants, especially those who are mothers, talked about Barbie’s body as one reason they might feel apprehensive of having Barbie in their houses. They would not want their daughters to suffer problems of body image because they do not look like Barbie. At the same time, some of the same participants also highlighted the importance of educating children about their bodies. As they suggested, talking to them about accepting their bodies as they are instead of seeing Barbie as a role model could greatly help diminish girls’ body issues.

Barbie’s race and ethnicity was an important topic of conversation. In Chapters 4 and 5 I examined girls’ and women’s perspectives toward the lack of racial and ethnic variety among Barbie dolls, especially when many of my participants were growing up. Mainly, girls encountered Barbie’s race or ethnicity through the color of her hair, but also the color of her skin. Many participants complained that throughout their girlhoods there were not many options for them to choose from, and they could not find Barbie dolls that looked like them. Those who had Barbies of color identified these as their favorite ones. Girls in the present also pointed out the continued positioning of white blonde Barbie as the central figure in the Barbie line. This lack of diversity played an important role among parents who did not want their daughters to have contact with Barbie if the only option was the white and blonde doll. While these were the perceptions about this aspect of race, some examples from my participants’ play experiences depicted how girls appropriated their dolls to push against this issue and make their dolls more diverse. Sharon, for instance, tired of Barbie mostly being blonde, painted two of her dolls’ hair; Alondra, as another example, assigned a different ethnicity (Puerto Rican) to all of her dolls and made her dolls of color the main characters in her play scenarios. Barbie’s
ethnicity was essential in the experiences of girls presented in Chapter 6 who had the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the doll with the inclusion of Puerto Rican Barbie. While some girls had made their dolls Puerto Rican because that option was not available prior to 1997, this new doll meant that Puerto Ricans could finally have their own doll. Finally, in terms of race one important point to make is what participants articulated about their preferences. While some participants preferred Barbie dolls of color, whose skin tone and hair more closely resembled their own, others completely rejected such dolls.

**Reflections on my Position as Researcher/Participant**

At the genesis of my research and throughout the entire process of the study I was aware of my position entering the discussion about Barbie. Throughout my girlhood I loved the doll, and I never had negative experiences with her. I do not recall ever receiving problematic messages from her, about looks, about class, about race, or other topics. At that time I was not critically analyzing the messages and ideologies that surrounded me. Yet, whereas my experiences with Barbie were positive, I understood as a researcher that my own experiences did not represent everyone else’s. Moreover, as a scholar, I had become more attuned to the ways that Barbie could be problematic for girls and the range of interactions girls had had with the doll. Having understood this, I was prepared to hear about a multiple of narratives and opinions toward the doll.

While I had an idea of what I might hear, I did not have predetermined themes but rather they emerged organically. What fascinated me was the possibility of weaving
together all the narratives around common themes and the way that new sections in my discussion were being created. One especially was very important for me. The section “More than a Doll: Barbie’s Significance in Girls’ Lives” came together after I realized that for some of my participants their relationship with Barbie went beyond that of a child and its favorite toy. I had not planned for this section, yet, after reviewing my data I began piecing together these narratives where Barbie was a companion through girls’ difficult times; she was there as an outlet when either no one else was, or when real life was just too arduous to confront. Thus, though I aimed to find what Barbie’s influence in Puerto Rican girlhoods was, I never knew how important a role she played in the life of some girls.

In my position as researcher I also had to hold back from agreeing or disagreeing with participants, or even to voice my opinion about a topic they were discussing. For instance, when my participant Patricia talked about body image, she expressed certain ideas that are very ingrained in our culture – the idea that if you are not thin, you are not beautiful. Or in other words, “She has a pretty face, but…” I wanted to voice my opinion about this and say something like, “Women with curves are beautiful too.” However, I understood that my position as the researcher was not to pass judgment or to tell my participants what to think. Instead, I was there to listen to them because my main goal was to learn about their perceptions and their experiences, not my own. I also felt it was important to maintain respect, especially with participants I had not met before. Questioning something they said, disagreeing, or voicing my opinions could have jeopardized the rapport that we had built.
In my continuous reflections about the study, I point to my own development as a qualitative researcher. As I underwent the process of transcribing interviews I noticed several moments in which there was a need for a follow-up question or to ask the participant to elaborate on a point she made. I only became aware of these instances as I listened to the recorded interviews and realized that I wanted to know more about specific topics, but I either did not think about it in the moment of the actual interview, or did not feel comfortable asking more (e.g. when a participant said she did not like Barbie dolls that were black, I presume I did not want to make her feel uncomfortable by asking more about that). My assessment of my own practices indicates that I need to become more aware of these moments where there is opportunity to elaborate and to become more comfortable asking further about topics, even if they are difficult ones.

Finally, as a researcher and participant, this project helped me unearth my experiences not only in relation to Barbie, but also with girlhood in general. Moreover, it pushed me to examine perceptions of Barbie that are not my own, my own understandings about race and about colonization, and to unlearn my own discourses of race. As I was writing about how my participants were using certain words to talk about race and how it relates to our own culture, I realized through the transcripts that in a few instances I was using the same words. Those were moments when I recognized I needed to unlearn the discourse that had been so ingrained in me. In each chapter I aimed to not only talk about my participants’ experiences but also my own, thus I became “researched,” which is an important aspect of memory-work approaches (Onyx & Small, 2011). Nevertheless, I was careful not to become the central figure in my research. First and foremost, I wanted to honor the experiences of other women and girls. At the same
time, I also tried to be reflexive in the perspectives I was providing and my own understandings of the topics at hand. I asked questions about how I was talking about topics and how to explain ideas that are closely tied to the culture. It was important for me to not only analyze what was happening among my participants but also my place in the process. This happened through the practice of self-reflection that occurred simultaneously as I analyzed the data.

**Implications and Suggestions for Further Research**

I have explored in this work women’s and girls’ meaningful and complex experiences with Barbie that gave way to imaginative narratives, encounters with femininity, class, body image, and race, and which allowed girls to construct identities. Twenty-one participants recounted their stories of how Barbie became part of their childhoods and the meanings the doll held in their lives, showing how different those experiences can be for girls according to their contexts. It was a main goal of this study to examine women’s and girls’ views on Barbie and their experiences with the doll that were either currently taking place (girls) or that had taken place in the past (adults). In paying attention specifically to the experiences of Puerto Rican women and girls, I aimed to disrupt the tendency to mostly do research about girls in dominant cultures and thus extend the research on Barbie to places where the scholarship had yet to explore.

The findings of this research position girls as important critics of the artifacts of their popular culture. They were and are able to identify aspects of the objects made for them, such as Barbie, that may send problematic messages to the person interacting with
it. Simultaneously, they understand that Barbie serves as an instrument they can use to construct their own meanings, where they can gain pleasure from playing with it and they can modify or play with the doll in ways that create meaning to their own lived experiences. There is something to be said about how girls actually experience(d) Barbie. The participants in my research – both girls in the present and adults remembering their childhood – pointed out some of the issues about Barbie and the potential messages girls may be receiving from the doll. Yet, it is important to point out how the girls (present and past) not only identified those problems but also subverted them through their interactions with Barbie. The critical engagement with Barbie that happens along the pleasures of Barbie play underline the fraught and complex relationship girls have with the doll. This constitutes an important contribution my research makes to the field of girlhood studies, for it positions girls as central critics and experts on Barbie.

Moreover, the specific context in which this research took place offers significant contributions to the study of girlhood and the study of Barbie. In addition to the issues of race, gender, and class generally identified in the scholarship about Barbie (Chin, 1999; DuCille, 1994, 1999; Kuther, & McDonald, 2004; Negrón-Muntaner, 2002; Rand, 1995; and others), the cultural ideologies the participants of this study had received added to the complexities of said issues. This happened, for instance when participants claimed that Barbie did not have negative influence on their body image, yet their ideas of beauty were closely tied to the ideologies and discourses of beauty and race of their culture. The context was also important in examining how Barbie’s model of affluent femininity takes a different meaning when it happens in a colonial territory where wealth and progress are believed to be achieved only through mobility to the U.S.
This study has only scratched the surface in the exploration of Puerto Rican girlhoods through Barbie play. Certainly, more work on the Barbie phenomenon in Puerto Rico and work on Puerto Rican girlhoods are needed. With sufficient time and funding the findings presented in this project can be expanded in various ways. Below, I propose suggestions for further research that would expand the scope that my work has begun unearthing and, thus, expand the range of experiences of girlhood and Barbie play currently available in the scholarship.

**Rejection of Barbie.** Despite asking for participants who either played with Barbie or rejected her, and also asking for those who had negative experiences with her, the women who responded to my call for participants were mostly those who avidly played with Barbie, and who, for the most part, keep positive memories about the doll. Although this served as a starting point for exploring Puerto Rican girlhoods through Barbie, it also represents a limitation of this study and an idea for further research. In order to expand the study of Barbie in Puerto Rico, one must collect the testimonies of those who did not play with her or who remember the doll negatively.

**Gender.** In this project I have mostly referred to the people who played with Barbie as girls. I understand that in this sense I am perpetuating the stereotype that only girls play with dolls or that dolls are only for girls. This is something that I am heavily taking into consideration for my research, since boys also play with Barbie, even if their play may often be different from most girls’ play. Men may have experienced Barbie in different ways – through sisters, friends, or even their own play. It is important to document their experiences with the doll, especially because Barbie is such a strong symbol of femininity.
Comparisons to other places and populations. In the beginning of this dissertation I indicated that one of the major gaps in the scholarship about Barbie has been the overall exclusion of non-dominant cultures. While new studies have been filling this gap, most of the research about Barbie has centered on the experiences of (mostly white) girls in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. This study has aimed to disrupt this by examining the Puerto Rican population in the Island. One important contribution to the literature would be to study other parts of the Caribbean to compare the impact Barbie had on different populations. Another contribution would be to study the Puerto Rican population in the diaspora, for instance Nuyorican's (Puerto Ricans from New York). As was presented in Chapter 2 and later in Chapter 6, there is a marked difference between how Puerto Ricans in the Island and Puerto Ricans in the diaspora have received Barbie.

Further examination of the impact of colonization in Barbie play. The sixth chapter of this dissertation began unearthing the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico through the lens of Barbie play. It presented a case in which Barbie was used to push against colonizing practices in a girl’s household. It also showed, through an experience shared in an informal conversation, that some girls in P.R. may not be allowed to play with Barbie because it is a representation of the colonizer, the U.S. My exploration can serve as a springboard to continue examining this colonizing relationship and its influence in Barbie play by interviewing more women and girls, inviting them to specifically talk about these types of experiences.

Research conducted by girls. This research has made a contribution to the study of girlhood by doing work for, with, and about girls. There is, however, an important part of girls’ studies that my project could not do, but that I consider highly critical for
honoring girls’ experiences and bringing them to the forefront of scholarship. In future research about girlhood my study should also be by girls. Other works in the field of girlhood studies have provided girls the opportunity to not only be the participants but also become the researchers (see for example Hains 2012). Future research about Barbie in Puerto Rico should invite girls to make decisions about the research approach, handle methods of data collection, and participate in the analysis of data.

**Concluding Remarks**

Barbie’s impact on the Puerto Rican girlhoods depicted in this dissertation was complex, nuanced, and full of tensions. Barbie is a fraught object that comes into contact with girls at a fraught phase of life. What this research presented illustrates the different layers of girls’ experiences with Barbie. Even within the experience of one girl, there are multiple nuances of how girls experience and view the doll. The same person can experience Barbie in a positive way because the doll offers a space to live a dream while at the same time the girl perceives Barbie as an enemy because she cannot see herself reflected in the doll.

From this study it can be surmised that Barbie played an important role in the formative years of many Puerto Rican girls. Participants perceived interactions with the doll, however different, and whether entirely positive or not, as an important part of their girlhoods and in some cases even their adult lives. While I have presented the conclusions I have reached throughout the study, I view the action of “concluding” as something that connotes the idea of an ending, of something final. Rather, I view my
work as the beginning of the explorations of Puerto Rican girlhoods and Puerto Rican girls’ interactions with Barbie. This study set out to trace Puerto Rican girlhoods through Barbie play, so what does it say about Puerto Rican girlhoods?

As stated at the beginning of this work I used the term Puerto Rican Girlhoods, as a plural, because I understood that girls’ experiences of the same event or object can be extremely different from one another. My work explored the individual experiences of various Puerto Rican women and girls from various generations and it also framed the ways in which certain experiences can be shared by a group of girls. Yet, the participants’ experiences do not represent just one type of girlhood experience in the Island, but rather how Barbie played a role in their individual formations. Even when the participants were related to each other their interactions with Barbie, and therefore their experiences of girlhood, differed. What my research says about Puerto Rican girlhoods through interactions with Barbie is that for a large number of girls the doll played an important role in forming their identities and in understanding what it means (or what is expected) to be a girl.

I leave this work open-ended, awaiting to be further explored and to continue the work I have begun. As Barbie continues to be in girls’ and women’s lives, despite the introduction of other brands of fashion dolls, so should we as researchers continue the work about the meanings she carries in girls’ lived experiences. As has been depicted throughout this study and as has been stated by scholars of girlhood, childhood, and cultural studies – among other fields – dolls are not mere objects of play (Driscoll; Forman-Brunell; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell; Wagner-Ott). Dolls’ continuous contact with girls provides possibilities for insightful observations about girls’ everyday lives. They
carry stories, meanings, and serve as windows into girls’ lived experiences. They tell us about who girls are. Through dolls we can trace a history of girls’ lives. As such, dolls and particularly Barbie, need to be further explored to understand and learn more about girls so that we can continue tracing Puerto Rican girlhoods.
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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University
263 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16801

Title of Research: **Interactions with Barbie among Puerto Rican Females**
Name of principal Investigator/Primary Researcher: **Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez**
IRB: **45420**

A. Purpose and Background

I am conducting research on individuals’ experiences with Barbie – whether they have played or not with the doll, or whether their experiences were positive or negative. The purpose of this interview is to collect stories of these experiences on an individual basis.

B. Procedures

If I agree for to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

1. I will be asked questions about what I remember from my childhood in relation to Barbie. It will begin with the questions: Did you ever play with Barbie? After that a series of questions (or a conversation) about my experiences will be asked.

2. I may be video-taped or recorded while I am being interviewed. These recordings will not be made public.

3. I will be asked to bring any Barbie-related artifacts or a picture from my childhood (related to Barbie) I would like to share with the researcher. The artifacts may include, but are not limited to: Barbie dolls (these include all the dolls in the line), magazines, books, trading cards, sticker books, fashion plates, coloring books, videos, board games, video games, music cassettes, Barbie dreamhouse and other pieces for play, accessories for girls, etc.

4. If I choose to, the researcher may contact me for follow-up interviews or to participate in a focus group with other participants to share our Barbie stories. I will be notified when this will take place.

I agree to participate in follow-up interviews _________

I agree to participate in the focus group ____________

C. Risks
Risks will include the possible loss of privacy, possible discomfort at answering some questions and inconvenience.

Confidentiality: The information gathered from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. My real name will not be used in the report and all files, transcripts and data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my, the researcher’s home, and no one except the researcher will have access to them. My name will not be used and any identifying personal information will be avoided (unless I specify my real name may be used).

**Pseudonym I would like to be used for my name:**

D. Direct Benefits

There are no guaranteed benefits to me.

E. Alternatives

I am free to choose not to participate in this research study.

F. Costs

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this research study.

H. Questions

I have spoken with Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have any further questions about the study, I can contact her by calling 787-464-7012 or writing to her at era134@psu.edu

I. Consent

I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY.** I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty.

Print name ______________________________ e-mail: ______________________________

Signature ______________________________ Date: ______________

Research Participant (18 or older)

Signature ______________________________ Date: ______________

Interviewer/Researcher
Appendix B
Informed Consent Form (Spanish)

College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University
263 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16801

Título de la Investigación: Interactions with Barbie among Puerto Rican Females
Nombre del investigador principal: Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez
IRB: 45420

A. Propósito

Estoy haciendo una investigación sobre las interacciones y las experiencias de personas adultas con Barbie cuando eran pequeños – tanto si jugaron o no con la muñeca, o si las experiencias fueron positivas o negativas. El propósito de esta entrevista es recolectar historias sobre estas experiencias.

B. Procedimiento

Si acepto participar en esta investigación, ocurrirá lo siguiente:

1. Me harán preguntas sobre lo que recuerdo de mi niñez en relación a Barbie. Comenzará con la pregunta: ¿Alguna vez jugaste con Barbie? Luego, me harán una serie de preguntas sobre mis experiencias (o comenzará una conversación sobre ellas).

2. Hay la posibilidad de que mi entrevista sea grabada en video o en audio (o ambas). Estas grabaciones no se harán públicas.

3. Me pedirán que traiga cualquier artefacto relacionado a Barbie o una foto de mi niñez relacionada a Barbie para compartir con la investigadora. Los artefactos pueden incluir, pero no están limitados a: muñecas Barbie (o sus amigos), revistas, libros, cartas, libros de estampillas, “fashion plates”, libros de colorear, videos, juegos de mesa, música, casa de Barbie, accesorios, etc.

4. Si así lo deseo, la investigadora podrá contactarme para futuras entrevistas o para participar en entrevistas con otras personas. De ser contactada, tengo todo el derecho a no aceptar las entrevistas

Acepto a ser contactada para futuras entrevistas _________
C. Riesgos

Riesgos incluyen la posibilidad de perder privacidad, posible incomodidad respondiendo algunas preguntas, e inconvenientes.

Confidencialidad: La información recopilada en este estudio se mantendrá lo más confidencial posible. Mi nombre real no será utilizado en el reporte ni documentos, transcripciones y la data serán guardados por la investigadora, y nadie excepto la investigadora tendrá acceso. Mi nombre no será utilizado y se tratará de no usar cualquier información que pueda identificarme (a menos que yo especifique que se pueda utilizar).

**Seudónimo que prefiero sea utilizado en lugar de mi nombre:** __________________________

D. Beneficios

No hay beneficios garantizados para mí.

E. Alternativas

Tengo la libertad de escoger no participar en este estudio.

F. Costos

No habrán costos para mí por participar en este estudio.

H. Preguntas

He hablado con Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez sobre este estudio y mis preguntas han sido contestadas. Si tengo más preguntas puedo contactarla llamando al **787-464-7012 o escribiéndole a era134@psu.edu**

I. Consentimiento

He recibido una copia de este formulario de consentimiento.

**LA PARTICIPACION EN ESTE ESTUDIO ES VOLUNTARIA.** Estoy en libertad de no aceptar participar en el estudio, o en cualquier momento puedo retirar mi participación sin alguna penalidad.

Nombre __________________________ e-mail: __________________________

Firma ___________________________ Fecha: __________________________

Particpante (18 o mayor)

Firma ___________________________ Fecha: __________________________

Investigadora
Appendix C

Interview Questions

While the interviews were carried out more as an informal conversation, these are some of the questions I asked participants.
*For the sake of format, the questions are in past tense, but for some of the participants they were asked in the present tense.

Background:

1. What is your gender
2. Age
3. Ethnicity
4. Occupation
5. Where are you from? Is that where you grew up?
6. “Growing up, which social/economic class would you say best describes you.” “Is that how you would have seen yourself at the time?” Is that how you see yourself today?
7. How else would you describe yourself?

Barbie and play:

8. Tell me a little bit about who you were during your Barbie ages
9. Tell me about your experiences with Barbie
10. Did you ever play with Barbie?
11. If you played, how old were you? Until what age did you play?
12. Do you remember how many Barbies you had?
13. Did you have other Barbie accessories, house, clothes, etc.?
14. What was involved in your play?
15. Did you identify with the doll?
16. Was the skin color/hair color important?
17. Were there ever any objections to your play?
18. Growing up, what was your relationship with the doll?
19. As an adult, how do you feel about Barbie?
20. If you had children, would you allow them to play with Barbie dolls?
21. What kind of play did you do with Barbie?
22. What roles did she play?
23. Did you assign a different sexual orientation?
24. Did her race or ethnicity remain the same?
25. Did you play by yourself or with others, or both?
26. Was the play different in private (by yourself) and in public (with others)? How?
27. Did you repurpose the dolls?
28. Did you follow the “instructions” of the box? (e.g. if Barbie is an astronaut, was that her role in their play?)

29. Do you have drawings, pictures, or other things related to Barbie? Can you show them/share them with us in our group meeting?

30. Did you own books, magazines, trading cards, videos/games, etc. related to Barbie? If so, did they become part of your play? Did you follow/continue a storyline from any of those sources?

31. Did you play with other dolls?

32. Do you look back on your Barbie play in a positive way? Why or why not?

33. Did you incorporate household objects into your play?

34. Do you identify with Barbie?

35. Would you like to be like her?

36. Do you think you could be anything you want to be? What would you like to be?

Questions 34-36 were specifically for girls in the present.
Appendix D

Consent/Assent Form for Girls

College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University
263 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16801

Title of Research: **Interactions with Barbie among Puerto Rican Females**
Name of principal Investigator/Primary Researcher: **Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez**
IRB: **45420**

A. Purpose and Background

I am conducting research on individuals’ experiences with Barbie – whether they have played or not with the doll, or whether their experiences were positive or negative. The purpose of this interview is to collect stories of these experiences on an individual basis.

B. Procedures

If I agree for to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

1. I will be asked questions about what I remember from my childhood in relation to Barbie. It will begin with the questions: Did you ever play with Barbie? After that a series of questions (or a conversation) about my experiences will be asked.

2. I may be video-taped or recorded while I am being interviewed. These recordings will not be made public.

3. I will be asked to bring any Barbie-related artifacts or a picture from my childhood (related to Barbie) I would like to share with the researcher. The artifacts may include, but are not limited to: Barbie dolls (these include all the dolls in the line), magazines, books, trading cards, sticker books, fashion plates, coloring books, videos, board games, video games, music cassettes, Barbie dreamhouse and other pieces for play, accessories for girls, etc.

4. If I choose to, the researcher may contact me for follow-up interviews or to participate in a focus group with other participants to share our Barbie stories. I will be notified when this will take place.

I agree to participate in follow-up interviews _________

I agree to participate in the focus group _________

C. Risks
Risks will include the possible loss of privacy, possible discomfort at answering some questions and inconvenience.

Confidentiality: The information gathered from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. My real name will not be used in the report and all files, transcripts and data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my, the researcher’s home, and no one except the researcher will have access to them. My name will not be used and any identifying personal information will be avoided (unless I specify my real name may be used).

**Pseudonym I would like to be used for my name:** ________________________________

D. Direct Benefits

There are no guaranteed benefits to me.

E. Alternatives

I am free to choose not to participate in this research study.

F. Costs

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this research study.

H. Questions

I have spoken with Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have any further questions about the study, I can contact her by calling 787-464-7012 or writing to her at era134@psu.edu

I. Consent

I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty.

Print name ________________________________ e-mail: ______________________________

Signature ________________________________ Date: __________________

Parent/Guardian

Assent from child _____________________________________________________________

Signature ________________________________ Date: __________________

Interviewer/Researcher
Appendix E

Consent/Assent Form for Girls (Spanish)

Título de la Investigación: Delineando la Niñez Puertorriqueña a través de narrativas sobre juegos con Barbie
Nombre del investigador principal: Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez
IRB: 45420

A. Propósito

Estoy haciendo una investigación sobre las interacciones y las experiencias de féminas con Barbie—tanto si juegan (jugaron) o no con la muñeca, o si las experiencias fueron positivas o negativas. El propósito de esta entrevista es recolectar historias sobre estas experiencias.

B. Procedimiento

Si acepto participar en esta investigación, ocurirá lo siguiente:

1. Me harán preguntas sobre lo que recuerdo de mi niñez en relación a Barbie. Comenzará con la pregunta: ¿Alguna vez jugaste con Barbie? Luego, me harán una serie de preguntas sobre mis experiencias (o comenzará una conversación sobre ellas).

2. Hay la posibilidad de que mi entrevista sea grabada en video o en audio (o ambas). Estas grabaciones no se harán públicas.

3. Me pedirán que traiga cualquier artefacto relacionado a Barbie o una foto de mi niñez relacionada a Barbie para compartir con la investigadora. Los artefactos pueden incluir, pero no están limitados a: muñecas Barbie (o sus amigos), revistas, libros, cartas, libros de estampillas, “fashion plates”, libros de colorear, videos, juegos de mesa, música, casa de Barbie, accesorios, etc.

4. Si así lo deseo, la investigadora podrá contactarme para futuras entrevistas o para participar en entrevistas con otras personas. De ser contactada, tengo todo el derecho a no aceptar las entrevistas.

Acepto a ser contactada para futuras entrevistas ________

C. Riesgos

Riesgos incluyen la posibilidad de perder privacidad, posible incomodidad respondiendo algunas preguntas, e inconvenientes.
Confidencialidad: La información recopilada en este estudio se mantendrá lo más confidencial posible. Mi nombre real no será utilizado en el reporte ni documentos, transcripciones y la data serán guardados por la investigadora, y nadie excepto la investigadora tendrá acceso. Mi nombre no será utilizado y se tratará de no usar cualquier información que pueda identificarme (a menos que yo especifique que se pueda utilizar).

Seudónimo que prefiero sea utilizado en lugar de mi nombre: ______________________

D. Beneficios

No hay beneficios garantizados para mí.

E. Alternativas

Tengo la libertad de escoger no participar en este estudio.

F. Costos

No habrán costos para mí por participar en este estudio.

H. Preguntas

He hablado con Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez sobre este estudio y mis preguntas han sido contestadas. Si tengo más preguntas puedo contactarla llamando al 787-464-7012 o escribiéndole a era134@psu.edu

I. Consentimiento

He recibido una copia de este formulario de consentimiento.

LA PARTICIPACION EN ESTE ESTUDIO ES VOLUNTARIA. Estoy en libertad de no aceptar participar en el estudio, o en cualquier momento puedo retirar mi participación sin alguna penalidad.

Nombre __________________________________________ e-mail: __________________________

Firma ______________________________________________ Fecha: ________________________

Padre, madre, o guardián

Asentimiento del menor ____________________________________________________________

Firma ______________________________________ Fecha: ________________________

Investigadora
Appendix F

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Busco participantes para investigación

“INTERACTIONS WITH BARBIE AMONG PUERTO RICAN FEMALES”

¿Jugaste con Barbie cuando pequeña? ¿Detestabas la muñeca cuando pequeña? Como adulta, ¿cuál es tu opinión sobre Barbie?

Mi investigación busca recolectar memorias de mujeres Puertorriqueñas que interactuaron con Barbie de alguna manera en su niñez, ya sea habiendo jugado con la muñeca (u otros juegos de Barbie), habiendo coleccionado Barbies, habiéndola rechazado, u otras interacciones.

Si tienes interés en participar o simplemente obtener más información sobre mi investigación, puedes contactarme a mi correo electrónico:

Emily R. Aguiló-Perez, PhD Candidate
Penn State University
e.aguiloperez@gmail.com
VITA
Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez

EDUCATION
2016 Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction; Minor in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
2012 M.A., English Education, University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, PR
2008 B.A., English, University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, PR

AWARDS
2012 – 2016 Bunton-Waller Graduate Award
2013 – 2016 Naddeo Family Scholarship in Education
2015 – 2016 Hispanic Scholarship Fund/Remy Martin Scholarship
2015 – 2016 AACTE National Holmes Scholars Program

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS


SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

RECENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE
LLED 402 Teaching Children’s Literature
CI 280 Introduction to Teaching English to English Language Learners
SCOPE College and Career Preparation