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Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez's *An American Icon in Puerto Rico: Barbie, Girlhood, and Colonialism at Play* comes at a most relevant time with the *Barbie* (2023) movie having brought back debates on Barbie and white feminism in global popular discourse through social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter). This complexity of whiteness, race and colonialism underlines Aguiló-Pérez's exploration of identity formation in Puerto Rican girlhoods across multiple generations through their interactions with Barbie which is both a symbol of transnationality and femininity in this book.

In the "Preface" and "Introduction: The Transnational Doll from Our Childhoods," Aguiló-Pérez lays out the intentions of this project and states that her study is based on interviews with women and girls, aged between eight and sixty-two, who have or still maintain a connection with Barbie. Situating herself as both a Barbie fan and a participant-researcher, Aguiló-Pérez questions why this icon was important in the childhoods of Puerto Rican girls and what the dolls meant to the interview participants (11). Barbie, who serves as a proxy for imagined upward mobility and a simulation of adult life, exists at intersections of class, race and gender, and Aguiló-Pérez examines this politics and revisits the debates around Barbie by drawing on the lived experiences of the girls then and now - those who were/are the intended players. She employs memory-work methodologies in her study wherein the memories evoked by these guided conversations (that are outlined in each chapter) become her data. Though this method raises the question of trust and admissibility, Aguiló-Pérez clarifies that the focus is not on the veracity of the memories but "*how* they remember them, *why* they remember them, and what their significance is for their (our) lives" (12, emphasis in original) to understand their individual identity formations and reconstruct their self through nostalgia. Aguiló-Pérez supplements verbal memory with artefactual memory—in the form of preserved dolls and various Barbie accessories—as well as archival work at doll museums in Puerto Rico and New York. She also takes great care to maintain her

objectivity as a researcher, while she uncovers the “multiplicitous” (14) girlhoods lived by her multi-generational participants. Aguiló-Pérez stresses throughout her study that the participants are not representative of *all* Puerto Rican girls and women, but that they are a case study to show an aspect of how Barbie is received in Puerto Rico.

Chapter 1, “Girlhood, Dolls, and Barbie: Spaces of Innocence?” functions as an extended literature review where Aguiló-Pérez summarizes the existing scholarship on girlhood studies, girls’ material culture focusing on dolls, and on Barbie specifically reminding readers that adults are very much creators and consumers of girlhood culture, including dolls. As she reiterates throughout the text, dolls have historically been used as objects of socialisation and training for womanhood and motherhood, establishing gender norms, becoming “spaces where girls negotiate and perform their own ideologies about girlhood and femininity” through dramatic play (36). Barbie, on the other hand, as a fashion doll a career woman bears endless possibility. By drawing on the work of Barbie scholars, Aguiló-Pérez argues that looking beyond the criticisms of Barbie as a sexualised doll with unhealthy beauty standards and instead studying the way girls have interacted with Barbie and associated paraphernalia could assist in the recovery of untold women’s histories (40), especially the way in which generations of girls have transformed Barbie to interrogate the lack of diversity and the commodified multiculturalism of Barbie (43). Aguiló-Pérez also notes that much of Barbie scholarship has been restricted to the Global North and that there is little research on Barbie from the Global South. This work addresses that gap by looking at Barbie within a primarily non-white culture in a country that is both within and outside the Global North.

In Chapter 2, “The Politics of Barbie in Puerto Rico: A New Icon Emerges”, Aguiló-Pérez illustrates the colonizer/colonized relationship between the USA and Puerto-Rico and Barbie as a neo-colonialist import. She begins by tracing Barbie’s entry in to Puerto Rico and

growing popularity through newspaper archives. This is followed by her explaining the delineation of the USA-Puerto Rican economic and immigration ties in the 1950s and 1960s which is the wave Barbie rode in on as a “transnational” object (52). Aguiló-Pérez further discusses the exoticisation, infantilisation and othering of Puerto Rico, even with the Puerto Rican Barbie launched in 1997. Even though the original box containing this Barbie presented a racist and skewed history of Puerto Rico and its colonization, the Puerto Rican Barbie was still more culturally relatable than white Barbie or Friends of Barbie, and Aguiló-Pérez attempts to show that the fear of Barbie as a colonial imposition was in some ways a red herring. While becoming a symbol of nationality for the players, her very status as a Barbie also meant that Puerto Rican Barbie had the ability to cross national borders, and more so as a companion to the Puerto Rican girls who also crossed borders between USA and Puerto Rico (66). But even without the physical ability to cross, Barbie’s symbolic transnational ability enabled the participants to imagine themselves aspiring to and fulfilling the American Dream, working in tandem with the other colonial influences such as television media.

Having set the context for her study, Aguiló-Pérez discusses the interviews in greater detail from Chapter 3 onwards. In “Fashioning a Self: Experiences of Body and Feminine Identities with Barbie,” she studies the various generational interactions with Barbie to understand how Barbie specifically helped in the identity formation of girls with respect to their ideas of beauty, femininity, agency, and self. She writes that the doll itself and the associated merchandise together would become part of the imaginative play and understanding of being a girl could come from either identification with Barbie’s “affluent white heterosexual femininity” (82) or rejection of it. The author reveals that older generations of Barbie players expressed more conservative beauty ideals while younger players rejected it (83). Overall, Barbie was synonymous with girlhood and taught several of

the participants how to be a girl through imaginative simulation of socially accepted femininity which also led some of them to “code-switch [their] behaviour in order to properly fit gender expectations” (83). Even when Barbie did not fit Puerto Rican beauty standards, she still impacted self-esteem through Mattel’s marketing strategies and slogans which encouraged identification as an empowered woman with many careers.

Barbie’s “affluent femininity” (101) and whiteness become the main themes explored in Chapter 4, “Accessing Barbie: Conversations about Class and Race.” Read as symbol of capitalist, consumer culture by Barbie scholars, Aguiló-Pérez writes that much of Barbie and the related paraphernalia which are projected as completing the Barbie experience, is beyond the capacities of low-income Puerto-Rican families. Aguiló-Pérez infers from her participants that not having access to Barbie can become an isolating and shameful experience. She notes how handmade clothes for Barbie can indicate low class status (99) especially as Barbie is established as fashion doll living a luxurious lifestyle, and as Aguiló-Pérez reiterates, a symbol of the American Dream.

This American Dream aura of Barbie is also reflected in her whiteness and the preference for lighter-skinned Barbies that Aguiló-Pérez’s participants largely displayed. As she writes, white Barbie is *the* Barbie and the centre of all Barbie narratives, with other dolls of colour being conferred either secondary roles such as “Friends of Barbie” or sold as collectibles like the “Dolls of the World”. In fact, I would add, in Barbie media such as Mattel’s *Barbie movies* (2004 – present), even when Barbie is called something other than Barbara Millicent Roberts, she is always white. Race and ethnicity however, are complicated issues in Puerto Rico, as Aguiló-Pérez illustrates in this chapter with a long history harkening to the first colonization by Spain and then by the United States of America, and while white Barbie may not be wholly relatable, black Barbie too is rejected by Puerto Ricans (112). Aguiló-Pérez explains that skin color and hair become important factors in determining racial

identity in Puerto Rico and several of her participants reveal implicit racism. The author also introspects on her own preference for Barbies of colour and undertakes a re-focusing of lens to re-examine her own memories of Barbie play and perception of the ‘Other’ or exotic (120).

Chapter 5 “All in the Family: Barbie’s Place in Familial Dynamics” delves deeper into the familial relationships between the interview groups to see how Barbie doll play has created bonds of inheritance, resistance, and joy between them, as in “Puerto Rican culture, the relationship between mothers and daughters involves the transmission from older generations to new generations of stories that teach girls how to be women” (127). Through her mother’s, aunt’s, sisters’ and her own memories of Barbie play, Aguiló-Pérez gauges how the nature of the play has changed over generations with the growing number of dolls and associated merchandise and media available and how their own play interacted with each other’s. In the process, she also interrogates the nature of her own memories, in keeping with the practices of memory-work methodologies. While her mother, aunt and older sister played with Barbie mainly as a fashion doll, living a “more fashionable life through [their] doll[s]” [129], Aguiló-Pérez engaged in creative play with her many Barbies by imagining them in narratives and dynamics inspired by telenovelas, and her younger sister rejected them and the creative play imagined by Aguiló-Pérez altogether. As a participant, she notes how some of her sisters’ memories of *her* doll play took her by surprise: “[they] were engaging in collective memory-work (Haug et al. in Aguiló-Pérez) 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” (132). The intergenerational dynamics of mothers passing on Barbie traditions to their daughters—such as Barbie clothes sewn by adult women being passed on to young girls—is more observed in the interactions of the other mother-daughter interview groups. This makes them creators of Barbie traditions, and connects multiple generations in a single act of doll play. Aguiló-Pérez reads this curation as a space for both wish-fulfilment

and control, where the mother controls the daughter's play to hinder the daughter's identity formation and fulfill the mother's desire for Barbie, or where mother and daughter work in tandem to negotiate each other's identity and sense of femininity through Barbie. Aguiló-Pérez connects her study on intergenerational dynamics to the strategy of how Mattel caters to both demographics through their products – by releasing dolls for play for girls, and dolls for collection and curation for the nostalgic early-generation player.

As participant-researcher, Aguiló-Pérez runs the risk of observer bias, especially as two out of the six interview groups consist of women she has known all her life, yet she adroitly walks the tightrope. In fact, this inadvertently gives her project a dimension of being a long-term observational experiment, from before the project was even potentially conceived. This is especially seen in the case study of her younger sister Frances, who rejected Barbies as child. Her personal knowledge of Frances enables her to make this analysis:

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, and wearing makeup and heels—Frances wasn't buying it (131).

Her knowledge of Frances, coupled with her position as a critical researcher provides her an objectivity to read Frances's subjectivity.

Though the scope of this book is Puerto-Rican girlhoods and their relationship with Barbie, problematisation of the double standards around Barbie/boyhood where Barbie is a random object for boys would raise the question of how boys are taught to view girls through doll play and add to the conversation around girlhood that is Aguiló-Pérez's aim.

Additionally, as the participants of this study are all cisgender, which Aguiló-Pérez notes is a limitation of her study (22), there is also scope to explore the relationship between Barbie and queer children in Puerto Rico and other places in the Global South.

Aguiló-Pérez's study exposes how deeply entrenched the effect of psychological colonialism can be in identity formation and national girlhood. The memory-work methodology she employs allows her to not only interrogate her own positionality vis-à-vis Barbie but also uncover personal histories around the doll. Moreover, it accomplishes what it had set out to do – conceptualise girlhoods beyond the Global North through of its interactions with Barbie. Given Barbie's global popularity and relevance even now, despite other competing doll brands, this is a study on girls' material culture that could well be replicated in other countries in the Global South with similar histories of colonialism.

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