“AND THAT’S WHAT I THINK BEING AN AMERICAN GIRL IS ALL ABOUT!”: GIRLS’ REFLECTIONS ON AMERICAN GIRL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN GIRLHOOD

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By

VERONICA E. MEDINA

Dr. Mary Jo Neitz, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,

have examined the Dissertation entitled

“AND THAT’S WHAT I THINK BEING AN AMERICAN GIRL IS ALL ABOUT!”: GIRLS’ REFLECTIONS ON AMERICAN GIRL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN GIRLHOOD

Presented by Veronica E. Medina

A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Mary Jo Neitz

Professor Rebecca R. Scott

Professor David Brunsma

Professor Mary Grigsby

Professor Lisa Flores

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my nieces Claire Elizabeth, Catherine Ann, and Victoria Alicia and to my nephew Paul Joseph. Each one of you is so amazingly special and my words cannot express the depth of my love for each of you. In your own unique and beautiful ways, each of you is talented, intelligent, compassionate, and funny. You are constant reminders of how blessed in life I truly am. I am-- and will always be-- so proud of all of your accomplishments-- be they big or small. Watching you grow up has been an incredible journey and I look forward to sharing your special life moments with you. I will always be your biggest fan. I also hope to be a source of inspiration for you as you meet life's challenges. No matter what you need, I will be there for you, now and always.

To Victoria Grace: you have inspired me, every day since the day you were born, to keep fighting. I am amazed at your strength and resilience and I look forward to watching you grow even stronger than you already are. You truly are a firecracker and I predict that you are going to go farther than anyone's wildest dreams!

Finally, I dedicate this in loving memory to Arya Esperanza who left our lives far too soon. I wish I could have known you. You, no doubt, would have made your own special mark on this crazy world. You are loved… and missed.

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ABSTRACT

In this project, I analyze 289 essays submitted to the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City (TMM) as part of their 2007 “What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?” exhibit. Inspired by-- and anchored with-- the fictional protagonists of the wildly popular *American Girls Collection*, the exhibit “celebrate[d] the spirit of girlhood in America” through its displays, living history events, *and of primary significance for this dissertation*, *an essay contest* seeking answers to the titular question from modern-day girls and women.

Although girls, especially those between the ages of 7 and 12, are the target audience for American Girl dolls, stories, and merchandise, their perspectives about the meaning and influence American Girl has in and on their daily lives are largely absent from existing scholarly research. With some notable exceptions (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Nardone 2002; Diamond *et al* 2009; and Marshall 2009*),* the vast majority of research on American Girl relies on and theorizes from analyses of texts that American Girl itself produces.

By integrating and privileging the voices of American Girl’s target audience, my analysis seeks to determine if, and to what extent, their readings

and interpretations of American Girl's stories converge with or diverge from the conclusions about the influence of American Girl in girls' lives drawn in prior research. I examine girls' responses to the question posed in the essay contest's title, as well as essay prompts seeking girls' stories about the lessons they have learned from American Girl and how they have applied those lessons in life. Additionally, I discuss essayists' reflections on contemporary girlhood and how American Girl is implicated (or not) in shaping those perceptions.

This project demonstrates that American Girl stories and meanings function as one set of tools in a cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) that girls draw from and use in creative, flexible ways and across a variety of situations. These uses are either invisible to or mischaracterized by scholars due to the ambivalences the company inspires, as well as biases we have toward what (and how) we research.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> *"Girls have long been marginalized because of their gender and age, making them some of the most disregarded individuals in our culture. It is more than time to alter this belief and recognize that girls' culture deserves attention*." -- *Sherrie Inness (1998:180)*

> *"To the extent that a product is imbued with drama and can evoke performance, it carries the seeds of its own promotion, and evangelists will proselytize in its name."*
> -- *Nina Diamond* et al *(2009:132)*

How does one capture the scope and impact of a pop culture phenomenon like American Girl? One asks American Girl fans, of course!

Such an investigation may turn up answers similar to the one offered by 10-year-old Shelby, who enthusiastically opines, "*I think American Girl dolls are as spectacular as lemonade on a hot summer day!"* Even though she is teased by some of her classmates for being "*too immature*" because of her obsession with American Girl dolls, seven-year-old Leslie attests, "*I live and breathe American Girl* [and] *I treasure all of the values of what they represent.*" For nine-year-old Gianna, "*An American Girl doll is not just a doll; it's like a pet or a person that you love and care about."* Her American Girl doll cheers her up when she has had a bad day, and perhaps most importantly, Gianna claims, "*My American Girl doll has shown me how to be a real American Girl!"*

Shelby, Leslie, and Gianna are just three of the nearly 300 participants who submitted essays for consideration as part of the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City's 2007 "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?"

exhibit.[1] This special exhibit featured displays of American Girl dolls, accessories, and stories, as well as the Museum's regular permanent collection of artifacts, to commemorate the history of girlhood in the United States. Historical sites and libraries in the Kansas City metropolitan area co-hosted "living history" events inspired by and anchored with the key characters in the *American Girls Collection* and Pleasant Rowland, the founder and creator of American Girl, addressed devotees in special moderated "conversations" over lunch and afternoon tea.

The primary purpose of the TMM's special American Girl exhibit was to "educate young women about history, *by bringing it to life with stories that real American girls are part of* and to which they can relate" (TMM "Press Release" 2007, my emphasis). The TMM invited girls "from age seven through adolescence and into womanhood, to share their perspectives on growing up as a girl in the late 20th and early 21st centuries" by way of participation in an essay contest (The Kansas City Star, Jan. 18, 2007). Museum staff incorporated selected ("winning") essays from the contest into the exhibit. Additionally, participation in the essay contest offered entrants the opportunity to win prizes such as a trip for two to American Girl Place in Chicago, the opportunity to have

[1] This study did *not* involve the use of human subjects; the data consists of written documents. However, to protect the identities of the participants quoted (all are younger than 18 years of age), I refer to them by first names only, which are pseudonyms. For additional information, regarding the source of data and the conditions for its use, see Chapter 3. Throughout the remainder of the dissertation, I will refer to the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City as the Museum or the TMM for brevity.

tea with an American Girl author, or the chance to meet Pleasant Rowland (TMM "Call for Essays" 2006).[2]

Scholars argue that American Girl merits scrutiny, not only because of the wide market success of the company's dolls and storybook collections, but also because of its contributions to and influence as a site of children's popular culture. In 2001, American Girl titles had outsold the first four volumes of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and were set to outpace the sales of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, which originally debuted in the 1950s (Nielsen 2002:92, n. 1). The company's reach and significance is so large that it led marketing professor Nina Diamond and her colleagues (2009) to observe that American Girl has become "something of a cultural icon and [it] has earned a position within the ranks of powerful emotional brands" (pg. 118).

American Girl is and creates culture. As my dissertation aims to illustrate, the company and its ideologies, objects, and practices function as a culture that girls draw upon and from, and use in creative, flexible ways across a variety of situations. American Girl's stories and characters function as interpretive devices that girls use in navigating the complexities of girlhood. I seek to extend the existing scholarship on American Girl and its meanings and uses in girls' everyday lives by integrating and privileging the voices of the very population American Girl purports to empower, but whom scholars suggest are potentially

[2] Appendices A and B contain the TMM's Call for Essays. The front page of the Call for Essays features a description of the exhibit, essay contest, and guidelines for essay contest participants (Appendix A). The back page of the Call for Essays features an entry form that was to accompany all essay submissions (Appendix B).

duped or ill-served by the company's inaccurate, stereotypic or constraining representations of American history, national identity, and femininity. I argue that American Girl is but one repertoire in a cultural tool kit available to girls (Swidler 1986). However, because of the ambivalences the company inspires, how girls draw from the stories and characters may be invisible or mischaracterized by scholars.

For example, Nancy Duffey Story's (2002) dissertation focuses extensively on the rhetorical and representational strategies through which American Girl constructs its girl readers as consumers, reinforcing girls and women's traditional roles in the domestic sphere, as well as their stereotypic representations as fashion- and appearance-obsessed. Story (2002) identifies herself as a feminist, post-structuralist, neo-Marxist researcher; as such, she admits that her theoretical and epistemological perspectives influence and simultaneously limit her analysis of American Girl's texts. At the conclusion of her analysis, Story (2002) confesses, "I am fully aware that my reading may not be similar to the reading of children between the ages of seven and twelve, the intended audience of these texts" (pg. 212). Aware that "other readings are both possible and probable," Story (2002:212-213) issues a call to fellow researchers to pursue alternate interpretations of the meaning and influence of American Girl from "genuine insider sources" such as American Girl's advisory board members, employees, executives, and authors. She also encourages researchers to seek *children's "readings"* of American Girl texts and gather data on how girls make meaning from and of American Girl.

My dissertation project answers Story's call to seek readings by "insiders" and offers a unique contribution to the extant research on American Girl precisely because the data originates from a relatively large sample of girls who have first-hand experience of and with American Girl texts and products in their lives, either presently or in the past. In this project, I offer an analysis of essays written by girls who use(d), own(ed), or have been involved with American Girl to determine how they define what it means to be an American Girl. I discuss what lessons girls have learned from American Girl's stories and characters and how they integrate those lessons into their daily lives, as well as how their engagement with American Girl shapes their understandings and experiences of contemporary American girlhood. Additionally, I highlight novel ways girls utilize the company's narratives to make sense of disruptive childhood experiences.

Privileging Girls' Voices

My decision to privilege the voices of girls in this study reflects my ongoing commitment to feminist standpoint theory, in particular, and feminist theories and methodologies, generally. Standpoint theorists recognize that subjects are located in the material world, that they are situated in a particular time and place, and that they have a particular vantage point from which to regard phenomena, processes, or objects under investigation (Sprague 2005). Standpoints reflect "the combination of resources available" to particular knowers who are located "within a specific context from which an understanding might be constructed" (Sprague 2005:41). Standpoints reflect individuals' practical experiences and their relationships to systems of ruling (which are organized by social relations of

domination such gender, race, class, age, sexuality, nation, etc.), as well as their access to distinctive bases of knowledge (Sprague 2005:41-47).

Because of their gender and age, many cultural analyses treat women and children, respectively, as objects rather than subjects. Women and children are generally viewed as lacking psychological complexity which, as Carolyn Kay Steedman (2006[1986]) notes in her cultural analysis of the gendered dimensions of English working-class life, denies them "a particular and developing consciousness of the meanings presented by the social world" (pg. 11). Steedman recognizes, however, that childhood is an important research site because it is "the place where a child enters a culture, and [where] a culture comes to occupy a child" (pg. 110). As anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2001) so astutely observes, "[T]he lives and worlds of children have rarely been viewed as profound enough, complex enough, or important enough to support serious social theory or political economy" (pg. x). Chin (2001) goes on to note, however, that recent trends in ethnography and anthropology, in particular, are increasingly centering the lives of children and childhood. In these new perspectives, scholars are conceptualizing children as "knowing historical subjects" and as people who are active participants in the politics of daily life and in social, historical and political processes (Chin 2001).

My project is situated in a context in which the "subjective" data that feminist researchers chose to analyze-- whether the data are personal narratives, life stories, women's talk, hanging out, diaries, or in the case of this study, essays written by girls-- are often dismissed as "anecdotal, adding color or personal

interest" to their projects. Researchers with more positivistic inclinations dismiss these subjective sources of data as "unreliable as a basis for generalization" (Maynes *et al* 2008:5). As Marjorie DeVault (1999) recalls, references to women's talk as "chitchat or gossip" are "classically sexist formulations" and function to control women and limit their contributions to public discourse (pg.57). Sociologist Julie Bettie (2003:59) encountered similar resistance from a colleague who dismissed her research for *Women Without Class* as "hardly ethnography." She argues persuasively, however, that "hanging out," "'just talkin'" or "kick[ing] it" with the girls she studied in California's Central Valley was "important ethno to graph" and rendering these methods and the data invisible or illegitimate has the effect of privileging the public spheres of life over the private (pg. 30). Bettie justifies "bedroom culture," and especially, girls' talk as precisely ethnography because it is through talk that girls enact identities, disclose insecurities, and bond (Bettie 2003:28-29).

Girls' spaces and their engagement in gendered popular culture reveal sociologically significant contradictions and power imbalances. The types of popular culture with which women and girls engage are inherently vulnerable to critique, but this is not a new trend. Writing about young women's engagement with body projects associated with preparing for prom, Amy Best (2000) observes, "The very practices that girls are expected to invest in and to find pleasurable are also dismissed as trivial." She continues, "The basic paradox lies in the following: the project of becoming feminine is defined as frivolous, and that which is frivolous is also feminine" (pg. 36). Although reading is generally a

respected activity and perceived as a highly esteemed way of receiving cultural information, it is inherently vulnerable to critique when one considers *who* is reading, as well as *what* one is reading (Griswold 2000:30). Sociologist Wendy Griswold (2000) argues, for example, that since the 18th and 19th centuries, moralists have objected to certain types of novels that girls read, especially those presumed to waste girls' time and corrupt girls' virtue (pg. 103). The assumptions critics hold about the content of romance novels induces women's guilt about reading; the genre is often dismissed as "soft-core pornography" (Radway 1991:103-104). Adding to the price that women paid in "guilt and self-doubt" for reading their allegedly "dirty" books was the time the activity took away from meeting their husbands' and children's needs and the material costs associated with buying the romance novels themselves (Radway 1991).

Scholars often consider proms, beauty pageants, romance novels and other feminine spaces and activities too inconsequential to merit serious inquiry, reflecting not only sexist assumptions about particular cultural sites, but also classist assumptions about the type of culture worth studying (Banet-Weiser 1999). However, popular culture "exists as a space that can be simultaneously conventional and unpredictable, liberatory and reactionary, personal yet anonymous, and grounded in materiality while also being a realm where fantasy is played out" (Banet-Weiser 1999:6). In the case of reading fiction, for example, such perspectives fail to account for the functions that this activity plays in individuals' lives. Individuals read novels for reasons that range from "pure utility to pure entertainment (Griswold 2000:114). *Readers themselves* often

conceptualize reading as a mixture of entertainment and instruction. Novels, for example, allow individuals to learn about people with whom they are not familiar. Habitual romance novel readers reported that they acquired knowledge about history, far-away locations, and customs of other cultures from reading. Radway (1991) asserts that this is a compensatory function of reading that filled women's "mental world with varied details or simulated travel" and allowed women "to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space," especially since their domestic responsibilities precluded them from participation in more public realms or from traveling (pg. 113).[3] For habitual romance readers, the novels also provided women with a reprieve from the physical and emotional labor associated with domestic responsibilities and family care. Novels also provide a window into understanding "how people live and cope with their problems;" some readers believe literature "is the best way of coming to understand others" (Griswold 2000:90, 92). Furthermore, individuals who "read for cultivation" look for assistance in improving their own lives. The women in Radway's (1991) study suggested that romances encourage favorable transformations in their perceptions of themselves (pg. 101-102).

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[3] According to Radway (1991), the women engaged in habitual romance reading expressed their desire for historically and geographically accurate novels and believed that novelists engaged in extensive background research, including traveling to sites that form the backdrops of their novels and poring over historical documents (pg. 110). Their belief that the novels were historically and geographically accurate justified women's material and temporal expenditures because the texts were then perceived to "possess a certain intrinsic value" that was transferred to readers, who in turn, shared their acquired knowledge with spouses and friends (Radway 1991:107). These beliefs are similar to those held by parents and educators about the historical fiction novels associated with the *American Girls Collection*. Parents, for example, stress the "educational aspects of the collection, the realism of its characters, the presentation of positive role models, and the overall wholesomeness of the concept" (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:167).

Because of its emphasis on highlighting girls' role in history and in celebrating girlhood, in general, American Girl-- like proms--"enables girls to occupy a position within a public space, a significant fact when considering women's historical relegation to the private sphere" (Best 2000:46). Participating in the TMM exhibit and essay contest--which sought to define what it means to be an American Girl, as well as to highlight the essence of modern girlhood from the perspectives of those experiencing it-- "represents a struggle to stake a claim to one's identity" (Best 2000:46). This is no small feat, especially in the realm of children's popular culture, where "[b]oys define the group, its story, and its code of values" and where "[g]irls exist only in relation to boys" (Pollitt 1995:153).

As with talk and bedroom culture, documentary sources-- such as the essays under investigation here-- "may be drawn on to recuperate the otherwise muted voices of women and other dominated groups, and feminist scholarship particularly affirms the intersection of the personal and the social" (Hammersly and Atkinson 2007:124). Documentary sources illuminate the ways in which subject populations make meaning of, record, diagnose, and organize their social activities (Hammersly and Atkinson 2007:121). Historian Joan Jacob Brumberg's *The Body Project* offers an inspiring example of this stance. She acknowledges that many people "find the literary remains of ordinary girls silly or worthless," but for her, girls' diaries contained invaluable data that "provide[d] entry into the hidden history of female adolescents' experiences" (pg. xxvi-xxvii). For Brumberg (1997), diaries dating as far back as the late 1890s contained girls' first-hand accounts of their day-to-day routines including "authentic testimony to

what girls in the past considered noteworthy, amusing, and sad, and what they could or would not talk about" in public (pg. xxvii). Brumberg (1997) refers to the diaries that informed her research as "a national treasure" (pg. xxvii); they provided her not only with textual evidence about girls' relationships to their changing bodies, but also with evidence of changing cultural meanings about girls' bodies over the past century.

In most scholars' analyses of American Girl historical fiction novels and other American Girl texts-- including Nardone's (2002), as discussed above-- the focus has been on how American Girl interpellates readers and little, if any, attention is paid to how girls themselves select American Girl's stories, ideologies, and representations and appropriate them in their daily lives. I argue that the reliance on analyses of texts produced by American Girl itself prevents scholars seeing the complex process of meaning making in which girls are engaged. While there have been some attempts to integrate first-person accounts into analyses of American Girl (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Nardone 2002; Marshall 2009; and Diamond *et al* 2009), the focus remains on interpellation rather than on appropriation. This trend continues to ignore what Nardone (2002) refers to as "inaccessible undercurrents" (i.e. points of cultural selection and resistance) that may push us to new shores, new understandings of what American Girl means to its target audience.

Before proceeding to my discussion of how the present study is organized, I offer a brief introduction to American Girl and its significance in girl culture, as well its significance as a site for sociological investigation.

What is American Girl?

Founded in 1985 by Pleasant Rowland, a former teacher and textbook author, American Girl (formerly known as Pleasant Company) has grown from a small mail order catalog business to a cross-market, cross-industry powerhouse. The *American Girls Collection,* American Girl's signature product line, is a doll and storybook collection featuring "fictional heroines [who] live during important times in America's past, providing 'girl-sized' views of significant events that helped shape our country and [they] bring history alive for millions of children" (American Girl 2006 "Brand Overview"). Rowland developed the *American Girls Collection* to rectify what she identified as a problem with toys, generally, and girls' popular culture, in particular. When shopping for Christmas presents for her nieces, Rowland felt that the toys available to young girls lacked aesthetic appeal, quality, and most importantly, intellectual substance. Rowland was displeased that dolls like Barbie and the Cabbage Patch Kids "celebrated being a teen queen or mommy" and did not provide girls with "uplifting" or empowering role models and resulted in a stifling vision of "girl culture" (Talbot 2005). After an inspiring visit to colonial Williamsburg, Rowland struck upon the idea to "market this tangible history to children" through dolls and historical fiction novels (Talbot 2005).

The social and political context of the 1980s virtually ensured the success of American Girl's stories and books. Ronald Reagan, whose presidency "both reflected and shaped the times," aspired to return the nation to "traditional" values and re-center the family, religion, and morality, which social conservatives

believed to be under attack by big government, liberalism, and feminism (Story 2002). The feminist "backlash," especially, created an audience receptive to the American Girl characters who simultaneously represented wholesome values, feminine appearance, and female empowerment in a context in which there was substantial contestation about women's public and private roles. Additionally, American Girl characters spoke to the New Right's creed of individualism; with a cheerful disposition, determination and the right values about faith, family, and friendship, American Girl characters-- and real American girls, by extension-- could overcome any obstacle (Story 2002:106-108).

The growth of the signature *American Girls Collection* over the last twenty-five years illustrates the significance and impact of Rowland's idea. In 1986, the *American Girls Collection* debuted with only three characters: Kirsten Larson, Samantha Parkington, and Molly McIntire. As of this writing, 17 historical characters have appeared in *The American Girls Collection*, with the most recent additions introduced together on August 8, 2011 and the next character set to debut in fall of 2012.[4] To appeal to younger audiences and to capitalize on the potential for "cradle to grave" brand loyalty, American Girl expanded their product line in to include baby dolls such as Bitty Baby (introduced in 1995) and Bitty

[4] As of Spring 2012, only 12 of the 17 dolls were available for purchase. Five character dolls, including two of the original three characters, have been retired and are no longer available from American Girl. Samantha Parkington and Nellie O'Malley entered the American Girl archive in 2009. Kirsten Larson followed into the archive in 2010. American Girl archived Felicity Merriman and Elizabeth Cole in 2011. As of this writing, Molly McIntire is the only original character doll to remain available for purchase. See Appendices A and B for a complete chronology (as of Spring 2012) of the *American Girls Collection* by date of introduction and by era represented, respectively. See http://www.americangirl.com/archives/hc.php for the *American Girls Collection* archive.

Baby Twins (introduced in 2002).[5] Despite Rowland's professed aversion to toys and dolls that limited girls to traditional gender roles, the Bitty Baby lines target girls between the ages of three and seven who are either pre-literate or too young for the story-driven dolls of the *American Girls Collection*.

In 1995, American Girl introduced the Girl of Today doll line. The Girl of Today line, which was renamed Just Like You in 2006 and then rechristened in 2010 as My American Girl, allows girls to "customize" dolls to reflect their unique physical features. There are 40 different combinations of hair, eye, and skin color and hair length, texture, and style for My American Girl dolls and they can be personalized with extra accessories such as braces, eyeglasses, or earrings and outfits the reflect their owners' interests. Unlike earlier versions of the Girl of Today dolls, the current line of My American Girl dolls "come to life" on the virtual campus of Innerstar University, American Girl's online gathering space for My American Girl doll characters and their owners.[6]

In 2001, American Girl introduced the Girl of the Year doll and storybook line. Contemporary issues such as balancing schoolwork with extracurricular activities, grappling with bullies, dealing with the social challenges of being homeschooled, or protecting the environment drive the plotlines of the Girl of the

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[5] "Cradle-to-grave marketing" is, according to youth marketing guru James McNeal, one of two sources of new customers-- the other being defection from competitors-- and it reflects "good business logic." McNeal argues that the "warm and fuzzy" feelings children develop toward stores, brands or products when they are young increases the likelihood that they'll select those same stores, brands, and products when they reach market age (Quart 2003:51).

[6] See http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=17 for additional information about My American Girl dolls and the Innerstar University virtual community.

Year storybooks. Unlike other American Girl doll lines, the Girl of the Year line is a limited edition product. Each doll in this line is available for one year only before she enters the Girl of the Year archive and the next character arrives.[7]

Initially only available through the company's mail order catalog, American Girl merchandise is now available for purchase through the company's website and at American Girl Place experiential retail stores. The company's flagship store, American Girl Place Chicago, opened its doors to the public in 1998. The concept has become so popular-- as both a site to purchase American Girl merchandise and as a *destination* to *experience* American Girl culture and identity-- that additional brick and mortar stores are popping up across the country. American Girl Places have opened up in upscale shopping districts in New York City (2003), Los Angeles (2006), Boston and Minneapolis (2008), Denver and Kansas City (2010), Washington D.C. and Seattle (2011), as well as St. Louis (2012). Two new American Girl Places will open in Houston and Miami between late summer and fall of 2012.[8] American Girl Place Boutiques and Bistro, smaller spin-offs of the popular American Girl Place retail outlets, opened up in Atlanta and Dallas in 2007.

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[7] American Girl did not introduce Girl of the Year characters in 2002 or 2004. Also, books for each of the Girl of the Year characters remain available for purchase after the respective character dolls are archived. To view all of the characters in the Girl of the Year collection from 2001 to 2012, visit http://www.americangirl.com/archives/goty.php.

[8] For additional information on American Girl Place Houston, visit http://www.americangirl.com/corp/pr.php?y=2012&date=0215. For information on American Girl Place Miami, visit http://www.americangirl.com/corp/pr.php?y=2012&date=0216.

While American Girl was expanding its doll collections and building additional brick-and-mortar stores, the company was also cross marketing its products with other large name-branded companies. From roughly 2001 through 2007, Hallmark, the Kansas City-based card and collectibles giant, offered American Girl-branded products through its retail outlets and website. In 2005, American Girl collaborated with Bath & Body Works and released "**Real**beauty Inside and Out," a personal care product line and signature fragrance, respectively, which Ellen Brothers, president of American Girl and Executive Vice President of Mattel, suggested demonstrated American Girl's commitment to "nurturing the whole girl-- her body, her mind, and her spirit" (Mattel 2005).

Finally, within the past few years, American Girl has also begun to capitalize on new social media technologies such as Facebook and YouTube to bring together hundreds of thousands of American Girl devotees in a virtual American Girl community. American Girl's Facebook page is "liked" by over 200,000 fans and the company established a YouTube channel devoted to American Girl content, including American Girl movie trailers, videos of American Girl authors discussing their books and characters, and even home videos submitted by American Girl enthusiasts. [9]

American Girl has a glowing reputation with parents and educators alike; American Girl is credited with "changing the ways girls conceptualize America and themselves" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:140). American Girls' books

[9] For the American Girl Facebook page, visit https://www.facebook.com/#!/americangirl. For American Girl's YouTube channel, visit http://www.youtube.com/user/americangirl?feature=results_main.

buck the tendency in children's literature to represent girls as inactive, being reliant upon boys for help, waiting on boys to fix things, using things boys invent, and just generally being available and expected to wait upon and serve boys (Sadker and Sadker 1994). Parents and educators tout American Girl characters, especially those in the signature *American Girls Collection*, as wholesome role models that inspire girls to realize their own ingenuity, courage, and integrity.

Aside from being an immensely successful commercial enterprise, American Girl is a "cultural cynosure" and as such, it is "a site of contestation" that acts as "both a lightning rod and a fault line for contemporary cultural debate" (Diamond *et al* 2009:133). At its most basic level, American Girl is a form of "femoribilia," a play on the word memorabilia that speaks to the artifacts and material culture of femininity that convey lessons about appropriate female behavior (Peril 2002:11). The company and its products form a representational system that tells particular (celebratory and empowering) stories about girls, girlhood, and the nation. Like other forms of popular culture, it reflects and expresses individuals' (or society's) desires, disgusts, and their politics (Williams 2006:14). For parents, American Girl is a form of "protective" culture that seeks to shield girls from contemporary culture's dangers (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002). For critics, American Girl is a site that (re)produces traditional notions of femininity and the works to reinforce race and class hierarchies through its representational strategies (Acosta-Alzuru 1999).

Although it does not exist in isolation from other cultural or social forces, American Girl is a space in which girls make sense of what it means to be a female (and a child) in American society. It is a cultural space in which they learn how to negotiate the various relationships in which they find themselves embedded (i.e. in families, in friendships, as students, as the creators of history, as members of an "imagined community"). It is a space through which girls learn, negotiate, contest or internalize the dominant values and ideologies of American society such as individualism, multiculturalism, and pluralistic tolerance. American Girl is a site through which girls learn to handle their individual problems and understand historical social issues.

American Girl is also implicated in the (re)production of social inequalities through its narratives as well as through its production processes. Although the American Girl stories produce and reinforce perceptions of a multicultural and classless American history, the company simultaneously (re)produces racial and class hierarchies and perpetuates global inequalities through its reliance on the labor of third-world women and children to produce the dolls, clothing, and accessories for socially privileged consumers in the United States. American Girl is a site ripe for sociological investigation, but as the present study seeks to demonstrate any investigation that fails to consider the perspectives of its target audience misses key points of understanding.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of extant research on American Girl; in this chapter, I delineate the major themes and findings addressed in these

studies on American Girl and discuss the implications for theorizing from textual analyses at the exclusion of first-person accounts from American Girl's target audience. While scholars examining American Girl hail from a broad range of disciplines, sociological analyses of this cultural phenomenon are lacking. Additionally, the vast majority of studies rely almost exclusively on analyses of texts that American Girl itself produces while only a small handful of researchers incorporate the perspectives and opinions of American Girl's target audience.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological and theoretical frameworks that inform this study. Relative to other studies on American Girl, the data for this dissertation is exceptionally novel and offers a unique perspective for interrogating the role and influence that American Girl has on the lives of girls who are directly involved in America Girl culture. I detail the source and significance of the data upon which the dissertation is framed, as well as how grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and personal narrative analysis (Personal Narrative Group 1989, Riessman 1993, DeVault 1999, and Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2006) influenced the coding and analytic strategies I employed. I also argue that American Girl dolls and stories function as components of girls' "cultural tool kits" that they draw from and use in creative ways to make sense of the world and their place in it (Swidler 1986).

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 comprise the substantive body of this project. In Chapter 4, I examine how girls define what it means to be an American Girl. Essayists responded to the nominal question of the TMM exhibit and essay contest in a multitude of ways and to a variety of ends. I analyze the

characteristics, activities, and values that girls attribute to the meaning and experience of being an American Girl. I discuss the ways in which essays demonstrate the prevalence and influence of American Girl's narratives of multiculturalism and traditional femininity in girls' responses and what implications may arise from this.

Chapter 5 takes up the lessons that girls learn from reading American Girl stories and playing with American Girl dolls. Essays demonstrate that American Girl contributes to practical skills and competencies such as improved literacy and increased interest in history. Lessons in stewardship and character also abound and influence girls' activities and goals. Additionally, American Girl characters and stories also impart relational lessons; girls draw extensively from American Girl to navigate their relationships with family and friends. I illustrate the creative applications of these lessons in girls' lives.

In Chapter 6 I explore girls' reflections on contemporary American girlhood and what role-- if any-- American Girl's narratives of national identity play in shaping those reflections. In their essays, girls drew on their knowledge of American Girl's characters and stories to make comparisons and contrasts between girlhood in the past and girlhood today. Family connections figured prominently in several of these discussions, illustrating Diamond *et al*'s (2009) observation that American Girl is implicated in the "creation of female family history and family identity" (pg. 126). Girls also compared and contrasted American girlhood with their perceptions of what girlhood is like outside of the

United States. These essays, in particular, hint at the social, political and cultural contexts of 21st century American girlhood.

The last substantive chapter, Chapter 7, provides an analysis of how girls use American Girl stories to deal with challenges in their lives, and in particular, how the American Girl stories and characters form a component of "imaginal coping" when girls face serious health concerns or financial hardship (Clark 2003). In this chapter, I argue that "imaginal coping" involving the American Girl characters and stories aligns with Swidler's (1986) notion of "culture as a tool-kit." Identifying with the American Girl characters and applying lessons from their stories in traumatic or stressful situations can be empowering for girls. This chapter demonstrates that girls actively manipulate cultural objects like American Girl dolls and stories to reflect the realities of their lives.

Finally, I conclude the dissertation in Chapter 8 by summarizing my findings and discussing the contributions my study makes to the existing body of research on American Girl. I discuss some limitations to the present study and suggest future directions for continued research on American Girl. The company plans to introduce of a new historical character and launch the newest American Girl Place in fall of 2012. In light of the company's planned expansions and extensions, there appears to be no limit to the future research other scholars can conduct on the company and its consumers.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The first scholarly research on American Girl appeared in the late 1990s, roughly 15 years after the company's founding. By that time, American Girl had claimed a 40% share of the U.S. doll market and had sold nearly 48 million books and four million dolls (Acosta-Alzuru 1999). By its 25th anniversary in 2011, American Girl reported sales of nearly 135 million books and 20 million dolls, to say nothing of the company's rapid expansion of brick-and-mortar retail outlets and its foray into cross branding with other retailers such as Hallmark and Bath and Body Works (American Girl 2011 "Fast Facts"). Although American Girl continues to grow exponentially, scholarly research on American Girl remains limited. One finds noteworthy research about American Girl in fields such as history, children's literature and literacy studies, English and rhetoric, communication and mass media, and marketing, but there is a dearth of research about American Girl originating in sociology.

Additionally, as is illustrated by the literature review that follows, the majority of the extant research on American Girl derives from analyses of texts that American Girl *itself* produces. Researchers have analyzed American Girl's historical fiction novels, catalogs, magazines, dolls and accessories, and its "brandscape" American Girl Place to deconstruct or otherwise interrogate the texts for the messages and ideologies they are purported to convey to American Girl readers and consumers. Rarely have researchers considered how the target audience for American Girl products and stories themselves-- primarily girls

between the ages of 7 and 12, but also to some extent younger girls and young teens-- actually understand and employ, manipulate, or resist American Girl narratives, ideologies, and products in their everyday lives.

Because researchers' attention has been on analyzing American Girl-produced texts, few studies have sought girls' and women's interpretations, uses, and reflections about American Girl narratives, ideologies, or products or how American Girl has contributed to their lived experiences as females in contemporary American society. There are, of course, interesting and useful exceptions to this trend (which I discuss at the conclusion of this chapter) but, largely, the conclusions drawn from and about American Girl emerge from *researchers'* interpretations of the company's texts, *not from American Girl's target audience*. One of the questions this raises for me, then, is whether researchers' readings of American Girl are the same as or different from the readings of the target audience. If the target audience's readings and interpretations of what it means to be an American Girl are convergent or divergent from the conclusions drawn by researchers investigating American Girl, then in what ways and to what degree do they converge or diverge?

Despite their diverse disciplines and theoretical and methodological approaches, researchers studying American Girl and its texts and products have arrived at similar conclusions in their analyses. Scholars who have studied the company and its texts are generally quite critical of the American Girl brand, despite the company's mission of providing girls with an uplifting vision of American girlhood. Among the critiques leveled against American Girl are the

charges that the company: presents a romanticized and whitewashed version of American history that is rife with historical omissions or inaccuracies; creates a hegemonic, socially privileged and racially, ethnically and culturally homogenous national identity; and promotes a highly stereotyped gender identity in which consumption and gendered cultural reproduction feature prominently. This review of extant studies on American Girl details the analyses and conclusions related to these themes.

American Girl and (Mis)Representations of American History

The historical fiction novels associated with *The American Girls Collection*, as well as other American Girl texts such as activity and craft guides and even motion pictures based on American Girl historical characters, "are the way in which millions of young readers are introduced to many aspects of the nation's past" (Nielsen 2002:85). For example, in the mid-1990s, more than 2,000 American elementary classrooms adopted American Girl's "America at School" curriculum. The "America at School" curriculum, intended for students in the third through fifth grades, integrated lessons in social studies, language arts, literature and crafts with the American Girl historical characters' school stories (Susina 1999).[10] For students whose classrooms did not adopt "America at School,"

[10] The stories for each character in *The American Girls Collection* appear across a series of six books; the titles are virtually identical for each story, with only the characters' names changing across titles. For example, stories in which the readers first meet the characters and their families are titled *Meet* _____, with the specific character's name filling the blank (i.e. *Meet Molly, Meet Kirsten, etc.*). Christmas or holiday stories are titled _____'s *Surprise*; spring and birthday stories are titled *Happy Birthday,* _____*!* Each character's summer story is titled _____ *Saves the Day* and each winter story is titled *Changes for* _____. Stories centered around the characters' school exploits are titled _____ *Learns a Lesson*; these are the stories on which the

American Girl historical fiction novels are widely available in school and public libraries across the country. They are also available for purchase at national bookseller chains such as Barnes and Noble, which often host American Girl events when the *Collection* debuts new characters and stories (Nardone 2002).[11] The historical fiction novels, as well as the company's advice and craft titles, are available for purchase in national discount stores such as Target or via discounters' websites. Additionally, one can purchase American Girl books from the company's numerous retail outlets and on the American Girl website.

One theme to emerge in analyses of American Girl texts is that of historical (mis)representation. With the notable exception of historian Fred Nielsen, who argues that the (mis)representations and omissions of historical events and issues in *The American Girls Collection* are understandable and, to a certain degree necessary, most scholars argue that these (mis)representations and omissions are problematic. A number of analyses suggest that the scope of historical (mis)representations and omissions results in the development of a romanticized and whitewashed version of American history, as well as American-centric or supremacist values. Critics also argue that the historical

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"America at School" curriculum is based. For an excellent analysis of the formulaic structure of the historical fiction novels, see Acosta-Alzuru (1999:19-22).

[11] Nardone's research on a "Meet Kit" reading event at a Barnes and Noble location in The Woodlands, TX, reveals that American Girl retains strict control over American Girl-related book events. According to the Barnes and Noble employee coordinating the event, the bookstore was required to sign an agreement indicating that they would adhere to American Girl's script and structure for the programming. At the end of the reading event, the employee was required to show participants the store's American Girl book section and new titles for Kit, newly introduced by American Girl at the time Nardone conducted her research. For a detailed description of the "Meet Kit" Barnes and Noble event, see Nardone 2002:137-141.

(mis)representations of race, social class, and, especially, gender in the American Girl historical novels fundamentally affect the ways in which readers define or understand national identity, as well as the role that women and racial/ethnic minorities played in American history, a series of themes I address later in this chapter.

As indicated above, historian Fred Nielsen tends to stand alone in his defense of American Girl's historical novels. Nielsen claims that American Girl recognizes that "history often consists of difficult times" and, as such, attempts to introduce readers to many of the unfortunate chapters of American history such as slavery, economic depression, and war. Nielsen (2002:91) argues that American Girl historical novels offer other positive features for young readers of history including:

> a sense of chronology of American history; a knowledge of some of the people and events of that history; an awareness of historical change, especially in social and cultural practices; the recognition that technological change was not always for the better, [and perhaps most importantly] that women and African Americans were long second-class citizens.

In his analysis, Nielsen also takes to task those critics who suggest that the company's representations of historical events are too "saccharine" and that the stories are too predictable, too formulaic. He reminds his audience that the books "are not written for [an informed adult]" for it is to the informed adult that the "American Girl books will teach no history." Nielsen (2002) argues that is unrealistic to expect the target audience of American Girl to 'participate in the historian's craft' (pg. 91).

According to Nielsen (2002), American Girl can "slight the unpleasantness" of the nation's past atrocities (i.e. slavery, Jim Crow, the exclusion of women from full social and political participation) because the novels' target audience "do[es] not need, and probably should not have, an unexpurgated history" (pg. 90). Because of the age of the target audience, readers are presumably (and arguably) not cognitively or developmentally mature enough to understand the scope of these atrocities, a sentiment expressed by Neil Postman who argued that to present the "whole of American history" was "dangerous" to developing minds and contributed to what he called the "disappearance of childhood" (Nielson 2002:90). Instead, American Girl offers historical fiction novels that are age appropriate but, by extension, "historically incomplete" (Nielsen 2002:91).

Nielsen (2002) writes his analysis of the American Girls' historical novels from the perspective of a parent, not of a history professor. He reminds his audience that "true" history texts-- such as those written by John Hersey and Anne Frank and "shelved in the junior section, far from American Girl"-- will be available to his daughter when she is older and able to comprehend them (pg. 91). In the meantime, he is content for his daughter to learn about the historical context of each American Girl character's story through the books' "Peek into the Past" sections. For Nielsen (2002), the "Peek into the Past" sections provide a "good introduction" to the historical context of each character, even though they present only limited analysis of each represented era's unique social problems.

Even though Nielsen is generally lax in his critique of American Girl's representation of American history, he does acknowledge some of the more problematic ways in which American Girl handles social issues. For example, Nielsen (2002) grants that American Girl stories treat social class uncritically by obscuring or ignoring structural explanations for social class difference in various historical eras. Some stories, and particularly those in the Samantha series, "present a clear social hierarchy" in which privileged characters ridicule or dismiss working-class lives and experiences (Nielsen 2002:88). He also concedes that discussions of the consequences of historical and persistent racial inequality are generally nonexistent (Nielsen 2002). For example, while Addy Walker's stories celebrate her escape from slavery into freedom, American Girl glosses over the perilousness and tenuousness of that freedom resulting from the deep-rootedness of institutionalized racism (Nielsen 2002:89).

Before turning to other critiques of the historical (mis)representation in American Girl texts, I conclude my summary of Nielsen's analysis by addressing his assessment of how the American Girl texts allegedly promote consumerism and conspicuous consumption, a theme I discuss in the next section. Whereas other critics have argued that American Girl functions as a 'seamless commercial for itself' through its various material, symbolic, and experiential components (i.e. the dolls, accessories, narratives, and the brandscape), Nielsen (2002) again stands alone and suggests that "to actually read the books is to realize the degree to which they downplay consumerism" (pp. 87,89). Nielsen (2002) argues that a consistent theme across many of the novels is not that 'happiness

is stuffed in a shopping bag,' but that "friendship, family, and simple pleasures are more important than things" (pg. 90). Nielsen does allow that this may be a result of how particular characters are situated historically. According to Nielsen (2002), "To be true to history" Addy's and Kit's stories "must be stories of relative deprivation-- and they are" (pg. 90). One cannot expect a family of recently escaped slaves or a Depression-era family experiencing the effects of mass unemployment and downward mobility to live extravagantly.

In a playful extension of sociologist James Loewen's critique of history textbooks, Daniel Hade (2000) argues that American Girl's historical fiction novels contributes to a romantic, sentimental, and sanitized version of American history.[12] This occurs in two ways: through the historical inaccuracies contained in the books and through whose perspectives the stories are organized and told. Hade (2000:163) asserts that American Girl upholds a mythical image of the United States as a place where childhood is characterized by safety and innocence, where individuals have unfettered access to opportunities to meet their needs, and where individual initiative-- and in particular, the initiative of a young child-- is sufficient to overcome poverty and oppression.

Hade refutes Pleasant Rowland's assurance that material for American Girl historical novels is thoroughly researched and historically accurate. He

[12] Loewen's analysis of American history textbooks suggests that they ignore real historical issues and present, instead, a "feel-good, progress-oriented version of American history" (Hade 2000:158). Hade (2000) notes, "In effect, [American history textbooks] are too busy telling students how great the United States was and still is to give them much real history" (pg. 158). Consequently, American students learn a sanitized version of American history that romanticizes or renders invisible the struggles of the poor and other socially marginalized groups (Hade 2000:163).

argues that misspelled names, inaccurate depictions of immigration routes, and negative representations of Swedish society in *Meet Kirsten*, for example, work to reinforce the notion that Sweden is "old, tired and behind the times" and that the United States is, by comparison, a "land of progress filled with new ideas, new vitality, and new technology" (Hade 2000:158). For Hade, these are not simply inaccuracies of "just a few insignificant details," but rather, examples that reinforce myths of opportunity and mobility in the United States.

Hade (2000) also problematizes the perspective from which American Girl narrates history. He argues, for example, that the socially elite characters in *The American Girls Collection* co-opt the positions of historical witnesses; it is their perspectives and experiences that American Girl represents in its books. This creates the impression, according to Hade (2000) that "the few privileged girls such as Samantha are American Girls, but the poor, such as Nellie, are not" (2000:162).[13] Consequently, contemporary American girls cannot "study, connect with, or feel a sense of pride in past accomplishment" with working-class characters (Hade 2000:158).

American Girl's discussion of child labor in the Samantha books provides examples of how the elite perspective glosses over or misrepresents such a significant social issue. At the turn of the century, over two million children

[13] Although Nellie appeared as a character in Samantha's stories (which debuted in 1986), the Nellie doll and book series was not added to the *American Girls Collection* until 2004, several years after Hade's essay appeared in *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context.* It is evident that at the time that Hade wrote his chapter, he was not aware of American Girl's intention to introduce Nellie's perspective to the *Collection's* historical record. It would be interesting to determine if criticisms such as Hade's factored into American Girl's decision to integrate Nellie as an independent character/doll into the *Collection*.

across the country labored in the industrial factory system and they comprised one-quarter of the nation's labor force. However, the conclusion of Samantha's birthday story asserts that virtually all American children had time to play, forcing Hade (2000) to wryly remark, "This would have been news to the hundreds of thousands of children, like Nellie O'Malley, working at that time" (pg. 161). According to Hade (2000), American Girl misrepresents the scope of child labor laws and actually blames *children themselves* for the problem of child labor. While admitting that *some* children did have to work and could not attend to their education, the "Peek into the Past" section of *Samantha Learns a Lesson* posits that protective legislation did attempt to curb the problem of child labor but that *child labor existed because children themselves broke the law and worked anyway* (Hade 2000:161). Hade reminds his readers, however, that in 1904 only a small number of states had prohibitions against child labor and the federal government would not enact national prohibitions against child labor until 1938, long after Samantha's and Nellie's stories are set. Furthermore, according to Hade (2000:161), holding children responsible for the problem of child labor obscures the role that employers played in hiring children at a fraction of the wages paid to able-bodied male workers, as well as the abominable conditions in which they worked.

Taking her lead from Hade's critique of the social privilege reflected in the American Girls' texts, children's literature professor Jennifer Miskec (2009) suggests that even when American Girl characters attempt to subvert traditional feminine gender roles by engaging in mischief, that mischief serves to reinforce

social hierarchies, particularly of class and race. In one instance, Samantha drops a piece of jelly biscuit on the floor; she attempts to have some "fun" by trying to attract as many ants as possible to the mess. However, it was Jessie, the African American seamstress employed by Samantha's grandmother, who ultimately resolved the subsequent ant infestation in the sewing room. Samantha's "brattiness" undermines her kindness towards Nellie and her sisters as well as her playfulness, which Miksec (2009:169) reads as mean-spiritedness.

Sherrie Inness (1998), an English professor and author of several analyses on girls' fiction and girls' popular culture, argues that American Girl historical fiction novels, through "insidious" and "omnipresent" political ideologies, "repeatedly suggest that American ways are best" and "build[s] up an American identity that stresses the importance and centrality of the United States" (pp. 175-176). She asserts that girls who read the stories and play with the dolls of the *American Girls Collection* will (inevitably) carry away values associated with American and white supremacy. Although she provides no direct textual evidence, Innes declares that the Felicity, Kirsten, and Molly stories, in particular, all present examples of American supremacist views. Mr. Merriman's role as a commissary agent for the Patriots in the book *Changes for Felicity* presents "a clear assumption" that "the American cause is more just than the British" (pg. 175). She writes that Kirsten's family immigrates to America "because her family believed it to be superior to her home country" (Inness 1998:176). Finally, although she offers little discussion to explicate this point, the chapter titled

"Hooray for the U.S.A.!" in *Changes for Molly* serves as further proof for Inness of the American-centric/supremacist values of the *Collection*.

Additionally, Inness (1998) argues that norms of whiteness and prosperity are present throughout American Girl's representations of the country's past. In American Girl's version of early American history, there are "a few blacks thrown in" but "no Hispanics, Asians, or the many other groups that make up America" (Inness 1998:176).[14] Inness also asserts that, with the exceptions of Addy and Nellie, American Girl features few poor characters. For the few characters that are poor, poverty is generally experienced as a very short-term problem overcome by one's own efforts or with the assistance and generosity of someone close to the character, as is the case, for example, in which Samantha's aunt and her wealthy husband adopt Nellie and her sisters.[15] As a result, the structural dimensions of class hierarchies-- as well as the intersections of race, gender, and class-- remain uninterrupted and unquestioned.

Carolina Acosta-Alzuru (1999) has asserted that American Girl's historical characters and the nation "are portrayed as mirror images of each other" (pg. 191); the characters personify the United States at key historical moments in the nation's history. For example, Felicity's rebellion against colonial social norms is

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[14] Inness' chapter appeared in *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures* in 1998; it is highly likely her book was in press when American Girl introduced Josefina Montoya to the *Collection* in 1997.

[15] American Girl did not introduce Kit Kittredge, whose stories are set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, into *The American Girls Collection* until 2000. Kit's family experiences downward mobility when her father goes bankrupt after attempting to pay his workers their full wages. In order to get by, the family begins to rent rooms and take in boarders, requiring Kit give up her bedroom and move into the attic.

a parallel to the American colonies' struggle for independence from England. Samantha's stories represent the emergent conflicts between Victorian tradition and 20th century technological and social innovation, personified by her grandmother's insistence in traditional lady-like behaviors and her Aunt Cornelia's participation in a suffrage movement and insistence that women should be able to earn their own money through paid employment (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:191). The characters' personification of significant historical events and key social transformations in American history reinforces Inness's claim of a norm of whiteness in the *American Girls Collection* because white characters appear across the *Collection*'s representation of 200 years of American history, beginning with Felicity Merriman in 1774 and ending with Julie Albright in 1974.[16]

In my thesis (Medina 2007), I argued that the *American Girls Collection* does not allow readers to conceptualize the United States as a post-colonial society as there are no dolls of color represented in the major historical events of the 20th century. In particular, there are no 20th century characters representing internally colonized peoples such as Native American and Latinos. As of this writing, the *American Girls Collection* features only one doll of color in the 20th Century-- Chinese-American Ivy Ling-- but she is not even the main character whose stories anchor the era highlighted by the company. Ivy is the companion character for Julie Albright, whose stories highlight the push for expanded

[16] The introduction of Rebecca Rubin into the *American Girls Collection* in 2009 did not fundamentally change this. While Rebecca's character is culturally different from other European-American dolls in the *Collection*-- not only is she Jewish, but she is also the American-born daughter of Russian immigrants -- she is still phenotypically white.

educational rights for girls and women in the mid-1970s. American Girl situates all of the other characters of color-- Kaya (1764), Josefina Montoya (1824), Cécile Rey (1853), and Addy Walker (1864) -- prior to the founding of the nation or a particular territory's claims at statehood (as is the case with Kaya and Josefina, respectively) or Reconstruction (as is the case with both Cécile and Addy). American Girl's limited representation of the perspectives and experiences of people of color in the 20th century contributes to what I call "static ethnicities" (Medina 2007:10), or the perception that particular racial-ethnic groups are incapable of "evolving" or fully participating in contemporary American society.

American Girl and the Construction of National Identity

In her analysis of the representational strategies American Girl uses in its catalogs and books, Acosta-Alzuru (1999) claims that the company forges a sense of national identity through "visual and verbal languages" including photos, font and color, and other typographical devices, and through written content. It is through these "visual and verbal languages" that the company "construct[s] an American past and depict[s] an American present that convey[s] a version of American girlhood [and] an American identity" (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:177). The catalog cover photographs, for example, seek to build identification between girls and the American Girl characters; models and dolls often resemble one another. For example, the models and the dolls frequently wear the same clothing, have the same physical features, and are engaged in the same activities. Even when live models do not appear on the catalog covers, the American Girl dolls are

portrayed in “realistic” and modern situations or activities that girls might identify with, such as trick-or-treating at Halloween or playing a musical instrument or a sport (Acosta-Alzuru 1999).

These catalog photographs and book illustrations suggest that an American national identity “includes a heterogeneous group [of girls], in the sense that they represent diverse physical characteristics,” at least visually (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:201). Additionally, American Girl forges a sense of national identity among its consumers by claiming that diverse-looking girls and girls from a variety of racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds adhere to common and timeless values. The company’s visual representations also suggest that girls’ consumption and engagement with the company’s dolls, clothing, accessories and the like, demonstrates that American girls are economically privileged.[17] In terms of verbal representational strategies, Acosta-Alzuru (1999) argues that the texts give girls “a special role in history,” asserting that there is an essential and historical basis for their identity as American girls (pg. 202). Additionally, there can be no confusion that “the collections are not concerned with ‘German,’ ‘Korean,’ or ‘Peruvian’ girls” (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:201). Through the brand name itself, the company signals American nationality and national identity.

While Acosta-Alzuru (1999) claims that American Girl supports the notion of a multicultural American past and present, Nancy Story (2002) arrives at a vastly different conclusion about a racially diverse American girl identity. Story’s

[17] According to Acosta-Alzuru’s analysis, catalog covers show dolls engaged in activities that require significant capital outlays: snow skiing, playing the violin, taking ballet or horseback riding lessons, or playing with a mini Macintosh computer (pg. 197).

analysis of American Girl catalog covers suggests that American Girl's attempts at racially and culturally diverse representation may not occur to the extent the company intends. In an analysis of 57 catalogs collected from 1994 through 2001, Story (2002) found that "the predominant racial image of American Girls is white" (pg. 132). Story's analysis of the catalogs reveals that girl models of color appear on only five covers of the 57 catalogs she reviewed. Story (2002) also notes that very few of the catalog covers she analyzed depicted cross-race play. In other words, "White girls play with white dolls, black girls with black dolls, hispanic girls with hispanic dolls (sic)" (Story 2002:132). American Girl is also, according to Story, guilty of flattening understandings of racial difference and invoking "a kind of 'race in a bottle' mix and match perception of ethnicity" through representations of the characters' perceived racial-ethnic backgrounds or through the numerous combinations of physical features of the customizable dolls.[18] Nearly a decade before Story's analysis, Ann DuCille (1994) offered a similar critique of Mattel's attempts to offer Black and other ethnically diverse Barbie dolls. Instead of crafting an entirely new ethnically correct Barbie doll with more realistic facial and body features, Mattel instead offered "dye-dipped versions of archetypal white beauty," which according to DuCille (1994), "gives us the face of cultural diversity without the particulars of racial difference" (pp. 51-

[18] Margaret Talbot (2005) applied this argument to American Girl, also, suggesting that the characters of color are essentially the same as the white characters in the *American Girls Collection*. She writes, "All American Girl dolls are plump-cheeked and sturdy-legged… with round eyes and small smiles that reveal precisely two teeth." Additionally, all of the characters share what Talbot refers to as an "essential personality" that is not overcome by the company's attempt at cultural distinctness.

52). It also provided an easy (and profitable) solution to charges of Mattel's Eurocentrism.

In their interview study, which extended Acosta-Alzuru's (1999) initial textual analyses of the company's catalogs and novels, Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) sought to determine how girls and their mothers interpreted the company's construction and definition of "American girl." The interview data revealed that ethnicity influenced participants' conceptualizations of what is American, and by extension, who can claim an American girl identity. In an identification exercise in which the researchers asked girls to identify the ethnicities of several dolls and catalog models, the respondents "showed some degree of confusion between ethnicity and color." Girls described African American models and the character Addy "in terms physical color, but not initially as 'American'" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:151). One respondent, with comments eerily reminiscent of responses elicited in the famous Clark doll study-- described Addy ambiguously, at best: Addy is a slave who seems really nice, but she is also half Black and half a good friend. Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) write, "Addy puzzles Joan, who seems to believe that slaves are not nice and Blacks are not good friends" (pg. 152). The identification exercise also revealed that girls and their mothers did not view Asian Americans or Latinos/Hispanic Americans as "American." For example, respondents identified the Asian American models as "Chinese," "Korean," or "Vietnamese," reinforcing the perception of Asian American "foreignness," an issue that also

arises in American Girl's representation of and girls' perceptions of the character Josefina Montoya (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:153).

Anachronistically described as a "Hispanic girl of heart and hope," Josefina does not seem capable of assimilation to American culture and practices, compared to Kirsten. According to Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002), American Girl represents Swedish immigrant Kirsten as "artfully mix[ing] her Swedish roots with American style, rendering a visual representation of the American melting pot," (pg. 147). On the other hand, Josefina's "stories, outfits, and accessories [are] purely Mexican" and "never mix and blend her Mexican heritage with American style and objects" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:147).[19] The identification exercise revealed that the girls and their mothers routinely described Josefina by her skin color or with the ethnic markers "Hispanic" or "Mexican." Additionally, even though Kirsten's books routinely tell of Swedish traditions such as the feast of Saint Lucia, it is Josefina's use of Spanish in her stories that "reinforces girls' perceptions that Hispanics have 'different likes and opinions' and are not part of the American culture" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:153). Finally, an episode in *Josefina Saves the Day* illustrates the deep-rootedness of cultural misunderstandings and mistrust between Americans and (New) Mexicans. When the Montoya family does not receive goods promised by an American trader, Josefina's grandmother accuses

[19] Josefina also "never personifies the country" as other characters do, primarily because her stories are centered around her mother's death, which has no national parallel. Additionally, Josefina's stories are set in 1824, almost a quarter of a century before New Mexico became a part of US territory in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:193-194), and nearly 90 years before New Mexico achieved statehood.

the American trader with using jokes, flattery, and music to trick the family into making a bad trade. Despite the American trader making good on his offer, this episode, "hint[s at] the intercultural conflicts awaiting New Mexico" which included (white) Americans' disparagement of New Mexicans and their customs, as well as fraud and theft committed against Mexicans and New Mexicans who did not speak English and could not protect themselves against bogus mineral rights and land contracts. Additionally, the "Peek into the Past" section of one of Josefina's stories hints at the various attempts to deny New Mexico statehood on the grounds that white Americans perceived New Mexicans to be "too foreign to be 'real' Americans" (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:194-195).

In an interesting thesis project, Nicole LaConte (2011) argues that American Girl contributes to the construction of a national identity by forging a connection between American citizenship and the espousal of Christian values, including adherence to the Protestant work ethic and industriousness, and patriotic militancy (pg. 10). LaConte suggests that until the introduction of Kaya into the *American Girl Collection* in 2002, all of the American Girl characters are presumably Christian.[20] Virtually all of the characters, with the exception of Kaya and Rebecca, have a book in their series that revolves around Christmas, something that Nielsen (2002) suggests is indicative of the "religious homogeneity" found in the signature *American Girls Collection* (pg. 92, n. 5).

[20] LaConte completed her honors thesis in the spring of 2011, yet American Girl introduced Rebecca Rubin into the *American Girls Collection* in 2009. I find it curious that LaConte did not address American Girl's attempts at representing religious pluralism through Rebecca, the company's first Jewish doll in the signature historical collection (and the second Jewish American Girl following 2001 Girl of the Year Lindsey Bergman).

Nardone (2002) also finds this problematic, even though she acknowledges that "not all of the books deal with the religious nature of the holiday" and, instead, focus on the holiday's secular traditions and instill the notion upon readers that "it's better to give than to receive" (pg. 116). Through its failure to represent religious pluralism adequately in the United States, Nardone (2002:16) asserts that the message for Jewish and Muslim girls living and growing up in America is that because they are not Christian, they are not really part of the culture, an argument that LaConte's analysis supports.

In LaConte's analysis, Kirsten experiences a shift in her values and behaviors that transform her from materialistic and idealistic to industrious and hardworking. This shift to the values and behaviors associated with the Protestant work ethic (i.e. hard work, entrepreneurialism) signals her full belonging in the nation. Kirsten ultimately learns to prioritize work over play and, through the course of her stories, she is able to overcome her status as an immigrant who is "explicitly un-American by her birth" and become an American through particular culturally supported practices (LaConte 2011).

Religious and patriotic symbolism is also woven together in Molly's stories, further reinforcing the relationship between citizenship, Christianity, and militancy. LaConte (2011) claims that throughout the Molly series "the military and its fighting soldiers are held up in respect, elevated to near sainthood… and the McIntires must show the military, this quasi-religious institution, immense respect to maintain their citizenship on this ideological level" (pg. 30). LaConte (2011) also asserts that in the Molly stories, school and summer camp represent

"the battleground[s] where the students begin to earn their national identity" (pg. 31-34). Molly and her classmates, for example, are encouraged to be good students because it is a "war duty;" they participate in school service projects to support American troops and to demonstrate their patriotism, and they sing patriotic camp songs and pledge allegiance to Camp Gowonagin in quasi-religious rituals.

LaConte (2011) argues that American Girl's representations of Molly's shift in behaviors from theatricality to patriotism reinforce the notion that girls must subscribe to Christian and militaristic values to claim an American identity. She asserts that American Girl conflates militaristic Christianity with American identity and, as a result, encourages young readers to view this message as "normal and estimable" (LaConte 2011:35). The result is that pacifists, as well as non-Christians, are excluded from being American girls.

American Girl and the Construction of Femininity

In their assessment of American Girl's contributions to the construction of femininity and gender identity, scholars typically tend to argue from one of two positions. The first position suggests that American Girl constructs a version of femininity that is empowering; girls are portrayed "as special, unique historical role players who belong to a special community" in which members share timeless values and experiences (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:148; Acosta-Alzuru 1999:201-203).

Sarah Eisenstein Stumbar (1999), who was twelve when she and her mother Zillah Eisenstein co-authored the dialogue "Girlhood Pastimes:

'American Girls' and the Rest of Us," best exemplifies this perspective. Stumbar observed, "Wherever I turned there were boys. I was drowning in a culture where it was all boys. Names, pictures, stories, all my earliest memories were of boys, and I was a girl" (pg. 88). The *American Girls Collection*, however, gave Stumbar and her girlfriends "their 'own' popular culture" because the books "put girls in the spotlight without making them always seem boy-crazed and stupid" (Stumbar and Eisenstein 1999:88). Stumbar recalls feeling "triumphant" upon discovering American Girl books and her enthusiasm is suggestive of the empowerment that occurs when members of a marginalized group see themselves reflected back through elements of popular culture. Educational researchers Myra and David Sadker (1994), well known for their work on educational sexism, find that children are more likely to feel that women and minorities made important contributions to the nation when they read about these groups in history. Furthermore, reading about people in non-traditional gender roles works to break down gender stereotypes (Sadker and Sadker 1994).

The second, and more prevalent, position on gender socialization and the construction of femininity in American Girls' texts argues vehemently that the company does not challenge traditional stereotypes of what girls and women are interested in or do. Instead, the company's texts reinforce notions that girls are (or should be) fixated on physical appearance and fashion (Inness 1998; Nardone 2002; and Story 2002), and that they are preoccupied with consumption (Acosta-Alzuru 1999; Susina 1999; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Story 2002; Nardone 2002; Schlosser 2006; and Marshall 2009). Researchers also argue

that patriarchy is an unchallenged feature of many American Girl stories and the texts work to normalize a "good girl" identity through moralistic portrayals of the characters' obedience, patience, and deference (Story 2002 and Miskec 2009). Finally, American Girl texts emphasize women's domestic roles and duties rather than representing or privileging public roles and duties (Story 2002; Schlosser 2006), reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

Although she recognizes that American Girl stories often depict girls "as outspoken and intelligent as boys," Inness (1998) argues that the stories also place a "repeated emphasis on a conservative ideology about what it means to be a girl or a woman" (pg. 177). For Inness (1998), this "conservative ideology" about femininity requires adherence to normative standards of feminine beauty such as wearing and styling long hair, demonstrating girls and women's preoccupation with primping and appearance (Inness 1998:177).[21] While Inness (1998) does not find cooking, playing with dolls, or buying clothing and dressing up in it to be problematic activities in themselves, she argues that American Girl presents them "as being the 'natural' province of women and girls" (pg. 178). Across all eras depicted by the *American Girls Collection*, all of the characters spend much of their time in these "traditional" pursuits.

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[21] Kit, introduced into the *Collection* in 2002, is, as of this writing, the *only* historical character with short hair; she wears a blonde chin-length bobbed hairstyle. All other historical collection characters feature hair that is at least shoulder-length or longer, which is more conducive to hair play and styling than bobbed hair. It is notable that in late June 2012, American Girl announced that it was introducing wigless options for dolls in the My American Girl line. American Girl developed the wigless options specifically for girls affected by cancer, alopecia, or hair loss caused by other medical conditions. No characters in the historical collection are hairless, however. See http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/static/dollHospital.jsp for more information on wigless doll options.

Story (2002) observes that “girls in the series frequently find themselves on stage-- both literally and figuratively-- where their conformity to gender norms receives reinforcement and their efforts to resist them are met with disapproval” (pg. 152). The characters receive praise, admiration, and support from the community and from their family and friends for adhering to gendered expectations, which include such things as learning to needlepoint and dance, enduring transformative beauty rituals and body projects, and performing gendered domestic duties such as helping their mothers with household chores (Story 220:163-172). The stories portray women and girls as both covetous and prone to consumerism. For example, Felicity daydreams about the merchandise in her father’s story; Molly’s adoration of the Miss Victory costume inspires her to audition for the lead role; Kirsten spies a straw hat on a visit to town and dreams about possessing it; and Josefina trades a hand-woven blanket for a violin for her father (Story 2002:166-172). Story (2002: 172) explains:

> American Girls in the historical fiction books usually end up getting the special objects of their desires because someone loves them enough to make a sacrifice. The girl-consumer may selfishly desire a dress or prized toy, but she also unselfishly gives to others and sometimes puts the desires of another before her own. In both scenarios, girls are preparing themselves for their future roles as mothers and wives who put their family’s needs before their own.

Constructions of traditional gender roles do not stop with the historical fiction novels. Story suggests that the company’s library of advice titles, craft and activity books, and their philanthropic and outreach programs such as the fashion shows, teas, and ice cream socials also construct a definition of girlhood that requires conformity to normative gender ideologies.

American Girl's consumerist ideologies and socialization messages are explored further in a mixed-methods study conducted by Carole Nardone (2002). In addition to a textual analysis of the company's catalogs and books, Nardone conducted participant observations at two American Girl Fashion Show fundraising events, observed girls at play with their American Girl dolls, and interviewed a small sample of girls and their mothers about American Girl. She concludes that the fashion show events are "yet another opportunity where [American Girl] works to create young consumers" (pg. 132). Attendees can enter raffles to win displays of catalog merchandise, but Nardone (2002:131) reports that this strategy often results in mothers, concerned about the "risk" inherent in raffles, informing their daughters that they can order from the catalog directly at the venue instead. The fashion show's emphasis on consumption is highlighted by narration which is scripted by American Girl itself (and which Nardone suggests is taken straight from the catalogs), as well as the emcee's encouragement for audience members to place their orders. Nardone (2002) argues that the fashion show events are actually less about American Girl's philanthropic commitments and more about the company's bottom line.[22]

[22] According to Nardone (2002), non-profit organizations that host American Girl fashion show fundraising events receive a return of only "five percent of the dollar amount of *catalog sales made through the show*" (pg. 129, my emphasis added). Story (2002:147) reports that organizations pay American Girl as sum of $5,000 for the rights to produce the fashion show for which American Girl not only provides the script and operations manual, but also the clothing, music and training video, tickets, invitations, and advertising. In addition to the percentage of catalogue sales, the organization receives the proceeds from the event, presumably from ticket sales, though Story does not make this entirely clear.

Nardone (2002) argues that the fashion show events "work to create real life experiences that help support the ideologies present in the written works" (pg. 132). The fashion show events evoke pleasures, create identification between girls and the characters, and forges emotional links between girls and women (particularly within family units) and to the company, thereby reinforcing consumption.[23] Nardone maintains that when American Girl characters come to life through the fashion show models' enactment of them on stage, the distinction between fiction and reality is blurred. For example, Nardone's daughter reacted with awe, "eyes dancing with the scenes from the stage," as "[w]hat she had seen in 2-D format for so long in the catalogs and books was actually right on stage in front of her" (pg. 135). In a second example of identification with American Girl characters, girls often attend the shows wearing American Girl clothing or with their American Girl dolls in tow (Nardone 2002:135). Addtionally, girls' invitation to walk the runway at the end of the fashion shows creates a third point of identification with the historical characters (Nardone 2002:137).

Finally, the American Girl fashion shows provide mothers and daughters an opportunity to "do something really girlie" and are often part of female family traditions (Nardone 2002:135). Nardone (2002) argues that these events "appeal to an audience member's sense of altruism while also allowing them to

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[23] For an excellent description of the pleasurable feelings that American Girl evokes through its experiential outlets and its merchandise, see Diamond *et al* 2009:124-125. Notes from one of the researcher's visits describe American Girl merchandise as "beautiful," "marvelous," and "perfect." The colors used for clothing and accessories conveyed to the researcher "joy, beauty, spring." The experience of being in the store and seeing the merchandise is "overwhelming," full of "wonderment" and "amazement."

indulge in highly scripted acts of consumption-- a win-win proposition" (pg. 130). Not only do girls and women connect emotionally to one another through their membership in an American Girl community, but they come to identify with the company through "the hyperreality of the event" which is filtered through emotional connections and pleasurable feelings (Nardone 2002:159).

In interviews with a sample of pre-service elementary education majors, English professor Elizabeth Marshall (2009) concludes that American Girl's "lessons of love and tolerance were overshadowed by pedagogies of consumption" (pg. 100). Marshall (2009) recounts that when asked to discuss what appealed to them about American Girl, the women in her study discussed "the 'cool' things that came with each doll" (pg. 100). The dolls' accoutrements, according to Marshall (2009:101), fundamentally affected the ways in which the young women remember playing with their American Girl dolls. They acted out the stories, dressed the dolls and played with their hair; Jan Susina (1999) argued a similar point about American Girl play nearly a decade earlier.[24]

Marshall's (2009) interviews also pointed to the enactment of a "romanticized, intergenerational sisterhood" over the company's stories and products (pg. 99). Family relationships formed an important context for the

[24] Like others, Susina (1999) argues that American Girl's books function as extensions of the company's catalogs. He goes on to observe, "While the books help promote the American Girls Collection as quality children's entertainment to adults, the fixed narratives associated with the dolls may actually limit the amount of imaginative play by girls" (Susina 1999:134). A similar observation emerged in Diane Carver Sekeres's analysis of branded fiction and the commodification of children's literature. Sekeres (2009) posits that the "ideas of what a young girl should strive for are so clearly expressed in [American Girl's] product lines" it could have a constraining effect on girls' play (pg. 408).

consumption of American Girl products and for creating an American Girl identity for some respondents. A number of young women recollected receiving dolls from their mothers and grandmothers and bonding with them as they read the books together, played together, or learned more about their family's backgrounds through conversations about the characters (Marshall 2009:99).

Ethnographic research conducted by marketing professor Nina Diamond and her colleagues (2009) offers similar findings about American Girl's role in fostering consumption through domestic reproduction and the creation of family memories at American Girl Place. In the American Girl Place Cafés, for example, conversation cards provides girls with "a template for getting to know their mothers and grandmothers as fellow girls whose experiences both define and transcend the specifics of their time" (Diamond *et al* 2009:125-126). As a brandscape, American Girl Place "both facilitates and participates in the creation of female family history and family identity. The brand experience becomes, literally, of family value" (Diamond *et al* 20009:126). Girls, their mothers, and other female family members bond to the brand through its association with family and the creation of family memories at American Girl Place (Diamond *et al* 2009).

Finally, Jennifer Miskec (2009) argues that the formulaic approach taken in the American Girl books presents conflicting messages of girl empowerment and Story's analysis (2009) argues that American books reinscribe binary constructions of gender in which males, and by extension male privilege, remains "unchecked." Miskec argues that American Girl books are "contradictory, with

authors attributing seemingly positive qualities to the young female character when the whole point of the book is to show that these qualities need to be corrected" (Miskec 2009:159). In her brief analyses of stories from the Felicity, Addy, and Molly series, Miskec (2009) suggests that American Girl offers its readers "normalizing lessons about what it means to be a 'good girl'" (pg. 158). Appropriate femininity requires adherence to adult-defined behaviors which are widely supported by family and society and which, according to Miskec, require girls' obedience and restraint. This creates a situation in which the messages girls receive in mass media about what constitutes an appropriate femininity (dependence, passivity, and nurturing) are inherently at odds with the characteristics of an ideal American (independence, assertive, and competitive) (Douglas 1995).

Despite his generally dismissive perspective on American Girl's historical representations, Nielsen (2002) argues that American Girl's lofty goals of bringing history alive for girls while simultaneously promoting independent, intelligent female role models is "an invitation to anachronism." "However attractive, even valuable such a vision might be for modern girls," Nielsen writes (2002), "it hardly describes the historical reality for most American females, whose lives were more circumscribed than the books allow" (pg. 87). In other words, the representations of girls' empowerment, independence, and ability to challenge traditional gender role expectations in American Girl stories are overstated.

Schlosser (2006) argues that that gender expectations represented in the American Girls historical fiction novels are problematic because they remain static over the entire span of American history the *Collection* represents. Schlosser (2006) writes, “In order to navigate successfully their respective historical moments, each of the American Girl characters would have had to learn the behavior acceptable to women of their time.” Furthermore, there is little indication that gender expectations are much different for girls today than in the past, requiring girls to adhere to traditional behaviors. Schlosser (2006) claims:

> Like Samantha, the reader should wait to be spoken to even when the message is important; like Kirsten, work hard at home and help your mother even it if means forgoing an education; like Addy and Kit, no matter how poor you are, help someone else if you need help too. The message becomes that girls today should continue what the website calls these ‘timeless traditions of growing up a girl in America.”

At the conclusion of each character’s series, the girls conform to a societally sanctioned form of femininity that is “often disempowering” (Schlosser 2006). Story (2002), for example, finds “there is little evidence in the series that women questioned their domestic and submissive roles” (pg. 151). She highlights the notable exceptions of Samantha’s aunt who publically supports women’s suffrage and Josefina’s aunt who begins a family business, but Story (2002) concludes that even if girl characters themselves question or challenge their domestic roles, their stories resolve with their return to non-threatening positions in their families and in their communities.

As indicated at the outset of this chapter, the vast majority of studies about American Girl and its influence and meaning in girls’ lives theorize from

conclusions based on analyses of texts produced by American Girl itself. The voices of American Girl consumers are largely absent from these studies, which are certainly rich and informative, but flawed in one significant way. The way the researchers cited above approach American Girl and its influence on girls is totalizing and universalizing; it fails to account for the fact that some girls will not receive or accept American Girl's messages or that those who do may apply them to their lives in ways not anticipated by the company. There appears to be a presumption that exposure to American Girl's stories and products is the only variable shaping girls' beliefs, values, and behaviors. These analyses do not account for the influence of local cultures or other social influences and take girls (and American Girl) out of their everyday contexts. In other words, these analyses do not account for the influence of other discourses and contexts through which girls learn about what it means to be an American, a girl, and an American girl.

We cannot presume that American Girl is the only form of culture that girls are consuming and we cannot presume that American Girl alone causes or creates particular tendencies in girls. Other institutions such as family, school, media, and religion may work in concert with or compete against the ideologies, representations, and messages American Girl conveys to its target audience about what it means to be an American Girl and what should constitute an American girlhood. Failing to account for how and when girls draw from the stories, messages, and representations that American Girl conveys takes away from them their status as active, knowing subjects. As I seek to demonstrate in

the substantive chapters that follow, while girls do integrate the company's narratives and representations in their understandings of what it means to be an American Girl, they also engage with American Girl in creative and flexible ways. The company alone does not inform their definitions of what it means to be an American Girl.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

"A realistic culture theory should lead us to expect not passive 'cultural dopes,' but rather, the active, sometimes skilled users of culture whom we actually observe." *-- Ann Swidler (1986:275)*

"To the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what they reveal about social life-- culture 'speaks itself' through an individual's story."
-- Catherine K. Riesmann (1993:5)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the existing scholarly research on American Girl has sought to demonstrate-- primarily through textual analyses of the company's catalogs, novels, dolls and accessories, and retail outlets-- the various ways in which the company represents history, gender, and nation. Rarely are the perspectives, reflections, and interpretations of American Girl by its target audience sought or included in this research. Without incorporating perspectives from American Girl's target audience itself in these analyses, it is difficult to ascertain what alternate readings or novel understandings of the company's texts are possible and it violates a fundamental understanding in the sociology of culture that a single symbol or cultural object can represent and reinforce multiple, differing values (Wuthnow 1987:135).

Data and Sample

For the purpose of this study, the most important facet of the TMM's "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" exhibit is the essay contest and the submissions it elicited from girls (and women) in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The essay contest facilitated the TMM's commitment to highlight "the

words and experiences of today's girls" and asked entrants to focus their submissions on one of the following questions (TMM "Call for Essays" 2006):

- *What does it mean to me to be an American Girl?*
- *What lessons have I learned from my American Girl® doll or from reading American Girl® novels? How have I used these lessons in my life?*
- *How have I been inspired by an American Girl® doll or story?*[25]

A small print feature about the essay contest in *The Kansas City Star* (Jan. 18, 2007) gave additional guidance, encouraging potential entrants to "tell others about the challenges they've overcome, successes they've experienced, and their hopes and dreams for the future."[26]

Individuals who submitted essays competed for several prizes: a trip for two to American Girl Place Chicago (including airfare, hotel accommodations, lunch and $120 spending money); tea with an American Girl author; or the opportunity to meet American Girl founder Pleasant Rowland. Entrants also competed to have their essays displayed as part of the exhibit. Evaluative criteria for the essays included "honest expression, creativity, originality, and adherence to the topic."[27] Museum staff sorted and categorized entries by age

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[25] That the registered trademark symbol appears after "American Girl" in the second and third questions is no small detail: American Girl retains exclusive rights to all aspects of its products. American Girl's characters provided the framework around which the TMM's special exhibit was constructed. See Chapter 1 for additional information.

[26] See Appendix C for a reproduction of the TMM's Call for Essays and contest entry form which contains a list of submission guidelines, as well as evaluation criteria for the contest.

[27] Although I am interested in finding out more about the evaluation process, it is not of significant relevance to the current study.

group; they evaluated submissions *within* (rather than across) age groups so that essays written by seven-year-olds, for example, were not judged against those written by 12-year-olds (TMM "Call for Essays" 2006). Figure 1, below, lists the age categories, number of submissions per age category, and percentage of the total submissions each age category comprises.

Figure 1: Essay Submissions by Age Group and as Percentage of Total Submissions

Entrant Age Category	Number of Submissions	Percentage of Total Submissions (rounded to nearest tenth)
7- year old [28]	28	9.7%
8-year old	65	22.5%
9-year old	69	23.9%
10-year old	40	13.8%
11-year old	41	14.2%
12-year old	10	3.5%
13-year old	5	1.7%
14+-year old [29]	31	10.7%
TOTAL	**289**	**100%**

[28] The TMM received one submission by a six-year old, which I have added into the count for the seven-year olds as that is the minimum age requirement listed in the TMM Call for Essays.

[29] The 14+ year old category includes essays from entrants who range in age from 14 to 65. Within this category, just over half of the essayists-- 16 total-- were between the ages of 14 and 18. Entrants over the age of 18 submitted the remaining 15 essays in this category, or 5.1% of the total of all essays.

The TMM received 153 essays from respondents in Missouri and 125 essays from respondents in Kansas. A majority of essay contest entrants (252 or 87%) resided in the Kansas City metropolitan statistical area (KC MSA). Of the 289 total submissions, 26 entrants resided in Missouri and Kansas counties not considered part of the KC MSA and an additional 11 entrants resided outside of Kansas and Missouri. They answered the Call for Essays from Iowa, Maryland, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Appendix E provides a breakdown of the number of essays received from cities across the KC MSA and the outlying areas discussed above.

In May 2009, I submitted a request to the TMM to access the submissions for the American Girl exhibit essay contest. After paying a fee of $65 to cover the cost of photocopying and postage, and after signing a release detailing the terms of use of the essays for this research, the TMM accepted my request and I received photocopies of all essay submissions shortly thereafter.[30] Photocopies of the essays arrived bundled in categories according to age group with one exception. The "Winners" bundle contained 26 essays written by participants ranging in age from eight years old to late adulthood. I transcribed each of the photocopied essays-- including typewritten submissions-- into individual Word

[30] See Appendix D; the Request for Access to Collections details the terms of use. The terms are innocuous and did not hinder or affect the analysis in any significant or noticeable way.

documents. I imported each document into age-bounded document files in a qualitative data analysis program called MAXQDAplus 10.[31]

During the transcription phase, I did not correct essayists' misspellings or other grammatical or mechanical errors in order to maintain the integrity of their original submissions. However, in an effort to enhance the narrative flow in my analyses, I did "clean up" any significant errors in spelling or grammar in material that appears in the substantive chapters. During the transcription phase, I noted any additional information from essays that captured essayists' idiosyncrasies, personalities, or, perhaps, values. For example, 10-year-old Zoe, whose essay I discuss in Chapter 5, submitted a typewritten essay decorated by an American Girl banner and other images copied from the company's website. Seven-year-old Katrina drew a picture of a ponytailed girl jumping rope at the end of her essay summarizing that American Girls "all like to have fun." Only two essays contained photographs of entrants: eight-year-old Eliza (whose essay I also address in Chapter 5) appears in a photo inserted at the conclusion of her essay holding a Just Like You doll that she named "Amber" and eight-year-old Amanda's handwritten essay includes what appears to be a school yearbook photo.

[31] The software used in this project is a student version of MAXQDAplus10. It differs from the full regular version of the software in that the single-user student license is only good for one year, can only be installed on one computer, and cannot be upgraded. In order to purchase the student license to use MAXQDAplus 10, I had to verify my enrollment as a student and provide photo identification.

Before I move on to discuss the methodological approaches to coding and analysis employed in this study, I wish to address some important considerations about the sample from which the data is drawn. As with prior studies that incorporated qualitative data obtained through interviews and observations of girls' engagement with American Girl (i.e. Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Nardone 2002; Diamond *et al* 2009; and Marshall 2009), I believe that entrants in the TMM essay contest may comprise a relatively homogeneous and socially privileged sample. The TMM collected only basic information from participants' entry forms (i.e. name, age, address, parental consent for entrants under the age of 18). Aside from age, the TMM did not collect any additional demographic information about the entrants.

As the table in Appendix F demonstrates, racial data for the 15 counties comprising the Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area (KC MSA) suggests that the area is predominantly white (80.8%), with the next largest racial group comprised of Black persons (12.8%). Latinos are the third largest racial group in the KC MSA at 5.2%, with Asian persons comprising just 1.6% of the population. With the exception of the counties of Leavenworth and Wyandotte in Kansas, and Jackson County in Missouri, whites comprise over 90% of the population in *each* of the remaining 12 counties. In Jackson County, Missouri, white persons comprise 70.1% of the population and they comprise 84.2% and 58.2% of the populations of Leavenworth and Wyandotte counties in Kansas, respectively, indicating that these counties are more racially heterogeneous.

I speculate that the vast majority of participants who participated in the essay contest have a certain amount of race and class privilege that make the "tools" and lessons from the American Girl stories both accessible and feasible to them in their daily lives. This may be particularly true of the families that hail from Johnson County, Kansas. Essay submissions from Johnson County accounted for 81% of the essays received from Kansas (and almost 35% of all total submissions), whereas the nine submissions from Wyandotte County accounted for less than 7% of Kansas entries (and only 3% of total submissions).

The racial and economic distinctions between these two counties, in particular, are significant. Johnson County has the distinction of being among the state's wealthiest counties and boasts a median family income of $72,987.[32] As a whole, Johnson County is relatively racially homogenous with 91.1% of the population comprised of white persons and very small percentages of Black, Asian and Hispanic/Latino persons (2.6%, 2.8%, and 4.0%, respectively). Wyandotte County, on the other hand, is much more racially diverse, with 58.2% of white persons, 28.3% of black persons, 1.6% of Asian persons and 16% of Hispanics/Latinos comprising the population. It is also comparatively less affluent than Johnson County. The median family income of Wyandotte County is $40,333, or 55% of the median Johnson County family income.

[32] See http://www.kansasinc.org/pubs/VD/VD0809.pdf for additional information on Kansas counties' economic vitality and distress measures. A higher ranking indicates greater vitality on measures of wealth, growth, and dependent population data; lower rankings indicate greater distress on those measures. In 2008, out of 105 counties in the state of Kansas, Johnson (#1) and Miami (#5) counties were in the first quintile of Vitality and Distress Rankings for the state. Franklin (#25) and Linn (#42) counties appeared in the second quintile. Wyandotte County (#88) appeared in fifth quintile.

It is possible that the class position of many Johnson County families "affords them the necessary purchasing power for acquiring the AG dolls and products in the first place," as Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002:156) note of their own interview participants. Essayists from Johnson County-- or other predominantly white and relatively affluent counties in the Kansas City metropolitan area-- may not necessarily feel as if it is inappropriate or impossible to believe, internalize, or act upon American Girl's messages of empowerment, individuality, achievement, and assertiveness. As Swidler (1986) suggests, they may "come to value ends for which their cultural equipment is well suited" (pg. 277) because they have the racial and class privilege for which these values and their attendant strategies of action make sense.

Again, this is speculation and, in all fairness, if one were to compile demographic profiles for the various cities *within* each of these counties, one would find substantial variations indicating that the relationship between race, class, and rates of participation in the TMM's essay contest are tenuous, at best. Race and class are generally "unmarked" (or unremarked upon) by girls in their essays. In general, unless "difference" was pertinent to how a girl framed her engagement with American Girl (i.e. status as a transnational adoptee, being culturally or racially different from one's peers, having a disease or disability, experiencing financial hardship, etc.), what one is or how one is located (i.e. racially, ethnically, or socioeconomically) was absent from her discussion.

Methodological Approach to Coding

The decision to use qualitative data analysis software in the analysis stage of this project was to manage, virtually effortlessly, not only the essays but also the sheer volume of codes I expected the essays to produce.[33] The MAXQDAplus 10 software, in particular, is user-friendly and lends itself to various methods of inductive qualitative analysis such as grounded theory, as well as mixed methods analysis (Verbi Software 2012). Informed by analytic methods associated with grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), I used a two-pronged coding strategy that the software design supported. MAXQDAplus 10 allows for hierarchical code systems and multiple or overlapping coding (Verbi Software 2012) amenable to the various phases of initial, focused, and axial coding (Charmaz 2006).

In the "initial" or "open" coding stage, I applied a line-by-line coding strategy to arrive at my first-level or main coding categories. Line-by-line coding allows one "to remain open to the data and to see nuances in it" (Charmaz 2006:50). Furthermore, line-by-line coding allows one to "identify implicit concerns and explicit statements" and to "break data up into their component parts or properties" (Charmaz 2006:50). Additionally, line-by-line coding revealed that even the relatively more succinct and brief statements in the essays addressed as many concerns as those in wordier submissions.

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[33] Initial, focused, and axial coding, combined, produced 1,037 codes and 3,952 segments of coded text. With MAXQDA, generating new codes and applying them to segments of text across 289 essays was as simple as clicking a mouse and moving a cursor. Using this technology significantly reduced the time and labor associated with more manual methods of coding, leaving the "humanist" feel of inductive, interpretive research very much intact.

The "implicit concerns and explicit statements" I initially sought to identify in the initial stage of coding centered on the questions asked by TMM staff in the Call for Essays. For example, coding categories that emerged from the question "What does it mean to me to be an American Girl?" included: An American Girl *is*…; *Being* an American Girl is…; and To be an American Girl *means to me*… Each of these coding categories answers the question in distinct ways. To illustrate, segments of code that begin with the phrase "An American Girl is…" tended to precede adjectives describing the characteristics that entrants believed American Girls possessed, exhibited, or espoused. I applied the code "*Being* an American Girl is…" to descriptions of the level of effort required to enact or feelings toward possessing the label American Girl. "To be an American Girl *means to me"* applied to segments of text explaining behaviors associated with this identity; in essays these typically appeared as "to be"- or "to do"-type statements. The "discovery" of multiple themes within the primary or initial coding categories assisted with the second stage of coding in which I applied "focused" and "applied" coding strategies (Charmaz 2006:51).

"Focused coding," according to Charmaz (2006), "requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (pg. 58). The focused coding stage allowed me to streamline initial codes into more concrete conceptual categories while simultaneously developing axial codes. Axial coding, then, "specif[ies] the dimensions of a larger category" and links (and relates) categories with subcategories (Charmaz 2006:61). Focused and axial coding allows the

researcher to synthesize larger segments of data than in the initial coding stage; it is in these stages that codes move from being merely descriptive to conceptual and "the analytic powers of [one's] emerging ideas" are extended (Charmaz 2006:57-5; 63). For example, I applied the initial coding category of "To be an American Girl *means to me*" to a segment of text in which "*to be you, to be hopeful, truthful, to have courage, and to help others*" are several of the many "to be"- or "to do"- statements that emerge to form axial codes. [34]

Entrants addressed several topics not explicitly requested in the Call for Essays (see above). Many entrants discussed issues that I believed indicated important contemporary contexts affecting their lives and, as a result, their participation in the TMM essay contest, and which shaped the content of their essays in various ways. Among these issues were the impact of 9/11 and American military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the effects of recent economic downturns (experienced both personally and indirectly), media pressures and the prevalence of bullying. Comparisons of girlhood in the past, at least in terms of how girls and women perceived it to be, with how girls experience it today emerged as another significant theme in the process of coding. Many essayists indicated their career aspirations and future goals. Additionally, essayists compared "American" girls' lives with the lives of girls in other countries. Finally, markers of difference or diversity emerged as a

[34] I have formatted all quoted material from the TMM essays in italic font as way of distinguishing it from my analyses, interpretations, and explanations. I adhere to this convention in the substantive chapters that follow. I have also applied this formatting to all quotes that appear at the beginning of the various chapters of this dissertation for stylistic purposes.

significant coding category primarily because essayists deployed them in what appear to be deliberately self-conscious ways. In this study, these markers of difference or diversity included explicit references to girls' racial/ethnic or cultural backgrounds, dis/ability status, non-standard family forms (i.e. adoption, multigenerational households, blended families), or other specific characteristics that indicated the entrants were "marked" in some fashion.[35]

Methods and considerations employed in grounded theory influenced my approach to data coding; this has facilitated an inductive interpretive analysis of the data produced by the TMM essay contest. Grounded theory influences this study in one other way: it supports the use of "texts as objects of analytic scrutiny themselves" (Charmaz 2006:39). For Charmaz (2006), an "extant text" is one in which "the researcher had no hand in shaping," as compared to an "elicited text" which "involve research participants in producing written data in response to a researcher's request" (pg. 35). I did not solicit from writers the essays that comprise my data set; the TMM solicited and managed the essay contest in its entirety. To this end, the essays are "extant texts" that I treat "*as* data to address [my] research questions although these texts were produced for

[35] For an excellent discussion on "marked" and "unmarked" identity attributes, see Brekhus 2003. A "marked" identity, according to Brekhus (2003:13) is one that is "socially salient and perceived as highly relevant" to one's self-concept and interactions with others. "Unmarked" identity categories, on the other hand, are "socially generic" and taken for granted as generic or default attributes. Brekhus (2003) also indicates that "marked" identity attributes are perceived as conveying more social information than those attributes which are "unmarked," in many instances because these attributes are stigmatized or difficult to hide (pg. 14). To put this discussion into perspective, Brekhus notes, "Whites in the United States, for example, generally see their whiteness as insignificant" (pg. 22). However, physically handicapped, terminally ill, elderly, or racially distinct individuals cannot hide these attributes and, as a result, "can never commute to a zero percent presentational density" in which their attributes will not carry salience in how they understand themselves and how others perceive and interact with them (pg. 217).

other-- often very different-- purposes" (Charmaz 2006:35). Although aware that their essays were under consideration for display to the public through the TMM's American Girl exhibit, it is highly unlikely that any contributor anticipated her essay would become fodder for a sociological analysis.

Methodological Approach to Data Analysis

While grounded theory informs the coding strategy I employed for this study, narrative analysis heavily influences the analytic strategy. One primary reason for utilizing narrative analysis is that it is suited to qualitative feminist research. Feminist research is characterized by "a commitment to finding women and their concerns" through methods that "reveal the locations and perspectives of (all) women" (DeVault 1999:30). Feminist researchers move the focus of inquiry from men's concerns-- what DeVault (1999) calls "standard practice"-- to women's knowledge and experiences, which historically have "been ignored, censored, and suppressed" (DeVault 1999:30). Feminist researchers turn to narrative analysis as well as ethnography, qualitative interviewing and life history because these methods "will do the work of 'excavation." These methods shed light on the diversity of women's experiences and on the "ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible" (DeVault 1999:30). Although DeVault (1999) does recognize that these methods can be "practiced in nonfeminist ways [that] can easily reproduce the mainstream failure to notice women and their concerns," I believe that my orientation as a feminist researcher precludes that from occurring in this project. I stand in agreement with scholars who insist that the failure to account for women's and girls' talk (by way of textual

artifacts, in the case of this particular project) as a legitimate method and data source reflects a “masculine bias in the literature on methodology” (Bettie 2003:29).

A second reason for utilizing narrative analysis is that it is an appropriate methodological approach for exploring a “particular *social, categorical, or positional location*” such as girl, American, or American girl (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008:6, emphasis in the original). Personal narrative analysis “involves an epistemological strategy that sees individuals as *both* unique *and* as connected to social and cultural worlds and relationships that affect their life choices and life stories” (Maynes *et al* 2008:10). Although largely considered “subjective,” feminist qualitative researchers argue that the power of personal narratives rests in their power to “reveal something new about a social position defined by and of interest to the analyst, but more legible through an insider’s view” (Maynes *et al* 2008:6).

A final reason for drawing from the methods associated with narrative analysis in this study is that, at least in sociology, the method “has developed from the insight that people often make sense of their lives… *by telling and interpreting stories*” (DeVault 1999:87, my emphasis). Interpretation is a key feature of narrative analysis; narratives “do not ‘speak for themselves’ or ‘provide direct access to other times, places, or cultures” (Personal Narratives Group 1989:261; Riessman 1993:22). Narratives, instead, provide rich data-- fuel for the fire of analytic induction-- about how individuals understand their actions and make sense of their experiences (Riessman 1993).

By its very nature, narrative analysis is a flexible interdisciplinary method conducted by researchers in a number of ways, or as Riessman (1993) notes, "there is no *one* method here" (pg. 5, emphasis in the original). The "narratives" themselves contribute to the method's fluidity. For example, Mary Jo Maynes and her colleagues (2008) define a personal narrative "using the more common term *life story*" and, in just one instance, they operationalize personal narrative as a "retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context" (pg. 4, emphasis in the original). Yet, Maynes *et al* (2008) also extend the definition of personal narrative to include "oral histories, autobiographies, in-depth interviews, diaries, journals, and letters" (pg. 4). Riessman (1993) includes conversations or talk (or their transcriptions) and other forms of storytelling that appear in narrative form in her definition of personal narratives (pg. 2-4).

For the present study, however, I am adopting a much more broad and inclusive definition of a personal narrative. The essays under investigation are "*first-person accounts by respondents of their experience*" about what it means to be an American Girl and how they have been inspired by and use American Girl characters' stories in their daily lives (Riessman 1993:1, my emphasis added). It is true that I do not have *biological* or *historical* accounts of the course of the entrants' lives. I am not working with life stories and so the application of "personal narrative analysis" is to some extent, limited because my data does not allow me to consider "whole persons," or the self as constructed and reconstructed over time (Maynes *et al* 2008:10, 16, and 33). Unlike life histories,

the essays I am analyzing "lack the temporal framing based in a self-reflective and retrospective narrative stance" that personal narrative analysis seeks to engage with in the first place (Maynes *et al* 2008:82). Rather than life stories, I have textual "snapshots" of girls' and women's understandings of what it means to be an "American girl" in late 2006 and early 2007. These essays are "intermittent forms of personal narrative" similar to letters, diaries and journals, which will require addressing particular "generic" questions and limitations (Maynes *et al* 2008:82, 97).

Despite this limitation, however, the essays-- like letter collections and diaries, for example-- "can also illuminate the cultural ideals that guide different social categories of people in coming to and defending their own decisions and actions as well as those of others" (Maynes *et al* 2008:86). One way to get at these insights is to be attentive to the particular conditions under which essayists wrote their entries and what this tells us about their social world. For example, these essays were written with at least one reader in mind (i.e. staff of the TMM) and perhaps with many other readers in mind, as well (i.e. visitors to the TMM who would see essays selected by the TMM staff for display). They were written at a particular moment in time, but by a significant number of respondents across a range of ages. Because the Call for Essays provided prompts to entrants, what is (and is not) contained in the essays is potentially circumscribed. I can mine the essays for empirical evidence about the role of American Girl in the lives of girls and women who are intimately involved in its culture. Notwithstanding the imperfect "fit" of the definition of personal narrative with the data at hand, the

methods involved in personal narrative analysis are fitting for the task of "glean[ing] its truths from subjective perceptions about social phenomena" and "provid[ing] powerful insights into social action and human agency" (Maynes *et al* 2008:127).

The subjective and flexible definition and character of personal narratives-- including intermittent forms such as letters, diaries, and, for the present study, essays-- does not cast doubt on narrative analysis's methodological rigor. As with other methods, researchers must conduct narrative analysis systematically (Riessman 1993).[36] Researchers should also be clear about the types of generalizations they wish to make using personal narrative data (Maynes *et al* 2008). For example, the analysis contained in the following chapters seeks to make *sociological generalizations* or "claims that a given personal narrative illuminates a particular social position or social-structural position in a society or institution or social process and that it illustrates how agency can operate at this locus" (Maynes *et al* 2008:129). The benefit to having a large sample of essays to analyze is that internal integrity in the sample "develops from close readings of a smaller number of individual accounts, which are studied in depth" (DeVault 1999:87).

The assumptions and goals of personal narrative analysis make questions of verification and validity "largely irrelevant." According to Riessman (1993), "A personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened

[36] Riessman (1993) warns, "The methods are slow and painstaking. They require attention to subtlety: nuances of speech, organization of a response, local contexts of production, social discourses that shape what is said, and what cannot be spoken" (pg. 69).

nor is it a mirror of a world 'out there'" (pg. 64). Riessman is not dismissing traditional notions of reliability and validity; rather, she simply reminds us that "historical truth" about events and phenomena are located at the intersections of discourse, values, and outlets. To determine if personal narrative analysis is "valid" requires a radical reconceptualization of that notion. Compared to experimental or quantitative models of research that define validity through emphases on researcher control and procedural standardization (Sprague 2005), personal narrative analysis defines validity as the "process through which we make claims from the *trustworthiness* of our interpretations" (Reissman 1993:65, my emphasis). Narrative analysis does not seek "truth," per se, which assumes an objective reality; narrative analysis, rather, recognizes that social discourses and power relations influence what people say, how they say it, and that what is said may change over time based on narrators' values and interests which shift with context. Riessman (1993) suggests evaluating validity in personal narrative analyses by four criteria: 1) persuasiveness; 2) correspondence; 3) coherence and 4) pragmatic use (pp. 65-69).

According to Riessman (1993), persuasiveness refers to the degree to which interpretations and the claims that extend from them are reasonable and convincing. She writes, "Persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts and when alternative interpretations are considered" (Riessman 1993:65). As the several of the substantive chapters that follow demonstrate, many of the claims made by researchers about the influence of American Girl-- through analyses of the

company's texts-- in girls' lives are borne out by the essayists' responses to essay prompts about the meaning and role of American Girl. For example, many scholars have argued that American Girl attempts to demonstrate instances of cross-cultural understanding in friendships (i.e. Inness 1998) and this theme appears in and is explained in a number of girls' essays. Some theoretical claims are, in some instances, supported by evidence from this novel and unique body of data. Additionally, I consider and discuss alternative interpretations that emerge from the data in the substantive chapters (i.e. the intersections of American Girl narratives with those of transnational adoption), thus enhancing (in some small measure) the persuasiveness of claims made in prior research and in my own analysis. One way to determine if arguments based on the study of personal narratives (and in this case, these essays) are persuasive is to make comparisons with other forms of documentation. To this end, these other forms of documentation may include historical reference materials or other forms of historical evidence, including "plots commonly circulating in popular culture" (Maynes *et al* 2008:150), and perhaps other studies of girls' engagement with popular fiction that is written specifically with them in mind as the audience.

Correspondence refers to the degree to which researchers' interpretations "can be affirmed by member checks," or verified by participants in a study. Although acquiring affirmation about the researcher's interpretations and analysis from research participants is a laudable goal, it is impossible for this particular study. Still, this limitation is not too problematic. Riessman (1993) notes that "taking work back" to individuals often reveals that "members" may not agree with

researchers' interpretations so, "[i]n the final analysis, the work is ours. We have to take responsibility for its truths" (pp. 66-67). Rather than seeking "historical truth"-- or trying to find out about individuals' pasts and presents as they "really are," my project is concerned with "narrative truth" which seeks to highlight and examine "the role stories play in the creation of meaning about self and other" (Maynes *et al* 2008:148). The focus on narrative, rather than historical, truth allows researchers to focus on the ways in which individuals construct meaning in their lives.

Coherence, Riessman's third criterion for establishing validity, refers to interpretation of meaning at global, local, and thematic levels. According to Riessman (1993), "Global coherence refers to the overall goals a narrator is trying to accomplish by speaking.[37] Local coherence is what a narrator is trying to effect in the narrative itself," while themal coherence "involves content: chunks of interview text about particular themes" which figure "importantly and repeatedly" in personal narratives (pg. 67). For Riessman (1993), each level of coherence may offer a different perspective of the same issue or the three levels may work in concert to create or strengthen the same perspective. Regardless, these features inhibit ad-hoc theorizing (pg. 67). Because the essays under investigation are generally very short and offer little background information about the authors, establishing validity through coherence becomes a very

[37] Although Riessman (1993) offers a broad definition of narratives, the approach she outlines in her paper is explicitly shaped by her interest in oral first-person accounts, hence, her reference to speaking (pg. 69). She suggests, "Considerable adaptation and/or other methods will be required if data consist of written narratives, such as letters, archival oral histories, autobiographies, researchers' accounts, scientific representations, and theory itself" (Riessman 1993: 69).

difficult criterion to meet. Nonetheless, the essays do provide some degree of themal coherence as “chunks” of particular types of data do figure “importantly and repeatedly” in a number of essays to guide the focus of the substantive chapters to follow.

The final criterion for evaluating the validity of personal narrative analysis is “the extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others’ work” (Riessman 1993: 68). To ensure that the personal narrative analysis that we do drives future research or social action, Riessman (1993) encourages researchers to discuss our analytic and interpretive processes as explicitly and transparently as possible (pg. 68). In the conclusion to this study, I attend to both the contributions this study has sought to make and the limitations that arise from the data and my analysis of it. It is my hope that this study does inspire others to seek the voices of girls, and in particular, data that more closely fits the true definition of “personal narrative,” in any analysis of forms of girls’ popular culture.

Locating Myself

Maynes *et al* (2008) argue, “Personal narrative analysis can never be disconnected from the analyst” (pg. 100). In other words, in order to heed Riessman’s suggestion for transparency in the analytic and interpretive processes, and because “attention to self-positioning can enrich an analysis,” I find it important to discuss my location as a researcher studying essays about the meaning and use of American Girl (Maynes *et al* 2008:102).

For the most part, I do not consider myself an “insider” of American Girl “culture,” nor do I consider myself an insider, per se, in contemporary American

girlhood. Though I conducted research on American Girl for my master's thesis and conference presentations, I did not "experience" or "know" American Girl in the same intimate way as the TMM essayists. When I first became aware of American Girl, I was already in my late 20s, finishing my bachelor's degree. My father-- of all people-- introduced to me to American Girl. Employed as a pipefitter with General Motors, he picked up an American Girl catalog at work and brought it home to solicit an opinion on purchasing an American Girl doll for my then infant niece. In my childhood, I did not own or read American Girl dolls or books. When American Girl debuted on the market in 1986, I was preparing to enter middle school and I might well have been growing out of my own phase of playing with dolls around the same time.

In the course of this project, I realized that I cannot recall-- with detail or (chronological) certainty-- many of the mundane details of my own girlhood. While it is true that I am a "girl," I am not directly involved with the daily experiences of contemporary girlhood. Presently, I am in my mid-thirties and it is surprising to think that my teenage years were half a lifetime ago, to say nothing of my "girlhood"! I am not a mother and I know few individuals raising girls in the age range targeted for American Girl products, so I have no immediate first-hand knowledge from which to draw information about the role of American Girl in girls' daily lives or about "contemporary girlhood." [38] My strong curiosity to compare

[38] Only recently has this changed. My older brother's daughter, who recently turned 11, received the Josefina Montoya doll for Christmas from my parents. Unfortunately, I have not had a chance to discuss her perceptions of American Girl because she lives several states away and is heavily involved in extracurricular activities. My sister's twin daughters, who are toddlers, also received

essayists' reflections about girlhood with my own produced an "intersubjective encounter" with the TMM essays (Maynes *et al* 2008: 99).[39]

My commitment to feminist goals and social equality strongly influences this project and contributes to the tensions inherent in its undertaking. If the focus of my previous research is any indication, I am generally very critical of American Girl. In my master's thesis, for example, I argued that American Girl's representation of Kaya and Josefina Montoya contributes to perpetuating the myth in U.S. American society that the legacies of internal colonization experienced by Native Americans and Latinos are individual problems, rather than structural problems. Additionally, my thesis analyzed American Girl's implication in exploitive global production processes, as Mattel now owns the company.[40] In 2008, I presented a colloquium lecture addressing American Girl's representational strategies at the time of its 20th anniversary. For the lecture, I analyzed the essays of 12 women who reflected on the role that American Girl played in their lives.[41] In that analysis, I identified ways in which race and class

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Bitty Baby twin dolls from my parents this past Christmas. As one can guess, the twins are too young to be able to articulate their impressions but I look forward to discussing the American Girl dolls with them as they grow older and if they remain involved with American Girl.

[39] Maynes and her colleagues (2008) write that an intersubjective relationship in narrative analysis arises from the researcher's "attempts to understand another person's subjective take on the world", even when there is no direct contact between the researcher and the individual whose narrative is under investigation (pg. 99).

[40] Research on toy giants Mattel and Hasbro has uncovered massive labor abuses of women and children who work in their factories in export processing zones in Asia and Latin America. Corporations such as Mattel and Hasbro establish factories in these areas that allows them to take advantage of "surplus" rural labor and lax workplace safety laws (Langer 2004; Tempest 2006).

[41] Essays appeared at http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate2.php?section=twenty&id=1.

are unremarked upon in women's memories of American Girl and how this contributes to reaffirming American Girl as a socially exclusive consumer identity. The women's essays also reflected pervasive cultural scripts promoting and celebrating individual achievement and pluralist tolerance, further rendering invisible the impacts of institutionalized racial and class discrimination and racialized and classed cultural practices.

Throughout the coding and analysis phase, I attempted to bracket my criticisms of American Girl in order to open myself up to the possibility of experiencing a surprise similar to what Barbara Laslett experienced in her analysis of the life history of William Fielding Ogburn.[42] "Disagreements" between what the analyst believes or perceives and what her subject(s) believe or perceive are fruitful and can push the analysis in unanticipated directions. I entered this project with a genuine interest in hearing what "insiders" had to say about American Girl precisely because of how unique my source material is: the TMM essays are original, private collection, first-person accounts of the meanings and uses of American Girl in their lived experiences.

American Girl and the Cultural Tool Kit

I also wanted to bracket my criticisms because I genuinely believe that the essayists whose work I am reading and analyzing are not cultural dupes. In a

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[42] Barbara Laslett's interest in the life story of William Fielding Ogburn stemmed, in part, from her disagreement with his ideas on the role of emotion in sociology. Summarizing Laslett's autobiographical engagement with Ogburn's life history, Maynes *et al* (2008) write, "Laslett began her research with the implicit question 'How did we get this way?'…*It therefore came as a surprise when she learned in the course of her research* that Ogburn had not always been 'this way'" (pg. 104, my emphasis).

seminal article, sociologist Ann Swidler (1986) defines culture as a “tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different problems (pg. 273). Culture, and by extension, cultural objects or artifacts-- such as dolls and storybooks-- provide people with the “components” necessary to construct “strategies of action.” Strategies of action are “the larger ways of trying to organize a life within which particular choices make sense, and for which particular, culturally shaped skills and habits (what Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’) are useful” (pg. 276, n. 9).

This “culture as a tool kit” model suggests that the relationship between culture, structure, and action is historically and situationally variable. Rather than *necessarily* acting on the dominant values of a given time or place, individuals “do different kinds of things in different circumstances,” based upon the cultural resources at their disposal and, most importantly, based upon the parts of their cultural repertoire that best suits them in any given situation (Swidler 1986:277). This perspective takes at its core that culture does not act upon passive individuals; individuals, rather, act on and through culture (Swidler 1986:275).

In invoking culture to explain our behaviors, it is important to recognize that the *meanings that individuals attach to particular cultural resources*-- not necessarily values-- influence their strategies of action (Swidler 1986:281). Cultural elements that shape our actions obtain meaning in “concrete life circumstances.” By way of example, she suggests that a young couple attending church with their children may find themselves with renewed religious inclinations, but this does not demonstrate that culture *caused* these feelings.

Rather, attending services becomes meaningful because it has become part of the family's weekly practices (pg. 281). Meaning, then, is carried in and through such symbolic vehicles as "beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, ceremonies" and contained in informal practices such as "language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (Swidler 1986:273). Additionally, the symbolic forms through which individuals experience and express meaning are diverse, as well as conflicting; culture is not unified and it does not push action in a consistent direction.

Swidler's approach to culture is intended to bring historical context back into cultural analyses of social structure, but she suggests that it is also applicable to the study of "specific cultural symbols." She writes, "The significance of specific cultural symbols can be understood only in relation to the strategies of action they sustain" (Swidler 1986:283). By historical, Swidler means to demonstrate how the model of "culture as a tool kit" can account for cultural continuity, as well as cultural change. Drawing from Clifford Geertz, Swidler proposes that in "settled lives," "culture is a model of and a model for experience; and cultural symbols reinforce an ethos, making plausible a world-view, which in turn justifies the ethos" (Swidler 1986:278). In "settled lives," then, "culture and structural circumstance seem to reinforce each other" (pg. 278). On the other hand, in "unsettled lives," "when people are learning new ways of organizing individual and collective action, practicing unfamiliar habits until they become familiar," doctrine, symbols, and ritual more directly shape action (Swidler 1986:278). Existing culture in "unsettled lives" (or unsettled circumstances) shapes new strategies of action while also sustaining old ones.

In Chapter 7, I discuss how chronic illness/disease or severe economic hardship challenge girls' claims to being "normal" or "regular" American Girls. I would suggest that American Girl symbolism is highly useful to girls who are negotiating "spoiled" identities in these unsettled "circumstances."

Critiques of Swidler's model assert that she does not consider how groups come into conflict over cultural expression and she assumes that "dominant culture" is "taken for granted" (Hall, Neitz, and Battani 2003:247). As I addressed in the discussion of my sample above, I am aware that the presumed race and class privilege of the participants in the TMM essay contest might give them "advantage" and "protection" relative to the dominant culture. I could be missing perspectives from groups of girls that are located more marginally to the dominant culture (Hall *et al* 2003).

CHAPTER 4: TO ME, TO BE AN AMERICAN GIRL MEANS…

"To me, being an American Girl is not just about having a doll and joining a club, but to me it is a lifelong commitment and activity."
-- Inez, Age 9

"Being an American Girl doesn't mean you have to be American. Kirsten wasn't American." *-- Mariah, Age 10*

"Anybody can be an American girl because it's not a club, it's just who you are. I love it like that because nobody is left out."
-- Brenna, Age 10

"A girl who simply resides in the USA does not automatically deserve the title 'American girl'…Whenever a girl is dependable to help out when she's needed, follow through with her commitments, and be genuinely concerned when a problem arises, then she's American girl material." *-- Faith, Age 16*

As straightforward as it may seem, the question "What does it mean to be an American Girl?" produces no simple answers. The quotes above illustrate that the question elicits ambiguous, contradictory, and fluid answers. This, of course, is not a novel finding.

Respondents in Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel's (2002) study of American Girl identity-- one of the few studies to incorporate first-person accounts of American Girl's target audience into analyses-- "highlighted links between American girl identity and issues of nationality, citizenship, and values" (pg. 154). Respondents' answers suggested American Girl identity emerged in several possible ways: by birthright, through assimilation or naturalization, by "growing up in America" regardless of where one was born (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel

2002:154). It was also, in Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel's assessment, inextricably linked to the consumption of and engagement with American Girl products.

Joan, a young respondent in Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel's (2002) study, illustrates the complexity of the question well. Asked if she believes playing with American Girl dolls and reading the books makes her an American girl, Joan responded that she believed it did. When pressed about whether these activities were necessary to claim an American Girl identity Joan said "No, you can be in the AG club, have an AG doll, read a catalog, read books, have an outfit… anything that involves AG but," she concedes, "if you *feel* that you're an American girl, then you are" (pg.153, my emphasis). Joan and her friends also suggest that being an "American girl" is tied to particular characteristics such as being nice, understanding and friendly, helping others, demonstrating leadership, believing in oneself, and being smart (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:154). The interview data leads Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002) to observe, "These views seem to reflect the influence of the AG catalogs and books, which depict girls and dolls/characters with these characteristics, highlighting slumber parties, cookouts, and sports as preferred activities" (pg. 154).

In the analysis that follows, I attempt to delineate how girls who participated in the TMM's "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" exhibit and essay contest responded to this nominal question. As the findings in Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel's (2002) study suggest, and as the introductory quotes to this chapter demonstrate, girls' responses are rich in examples and meanings, prime for extraction. I address the particular characteristics, activities, and values that

girls believe are core to the meaning of being an American Girl. In some instances, the essayists' responses lend support to the arguments put forth about the influence of American Girl texts on defining what it means to be an American Girl (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002). In other instances, American Girl references are entirely absent from girls' definitions and instead reflect the influence of other discourses, particularly a pervasive cultural script about what it means to be a "good girl."

"American Girls are All-Around Great People"

Girls use a very wide variety of adjectives to describe what it means to be an American girl or to explain what an American girl is, but their modifiers overwhelmingly suggest that American girls are "*all-around great people,*" as 12-year-old Uma claims. Just a general survey of descriptors reveals the positive qualities that essayists believe allow one to claim that she is an American girl. One is or should aspire to be brave, caring, smart, friendly, fun, generous, genuine, hardworking, helpful, honest, independent, motivated, patriotic, polite, responsible, self-controlled, thoughtful, truthful, and unique.

One way that girls describe themselves with these attributes is by drawing comparisons or parallels between themselves and the American Girl characters, which the company describes with catchy taglines. Felicity is spunky and spritely; Josefina is faithful, hopeful and full of heart; Kirsten is strong and full of spirit; Addy is courageous; Samantha is bright and beautiful; and Molly is a lovable and patriotic dreamer and schemer (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:190). Additionally, Kit is resourceful and clever; Kaya is daring and adventurous; Julie

is creative, optimistic and fun loving; and Rebecca is inspiring, confident, and dramatic; and Marie-Grace and Cécile, the newest additions to the historical collection, are caring and daring.[43]

When girls do draw directly from American Girl texts to describe what it means to be an American Girl, they generally apply or adapt the company's descriptions of characters or mention key plot points from their stories. For example, 10-year-old Zoe writes, "*What it means to be an American Girl is to be you, to be truthful, to have courage, and to help others, everything that the characters from the past and present teach us.*" Zoe goes on to describe some of these characteristics more fully, pulling examples from the books. To be courageous, for example, means, "*Being brave in the face of danger. Kaya would not have made it through the fire if she had panicked instead of being brave.*" To be helpful means helping someone who is being picked on; "*Lindsey protected her friend from bullies and helped plan her brother's bar mitzvah*."[44]

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[43] Character descriptions can be found at http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/static/books.jsp. The page for each character features a banner that prominently displays her tagline. Additional information can be found at http://www.americangirl.com/play/historical-character/ . Clicking on the icons for each character allows readers to "meet" the character, learn about the family and friends featured in her stories, and play simple computer games based on her character. Downloadable parents' and teachers' guides for each character are also available from the Play section of the American Girl website.

[44] Some girls solidified their connection to and identification with American Girl through incorporating visual cues in their essays. For example, Zoe's essay featured an American Girl header as well as background images taken from the American Girl website. She included the company's signature star logo into the conclusion of her essay after encouraging readers to "*Follow YOUR inner star,"* a message of encouragement that often appears in the American Girl catalogs and on the website. Several essays written by seven- and eight-year-olds include hand-drawn pictures of their favorite characters Kit, Kaya, and Molly. One of these essays featured a picture of the entire *American Girls Collection*; one featured a photograph of an essayist holding her American Girl doll.

Although American Girls are "all-around great people," they are also humble. According to several of the essayists, one can be proud of her accomplishments but to be boastful is bad form. Uma, the 12-year-old whose essay provides the title for this section, writes, *"Being an American Girl means being proud of yourself. Yet you cannot always brag and let all your pride go to waste.*" Being a good sport is an extension of having humility. Victoria, age 11, believes, "*An American girl would have good manners. She would be a good sport and never brag if she won and somebody else didn't*." Taryn, a seven-year-old, echoes Victoria's sentiment. Although Taryn believes that helping others is the first responsibility, as well as primary meaning, of being an American Girl, being *"a good sport and cheer[ing] your friends on when they have a game or competition*" is the second most important meaning of being an American Girl. Harley, a nine-year-old, also mentions good sportsmanship in her essay; she writes, "*Having a good attitude even if you lose is also important if you want to be successful."*

Eight-year-old Eliza invokes an American Girl character directly in her discussion of humility. She writes, "*By reading the book Meet Kaya I have learned a girl should not boast about being better than someone else. Instead of boasting and saying you're better than someone else, a person should have humility.*" Eliza considers that complimenting and encouraging a competitor might be better. She suggests, "*So when I race somebody, I could say to my friend, 'Wow! You went really fast!*"

Girls' emphasis on humility and sportsmanship appear to be offshoots of other meanings and characteristics of being an American Girl, including doing one's best or trying one's hardest and never giving up. It is difficult to boast in light of someone else's best effort because it violates these attributes that make one an American Girl in the first place. Additionally, to hurt another's feelings through boasting and poor sportsmanship-- whether intentionally or not-- violates the ethic of care that runs through American Girl stories. For example, 11-year-old Daniela believes that *"what makes American girls so great"* is that they *"never give up and always do what they think is the right thing. They believe in each other.*" For nine-year-old Skylar, being an American Girl "*means to be nice to everyone,*" which by extension means, "*you should not be mean to anyone.*"

Girls encourage one another to extend their friendship and concern to others who they might not necessarily know personally or who they believe may not be worthy of friendship because of previous (negative) deeds. In her essay, 10-year-old Wendy writes, "*From Samantha I learned do unto others when [she] had a birthday party and a boy put salt in the ice cream. At school a boy pushed me but I didn't him push him back, what I learned was to not do the mean thing he did to me.*" Missy, an eight-year-old, combines the Golden Rule with American Girl's message of persistence. She writes, "*I have learned that you should never give up and you should treat others the way you want to be treated, it does not matter how you look or what somebody thinks.*"

The Golden Rule and persistence are combined in 12-year-old Joline's essay, as well. After describing that American Girls should be helpful by offering

assistance to people who are struggling with various tasks or issues (carrying something, learning a new concept in class, and experiencing sadness), she writes, "*Most importantly an American Girl follows the golden rule; treat others as you would be treated. If you want to be an American Girl you should try your best on everything you do and follow the saying, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.*" In her next sentence, Joline continues, "*An American Girl is kind to everyone no matter what they look like, what clothes they wear or what they believe in-- like Felicity didn't refuse to be friends with Elizabeth when she discovered Elizabeth was not on the patriot's side.*" Alice, an 11-year-old who learned from Felicity's stories that she should think of others first and obey her parents, also learned "*to be kind even when someone doesn't deserve it.*" Felicity *chooses* to treat the brute Jiggy Nye with kindness; "*even though he treated her beloved horse Penny so terribly"* she takes him food and blankets. Finally, according to 11-year-old Heidi, "*The most important lesson that I have learned from the American Girl books is to care for others."* She writes that Felicity, Elizabeth, Molly, Samantha, Addy, Kit, Kaya, and Josefina *"were all very caring girls"* who *"seemed to live by the Golden Rule.*"

In order to be a caring American Girl, essayists suggest it is important for one to put others ahead of oneself. For example, nine-year-old Beth writes, "*I think I'm a caring person because I try think of other's people's feelings"* and so she does her chores before having to be prompted to do them by her mother. Beth cares for the *"people in [her] grade that have problems*" by playing with them at recess and helping them in the classroom because "*I think it makes them*

feel better and not left out," she writes. Ida, an 11-year-old who engages in a number of community service activities, writes, "*Being an American Girl also means that sometimes you have to think of others before you think of yourself. This skill is especially important when it comes to family members and other really close friends*." Caring for others and putting on others' needs ahead of one's own are requisite characteristics to claim the title of American Girl, according to 16-year-old Faith. She writes, "*[An American girl] should care about the well-being of the people surrounding her and be ready to make sacrifices in the group's interest. For example, I am the oldest child [in a large family], so I have experienced putting aside my own feelings to keep our household functioning.*"

Another factor that contributes to American Girls being "all-around great people," according to the essayists, is their tendency to "do the right thing" and "make the right choices." Tori, a 12-year-old who feels that believing in oneself and being a good friend make an American Girl, also believes that a third important quality of an American Girl is "*doing the right thing [and] to not do something you know isn't right.*" Tori provides an example of how she applies this lesson in school. She writes, *"Say you are taking a test and someone goes to the restroom leaving their test paper unguarded. If you don't look and [don't] cheat, since you know you shouldn't do that, then that is doing the right thing!*" She suggests that choosing not to cheat will not only make one feel good, but "*you will be acting like an American Girl.*" Vanessa, drawing inspiration from Kaya's misfortune of losing track of her little brothers after transferring their

caretaking to her sister Speaking Rain, writes, "*How this lesson applies to my life is I know never to ask someone else to do my work in school*." Passing off the responsibility of completing her schoolwork to a friend would make Vanessa feel bad inside. Additionally, she posits, "*I would also ask myself the question, 'Why did I make that person do that? It wasn't the right thing to do.'*" For Ruby, a nine-year-old, excluding people from a club is not doing the right thing. She writes, "*[A]t recess a group of girls wanted to form a club with only certain girls in it. At first I thought it was a great idea, however, soon I knew it wasn't right.*" After telling the girls who wanted to form the exclusive club that they were not doing the right thing, Ruby "*decided to form a club that everyone could belong to.*" She reports, "*It felt good to stand up for all the girls and do what was right.*"

Even though American Girls strive to be their best, do the right thing, and make the right choices, essayists do not expect themselves or other girls to be perfect. Uma, for example, notes, "*When [American Girls] do make a mistake by choosing the wrong thing, they learn from that mistake and move on*." She adds, "*We know we don't have to be perfect and enjoy being the best we can be*." Similarly, although Joline lives by the Golden Rule, she grants herself and other girls some latitude when it comes to striving to be an American Girl. She counsels, "*[Y]ou must remember if you are a human you are going to make mistakes-- no one is perfect.*" While 11-year-old Maureen concedes that "*an American Girl will make mistakes because she is not perfect,*" she also believes that she will work harder and try again if she makes mistakes because an American Girl *"never gives up*."

As indicated by the quotes at the outset of this chapter, girls seem ambivalent, at best, as to whether one must be an American to be an American Girl. For Kara, a nine-year-old, *"anybody can be an American Girl"* as long as the individual is willing "*follow these rules: persevere, be courageous, lend a helping hand every time you can, do not let things pass by and be yourself*." The title of American Girl is not, for Kara, connected to birthplace or citizenship but, rather, is associated with enacting particular behaviors that she reads about in the Molly and Samantha stories. Ingrid, an 11-year-old, holds a similarly flexible view. She writes, "*I think any girl can be an American Girl, no matter what her skin color is, her hair color, her religion, or the language she speaks*." These potential markers of racial, ethnic and national identity are less important to being an American Girl than pro-social behaviors and activities. Ingrid writes, "*I think being an American girl means making friends, helping others, and being you!"*

For some girls, however, the definition of what it means to be an American girl rest squarely on being American. Other characteristics or qualities are then added to this anchor. For example, 10-year-old Jessica writes that an American Girl is "*A girl who lives in America who has hopes and dreams and she works hard to make them come true.*" Halle and Elise, both 13, resorted to dictionaries to arrive at a definition of what it means to be an American girl. Halle writes that if her Scholastic Children's Dictionary had an entry for "American girl" then "*it would most likely say that she is a female child or young woman born or living in the United States."* She goes on to note, however, "*But in my mind American Girl means so much more than that."* For Halle, being an American Girl includes

such qualities as independence, courage, and confidence. By looking up the definitions of American and girl in her Webster's Dictionary, Elise claims, "*So my dictionary is saying that an American Girl is a female child living in America."* She goes on to say, "*I think it's something that goes a lot deeper than that.*" Elise's definition of being an American girl transcends time. She writes, "*[A]n American girl is not just a girl living in America, it's all the girls of America, not just the girls living today, but the women who used to be girls, and all the girls that have* ever *lived in America."*

Still, other essayists adhere to a much more patriotic and nationalistic definition of what it means to be an American Girl. For example, nine-year-old Gabby writes, "*To me, being an American girl means to like my country, to salute my flag, and to be a true patriot."* The American Girl books and dolls factor into her definition in significant way because, for Gabby, "*Also, being an American girl, to me, means using whatever I can to learn about my country's history."* She also suggests that, of course, one must have confidence and follow one's dreams, but being an American girl is tied to a sense of nationalism. Rachel, a 14-year-old, believes that American girls are compassionate, loving, and committed to their families. Additionally, *"As American girls, we are very supportive of the United States,"* she writes. Rachel believes that all American girls "*very likely have the Stars and Stripes [or some other symbol of patriotism] shown somewhere within [their] houses."* She continues, "*Our country would be nothing without the support of American girls like you and me.*" For Rachel, "*All in all, a fun-loving, compassionate, and patriotic girl can be described as a true*

American girl." To reinforce this point, she invokes imagery from the song "God Bless America," noting that daily, "*across amber waves of grain, from sea to shining sea,* girls "*like you and me are making the United States a better place to grow up and live*."

In their attempts to demonstrate good character, as well as their loyalty and patriotism to the nation, essayists are engaged in a moral discourse; they are "expressing a certain idea of the good person in the good society" (Hall *et al* 2003:20). This reveals that girls are guided to act both by the American Girl stories and other narratives (of gender and nationalism, for example) circulating in the broader culture, as well as by the social relationships in which they are embedded (Hall *et al* 2003:41).

"Being an American Girl is No Stroll in the Park"

While essayists tended to hold the American Girl characters up as role models and many aspired to be just like them, several admitted that this endeavor was sometimes difficult. Tracy, a 10-year-old, writes in her essay, "*Being an American girl is no stroll in the park. It's very hard work."* Her statement opens up an interesting avenue for discussion because it challenges the notion that girls accept American Girl's socializing messages easily, naturally, or uncritically. Jennifer Miskec (2009) suggests that readers of American Girl stories are "positioned as objects of the lessons, that, as scholars have rightly noted, are normalizing lessons about what it means to be a 'good girl'" (pg. 158). The "rightness" of those lessons is indeed worthy of consideration. Certainly the scholars who Miskec cites (i.e. Daniel Hade, Jan Susina, Sherrie Inness, etc.)

have presented compelling arguments regarding what the socialization messages and ideologies contained in the American Girl texts are, as well as their implications for girls' understanding of the appropriate roles they can play and behaviors they can enact. What scholars have not considered, however, is what girls think about the process of identifying with or emulating the behaviors associated with American Girl.

Nine-year-old Ruby laments, *"I wish being an American Girl was always easy but I have to tell you that it's not.*" Ruby continues, "*Each day I make an effort to have the traits I believe makes me an American Girl*." As her statement suggests, Ruby must *consciously* enact particular types of behaviors to be an American girl and this requires her to consider her relationship to others, as well as herself. She explains, "*While I do fun things and all that stuff, being an American girl has responsibilities too. For instance self-control, kindness, and respect. Being an American girl is both responsibility and being free. You have to balance them both."* Ruby also believes that the work of being an American girl is ongoing. She remarks, "*Sometimes my days don't go the way I want them to and I mess up, but I learn from these mistakes and I grow*." Whether it is returning homework to school on time, speaking up when she knows that others are doing things they should not be doing or excluding others, or avoiding fights with her brother, Ruby *works* on these things. She says, *"Even though it can be hard, I always feel good about myself when I am responsible, standing up for what is right, and caring for others."*

Charity, a ten-year-old, believes that the lessons of the American Girl characters are very relevant to her life. Like Samantha, Charity stands up for others and, like Molly, she does her homework immediately after school. Charity is motivated to "*good actions and thoughts"* because this makes her proud, not because this necessarily brings her praise. "*I've never had someone tell me, 'Oh, you're like an American Girl!"* she writes. "*I take pride in knowing that most of my good actions and thoughts toward others are similar to a specific American Girl doll at different times*." Emulating the American Girls however is not easy. Charity writes, "*I work hard always to make the best decision and to think things through even if others try to convince me to do something that I know in my heart isn't a good decision*." Even though Charity encounters difficult situations that might be "*easier to walk away from*," she instead finds it "*fun and challenging to make the best out* [*of them*]" as Kit would.

While the girls cited above do discuss that they must *work* at the behaviors and qualities they associate with American Girl characters, their examples do reinforce a conclusion drawn in Acosta-Alzuru's analysis of the American Girl books. She writes, "The dolls/characters are consistently portrayed as resourceful, good-hearted girls who learn from their mistakes" (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:184). It is difficult to ascertain from the essays alone if girls' conclusions about the hard work it takes to be an American Girl arise solely from their own lived experiences and reflections or if they primarily graft American Girl's representations of the characters onto their claims. Acosta-Alzuru (1999),

has convincingly pointed out, “[American Girl] continually, and even overtly, tells its readers what constitutes an American Girl” (pg. 189).

American Girl and the “Good Girl” Narrative

Recent studies by Girls Inc., the Girl Scouts, and Girls Leadership Institute demonstrate that girls feel a tremendous amount of pressure to be “Good Girls.” In order to be “good,” girls are pressured to please others, are taught not to brag about their accomplishments, are shamed into hiding their intelligence or risk losing status and popularity among their peers, and they are admonished not to cause trouble or speak loudly (Simmons 2009:3). The very characteristics or qualities that define a “Good Girl” in Simmons’s analysis and in the studies noted above are nearly identical to those that girls use to describe what it means to be an American girl. According to Simmons (2009), this constant pressure “to be ‘Good’-- unerringly nice, polite, modest, and selfless” has long-term negative consequences for girls’ relationships with other girls, with others in general (i.e. teammates, teachers, coaches, employers, etc.), and, perhaps, most importantly, with themselves.

In their highly influential work on early adolescence, the “crossroads” of women’s development, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) uncovered a “tyranny of the nice and kind” (Simmons 2009: 266, n. 5). Brown and Gilligan found that in girls’ relationships with others, the pressure to be “good” led them to withhold their true thoughts and feelings. In their interviews with 100 adolescent girls, Brown and Gilligan discovered that girls dissociated from strong thoughts and feelings and took their “authentic voices out of relationships” (Simmons

2009:266, n.5). Like Brown and Gilligan, Simmons finds that the “Curse of the Good Girl” leads girls to believe that expressing certain emotions and vulnerable feelings created perceptions that they were weak or losers. An inability to authentically and productively deal with emotions and vulnerability left girls with “deep internal struggles with their emotions, many of which led to self-destructive behavior” including cutting, disordered eating, explosive outbursts, and extreme isolation and withdrawal (Simmons 2009:16).

Over time the pressure to be perfect and to do everything right becomes “a fundamentally self-limiting experience” because being good can “leave many girls uncomfortable with feedback and failure,” creating a psychological glass ceiling for girls (Simmons 2009:1, 6). The “Curse of the Good Girl” inhibits girls and women from engaging in “healthy risk-taking and self-assertion” because these behaviors might lead to “failure, disappointment or another person’s unhappiness” (Simmons 2009:6). Throughout their lives, the effects of the “Good Girl” discourse inhibit women from acquiring the “skills required to self-promote, negotiate, and absorb feedback,” which “are among the new criteria for success” in a post-industrial society. Simmons (2009) suggests that the dearth of women in the ranks as law partners and business school students-- but their overrepresentation in the “caring professions”-- is one telling sign of the effects of the Good Girl narrative (pg. 9).

As their essays indicate, girls do acknowledge that they are not perfect and that being perfect is *not* a quality that is *required* of American girls; they can make mistakes (though, I concede, there is pressure to learn from them). As

girls' essays also indicate, achieving the title of an American Girl requires work. It is not something that comes naturally to them; they must make conscious efforts and choices to adhere to the expectations of being an American girl, or by extension, a good girl. We need to be attentive to the pressures imposed on girls to be "good." Clearly, it would be a mistake to think that the message to be good comes from American Girl alone; it does not. Girls receive this message from other sources in the culture, as well. Simmons' research demonstrates that this pressure could have long-term consequences for girls when they reach adulthood. With that said, girls find inspiration within the American Girl texts for navigating girlhood and all of its attendant challenges, be they mundane or extraordinary, as the following chapters seek to demonstrate.

CHAPTER 5: AMERICAN GIRL LESSONS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

"I have learned so much in the American Girl dolls and stories that I have become a better person" *--Whitney, 8 years old*

"The lessons I have learned have impacted my life forever and I hope to share my experiences with my future children someday. These are just few reasons how I've been inspired and touched by the dolls to become a real American Girl." *--Tatum, 10 years old*

In addition to providing hours of entertainment, play, and companionship to their owners, American Girl dolls also teach girls practical lessons through their accompanying stories. Girls' essays reveal that they invoke these lessons in their daily lives. These practical lessons are overlooked in other analyses, which tend to focus on American Girl's representations of historical events or how the company conveys ideologies of traditional femininity and national identity. Again, these issues are not without merit. However, focusing on the ideologies in American Girl texts renders alternative readings (and applications) of American Girl invisible and obscures how girls make meaning of the dolls and stories or use them in practical ways to approach problems or concerns in their daily lives.

In this chapter, I address some of the practical lessons that girls gain from reading American Girl stories or playing with their character dolls. American Girl contributes to girls' increased participation in reading, increases their interest in history and, through identification with particular characters, provides girls with templates for overcoming social barriers while gaining self-confidence and self-

esteem. Additionally, I discuss how girls enact American Girl lessons through community service and philanthropy. Helping others is an important lesson that girls absorb from the American Girl stories and characters and an important component to how they conceptualize themselves as American Girls. As such, they apply this lesson through their engagement in various charitable activities in their communities. Finally, I discuss how American Girl's promotion of diversity and multiculturalism influences the lessons girls learn about friendship, as well as how they make sense of their own cultural identities.

The Practical Lessons of American Girl

On a very basic level, American Girl texts may support the acquisition of literacy skills because of readers' ability to identify with the characters. Matilda, an 11-year-old in the fifth grade, recounts, "*Reading was the worst thing for me, but American Girl helped me by giving me stories I could connect to.*" Kirsten's stories inspire Matilda because *"Kirsten was not afraid to make friends with someone different.*" Through Kirsten's friendship with Singing Bird, Matilda believes that "*we are more similar than we are different*" and American Girl has taught her "*it is good to reach out to other cultures*." The centrality of the American Girl books in Matilda's acquisition of improved literacy skills cannot be understated; it is a point she returns to at the end of her essay. Prior to imploring the TMM staff to "*consider* [her] *for 1st place"* in the essay contest because she "*worked long and hard on this* [essay] *and had so much fun*," Matilda notes, "*Before I read these books, I was not so good at reading and now I am pretty good at reading"*

Like Matilda, eight-year-old Libby credits the American Girl stories with encouraging her to read. It is Libby's identification with Josefina, especially, that has helped her to continue to improve her reading skills. She writes, *"I don't usually like to read and it's sort of hard for me to do when I don't really enjoy it."* In those moments, Libby recalls Josefina's distaste for chores and the fact that Josefina finds them difficult, especially because she no longer has her mother to give her guidance. But, as Libby points out, *"Even though it is difficult, she keeps on doing her chores just like me and my reading."*

For however problematic its representations of history are, American Girl's historical fiction novels introduce aspects of American history to millions of young readers and "it merits attention that millions of young readers are being introduced to the American past *at all*" (Nielsen 2002:85, my emphasis). Brenna, a 10-year-old, writes, "*American Girl stories have allowed me to read how girls throughout history have handled their problems. My American Girl doll has allowed me to act out my dreams, and it shows me how girls from other times used to dress. So, American Girl has made me even more interested in history*."

"*I think American Girls are fun and educational!"* exclaims 12-year-old Brittany in her essay. She continues, "*They make history fun! They give a view of how people have dealt with things in their time. From Native Americans to the Civil War to World War Two. [American Girl] showed me how they lived during their times.*" Similarly, 11-year-old Kyleigh writes, "*American Girl books really inspire me to learn about history and to read more books."* She continues, "*Playing with American Girl dolls has made me more interested in history. It has*

helped me understand why things are the way they are today." Kyleigh's attachment to the American Girl books and her willingness to see them for and use them as a learning tool might arise from the emotional connection forged through a family memory. Kyleigh admits, "*My love of American Girls started with my grandmother and her Samantha doll*."[45] Kyleigh fondly describes how she and her sister play with their American Girl dolls when they visit their grandmother's house.[46] Still, the fact that they have encouraged her to read more and learn more about history should not be dismissed.

Identification with American Girl characters assists girls in increasing their feelings of self-efficacy and bolstering their self-esteem, requisite skills for empowerment. This is especially true for girls with characteristics that they believe set them apart from others. For example, Miranda, a gifted eight-year-old, writes about how identification with the American Girl character Emily helped her overcome the social barriers she experienced because of her intellectual difference. She writes, "*Many people think if you are smart you have it made or that you don't need any special help."* Despite earning good grades, Miranda struggled with school and felt frustrated because "*school, for me, was like sitting through the same movie for six hours every day-- day after day.*" This created a

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[45] It is difficult to distinguish from Kyleigh's essay for whom Samantha was intended: Kyleigh or her grandmother? She simply says, "*My Grandmother always wanted an American Girl doll. She got a Samantha for Christmas before I was born*."

[46] According to Story (2002), girls who have an emotional or sentimental attachment to American Girl because they received American Girl as gifts from a family member or loved one may, "arguably," be more enticed to receive the identity messages (pg. 123). See also McCracken's (1988) analysis of the symbolic nature of cultural objects, and in particular gifts.

lot of pressure and isolation for Miranda; she hesitated to accept the "gifted" label because she feared "*it sounds like you are bragging and think that you are better than other people*," a violation of American Girl's lessons about boastfulness.[47] When it became evident that Miranda would have to switch to a school that was better able to meet the scholastic and social needs of gifted students, she drew from directly from Emily's story to help her with this transition. Miranda recalls:

> *[Emily], too, had to overcome being the new kid in a strange land and start all over. I love that you know she must have been scared but she was still brave. She was very bright and it helped her overcome her fears and fit into her new situation. She is beautiful on the outside and INSIDE, like me.*

Miranda's emphasis on the word "inside" highlights the overall theme of her essay; girls who appear to have it all on the outside carry with them internal challenges that American Girl stories help them understand and resolve.

For many essayists, the American Girl characters inspire confidence and bravery and teach them practical lessons on teamwork. "*Before I read about Felicity, Elizabeth and the others, I was a little timid,*" writes 11-year old Heidi, "*But now I feel that I have fulfilled my dream of becoming a kind, confident, caring, honest, and brave American Girl.*" Heidi is especially inspired that Felicity "*didn't just say 'Oh well' and got on with her life"* when she saw that the horse Penny was being mistreated. Instead, "*She stood up for someone who could not stand up for themselves.*" Heidi admits that Felicity must have been very scared

[47] See Chapter 4.

when she first approached Penny. "*But did that stop her? No it didn't!,*" she writes.

Hope, a nine-year-old, writes that the American Girl stories, generally, but Molly's in particular, have helped her with her "*social abilities*." She writes, "*For instance, when working together you need to listen to what the other people in your group have for ideas and not just what you think."* Molly has also inspired Hope to believe in herself, no matter what other people may think; she thought it was "*just very amazing"* that Molly kept her hopes up in spite of her father's absence and continued to work very hard to earn the role of Miss Victory.

While girls may personally benefit from the skills and lessons they learn from the American Girl stories, their essays demonstrate that helping others is an integral component of being an American Girl. Diane Carver Sekeres (2009) observes that American Girl characters "teach that the characteristics of an American Girl are primarily those inner qualities that enable us to live well and benefit others" (pg. 408). It is to the how girls use the American Girl stories to benefit others that I now turn.

"I Was Inspired to Do Something Good for the People Around Me…"

Many of the essayists drew inspiration from the characters' good deeds and became involved in community service activities or philanthropic causes. This sense of stewardship and commitment to help others is a fundamental component to what it means to be an American Girl, as the essay by nine-year-old Ivy demonstrates. Ivy writes, "*Once I read Kit's and Samantha's stories, I was inspired to do something good for the people around me. In both stories the*

girls do something for the less fortunate." Kit's volunteerism at a soup kitchen and Samantha's assistance to Nellie and her sisters inspired Ivy to participate in an "Adopt-a-Family" holiday gift program in her community. She writes, "*I took the time to go shopping for a girl who asked for so little, but the return for me was greater than any gift I could receive. I felt like a real American Girl after that experience."* Critics make a compelling case that American Girl promotes a heavily consumerist message through its stories, but Ivy's essay suggests that American Girl's alleged emphasis on consumption and consumerism may be overemphasized. She notes that after reading Kit's and Samantha's stories and participating in the Adopt-a-Family program, "*I've also been more thankful for what I have and [have] not [been] wishing I had something that my friend has all the time.*"

"*Being an American Girl means that going through difficult times can be tough,*" writes 11-year-old Ida, "*but there is always a way that you can brighten up the spirit like Molly during WWII and Kit during the Depression.*" Ida has attempted to "brighten up the spirit" by participating in a program that delivers meals to the elderly and the invalid "*who could not get out of their homes and buy food for themselves much less cook it.*" Ida also put her crafting skills to use by participating in a Christmas tree fundraiser for a local cancer research center. Not only was Ida able to pay tribute to a family member who had died from cancer, but it was a way to give to others who had less and reminded her of Samantha's donations of clothing and toys to the orphanage where Nellie and her sisters stayed before they were adopted by Samantha's wealthy uncle. Ida

wanted her essay to inspire attendees of the TMM's exhibit "*to get out there and do some community service to be the best American Girl that you can be"* and she hoped that her essay "*has made you really act on what you believe in*."

That Samantha "*lived in a time when women weren't allowed to vote but were protesting it"* was a source of inspiration for nine-year-old Crystal's contribution to the fight against cancer. "*I believe that cancer should have a cure,*" writes Crystal. *"Samantha taught me to fight for it.*" To that end, Crystal has walked in fundraisers, donated toys to the cancer unit at a local children's hospital, and even cut off her hair for the charity organization Locks of Love. Not only is Crystal inspired by Samantha's generosity, but she is inspired by Addy's perseverance, claiming "*Addy taught me the most important lesson: to never give up.*" She carries this lesson with her to her extracurricular activities, which include both athletics and Girl Scouts. These activities are very meaningful to Crystal, and they also require significant effort and determination but "*Addy taught [her] to keep up the hard work.*" Crystal concludes, "*As you can see, American Girls do more than just entertain us. They teach us skills that we might have to use later on in life. So when you read an American Girl book, think about the lesson it teaches you, and how you can use it in your life.*"

"*Molly helped in the war effort,"* writes eight-year-old Nicole, "*I, therefore, decided to help with the war effort.*" In order to do so, Nicole assembled care packages containing food and her hand-drawn pictures to send to hardworking soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nicole also donated her hair to a charity organization that provides wigs for pediatric cancer patients and, she writes, "*I*

help others by clowning with my grandma at churches. I like to see the kids laugh." Finally, 10-year-old Daphne, whose essay I will revisit in the section below, blends American Girl's lessons of helping others with its lessons in tolerance. She writes, "*You know that no matter what your religion is, what country you were born in, or what your skin color is, you have a willingness [as an American Girl] to help and treat others with respect.*" Daphne engages in community service activities both through her church and with her Girl Scout troop to help others who are less fortunate than she. At church, Daphne fixes meals for the homeless and shops for back-to-school clothes for children in foster care. With her fellow Girl Scouts, she puts together craft projects for patients at a local children's hospital. "*In my heart,"* Daphne writes, "*I know the importance of being kind and helping others"* and this is why she identifies herself as a true American Girl.

As the essays above illustrate, American Girl plays an important role in inspiring girls to do good deeds in their communities and they draw inspiration to act from identifying with particular characters from the *Collection*. Other individuals or institutions may work to support or reinforce American Girl's message to help others. Several of the participants indicated that they are active participants in Girl Scouts, an organization that supports girls' engagement in community service in a number of different ways. Many girls are also members of faith communities and they may be learning lessons about helping others from these venues as well. Last by not least, girls' families may also be important in fostering in American Girl readers and enthusiasts the desire to help others.

Lessons about helping others and being good, loyal friends regardless of differences are important topics across essays. How American Girl has inspired readers to negotiate, understand and value diversity and multiculturalism is the issue to which I now turn my attention.

"Friendship is Important No Matter Any Differences"

As discussed in Chapter 2, American Girl engages in a number of representational strategies suggestive of their support for multiculturalism and diversity. The first strategy the company engages in is to feature characters of color in the signature *American Girls Collection*. By offering Native American (Kaya), African American (Addy and Cécile), Hispanic (Josefina), and Jewish (Rebecca) characters, American Girl suggests that "ethnicity is a key element of the American imagined community" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:144). The different combinations of skin, hair, and eye color of the "non-ethnic" dolls in the signature *American Girls Collection* as well as the 40 different combinations of physical features for the customizable My American Girl line are suggestive of the heterogeneity that characterize real girls.

The second representational strategy involves featuring ethnically diverse models or girls in catalog photos and book illustrations. As discussed earlier, this strategy seeks to establish that an American national identity "includes a heterogeneous group [of girls];" it also seeks to build identification between the characters and real girls because models and dolls are often portrayed participating in the same activities or sharing similar features and interests

(Acosta-Alzuru 1999:201).[48] The third strategy, and the one most relevant for this analysis, is that within the stories themselves, American Girl shows characters in episodes that attempt to address and promote issues of multicultural understanding (Inness 1998: 172). The friendship between Kirsten Larson and Singing Bird illustrates American Girl's attempt deal with cultural differences and issues of multiculturalism. Innes (1998) writes, "Kirsten must address the distrust felt by many settlers toward Native Americans when she and Singing Bird become friends" (pg. 172). Additionally, Kirsten's stories convey the effects that European/American settlement had on Native Americans and almost subverts the stereotype of Native Americans as the historical "bad guys" in Euro-American settlement of the Great Plains.[49]

Regardless of whether scholars agree that these strategies demonstrate a legitimate and successful commitment to diversity on the part of American Girl, essayists generally accept the message that multiculturalism and tolerance are valuable assets to their experiences and identities as American girls. Girls' essays suggest that physical or cultural differences do not preclude one from

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[48] See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the critique offered by Story (2002) on American Girl's success with this representational strategy.

[49] Nardone (2002) points out that the representation of Kirsten's friendship with Singing Bird works more convincingly to reinforce stereotypes of cultural difference than to subvert them. For example, several characters in the second book of the series, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson,* refer to Native Americans as savages or equate the unruly behavior of White children with the behavior of Indians (pp. 94-95). Nardone (2002) also points out, "What is also quite interesting is that Singing Bird has no true personality until she miraculously begins speaking very good English" (pg. 95). Furthermore, Kirsten never tells her family of her friendship with Singing Bird and she fails to divulge that Singing Bird showed her a cave in which Kirsten and her father take shelter during a blizzard, "further support[ing] the notion of otherness and the marginalizing of Native Americans within [*Kirsten's Surprise*, the third book of her series]" (pg. 98).

claiming an American Girl identity; in fact, diversity-- as well as tolerance and acceptance of diversity-- is an important component of what makes one an American girl.

Brenna, age 10, writes, "*American Girl has taught me not to judge people by how they look but how they act. There is an American Girl doll for everyone to share her hopes and dreams with. When I see these dolls, I realize that people around me don't have to look exactly the same either*." For Brenna, the diversity represented by the dolls is important in and of itself, but behaviors emphasizing one's good character are equally important. Nine-year-old Marcela claims, "*You can be any color, any religion, any age or any size and still be an American girl. Look around you. There are American girls everywhere."* In Marcela's view, differences add dimension to an otherwise flat world. "*Say you are going to a school,"* she writes. *"There are lots of different kids in one class, right? So, each can bring a different patch for a quilt and put them together. It can make a beautiful picture made of different squares. It's the same with us. Girls can be very different but they can all be American girls."* 10-year-old Gwen shares Marcela's views; she writes, "*In each story, each girl is different in a good way because life would be boring if everyone were the same.*" For 11-year old Violet, difference is "*admirable*." She writes, "*Our difference makes us all special and unique. Think of how much Samantha and Nellie appreciated each other. They were different and still became best friends*."

For 10-year-old Daphne, multiculturalism and diversity are not only salient components of her identity and her lived experiences, but they are defining

characteristics of being an American girl in the 21st century. She writes, "*I am an example of religion, culture, and skin color blending together to make me a modern day American Girl*." Daphne was "*born in the US and raised in a Christian home*," but her family comes from Western Europe, Central Europe and the Middle East and have, as she describes, *"diverse religions and cultural views, as well as diverse physical characteristics. I am a blend of all these things*." For seven-year-old Keira, there is no distinction between her ethnic background and her American identity; the tenets of American Girl multiculturalism allow her to view them as compatible and, to some extent, indistinguishable. She writes, "*It's fun being an American girl because we eat Pakistani food*." As an American girl, Keira and her family can follow prohibitions against eating pork but also enjoy cultural celebrations such as Eid, where "*[t]here's music and mahendi which is like a tattoo of colorful flowers and plants*." Keira's ability to retain the cultural traditions of her family in an environment supportive of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism are pleasurable experiences associated with being an American girl.

The characters do factor into girls' understanding of cross-cultural differences, and several essayists draw inspiration from Kirsten's friendship with Singing Bird that Inness (1998) argued was an important attempt to promote cross-cultural understanding. 10-year-old Erica recalls befriending a young girl from Eastern Europe who was visiting the States for a summer. Erica could not communicate well with her new friend because of a language barrier, *"so [they] found a way to communicate without a word, just like Kirsten and Singing Bird*."

According to Erica, the summer was an important learning experience for her, and one that American Girl factored into significantly. She writes, "*I learned that no matter how different you are there is always a way to come together in friendship*."

Danica, an eight-year-old whose essay provides the title for this section, said the American Girl stories have helped her embrace her difference and share her culture with others as the only Jewish American girl in her school. In particular, Kirsten's story of arriving in America without any knowledge of English helped her to accept this distinction "*instead of being afraid to be different."* Additionally, Danica applies the lessons of Kirsten's friendship with Singing Bird to her friendship with her best friend who is culturally and religiously different from Danica. She writes, "*At my school my best friend is Muslim; even though our beliefs are different Jada and I are Best Friends. We like to play and shop together. American Girl has taught me that friendship is important no matter any differences."*

Not only do the American Girls stories inspire nine-year-old Felicia to be as helpful to her family and friends as possible, but she also writes of how they inspire her "*to be a friend to everyone even if they are different*." For example, Felicia recounts the story of how Molly and her English friend Emily are going to share a birthday party. At first, there is contention in this arrangement because *"Emily won't let Molly have cake or fruit punch like Molly wants to*," insisting

instead on a traditional English tea party, but eventually the two comprise and "*they have fun at the party and become good friends.*"[50]

Essays also suggest that girls use the American Girl lessons about diversity and multiculturalism to navigate, understand, and enrich their friendships and experiences, especially when they are different from those they encounter or when they encounter individuals who are different from themselves. Eight-year-old Phoebe draws inspiration from Addy in order to stay true to her Jewish beliefs. She writes, "*I am Jewish so sometimes I know how it feels to not be liked by others. It takes courage and strength to be Jewish*." Addy's perseverance inspires Phoebe "*to be the best person [she] can be*" because *"[w]hen Addy and her mother got to freedom everyone still turned them down and they kept on trying to be free*."

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, the lessons that American Girl teaches to its readers are more personally felt and meaningful than what scholars suggest through their analyses of American Girl texts alone. While it may be true that girls' attention to philanthropy and friendship are embedded in ideologies of traditional femininity, they are meaningful activities to engage in and they give girls a sense of doing something good. Furthermore, through identification with the characters, American Girl encourages the acquisition of practical skills such as increased literacy and interest in history and provides girls

[50] Emily's insistence on an English tea party for the girls' shared birthday celebration arises precisely because Emily is *not* American, but rather British. Emily stays with the McIntire family after she escapes war-torn London. The Molly stories highlight the importance of allies, cooperation, and adaptability during World War II so this provides a relevant context through which an explicitly non-American character can be absorbed by the signature historical collection.

with templates for dealing with characteristics that make them unique or for navigating a diverse and multicultural society.

CHAPTER 6: AMERICAN GIRL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN GIRLHOOD

> *"With all of today's high standards, it's tough to be a girl growing up in today's world. With the media, peer pressure... living in modern times creates an environment of uncertainty and confusion."*
>
> *-- Leslie, 7 years old*

> *"Living through this millennium is an experience I am glad that American girls all around the country are living. It makes us even stronger as we are living through a time of war."*
>
> *-- Penelope, 11 years old*

Historian Steven Mintz (2004) observes, "Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society, and each generation of children has had to wrestle with the social, political, and economic constraints of its own historical period" (pg. vii). Yet despite this reality, a number of deep-seated myths influence our ideas about contemporary childhood. We believe, for example, that modern childhood is a carefree time devoted to educational pursuits and play and is, by extension, free from adult responsibilities. We believe that children experience their families and homes "as a haven and bastion of stability in an ever-changing world" and that contemporary American society is, largely, "child-friendly" and highly concerned with the decline of childhood (Mintz 2004:2-3). The quotes introducing this chapter, however, are illustrative of Mintz's observation: today's American girls are no more insulated from significant social, political, and economic issues that characterize their society than the generations of children who came before them.

The essayists whose experiences and reflections form the backbone of this analysis were born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. The issues that girls face today affect not only how they experience girlhood, but also how they come to view themselves as American girls and how they think of contemporary American girlhood in relation to girlhood in the past and girlhood abroad. In this chapter, I suggest that on the one hand, American Girl functions as a "protective" device that girls may draw from or turn to for guidance when confronted with ideologies, values, behaviors that threaten their sense of a positive, safe, and wholesome girlhood. These threats include the pressure to grow up and mature too quickly and the role of negative media messages about popularity and self-worth, both of which can have negative effects on girls' sense of self, friendships, and other social relationships. Essays indicated that the company's *American Girl* magazine, in particular, was an important tool for girls.

On the other hand, I demonstrate that American Girl has an ambiguous relationship to the ways girls understand complex political and cultural issues that, ironically, shape their sense of what it means to be an American Girl. For example, two themes emerged in girls' reflections on "the essence of modern girlhood" in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and demonstrate American Girl's ambiguous role in shaping girls' discussions (TMM "Call for Essays" 2006). The first theme is that girlhood today is better than girlhood in the past; the second is that it is better to be a girl in the United States than in another country. I suggest that these themes of girlhood past and girlhood abroad implicate American Girl in different ways in girls' understanding what it means to be an American Girl.

In the first instance, there is a very strong and direct relationship between the American Girl stories and girls' perceptions of girlhood in the past. While girls also draw from other repositories of knowledge about the historical experiences of girlhood-- for example, what they learn about women's history in school-- their familiarity with the American Girl stories directly influences their perceptions. In the second instance, there is little to no direct relationship between girls' perceptions of girlhood abroad and American Girl. Broader cultural narratives or discourses-- including Orientalism, Islamophobia, and the need for Westerners to attend to third-world children's vulnerability-- shape girls' comparisons between American girlhood and girlhood in other countries. These themes emerge, I suggest, from the multiple ways American Girl's target audience understands, interprets, and defines the construct "American girl." In some instances, the construct represents a brand identification and association with American Girl's characters, stories, and values. In other instances, the construct represents the expression of a national identity that is not directly associated with knowing or consuming American Girl stories or products.

Contemporary Contexts of American Girlhood

For parents, American Girl is a trusted, respected, and worthwhile brand because of its mission to provide a cultural space in which "girlhood [is viewed as] as a period of innocence;" it is a brand that "help[s] girls remain girls a little longer" (Marshall 2009:97). American Girl's historical fiction protagonists and their doll embodiments are pre-pubescent and, consequently, love interests, romantic relationships, and preoccupation with body image, sex and sexuality,

and peer popularity do not figure into their stories. Additionally, the dolls appear modest and girlish rather than sexualized and cartoonish like Barbie and Bratz dolls (Marshall 2009). Parents believe that American Girl dolls and books will transmit wholesome and patriotic values to their daughters who they believe are forced to grow up too quickly in an era that is characterized by "a loss of values and unity" (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002:157). Many parents also believe that American Girl stories help girls "negotiate the broken terrain of girlhood in a plural postmodern society" by "providing a counterweight to popular culture's negativity and violence" (Diamond *et al* 2009:126-127).

While the company developed out of Rowland's own personal disappointment with the types and quality of toys available to girls, Rowland also capitalized on parents' concerns that the consumer culture their daughters were exposed to and engaged with forced them to grow up too fast (Diamond 2009:123). American Girl functions as a "moral salve for a culture whose conception of girlhood was often painfully at odds with girls'-- and mothers'-- day-to-day experiences" (pp. 122-123). To "do right by little girls," the historical fiction novels work to convey lessons and tales about "maintaining supportive and loving relationships with family and friends, engendering trust, perseverance, and dealing with embarrassment and disappointment" (Diamond *et al* 2009:122). The company also offers a library of self-care, self-help, and etiquette manuals through which "smart" girls can obtain expert guidance and advice on matters that reflect recent social, technological, and cultural transformations (i.e. internet

safety, parental divorce, bullying).[51] Additionally, the company developed *American Girl Magazine* as an "age-appropriate alternative" to other teen magazines, which critics argue negatively affect girls' self-images and "solidify feelings of economic and taste inadequacy" through depictions of celebrities in pricey, name-brand, high-end fashions (Quart 2003:5).

In their essays, a number of girls report feeling pressure to grow up before they are developmentally ready. As is evident in the chapter's introductory statements by Leslie and Uma, this form of age compression creates tremendous amounts of social pressure for girls. Leslie, whose devotion to American Girl often results in teasing, reports that her belief in and adherence to the values associated with American Girl created a rift between her and her best friend Becca. According to Leslie, Becca "*HATES American Girl,"* but perhaps most significant of their rift is Leslie's belief that her former best friend "*is growing up way too fast because of the peer pressure and values of today.*" [52] Ten-year-old Brenna feels that one major problem she faces today is "*people wanting me to grow up too fast,*" but as an avid reader of *American Girl Magazine* and the American Girl stories, she "*know[s] that [she] can be whom [she] want[s]*" without others trying to negatively influence her behavior.[53]

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[51] Many of the American Girl advice titles begin with the phrase *A Smart Girl's Guide to* _____ (i.e. *the Internet*; *Her Parents' Divorce*; *Staying Home Alone*; *Friendship Troubles,* etc.). The qualifier "smart" is inserted into the titles with the use of an editorial caret (∧) mark. This representational strategy simultaneously recognizes and celebrates girls' inherent intelligence while also suggesting that one must seek expert advice from American Girl to become smart.

[52] Leslie is also quoted in the introduction to Chapter One. She "lives and breathes" American Girl but is also teased and accused of immaturity due to her investment in American Girl culture.

[53] Brenna is also quoted in Chapter 6; American Girl has increased her interest in history.

Consumer economist Juliet Schor (2004), whose treatise *Born to Buy* details the trends and consequences associated with the commercialization of childhood, notes that age compression is occurring most rapidly among children between the ages of eight and twelve, the same age range that comprises American Girl's target audience. Age compression-- marketers' attempts to target younger kids with products and messages originally designed for older youth or adults-- assumes that children today are more sophisticated than children in earlier eras because of transformations across a variety of institutions such as the family, mass media, and schools. For example, marketers argue that today's children simply know more and are "getting older younger" because of their increased domestic responsibilities in single-parent and divorced families, their exposure to adult media and new technologies, and because they are experiencing puberty and sexual maturity earlier (Schor 2004:56). Age compression has a highly gendered dimension, which is of significant relevance in the study of girls and girls' cultures. One of Schor's (2004) informants complained that marketers transformed "girl power" into "sex power" and, as a result, "Parents were starting to panic," forcing some companies to reverse course (pg. 57). These concerns functioned to give companies like American Girl leverage as a brand that serves "as a protective shield for little girls against the precocious sexualization that is often blamed on consumer culture and, in particular, brand marketers" (Diamond *et al* 2009).

For girls like 10-year-old Brenna, American Girl offers several resources for navigating the territory of modern girlhood, including its advertising-free

American Girl magazine. Although the magazine did not feature prominently in the vast majority of essays (the historical fiction novels, dolls and movies were the more popular texts), it is an important source of advice and guidance for some girls. This reflects the company's "protective" mission. For example, Brenna, a 10-year-old, writes, "*I believe that American Girl is a great guide for girls to find the right path to being strong and better women.*" Brenna is involved with American Girl at a number of levels: she owns a doll, reads the historical fiction novels, and subscribes to *American Girl* magazine. She writes, "*When I read the 'help' at the very end* [of the magazine]*, I love to figure out the problem then read what American Girl has to say.*" Camryn, an 11-year-old, also reads *American Girl* magazine and reports that it "*helps girls like me express their feelings and deal with everyday life*." For Piper, another 11-year-old, the *American Girl* magazine provides an important space where "*girls get to see their thoughts and ideas in print, which means a lot to us*." Piper feels that the magazine "*is inspiring girls around the United States to reach their full potential*."

Another social trend affecting contemporary girlhood is bullying, and, according to Schor (2004), this involves "a new protagonist, the 'alpha girl,' a mean-spirited social enforcer" (pg. 13). Jasmine, a 10-year old, reports, "*Girls have to watch their back or have a lot of friends or [they] will get either made fun of or talked about."* Skylar, a nine-year-old, talks about the importance-- as well as the difficulty-- of being a loyal friend, particularly if "*your friend is not considered 'cool."* According to Skylar, today's television shows set a negative example about friendship and loyalty. She writes, "*On some TV shows people*

are not loyal to their friends because they are not what they call 'cool.' That is not a good example to American Girls around the World."

The role of media in children's lives cannot be understated. Research by the Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that television viewing is most intense for children between the ages of eight to thirteen, again, the age range that comprises American Girl's target audience and, as discussed earlier, that is experiencing substantial age compression through marketing and consumption (Schor 2004). On average, children consume about four hours of television per day-- or almost 30 hours weekly-- and those identified as "heavy watchers," almost one-third of the sample in the Kaiser study, reported watching more than five hours of television daily (Schor 2004:33). Schor (2004) notes that when other forms of media consumption are added to television viewing-- i.e. video games, computers, music, radio, and print media-- children's rates of total media consumption average almost 40 hours weekly (pg. 33).[54]

American Girl itself is a media force, but one that positions itself as counteracting negative images of girls in mainstream media. They have released several made-for-television movies as well as major theatrical films based on their characters. Additionally, the American Girl website provides several interactive ways for girls to engage with or follow their favorite characters. Girls can play computer-based games based loosely on characters' stories or interact

[54] Published in 1999, the Kaiser Family Foundation's *Kids & Media @ the Millenium* could not possibly anticipate the advent of smartphones and the ubiquity of cellphone usage among children and teens. Consumption and engagement with new social media like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, likely skews these figures even higher.

with other American Girl enthusiasts through social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, as discussed in Chapter 1. One cannot assume, however, that American Girl provides the only media to which girls are exposed and we must be cognizant of the ways in which mainstream media bombards girls with messages about their worth being tied to physical beauty, youth, and their sexuality while failing to support girls' development as leaders.[55]

Finally, girls' essays indicate that the economic and political climate of the new millennium profoundly influence their experiences of contemporary girlhood. I address how the volatile economic climate of the first decade of the 21st century shapes the experiences of American girlhood in the following chapter and focus the discussion in this section on the political context of American girlhood in the early 21st century. Whether girls and their families were affected directly or not, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and the United States' subsequent military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan emerge as significant backdrops of contemporary girlhood. It should come as no surprise that identification with Molly McIntire, whose stories are set during American involvement in World War II, factor into many girls' discussions of the War on Terror.

In her essay, 10-year-old Riley, a transplant to the Midwest from the Beltway, recalls, "*On September 11, 2001, my dad's office in the Pentagon was*

[55] For an excellent critique of the negative effects of mass media on girls' empowerment, the 2012 documentary film *Miss Representation* by Jennifer Siebel Newsom is an excellent starting point. For additional information, visit http://www.missrepresentation.org/.

hit by terrorists," though, luckily, because her father's Pentagon office was new, he had not yet moved into it. Riley's father retired from active military duty before the U.S.'s full-scale military involvement in Iraq, but she had experienced his deployments before and, in this regard, American Girl features prominently in Riley's essay. Riley writes, "*My mom read me the Molly books and it helped me a lot"* in dealing with the sadness she experienced when her father served in Europe. She recalled those lessons as two of her aunts prepared to deploy to Iraq to fight in the War on Terror. Riley asserts, "*I learned from the Molly books that sometimes you have to make sacrifices even if it makes you sad. Especially during war time."*

Gretchen, a seven-year-old, also drew a connection between Molly's stories and the war in Iraq. She writes, "*Seeing Molly help her family and help support the soldiers in World War Two made me think about the war in Iraq and how to help the people there. It made me think about war and how terrible it is.*" Jillian, a seven-year-old, is inspired by Molly, too, and believes that girls can help by "*pray[ing] for the people who are fighting in the war and pray[ing] for the kids that are sad because their parent left*. *We can also send care packages and other stuff to them*." In her essay, Jillian points out the costs of war paid by military families. Although it is unclear if she herself had a family member fighting in the War on Terror, Jillian writes, "*More than 1,200 kids in the United States have lost a parent in Iraq or Afghanistan*. *That would be sad if I lost my dad or mom*." She continues, "*There are even more parents that are hurt or sick.*" Eight-year-old Nicole, another girl inspired by stories of Molly's participation "*in*

the war effort," assembles care packages for "*hard working soldiers*."[56] Finally, eight-year-old Nina *"thinks it's cool that [her] dad helps keep our country free"* as a soldier in the Army. She writes, "*Because my dad protects me and my country, I can grow up and make my dreams come true, whatever they are. I'm glad to live in a free country like America.*"

For girls whose connections to the War on Terror were not as intimate as having a loved one fighting in it, American involvement with Iraq and Afghanistan still features prominently in their essays. Besides continuing to succeed academically, eight-year-old Isabelle writes that stopping the war is one of her hopes and dreams for the future. Adele, an 11-year-old whose essay is discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter, writes that being an American Girl is part pride in being American and part "*things that we go through"* that "*makes us an American Girl,*" including she writes, "*Wars with Iraq.*"

As the excerpts in the section above demonstrate, important and significant social and political trends and events shape the context and experiences of contemporary girlhood. I argue that these contemporary contexts and experiences work in tandem with girls' perceptions of American girlhood in previous historical eras, which are often-- but not exclusively-- informed by American Girl stories, as well as by other discourses that circulate in the culture at large. The construction of contemporary girlhood for the essayist does not exist without constructions of the past. The past and the present experiences of

[56] See Chapter 5. Nicole also "clowns" with her grandmother and has participated in the Locks of Love program as a hair donor.

girlhood are co-constructed in girls' essays and supported by American Girl's assertions that while some things in the "lives" of the historical fiction characters are different from some things in contemporary girls' lives, things such as "families, friendships, and feelings haven't changed much through the years" (Acosta-Alzuru 1999:188).

"…So Much Better Than When My Great Grandmother Lived"

Girls expressed frustration that, historically, women were restricted to "proper" activities, confined almost exclusively to the domestic sphere, and under men's control with little autonomy or independence. Women's lack of rights in earlier historical eras, too, was cause for consternation for the essayists. They felt it was unfair that girls and women in earlier times had fewer opportunities than boys and men to obtain an education, to work and have access to their own income, and to play sports. Finally, while the lack of "modern" technologies complicated women's lives and added to their tedious workloads, this also fostered creativity in their play, which some essayists and scholars agreed is lacking in today's media-saturated and technology-addicted society.

The essay written by eleven-year-old Alondra, which provides the title for this section, contains examples that are representative of these themes. In the first half her essay, Alondra writes about her great-grandmother Sophia's experiences of being 12 years old in 1899. She writes that Sophia had a lot of fun playing house and hosting tea parties with her friends, but she also reports, "*The ladies and girls d[id]n't have the rights that the men [had]*," like the right to vote. Sofia spent "*most of* [her] *time in the house with* [her] *mother, baking food,*

tending to the garden, or knitting and sewing clothes, blankets and much more." Aware of an upcoming election at her father's workplace, Sophia wistfully hoped, according to Alondra, "*Someday women will earn the rights that we should have."*

In the second half of her essay, Alondra discusses how girlhood has changed in the century since Sophia was born. Writing "*108 years later*" than Sofia, Alondra happily reports, "*For one thing, we are allowed to vote now*. *The ladies don't have to sew or knit in order to make clothes as we go out to the stores and buy them now*." Alondra insists that despite the passage of time, the girls of her generation share many of the same interests and values as the girls of her great-grandmother's generation. She notes, "*We still go to church and practice good manners*."

Alondra hints at the implications that computer technology has for American society, in general, and on the experience of girlhood, in particular. Discussing the ubiquity of computers from the grocery store to the gas pump, she observes, "*Computers have many great advantages however they have taken away the need for people to do the work."* Additionally, computers and other modern technology make life more complicated and fast-paced, and relevant to an analysis of girlhood, may affect how children play. Alondra writes, "*When you play a game today it is different than making up your own game or being creative like my great-grandmother did with her friends.*"

Unlike Alondra, who does not mention any American Girl characters or stories in her essay, eight-year-old Macy's knowledge of the Samantha stories influences her comparisons between girlhood in the past and girlhood today. For

example, maintaining a proper feminine image emerges as an important characteristic of girlhood in the past. Macy writes, "*Back when Samantha lived, she was expected by her Grandmother to be a young lady. She had to look good all of the time and she couldn't ride a bicycle most of the time,"* because it was considered unbecoming. Although turn-of-the-century industrial innovation and technological "progress in America" are of important themes in at least one of Samantha's stories-- *Samantha Learns a Lesson* (Hade 2000),-- Macy observes, "*She lived in a time that was really hard because she didn't have many things to make her hard work easier.*"[57]

Often, the clothing that girls and women wore in earlier historical eras gives modern girls reason to celebrate that they are experiencing girlhood today as opposed to in the past. Nine-year-old Fiona writes about her great-grandmother Emily's experience of girlhood in 1900. According to Fiona, Emily and her friends liked to crochet and make dresses for their dolls, but, she writes, they "*only ma[d]e dresses because dresses [were] proper.*" Additionally, during Emily's girlhood, "*Women [wore] dresses with hoop skirts every day, definitely*

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[57] According to Nardone's (2002) and Miskec's (2009) analyses, Samantha does have *someone* to make her work easier and her name is Jessie, the African American seamstress employed by Samantha's grandmother. When Samantha must make herself presentable to her grandmother, she goes to Jessie for help after she has torn her stockings and messes up her hair (Nardone 2002:105). As discussed previously in Chapter 2, Jessie cleans up an ant infestation caused by Samantha's attempt at "fun" (Miksec 2009:106).

Hade (2000) points out that in *Samantha Learns a Lesson,* the second book in the her series, Nellie delivers a reality check to Samantha about the developing industrial factory system. In a prize-winning speech about "Progress in America," Samantha extolls the virtues of the factory system and its ability to "make anything well and cheaply." Samantha rewrites her speech for the next performance after Nellie "sets Samantha straight on the realities of working in the factories--long hours, low wages, and unhealthy working conditions" (Hade 2000:159).

not pants," even to do chores. Contrasting her life today with Emily's life in the early 1900s, Fiona admits, "*I don't sew and I don't have to wear skirts and dresses all the time."*

Naomi, a nine-year-old who "*loves the adventures of the American Girls*" and "*also likes the girls because they had courage in themselves"* reports learning that "*women wore corsets [and] they had to fan themselves so they wouldn't faint*." Eight-year-old Bailey is glad that girls today "*don't have to wear big puffy dresses"* as girls did during Felicity's lifetime. She learned from the "Peek into the Past" section of Felicity's stories that women's tight clothing contributed to fainting.[58] "*Now,"* however*, "American girls have choices about what to wear."*

For 10-year old Dominique, "*one of the great things about being an American Girl is getting some privileges that boys get!!!,"* a sentiment that has both temporal and nationalistic nuances. Dominique writes that "*[b]ack in old times and even in some other countries today*" women had limited access to or participation in higher education, employment, and representational politics. She continues, "*Back then girls and women would feel pretty bad if a mayor or*

[58] According to Barbara Ehrenreich and Diedre English (2005), a "cult of invalidism" developed in the United States in the mid- to late-nineteenth century and "high-fashion" was directly implicated in (middle-class) women's sickness. They report that in the winter, women wore an average of 37 pounds of street clothing, with almost twenty of those pounds suspended in skirts from the waist. Tightly laced corsets exerted an average of 21 pounds of pressure (and up to extremes of 88 pounds of pressure!) on women's internal organs, causing short-term problems such as indigestion, constipation, shortness of breath and weakness. Long-term medical problems associated with women's corsets included bent or fractured ribs and liver displacement. Among the more gruesome medical conditions caused by corsets was uterine prolapse, in which the pressure of the corset gradually forced the uterus out of the vagina (Eherenreich and English 2005:120).

someone was telling you what to do and you couldn't even vote for that one or not!"

Olivia, another 10 year old, offers some ambivalent views about girlhood in the past. She writes, "*Well, in earlier times, being a woman or a girl in America wasn't so great or exciting, and though it wasn't boring, in pioneer times, women stayed home with children and did domestic jobs, like stay-at-home moms of today.*" Failing to account for the physicality required of domestic work, Olivia writes, "*In the past, women and girls would not be able to play sports or do 'hard work' because they were considered dainty and proper, even in America.*" Today, however, Olivia revels in the fact that "*12-year old girls could be suiting up to play football. A team of women could build a house for the homeless or be construction workers.*" Like Dominique, Olivia's assessment of American girlhood in the past also applies to her understanding of girlhood in other countries, a point taken up more fully in the following section. She asserts, "*And even today, in some countries, the culture is still like that* [women cannot work outside of the home]*, but not in America.*"

What is interesting about Olivia's essay is that she does not base her knowledge of girlhood in the past solely on what she has read in the American Girl stories; instead she credits real historical women with "*chang[ing] the way we think, live, and learn, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, Marie Curie, and even Oprah Winfrey!"* She is not the only essayist to do this; other essayists also discuss the contributions of historical female figures. However, essayists usually discuss the contributions of real historical figures in the same manner as they discuss

American Girl stories and characters, suggesting that the contributions of real figures to women's rights are similar to contributions made by the fictional heroines.

For example, 10-year-old Penelope draws inspiration from the American Girls Kit and Molly as well as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott. Similarly, 11-year-old Yvette mentions the "*founders of women's rights"* and lists Susan B. Anthony, Helen Keller, Sacagawea, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Tubman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Molly Pitcher, Amelia Earhart, and Clara Barton as integral to American heritage. She is as inspired by these real women and the role they played in speaking out "*so that women would not have to sit darning socks all day in a skirt"* as she is by the American Girl characters. According to Penelope, these pioneers proved that women *"have a mind and are as intelligent as men*."

In general, essayists who compared contemporary American girlhood with American girlhood in the past believe that their opportunities are relatively limitless and that their gender does not (or, at the very least, should not) prevent them from doing anything they want to do. This is reflected in the myriad career aspirations they hold, which range from traditionally female-identified occupations such as teaching and being a beautician to lesser-female-identified careers such as restaurateurs, pharmacists, FBI investigators, and surgeons. The essays also reveal the influence that American Girl has on shaping girls' perceptions of girlhood in the past. Many essayists drew directly from American Girls stories to describe the conditions of historical girlhood. They tended to focus on women's

limited political rights and representation, women's confinement to the domestic sphere, and the ways in which "proper femininity" (as expressed through fashion and behavior) worked to constrain girls in the past. By extension, extended political rights and economic autonomy, women's increased participation in the public sphere, and the liberalization of dress define contemporary girlhood.

Girls are aware that substantial inroads toward gender equality have occurred since their great-grandmothers' generation, however, their essays offer a view of contemporary girlhood that I would argue is an example of "feminism light." Girls demonstrate no discernible awareness that substantial forms of sexism and gender discrimination still occur, largely because the contestation over women's public and private roles-- a context that contributed to American Girl's successful entry into the toy market in the mid-1980s, in the first place-- remains unresolved (Story 2002). While girls' observations that many jobs previously off-limits to women solely because of their gender are now theirs for the taking, girls' essays did not demonstrate an awareness of the prevalence of the gendered wage gap or other forms of contemporary institutionalized sexism.

I find it notable, as well, that in girls' discussions of girlhood in earlier historical eras, the benchmark experience is middle-class girlhood (or at the very least one experienced by girls whose families were economically self-sufficient and socially integrated). Many women were, in fact, relegated to the domestic sphere as the United States transitioned from a primarily agricultural to primarily industrial economy, but the intersections of race, class, and gender also precluded women of color, poor women, and immigrant women from what we

believe are timeless girlhood experiences (such as playing, learning to needlepoint, etc.). Although some essayists, for example, focus on the discomfort of women's Victorian-era fashions, there is no recognition that the emergent "Cult of Invalidism" did not extend to working-class women. These women were generally unrecognized as "real" (proper) women because of their class and racial-ethnic backgrounds and their need to participate in paid labor; their need to participate in paid labor precluded them from the "luxury" of illness in the first place (Ehrenreich and English 2005).

The construction of contemporary girlhood does not end with comparisons to the past. Essayists also constructed contemporary American girlhood against girlhood abroad; it is through this second theme that American Girl's influence in shaping what it means to be an American Girl is less stable and direct.

"In Other Countries, Women and Girls Aren't Really Wanted…"[59]

As the heading to this section suggests, many girls who compared American girlhood with girlhood in other countries believed women and girls abroad were only valued for their potential roles as wives and as workers. There appeared to be an overall agreement among many essayists that "*women and girls aren't really wanted*" in some societies and, conversely, girls are more highly valued in the United States. In particular, essayists believed this to be the case with Afghanistan, Iraq, India, China, and some African countries. There was a general tendency for essayists who compared girlhood in the U.S. with girlhood

[59] Angelina, nine years old.

in other nations to include a discussion of multiple countries or multiple historical eras, rather than just limiting their focus to one nation or to the present day.

An essay written by 12-year-old Kacie provides a good example of girls' propensity for comparing (and conflating) multiple societies and epochs in one instance. According to Kacie, being an American girl means not having to fear for her life because she or her family might disagree with the views and policies of the government. In particular, she relates that she "*will never have to hide in fear for my life, trusting other people to hide me like Anne Frank did*." As an American girl, Kacie relishes in her right to speak freely and protest. Freedom to move about in her neighborhood, without an escort and without fear, is also important to Kacie. She claims that, unlike in Afghanistan, she can play freely in shorts without fear of physical punishment. Kacie remarks, "*The government can't have policemen beat me to death for not covering my whole body.*" Additionally, as an American girl, Kacie does not have to worry that she will be a child bride and she is glad she can choose her spouse and marry when she feels she is ready to do so. She writes, "*I have read about girls in India getting married to men who are older than them by 15 or 20 years sometimes, and these girls get married when they are seven."* In addition to marrying too young, Kacie is concerned that girls in India have no say in choosing their husbands. She writes, "*The family of a girl picks out the man then the girl gets married and is a slave to her husband and his family until she dies which is usually around 35.*"

Kayla, 17 years old, very specifically notes that she is glad to be a girl in the U.S. rather than in South Africa because she is able to bathe and change

clothes daily, whereas "*people in South Africa bathe in the same water as elephants. They wear the same clothes every day because their options are limited."* Kayla writes that many children in South Africa are "*imbedded in poverty*" and "*are starving.*" Kayla also believes that American constitutional protections for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness fundamentally influence her ability to be an American girl. She speculates that without the Constitution, "*I would be an American slave. I would be like the women in Bagdad and Iraq. The women in those countries must cover their entire bodies in with what is known as a burkah* (sic)." For Kayla, the burka symbolizes women's oppression and the inability of the wearer to express her individuality, meaning that the women and girls who don them "*don't have a choice to be unique from others.*" Perhaps most importantly, for Kayla, the burka is a symbol of forced faith. She writes, "*The women in those countries are forced to believe that their religion is the only religion, and that the only options they have are to worship their religion, take care of the family, and their homes."*

For some essayists, their status as transnational adoptees influences their perspectives on girlhood in the U.S. and shapes their ideas of how they believe their childhoods might have been if they remained and grew up in their birth countries. Lily, a nine-year-old Chinese American girl, is thankful for what she calls her American "*forever family*." She writes that if she had not been adopted, "*I would still be living in an orphanage in China, sharing toys, clothes, books, and pretty much everything!*" Aside from having her own personal belongings, Lily's access to education is also a benefit for which she feels fortunate. Lily writes, "*I*

am very blessed to be here and get to go to school." She adds parenthetically, "*In China, I probably wouldn't even have been able to go to school!"* Lily's life in the United States is bountiful; she has "*so much more of everything-- friends, church, vacations, a nice home, a family of my own!"* She participates in many activities and feels "*free and independent*." Despite her good fortune in the U.S., Lily has "*never forgotten about those kids still in China, and for* [her] *9th birthday, instead of presents,* [she] *asked for donations to go to those who aren't as fortunate as* [she is]." Lily wishes that other Chinese children will also have the luck of finding their own "*forever families.*"

Eight-year-old Brooklynn is another essayist who was born in China and adopted by an American family. Like Lily, Brooklynn is happy that she is free to go to school. "*Being an American girl*," according to Brooklynn, "*also means when I grow up I can choose how many children I want to have*." Brooklynn believes that, occupationally, the world is her oyster; she writes, "*I can grow up to be anything I want, like a doctor, dentist, gymnast or a teacher*." In Brooklynn's estimation, these goals are possible because unlike China, which she "*hopes and dreams… will someday be free*," the United States is the epitome of freedom. In addition to one day meeting her Chinese birth parents, Brooklynn also hopes that "*other girls from the Chinese orphanages can all become Americans"* because being an American girl is "*special*."

Arianna, a nine-year-old born in India, believes that her birth mother "*had to make the hardest choice*" and put her up for adoption due to poverty and social norms that shunned her for bearing a child out of wedlock. Arianna writes,

"*I guess you have to be married to have a baby. So she could not take care of me. She sent me to an orphanage. She knew that the people who work there would find me a forever loving family*." Arianna writes positively of her experience in the orphanage, noting that the women caring for her and the other children held her often (she was, according to her essay, only four months old at the time of her adoption). According to Arianna, what she likes about the United States is that "*there are lots of peach, tan, and brown people."* She writes, "*I feel okay being brown skinned because in America all people are equal*," something that makes "*America completely different from India.*"

Whether the essayists are American by birthright or by adoption, virtually all agreed on the characteristics that make girlhood in the United States preferable to growing up female elsewhere. To be an American girl means that one is free to make significant life choices for herself without coercion. For 10-year-old Chloe this means "*the choices of who you marry and what job you want*." Being an American girl means that one has access to education. Additionally, "freedom" of worship and religion characterizes American girlhood, according to some respondents. Nine-year-old Avery writes, "*American girls are able to choose what religion they want and what they want to pray about. I've heard that in some countries girls are told what to pray about and what religion to follow.*" Charlotte, a 10-year-old, concurs that "*[i]n some countries you have to be a certain religion. For example, in Iraq and Iran you have to be Muslim*." Nine-year-old Savannah writes, "*I'm also very glad I'm living in modern America*

because we are free to worship Jesus here. In other places you have to worship their false gods and they do not let you worship Jesus."

In essays comparing American girlhood with girlhood in other countries, *none* of the writers suggested that they developed these views from reading American Girl books or stories, nor did they provide any examples from American Girl stories that support this connection. This, then, suggests that the essayists' perceptions of girlhood in the United States compared to girlhood in other countries are influenced by a broader set of discourses in which the American Girl plays only a small part. As indicated in Chapter 2, however, several scholars have pointed to American Girl's implicit commitment to Christian values.

Nielsen (2002), Nardone (2002), and LaConte (2002), for example, have all argued that the *American Girls Collection* is religiously homogenous; with the exception of just two characters in the historical collection (Kaya and Rebecca Rubin), the characters are presumably Christian because their book series contain a story revolving around Christmas. LaConte (2002) suggests that the Kirsten and Molly stories demonstrate that inclusion into the American Girl community and identity requires adopting the cultural practices associated with the Protestant work ethic and Christian militancy. Nardone (2002) suggests that American Girl's failure to represent religious pluralism in a sufficient way marginalizes girls who practice Judaism or Islam. The girls who wrote about coercive religious practices associated with Islam, for example, do not have the benefit of reading a more theologically accurate or sensitive depiction of its belief system, rituals, and practices. There is no American Girl character to convey

that information in an age appropriate, educational, and entertaining manner (as Nielsen [2002] suggests American Girl does with the span of American history).

In some essays, writers identified particular countries that they believe do not value women; these countries (i.e. Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran) feature prominently in the national discourses supporting American military involvement in the War on Terror. Girls' status as transnational adoptees likely influenced their perceptions of girlhood in countries like China and India. In other words, the countries referenced reflect the contemporary context of our military engagement in the Middle East or contexts of personal salience such as how one came to join a family and, by extension, the nation. The essays demonstrate that Inness's (1998) assertion that American Girl stories promote American supremacy and American-centric values is tenuous at best. The texts themselves are not as xenophobic as Inness (1998) makes them out to be.

In the context of the War on Terror, for example, Malcolm Brown (2000) identifies a discourse of Islamophobia, an extension of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Islamophobia, according to Brown (2000) reflects "a shift from a sensual stereotype of the Orient, to a discourse of Islamic fundamentalism, fanaticism, and oppression of women" (pg. 77). Both Orientalism and Islamophobia are predicated on beliefs of Western intellectual and cultural superiority. Brown (2000) suggests that Islamophobia contributes to the assertions "that Muslims mistreat women, use religion to justify political and military projects, confuse religion and culture, interpret the Qur'an literally, face problems of political representation and legitimacy, and are compliant and

unreflective" (pg. 80). These beliefs contribute to the notion that Islam and Muslim cultures are monolithic, irrational, primitive, and sexist and, as a result, justify anti-Muslim hostility (Brown 2000:80). Brown (2000:74) asserts that Islamophobia is not "an ideology as such, though it does find ideological expressions;" instead, it is "a (passive) fear or (active) hatred of Muslims."

Girls' essays, as noted above, do reflect fear and misunderstanding about Islam and Muslim practices and many girls relied on extreme examples of fundamentalism-- localized to a small number of specific countries in the Middle East and with whom the United States is engaged with militarily-- to form their comparisons of girlhood in other countries to American girlhood. Girls discussed negative aspects of Muslim women's veiling and covering, as well as their loss of autonomy and exclusion from the public sphere. The political and cultural discourses that justify American military intervention and economic sanctions against a small fraction of the world's Muslim states likely influence these perspectives. It also reflects perceptions that the oppression of Muslim women is justified by the Qur'an, which many Muslim feminists vehemently argue is not the case. In some fundamentalist states, Muslim coercive controls over women are enacted because of the belief that women are the guardians of cultural and religious values and identity, but this is not significantly different than fundamentalism in *all* of the world's "great" religions including Christianity (Hargreaves 2004[2000]:374).

Girls' perceptions about *hijab* (or religious modesty) fail to account for the range of practices this describes as well as Muslim women's own perceptions

about covering. Jennifer Hargreaves (2004 [2000]) notes that veiling or covering runs the spectrum from "the most extreme fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an" which demands covering the *entire* female body to very liberal interpretations which "tolerate 'decent,' non-provocative Western dress with no veil" (pg. 375). Muslim women themselves hold conflicting views about covering. For some it is a "form of feminism in reverse" and a deliberate choice; for others it is not a voluntary choice and they do wish to resist it but are fearful that "anti-fundamentalist sentiments will be interpreted as anti-Islamic ones and will be used to fuel Islamophobia" (Hargreaves 2004[2000]:375). Essayists have negative assessments about the use of clothing to control women in Muslim societies but, as one popular political cartoon demonstrates, they do not turn that gaze back on their own culture's control of women through clothing and other body projects. In the political cartoon, two women pass one another on the sidewalk. One woman is dressed in a burka with only her eyes exposed; the other woman is dressed in a bikini, her eyes covered by sunglasses. Both women make note of each other's eyes and conclude "What a cruel male dominated society!" The root problem, of course, is not religion, but rather, patriarchy, but girls' essays do not reflect this level of understanding.

In the context of transnational adoption, parents' narratives about their choice to adopt a daughter from Asia may influence the ways in which girls think and talk about their birth countries. Sara Dorow's (2006) research reveals that American adoptive parents' talk constructed China as a "natural choice" from which to seek a child for adoption because the children there-- and especially

girls-- needed to be rescued (pg. 360). In their narratives, parents constructed China "as always in some way uncivilized" (Dorow 2006:372). Chinese children, and especially girls, need saving "from the backwardness of communism and poverty" (Dorow 2006:373). In addition to relying on racialized discourses that frame Chinese adoptees as more racially and culturally desirable than Black adoptees, parents relied on a gendered discourse that constructed Chinese women both as victims of and co-conspirators in "a backward patriarchal system that 'throws away its girls,' as one parent put it" (Dorow 2006:373).[60] In justifying their transnational adoption choices, many American parents expressed a desire to "raise strong young women whose opportunities in America were explicitly superior to those they would have had in China" (Dorow 2006:373).

Based on Dorow's findings, it is not difficult to imagine that Lily, Brooklyn, and Arianna's views about girlhood in China and India might be influenced by their parents' reasons for seeking transnational adoption in the first place. The emphasis that many parents' placed on having a "clean break" in their transnational adoption experience tied into their notions that a Chinese daughter

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[60] Although I focus on Dorow's findings regarding the theme of parents' "need" to rescue Chinese daughters from "uncivilized" China, it should be noted that this is only one dimension of her argument about "how race matters" in transnational adoptions. She argues that race "must be understood in the context of both the gendered American imaginary of China *and* its relationship to the black-white binary" (pg. 358, emphasis in the original). According to Dorow's argument, Asian children are constructed as "racially and culturally proud, assimilable, redeemable" in relation to Black American children, who are constructed as "racially and culturally abject, marginalized, and irredeemable," reflecting a shift in the rescue discourse "from liberal to neoconservative, and from domestic to transnational" (pg. 363). Additionally, "parents encounter their own racialized locations relative to domestic and transnational, Asian and Black" when they deal with the ways in which their children's cultural and racial differences are made visible (i.e. through name calling, negative representations of the child's birth country, or the child's questions as to why she was abandoned) (Dorow 2006:374).

(and an orphan, in particular) could translate "into a child more easily re-made for family and nation" because her "kinship and cultural attachments are seen as not fully formed" (Dorow 2006:368). For example, two parents in Dorow's study, George and Patty, wanted to adopt a newborn "so she could grow up as an American" and because she would not have to "overcome" her culture, language or any other vestiges of her birth country as an older child might (Dorow 20006:368). Dorow asserts that these sentiments reflect discourses of women's mutable identities and Asian Americans' marginality.[61] Family, then, is an intervening site "in the racialized process of creating individual and national identities, not just because families are sites of national reproduction but because the nation is imagined as family" (pg. 359).

The essayists' identification as "American girls" and "American" girls constitutes their membership in an "imagined community" that is predicated on the corporate construction of "immemorial pasts and limitless futures" as well as broader discourses circulating in the culture about what it means to be an American (Anderson 1983; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002). Essayists believe that while they may face substantial pressures and challenges in their lives today, being a girl in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a more enjoyable, free, and happy experience than if they were growing up in America in the past and, especially, than if they were growing up abroad.

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[61] For discussion on women's mutability and Asian American marginality, see Brackette Williams' (1996) *Women Out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality* and Lisa Lowe's (1996) *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, respectively.

American Girl's historical fiction novels, magazine, and advice titles provide girls with tools to navigate the pitfalls of contemporary girlhood.

Girls' knowledge about the difficulties associated with American girlhood in the past are directly informed by the company's texts and its representations of history. However, these texts do not work in isolation; girls also learn many lessons about the limited opportunities for women and girls in the nation's past through their exposure to official school curricula and from stories told by their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. Essayists' understanding of girlhood abroad is shaped by political discourses that pit the "West" against "Other" countries, notably those that are culturally and religiously different and who have, in the immediate past, posed a threat to national security. Understandings of girlhood abroad are also potentially informed by narratives in which non-Western children, especially girls, must be rescued from abuse, neglect, and opportunities precluded by poverty and sexism. For essayists who are transnational adoptees, this may be the case.

As girls' essays demonstrate, girlhood in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is rife with challenges. American Girl's stories and texts attempt to buffer girls from the pressures and demands of today's consumer society. American Girl functions as a component of girls' cultural tool kit to help them contend with the pressure to grow up before their time, as well with which to understand contemporary social and political contexts through identification with American Girl stories and characters. However, girls are also influenced by discourses that exist outside of the American Girl enterprise. It is important to

consider how these external discourses simultaneously support, challenge, or transform the company's intended meanings and, consequently, how girls use them to make sense of their place in the world and in history.

CHAPTER 7: CHALLENGES TO BEING AN "IDEAL" AMERICAN GIRL

> *"I might be struggling to stay alive, but I'm overcoming [cancer]… I think American Girl helps me with some of this stuff, because I know each and every one* [of the characters] *had a challenge."*
>
> *-- Adele, 11 years old*

> *"At the exact same time when I was deciding which doll I should get, my dad lost his job. It made me feel really sad. We could not do as many things as my friends and cousins did… Now, sometimes when I get jealous of what others have, I just remember the hard times Kit had to face in the Depression."*
>
> *--Anita, 9 years old*

Although an overwhelming majority of the essays submitted for the TMM's American Girl exhibit focus on positive childhood and adolescent experiences, several entrants' essays disrupt the notion of American girlhood as an idyllic experience and remind us that contemporary girls' lives are often fraught with the very pressures and problems we as a society purport they should never experience. In addition to asking respondents to discuss the characteristics and meanings of what it means to be an American Girl, the TMM's call for essays encouraged entrants to "tell others about the challenges they've overcome" (Kansas City Star 2007).

This invitation to discuss challenges is significant because, as human development and family studies professor Cindy Dell Clark (2003) notes, "In a society that does not glorify suffering, especially in the young, children may find no ready audience eager to hear about their courage" (pg. 80). A handful of essayists discussed experiencing challenges in their everyday lives that range

from mundane inconveniences to life-threatening medical conditions and serious economic hardship. This chapter analyzes illness and financial hardship as disruptions to an "ideal" girlhood and the role that American Girl plays in girls' coping with these troubles.

Disease and Chronic Illness as a Challenge to an Ideal American Girlhood

Medical advances in the post-World War II era substantially reduced the prevalence and severity of diseases among American children. According to Mintz (2004), "Sulfa drugs, penicillin, insulin, immunization against whooping cough and diphtheria, new treatments against tetanus, and fluoride against tooth decay helped to alleviate many traditional scourges of childhood" (pp. 287-279). Commitment to eradicating childhood diseases in the United States is perhaps best illustrated by the participation of nearly two million schoolchildren in early trials of the Salk polio vaccination in 1954, the largest field trial of any vaccination in history (Mintz 2004:278). Because of the widespread success in the United States in controlling or eliminating the most serious childhood health conditions, the experience of childhood "illness interrupts the construed world of normal childhood" and is viewed as "a violation of the child's world and identity" (Clark 2003: 136-137).

Clark (2003) argues that "spoiled identities" and a "sense of self threaded with exceptionality" often manifest from the diagnoses, treatment, and symptoms of children's sicknesses and chronic illnesses, and from the "distancing social reactions of others" in response to these health conditions (pg. 93-94). As a result, children may use play and "imaginal coping" to deal with the uncertainties

and feelings of powerlessness associated with their medical situations (Clark 2003: 94). At “illness” camps, children who share diagnoses and treatments often engage in play and creative activities that subvert the intended use of medical equipment by utilizing the devices in playful ways. For example, children attending “diabetes camps” use syringes to apply paint to paper, rather than to deliver insulin to their bodies, and children attending “asthma camps” inflate balloons with nebulizers or use inhaler spacer devices as noisemakers or musical instruments (Clark 2003: 100-101).

Other playful and imaginative strategies that ill children engage in to cope with their illnesses include role-reversal, establishing rituals around treatments, and using humor to relieve stress and tension in interactions with health care providers. Clark’s (2003) research revealed that chronically ill children may claim the role of “doctor” or another healthcare provider or treatment administrator and assign the role of “patient” to a pet, toy, playmate, or family member to “enhance the child’s sense of control over traumatic, invasive, painful, or disfiguring procedures” (pp. 122-123). Children with chronic illnesses may also develop elaborate rituals-- with the collaboration and cooperation of their family caregivers or healthcare providers-- to help them manage the anxiety, pain, or distress associated with particular medical treatments or interventions. In her research on diabetic children, for example, Clark (2003) noted that children’s rituals involved declaring parts of the body “off limits” for blood tests, selecting and using colored lancets and bandages to “brighten” up daily blood checks, or singing during insulin injections to distract from the discomfort of the procedure

(pp. 33-34). Chronically ill children often joked or made humorous remarks about their conditions, including parodying popular tunes through the incorporation of lyrics that reflected their particular medical troubles (Clark 2003: 133-134).

A final strategy that chronically ill children participate in to reduce the stigma and stress associated with their diseases and conditions involves the use of toys-- and their attendant stories, especially-- as "imaginary companions or transitional objects" for moral support (Clark 2003: 108). Clark's research suggests that popular culture characters play an important role in children's experiences with their illnesses "through [children's] identification or involvement with the main character" and as "a force comprised of pretense against miseries or challenges faced by the child" (Clark 2003: 107). Imagined relationships with superheroes like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers or storybook characters allowed children to feel secure, powerful, and comforted when they were most emotionally, psychologically, and physically vulnerable, as when undergoing medical tests or procedures. Clark (2003) writes, "Children borrowed distinctively personal meaning from these and other pop-culture figures" and relied on the symbolic strength attached to these characters, even when the children pretended that their favorite characters were afflicted by the illnesses which they themselves experienced (pg. 110).

In response to the call by the TMM to discuss challenges they face in their lives today, several respondents discussed the role that disease and chronic illness have played in their experiences of being an American Girl. While disease and chronic illness did not permeate a majority of the essays submitted

for the contest, a handful of entrants discussed their experiences with physical and mental health concerns such as food allergies, deafness, dwarfism, cancer, diabetes, and bi-polar disorder. The girls who experienced these health setbacks utilized their essays as a forum to raise awareness about their illnesses and to explain the ways that American Girl characters and books have helped them cope with their conditions, both directly and indirectly. The contest also provided a space for these essayists to reaffirm their "normalness," their right to call themselves "American Girls."

The strong attachment 11-year old Heather has for one particular American Girl character is evident in her statement, *"Kirsten Larson taught me a lot of things about dealing with my problems. We are two strong American Girls."* Heather is afflicted with severe food allergies. In her essay, she drew upon several facets of Kirsten's story to help her cope with the limitations imposed on her by her condition. Kirsten's status as a Swedish immigrant assimilating into a new culture and adjusting to pioneer life inspires Heather in her everyday life. She writes, *"I learned from Kirsten to accept that I'm different. I felt sorry for myself but I've learned to solve my problems."* One solution that Heather has arrived at for coping with her food allergies is to pack her own snacks to take to friends' birthday parties because she cannot eat birthday cake or other foods made with peanuts, milk, or eggs. Heather's inability to share treats with her friends during special events such as birthday parties is significant. "Food signifies social relatedness," it is symbolic and expressive and, as is the case with diabetic children on restricted diets, the inability to share food disadvantages

children in their ability to participate in events where eating occurs. Children with food restrictions "can feel out of balance socially and expressively" (Clark 2003:25). Packing her own snacks allows Heather to avoid an "act of exclusion" that might arise from being unable to share in her friends' festivities. Heather equates this solution to one that Kirsten made in the face of limited opportunities to form friendships in her new country. She writes, *"I've learned to take charge and bring my own party snacks like a popsicle. Kirsten made friends with a Native American instead of being left out of having friends as I would be left out of a birthday treat*."

Heather also uses Kirsten's stories to remind herself to be cautious and to remember the dangers associated with her allergies. In her essay, Heather recounts an episode in which Kirsten, fresh off the boat from Sweden, becomes lost in her thoughts and accidentally gets lost. Even though Heather is inspired by Kirsten's ability to forget her problems and to focus on other aspects of her life, such as school, family, and friends, she remarks, *"But forgetting isn't always a good thing. Kirsten found out the hard way on her first day off the boat… Forgetting about my allergies can lead to trouble."* With this cautionary episode in mind, Heather is proactive about monitoring the ingredients in the foods that she buys and eats. She writes, *"Not paying attention is what got Kirsten into big trouble. Kirsten taught me to be on the lookout when I need to be, and forget my problems when I need to."* Heather's food allergies are scary to her, a fear analogous to Kirsten's fear of finding and having to shoo away a baby bear near her home. Despite her fears, however, Heather remains optimistic that she will

outgrow her food allergies, that doctors will one day find a cure for them, or both. For Heather, Kirsten provides a lesson on hope and perseverance, which are prevalent characteristics in girls' assessments of what it means to be an American Girl. Heather applies the lessons of Kirsten's immigration to her experiences with severe food allergies and claims, *"Kirsten didn't give up, and she inspires me to be a stronger American girl."*

Although 11-year old Heather is not the only entrant to suffer from a chronic illness or disease, she is unique among entrants writing about health conditions in that she anchors the inspiration she draws from American Girl to just one character. Other essayists with physical or mental health issues tended to refer to American Girls broadly as a source of encouragement for dealing with their afflictions. For example, the friendship between Elizabeth Cole and Felicity Merriman inspires Ginger, a seven-year old who has been afflicted with juvenile diabetes since the age of five.[62] Putting her struggle with juvenile diabetes into perspective, Ginger writes, *"I learned that Elizabeth's life was hard and at some parts, there was only darkness. But then Felicity came into her life and showed Elizabeth that not everything needed to stay the same as before."* Clark's research on children living with juvenile diabetes reveals that their world-- their daily lives-- are "especially closely monitored, persistently organized, and full of pricks and pokes" (pg. 20). Ginger's essay illustrates the constant surveillance and types of mechanical devices required to maintain a good level of health

[62] Ginger's discussion of how she acquired juvenile diabetes is quite sweet. It is evident that heredity is a contributing factor. She writes, *"It started off that I was just a regular girl… But my grandfather had diabetes, and it skipped a generation and got me."*

among diabetics. She writes, *"I was on [insulin] shots for a couple of months that hurt a lot at first. Later I got an insulin pump which made it easier to live my life. Now I have a new device called a sensor. It tells me my blood sugar every five minutes on my pump so I don't have to prick my finger so often."* Like Heather's food allergies, Ginger's diabetes requires constant awareness; she indicates that she *"always know[s] her numbers* "

Adele, an 11-year old quoted at the opening of this chapter, is undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. For this essayist, the historically-specific challenges experienced by Felicity, Addy Samantha, Molly-- as well as Kirsten-- demonstrate how *"[the American Girl characters] all overcame challenges that some of us can't even imagine."* For Adele, each character's ability to overcome the *"special or hard"* times associated with the era in which she lived is what allows one to claim the title of American Girl. Talking about these characters' triumphs also provides Adele with a platform from which she can talk about her own challenges and accomplishments, especially of that of *"leading a normal life."*

For Adele, social problems experienced personally by the American Girl characters across the span of the nation's history, and their responses to those problems, offer illustrative lessons in perseverance, which help her cope with having cancer and getting treatments for it. She is sympathetic to Felicity's torn loyalties during the Revolutionary War period when Felicity *"went through fights between Patriots and Loyalists."* Kirsten's experience as an immigrant *"who struggled coming to a new country,"* coupled with her role in *"fighting to keep the family on their feet during bad times,"* is among *"the challenges that some of us*

can't even imagine," as are Addy's experiences with the Civil War and enslavement, which Adele describes as *"scary."* Adele notes the difficulties Samantha faced in helping orphans like Nellie, encouraging her audience to *"[t]hink how hard it would be to take care of so many at one time."* Molly's efforts to raise money for food and clothing for American soldiers during World War II serves as an example to Adele of staying strong and looking for a practical solution to a situation beyond one's control.

American Girl characters' focus on "solutions" is a source of encouragement for this 11-year old essay writer, even though she does not explicitly indicate what those solutions were and how the characters arrived at or acted upon them. Regardless, Adele claims she is better able to deal with cancer and chemotherapy because she *"know[s] each and everyone (sic) [of the American Girl characters] had a challenge"* through which she struggled and for which she found a resolution. *"The Chemo"* is Adele's *"solution right now"* and it allows her to attend school, where she earns good grades and participates in extracurricular activities such as sports and band. She indicates that she is *"beating the cancer so far"* even though she is *"struggling and overcoming [her] fears with needles and dying."*

Nine-year old Emma, who suffers from glaucoma, writes that *"one of the most important things that I've learned* [from reading American Girl stories] *is that there were a lot of girls who had to go through many difficult times."* By way of example, Emma discusses challenging episodes or conditions experienced by Molly (her father leaving for war), Felicity (who *"had to live in a time when people*

were fighting over beliefs"), and Addy (who *"had to be kept as a slave and was brave when she escaped"*). *"The strong girls in the stories"* provide Emma with inspiration. She writes, *"From reading American Girl stories, I know to always keep trying and never give up*." Characters like Molly, Felicity and Addy encourage Emma to continue to find a cure for glaucoma, though in her essay she does not expand upon the ways in which she is attempting to make that goal a reality.

The symbolic strength girls draw from American Girl characters and stories extends from coping with their own illness and conditions to coping and empathizing with family members' illnesses or health setbacks. Ellie, a 10-year-old essayist, feels connected to Felicity, partly because they share a similar family structure. Felicity has three younger siblings, including a baby sister, whereas Ellie has two younger siblings including "*a sister with the mind of a baby*." According to her essay, Ellie shares with Felicity the ability to "*look on the bright side of life*." Ellie notes that her intellectually challenged sister Kellie "*gets very frustrating sometimes. Those are the times that I use Felicity. I think…would Felicity have had patience or get mad at pure innocence?"* Ellie acknowledges that Felicity did not always make the best choices in her stories.[63]

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[63] See Story (2000:153-158 and 166-168 in particular) for an excellent analysis of gender transgression represented in Felicity's exploits which include publicly (though inadvertently) exposing her petticoat while climbing on a rooftop in an attempt to pick apples and illicitly borrowing and wearing her father's apprentice's breeches for a month before she is discovered doing so. According to Story (2000) these are but a few examples in which "[American Girl characters'] conformity to gender norms receives reinforcement and their efforts to resist them are met with disapproval" (pg. 152). Story argues that in the apple-picking incident, in particular, Felicity's mother chastises her for failing to assist her and other female family members in the production of apple butter in an appropriately feminine manner. Story (2000) suggests that Mrs.

She writes, "*True, she had her faults but all in all she was pretty good.*" Ellie continues, "*Sometimes I think maybe she would have made the wrong choice here but I will make the right one"* and exercise patience with her sister. Despite the critique that she offers of Felicity, the character still serves as an inspiration for Ellie in understanding her responsibilities to her mentally handicapped sister.

Another 10-year-old essayist, Maria, offers an additional reading of how Felicity's caretaking abilities in the face of a family health crisis have inspired her in the face of her mother's back surgery. While her mother rested and recuperated from the surgery, Maria stepped in and attended to her household and caretaking duties. For Maria, this incident was very similar to the situation that Felicity found herself in as she prepared to attend a highly anticipated dance lesson at the Governor's Palace. Much of Felicity's excitement about the Governor's dance centered on a fancy party dress that Mrs. Merriman was fashioning for her daughter. When Mrs. Merriman became ill, "*Felicity pushed aside her thoughts of the Governor's Palace and focused on helping her family."*

Maria writes, "*I knew our family's life was going to change a little until my mother recovered."* In this regard, Felicity's *"unselfish attitude guided* [*her*] *during* [*her*] *own family's health incident."* When Mrs. Merriman fell ill, Felicity served as her caretaker and cared for her siblings William and Nan while Mr. Merriman continued to operate the family's store. Maria writes, "*As Felicity had done, I helped around the house and did cleaning so my mother would not have to twist*

Merriman's lecture centers on women's proper role in the domestic sphere where "caring for family is a responsibility and a pleasure" (pg. 154).

and bend. I helped prepare meals. I watched my three younger brothers while my mom rested." For Maria, this was not an easy time. She wistfully writes that she often wanted to eschew her caretaking responsibilities for other activities like playing with friends or reading. Maria notes, "*At times I found it hard to put my family's needs before my own. Being unselfish was tough, sometimes, but I tried my best because my little sacrifices showed my family how much I loved them*." Identifying with the American Girl characters' hardships and imagining how the characters felt as they responded to these challenge allowed the participants with severe or chronic health conditions (or with family who experienced these issues) to productively deal with their stressful impacts.

Economic Hardship as a Challenge to an Ideal American Girlhood

Several essayists responded to the TMM's question about challenges they have faced in their lives by discussing how economic hardships brought on by parental job loss or other familial hardships have shaped their experiences in being an American Girl. The girls whose families experienced economic difficulties utilized the TMM essay contest as a place to discuss how American Girl characters have encouraged them to remain resilient in trying times. Even when the American Girl characters and stories were not directly discussed in girls' essays about economic hardship, the essay contest itself provided participants the space to "make meaning and establish as truth one's own interpretations of reality" that might be fundamentally at odds with the cultural constructions of childhood as an idyllic experience (Will 1994:46).

The first decade of the 21st Century is notable for its economic volatility. Almost as soon as the new century began, the U.S. found itself in a slight economic recession as the stock market bubble burst. By mid-decade, however, severe problems in the housing and finance industries overshadowed any signs of economic recovery (Irwin 2010). By the end of 2007 and lasting through the middle of 2009, the United States entered what pundits have called The Great Recession and many political figures suggested that the subsequent economic climate was as bad as or worse than the Great Depression.

Comparing the economic climate of the latter part of the first decade of the 21st Century with that of the Great Depression is noteworthy because much of the focus in both periods of recession has tended to be on adults. Mintz (2004) writes, "Adults dominate our memories of the Great Depression… [but i]n fact children were the Depression's most vulnerable victims, both economically and psychologically" (pg. 234). Rates of childhood malnutrition during the Great Depression ranged from 20 percent in New York City to as high as 90 percent in coalmining states. Across the country, schools were fiscally unable to operate so many either reduced their hours, offering shortened days or terms, or closed their doors entirely, "depriving a million school-aged children of access to an education" (Mintz 2004:234). Because of widespread unemployment or drastically reduced wages, families often sent their young children out to earn money by doing odd jobs and they pooled their resources together. As Mintz writes, "For many children, the Depression meant a declining standard of living, heightened family tension, inconsistent parental discipline, and an unemployed

father. Many children experienced severe psychological stress, insecurity, deprivation, and intense feelings of shame" (pg. 237). The same can be said for children whose families are experiencing the adverse outcomes of contemporary financial crises.

Because her story is set explicitly in the Great Depression, it is not surprising that many girls whose families are experiencing financial hardships identify with the Kit Kittredge stories. Nine-year-old Anita, quoted at the opening of this chapter, is a prime example of this association. Like Kit's father, Anita's father also lost his job; both families had to refigure their spending habits. Anita writes, "*[Kit] and her family pinched their pennies for everything because they did not have much money. They were forced to be frugal*." Anita notes that Kit did not receive new clothes because of her family's dire financial situation. In response, she writes, "*We also did not have that much money. So I understood how Kit felt.*" As Anita's quote at the opening of the chapter suggests, she felt left out of activities with friends and family that required expenditures that her family could not afford. In moments where Anita experienced jealousy of others' possessions, she says, "*I try to always be thankful for what I have. Kit inspires girls to make the best of what they have."*

Like Anita, nine-year-old Holly also experienced her father's job loss and draws on Kit as a source of inspiration. Holly writes "*The story when Kit's dad lost his job and they were going through the great depression (sic) helped me."* Although she offers no details, she indicates that her father's job loss affected the family's routine. Holly says that despite the disruptions, Kit's stories "*helped me*

learn that I was going through a hard time in life [and] just to stick with it." Although another essayist, eight-year-old Christine, did not write of her family's economic situation explicitly, she notes that she uses Kit's lessons of thrift and frugality in her everyday life, especially when it comes to outfitting her dolls. Christine writes, "*I have learned from Kit that when you don't have something, you improvise and make it out of what you do have.*" Christine recounts that in Kit's birthday story, Kit designs a party dress out of materials she already had available to her. Christine's stance on Kit is precisely how her creator envisioned American Girl enthusiasts to relate to her. Historian Fred Nielsen (2002) reports that American Girl author Valerie Tripp "conceived Kit partly as an antidote to 'affluenza'" and to combat materialism, which in the wake of recent economic recessions, is a habit many families can no longer afford to follow.[64]

Another character whose limited means help children cope with material hardship is Kirsten. According to nine-year-old essayist Reagan, Kirsten's loss of her beloved rag doll is similar to the loss of cherished friends that she experienced when her family lost their home and had to move. Reagan writes of how Kirsten and her friend Marta played often with their dolls but when Kirsten's father is unable to afford or trade for a horse and wagon to transport the family to another homestead, they have to pack away many of their treasured belongings to leave behind since they will have to walk. Reagan writes, "*This book inspired me because I had to leave my friends behind [in my former neighborhood]. We*

[64] Nielsen (2002) goes on to note, however, that this is a tenuous position to maintain as long as the American Girl catalogs continue to feature collections of highly priced historically 'authentic' merchandise for each character (pg. 90).

moved because my dad got hurt and my mom and dad could not afford the rent." Reagan, her parents and her sisters moved in with her grandparents. Reflecting on Kirsten's story, Reagan remarks, "*So I know what it is like to give up things more than a ragged* (sic) *doll. When I read this story, it told me not to give up*." Reagan reports that after her parents lost their home, *"I asked Santa for a house. A house like the one you live in*" but it is difficult to determine from her essay how close her family was to receiving this Christmas wish.

Stories of economic hardship among the essay contestants were relatively rare, but of those who did write about the financial challenges they and their families faced, 16-year old Julia offers perhaps the most touching. Because of her family's very limited means, Julia balances the normal responsibilities of a teenager such as attending school with adult responsibilities of childrearing and engaging in paid employment to assist her family financially. She writes, "*I have felt like an adult since the age of fourteen. Can you imagine going to school every day, working very hard when I am there to maintain good grades, going home to feed my family, changing diapers for an hour and then going to work?"* After returning from work, Julia notes that she is responsible for bathing, feeding, and putting her six-month old brother to sleep for the night. Following these duties, Julia then attends to her homework and other chores. She wakes with her brother when he cries in the middle of the night, causing her to report, "*Seldom do I get a good night's sleep*." Although the American Girls did not directly influence Julia to write her story, per se, she was inspired to write

because she toured the TMM. Her reflections are worth quoting at length. She writes:

> *During the tour of the museum, I say the toys from the 1800s and early 1900s. The dolls prepared girls for their responsibilities back in those days. The woman's job was to stay in the house and take care of the home, which reminds me of what I still have to do when I go home. Women think those days are over, of having to cook and clean for their families, but I still have to do it… Not only do I have to cook and clean, I have to provide for my family financially. Now you tell me, do you think it's hard to be a young teenage American girl?*

Julia's story is interesting precisely because it challenges the notion that childhood and adolescence are carefree times in which children are free from adult responsibilities and concerns and that they have access to institutions that support and protect them (Mintz 2004). Clark (2003) suggests that self-narratives are socially situated and collaborative to the extent that they are shared with others, even imagined others or others that one will personally never know (like the visitors to the TMM's American Girl exhibit). Sharing one's challenging experience through an essay contributes to an "intact defensible self" who is less vulnerable and isolated (Clark 2003:110).

American Girl as a Component of Imaginal Coping

Stories such as those associated with American Girl characters are an important component of culture to which individuals may turn and from which they draw in order to help them understand certain disruptive or challenging life circumstances. English professor Katherine Will suggests (1994), "Stories are models of how others have faced difficulties and conflicts" (pg. 47). As Clark's (2003) research with chronically ill children illustrates their identification with or

attachment to characters from popular culture shows or storybooks allow them to reframe, redefine, or reimagine stressful and troublesome circumstances. Stories are instruments through which individuals, regardless of age, “gain insight into their problems” (Will 1994:47).

Clark (2003) notes that imaginal coping inherently involves ambiguity, or shifts in meaning, because ambiguity “allows for an active thought process that permits experience to be interpreted with license, perhaps with an accompanying emotional catharsis” (pg. 135). In other words, while it is evident that the girls’ readings of American Girl characters’ specific stories and subsequent application to their specific situations may be a stretch from how American Girl authors intended their stories to be read, this does not make these readings necessarily problematic. Clark (2003) explains, “The meaning lies in the way the symbol is appropriated by the child, along with other social participants, who thereby redirect attention and remake significance” (pg. 136). Clark refers to a child’s imagination as an “inner draftsman” who dynamically and creatively pulls from and works with social and symbolic resources such as stories. Clark’s discussion aligns closely with Swidler’s (1986) conception of “culture as a tool kit.” Both scholars argue that individuals actively choose the cultural components they want to apply to their given situations from a repertoire of available resources. Chronic illness and severe economic hardship are manifestations of “unsettled lives,” or perhaps more appropriately, unsettled “circumstances” (Hall, Neitz, and Battani 2003:247). When individuals are learning new strategies of action in the face of changing situations, they still depend upon existing cultural models to

“learn styles of the self, relationship, cooperation, authority, and so forth” until new ideologies or cultural systems develop (Swidler 1986:279).

Furthermore, individuals’ capacity to tell their own stories-- as through the venue of an essay contest and museum exhibit-- is empowering and serves as part of the coping or healing process. Will (1994) suggests that gaining “voice” through telling one’s story is very important to classes of people like children, and in particular girls, who “have little of what we would call authority” and are otherwise constrained and inhibited by the culture in which they live because of its rigid hierarchies of age and gender (pg. 46). In the case of illness, Clark (2003) argues that the biomedical model of healing privileges only “didactic indoctrination” of scientific knowledge about one’s illness and treatment. As a consequence, other ways of knowing and coping such as through play and imagination are often dismissed, undermining children’s role in managing their illnesses (Clark 2003:117, 137).

I stand in agreement with Clark (2003) that “children’s own voices,” especially about how they deal with disruptive, challenging circumstances that contradict contemporary assumptions about the safety, stability, and pleasurable aspects of childhood, “contain an enlightening measure of insight” (pg. 5). Girls’ use of the American Girl stories and their identification with the characters illustrate an unexpected and interesting appropriation of the company’s stories, plotlines, and values.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

> *"As I search for opening sentences (and all those that follow), I am often reminded by intrusive anxieties that writing can be frightening. To write is to commit oneself to an interpretation; like any commitment, it closes off other possibilities."*
>
> *-- Marjorie DeVault (1999:190)*

This study has attempted to build on existing scholarship about American Girl and its meanings (and uses) in girls' everyday lives by beginning from the assertion that researchers must move beyond analyzing the texts produced by American Girl itself and, instead, focus on the interpretations, meanings, and uses of American Girl as articulated by *American Girl's target audience*. The 2007 Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City's "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" exhibit and essay contest provided an opportunity to extend theories about American Girl by analyzing how girls themselves responded to the nominal question, as well as to questions about the lessons and inspiration they draw from American Girl stories and dolls.

I do not suggest that theorizing from the company's texts is incorrect or inappropriate. In fact, that is far from the position I take. I find that the critiques leveled against American Girl are, for the most part, very important and informative and provide a substantial framework through which to understand the scope and influence of the company. What I do suggest, however, is that any theorizing about American Girl will remain incomplete, at best, and presumptuous, at worst, without considering the perspectives of the company's

target audience. The more appropriate question to be asking is not whether analyses of American Girl's texts are right or wrong, but rather, to what degree do the interpretations and meanings of American Girl drawn by its target audience converge with or diverge from the conclusions drawn by researchers.

Summary of Findings

Girls' responses to the nominal question of the TMM's essay contest, "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" indicate that the question can be answered in a multitude of ways, some of which reflect the influence of American Girl texts and some of which are related to larger cultural discourses.

As the analysis in Chapter 4 indicates, girls believe that one must demonstrate a particular set of positive and pro-social qualities and related behaviors in order to claim the title of American Girl. Many of these qualities-- being brave, kind, helpful, responsible, and polite, for example-- are associated with ethics of care and reciprocity in girls' relationships with others. Girls asserted that to be an American Girl an individual must exercise humility and good sportsmanship, make the "right" choices and abide by the Golden Rule, even when the recipient of a good deed or sentiment was unfamiliar, different than oneself, or guilty of committing some sort of prior misdeed. Additionally, persistence and learning from one's mistakes were important components of claiming the title of American Girl.

Girls' essays revealed that they did not find it particularly easy to enact or demonstrate these qualities; to be an American Girl required effort, but intrinsic feelings of pride resulted from these efforts. Although girls did feel pressure to

be “all around great people,” they acknowledged that they were prone to make mistakes but as long as they reflected on these and continued to do their best, they were still candidates to be American girls. The qualities that girls discussed as being integral to the definition of what it means to be an American Girl do reflect the influence of American Girl’s texts (Acosta-Alzuru 1999; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002). Girls frequently drew descriptions and examples of what it means to be an American Girl from company’s descriptions of characters and their stories; they either identified with particular characters who demonstrate or epitomize particular traits (i.e. Kaya’s bravery) or drew parallels between characters’ actions and their own (i.e. Samantha’s refusal to retaliate against a mean deed).

One possible implication that arises from girls’ descriptions of the characteristics associated with being an American Girl is that these descriptions reinforce the “good girl” narrative which itself reinforces notions of traditional femininity such as obedience, patience, and restraint (Miskec 2009; Simmons 2009). Through the influence of the “good girl” narrative, girls face a constant pressure to be “nice, modest, and selfless” in order to retain their status and popularity with peers and adults alike and, in the long term, this has serious negative consequences for girls’ relationships with others and with themselves (Simmons 2009).

The tendency for scholars to focus on American Girl’s representations of history and its ideologies of traditional femininity and national identity, while certainly problematic and worthy of attention, obscures the ways in which girls

use the stories to approach practical problems in their lives, the topic I addressed in Chapter 5. For example, essays demonstrate that American Girl stories and identification with American Girl characters contributes to girls' increased participation in reading, fosters an interest in history, and provides templates for overcoming social barriers. Many girls report that American Girl has contributed to increased self-confidence and provides practical lessons on teamwork and persistence. Additionally, identification with American Girl characters inspires girls to contribute to their communities in charitable and philanthropic ways. As Sekeres (2009) observes, the historical fiction characters educate girls about desirable "inner qualities that enable us to live well and benefit others," perhaps at the expense of imaginative play because "the stories are contrived to show the [characters] conquering the circumstances" and, as a result, "[t]here are no unhappy endings" for the American Girl characters (pg. 408). Furthermore, the company's representational strategies seek to establish a national identity that is heterogeneous and that promotes tolerance and diversity; the representations of a multicultural nation through American Girl's stories and dolls influence girls' approaches to friendship, especially where difference is involved. Cross-cultural tolerance (and understanding) and celebration of diversity are important components of American Girl identity and identification with characters' stories reveals the influence of American Girl texts in shaping these beliefs (Inness 1998; Acosta-Alzuru 1999; and Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002).

In addition to asking respondents to answer what it means to be an American Girl, the TMM's Call for Essays (2006) encouraged essayists to submit

their reflections on “growing up as a girl in the late 20th and early 21st century,” a theme addressed in Chapter 6. In their essays, girls reported that they feel a tremendous amount of pressure to grow up ahead of their time, a condition that American Girl seeks to temper through its mission of providing girls with wholesome role models and age-appropriate products that “help girls remain girls a little longer” (Marshall 2009:97). Girls’ essays also reflected how the sociopolitical climate of a post-9/11 world influence their perceptions of contemporary childhood as well as their definitions of what it means to be an American Girl. Each of these factors produced two unexpected threads within girls’ essays.

The first thread suggested that, despite its attendant pressures and problems, contemporary girlhood is preferable to growing up as a girl in the past. American Girl stories sometimes, but not always, played into this assessment. Among the factors that made girlhood in the past seem substantially odious compared to girlhood today are women’s lack of access to rights, in general, but in particular, their lack of access to or limited opportunities for education, employment, and political representation. Additionally, girls equate the evolution of women’s fashions throughout history as a form of liberation; they equate women’s clothing in past historical eras with a form of gender control as well as a general discomfort. In some instances, readings of American Girl’s texts informed girls’ knowledge of girlhood in the past. In other instances, knowledge about girlhood in the past was based on their familiarity with real historical figures connected to the various women’s movements in the United States (i.e. Elizabeth

Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, etc.) or other notable women in history (i.e. Marie Curie, Helen Keller, Sacagawea, Amelia Earhart, etc.) .

A second thread emerging from girls' discussion of contemporary contexts of American girlhood suggested that growing up female in the United States is, by far, preferable to girlhood in other countries. American military involvement in the Middle East in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, especially, forms one backdrop for girls' claims, though their status as transnational adoptees influences some girls' notions of girlhood abroad, as well. Girls generally believe that women and girls are marginally valued in other nations-- particularly Afghanistan, Iraq, India, China, and some African countries-- for their roles as wives and workers, but otherwise are devalued and unwanted. They believe that girls in the United States experience a higher quality of life and have access to more resources and opportunities than girls have in other countries, and most specifically in the countries listed above. However, in some circumstances, girls conflated multiple countries and multiple eras in their reflections. They also demonstrated a very simplistic understanding of complex cultural practices such as arranged marriage and religious veiling. Surprisingly, however, *none* of the essayists referred to the direct influence of American Girl texts in shaping these perceptions about girlhood in other countries, suggesting that a broader set of discourses and ideologies intertwine with American Girl's narratives about American girlhood, in general, to shape essayists' beliefs of how girlhood is experienced outside of the United States. I suggest that the discourses that justify the contemporary War on Terror and those justifying

transnational adoption (of girls, in particular) intertwine with American Girl's narratives of girls' special role in history and the virtues associated with the company's fictional heroines and shape girls' comparisons between contemporary American girlhood and girlhood in other countries.

Finally, Chapter 7 details the ways in which girls discussed the "challenges they have overcome" in their lives, a peripheral prompt in the essay contest. Among the notable challenges that girls discussed in their essays were significant medial conditions and economic hardship. I suggest that girls' identification with American Girl characters in the face of these challenges is component of imaginal coping (Clark 2003) and that the essays provided space for the essayists experiencing these disruptions to a "normal" or "ideal" childhood to claim their right to call themselves American Girls. The use of American Girl stories as a component of imaginal coping (Clark 2003) reaffirms the model of culture as a tool kit from which one can draw selectively and employ in a variety of situations as one sees fit (Swidler 1986).

Overall, my analysis does suggest girls' understandings and definitions of what it means to be an American Girl converge with and generally lend support to many assessments about the influence and reach of American Girl made by the scholars whose works I summarized and evaluated in Chapter 2. I do not find this to be a weakness, flaw, problem, or otherwise problematic reflection of my analysis and it is not antithetical to the goals of the project at hand. Rather, what I suggest is that the analysis I present in this dissertation both complements the analyses and observations by other American Girl researchers and adds

empirical support to strengthen their analyses, while also highlighting novel readings and appropriations of American Girl's lessons, as discussed in Chapter 7, for example. One of my issues with prior research on American Girl has been the tendency to theorize almost exclusively from *researchers'* readings of American Girl's texts and their interpretations of the socializing messages in American Girl's stories and products. A second issue that arose for me in prior research is the limited discussion other scholars have paid to discourses or contexts external to American Girl that may shape how girls engage with the company and its narratives. My analysis sought to demonstrate that context and broader cultural discourses simultaneously work in concert with and compete against those circulating within "American Girl culture." This is a dimension of inquiry not appearing in prior research on American Girl.

While this project does not completely engage American Girl's target audience in dialogue with American Girl scholars, it does open the door a little wider into an important site of extraction: *girls' own words and voices* about the role that American Girl plays in their daily lives and in their understandings of how to navigate and potentially transform American girlhood. Only when we understand what American Girl's target audience claims to understand, apply, appropriate and even potentially resist about the company and its narratives and ideologies can we begin to engage in a fuller, richer conversation.

Limitations to the Present Study

Though I do not view this as a limitation to the present study, it is important to note that the voices of women over the age of 18 who participated in

the TMM's essay contest are missing from this analysis. Given that they were encouraged to participate in the TMM's "What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?" essay context-- and, in some small measure did-- I must be clear that excluding their essays from analysis for the present study was a deliberate analytic strategy. Adult women do *not* comprise American Girl's target audience and, for the purposes of *this* study, I felt it more important to privilege the voices and perspectives of the girls who *are.* Furthermore, adult women comprised a very small percentage of entrants in the essay contest, in general; the TMM received just 15 (or 5%) of essays from women over the age of 18.

My decision to exclude adult women's essays in this study should not suggest that their perspectives about the role of American Girl in *their* lives are not important; they are. As Diamond and her colleagues (2009) gather from their observations and interviews, American Girl plays an important role in adult women's lives in part because of the brand's ability to impart treasured values and messages to their daughters, granddaughters, and nieces and its role in facilitating "the creation of female family history and family identity" (pp. 126-128). The adult women who submitted essays to the TMM did talk about the role that American Girl plays in allowing them to bond with own daughters and granddaughters. The adult essayists applauded American Girl for its promotion of wholesome values and for its role in educating girls about American history. Again, while they were interesting to read, adult women's essays were excluded from analysis solely because of my commitment to privilege the target audience of American Girl's stories and dolls.

Other scholars are conducting interesting research on adult women's engagement with American Girl. For example, Rebecca West, a PhD candidate from Loyola University Chicago is completing dissertation research (as of spring 2012) on adult women who collect American Girl dolls and who participate in online communities of American Girl collectors. She extends her dissertation research in a forthcoming article-- with colleague Bhoomi Thakore-- to assess how the company's marketing strategies influence racial perception and categorization among consumers, with the sample comprised of both adult American Girl collectors and adults who are not collectors.[65] There is no doubt that a broader sample of essays by adult women on the questions posed by the TMM's exhibit would add to this body of knowledge.

What I see as the primary limitation to the present study has to do with the "unidirectional" nature of the essays themselves. This is an interpretive project; I seek to interpret the meanings that emerge in respondents' answers to the questions of what it means to be an American Girl, what lessons they have learned from reading American Girl books or playing with American Girl dolls, and how American Girl has otherwise inspired them. In other words, I cannot ask for clarification of thoughts or push for explanation of examples and so the interpretation of essayists' responses to these questions is largely mine, with no

[65] The Loyola University Department of Sociology's spring 2012 newsletter, which can be found at http://www.luc.edu/sociology/news.shtml, features a summary of Thakore and West's research. Additionally, West and doctoral student Jessica Robinson of the University of Chicago are extending research about American Girl Place by examining its use of architectural design and curatorial narratives to accomplish the social and educational goals of a museum while simultaneously encouraging consumption of the company's products (including family memory making, as examined by Diamond *et al* (2009)).

ability for “member checks” or for soliciting feedback from the essayists themselves, which are important features of feminist qualitative research. With that said, however, I also recognize the impossibility of involving my “subjects,” the essayists, in the analysis on a number of different fronts (i.e. the sheer number of participants, the geographic distance I would be required to cover to meet them, their essayists’ varying levels of emotional and developmental maturity, etc.) (Sprague 2005).

I must be content with the understanding that what is contained in the preceding analysis is an accumulation of partial and fragmented “truths,” both those posited by the essayists themselves and by me in my interpretation of these essays. Inspired by the methodological approaches to narrative analysis (Reissman1993; Maynes *et al* 2008), I have attempted to understand how girls made sense of these questions by moving back and forth between empirical evidence from their essays and my own interpretation. As Marjorie DeVault (1999) notes, “Concerns about the ethics of representation, and the attempts to equalize interpretive authority, are central to feminist methodological innovations” (pg. 189). As a feminist researcher, I am concerned that I have not adequately represented the intended meanings that the essayists attempted to convey about the meaning and role(s) of American Girl in their lives but I believe I represented their perspectives to the best of my ability and I have been transparent about my biases.

A second limitation to this study may arise from the sample itself. As with the samples in interview and ethnographic studies conducted by Acosta-Alzuru

and Kreshel (2002), Nardone (2002), Diamond *et al* (2009) and Marshall (2009), I believe that the entrants in the TMM essay contest comprise a relatively homogenous and socially privileged sample, a concern I explicated in Chapter 3. There is, however, no real way to assess the verity of that suspicion. Although the TMM did require entrants to submit an entry form with their essays, the form collected only basic information such as name, age, address, and parent or guardian information and consent (for participants who were legal minors). The TMM did provide me with a spreadsheet listing each entrant's name, age, and essay title.[66] The city and state where each entrant lived at the time she submitted her essay was also included in this spreadsheet.[67] Since the address information is partial, there is no way to run a detailed analysis of it to determine the exact demographic make-up or characteristics of the communities in which the entrants live. However, the racial and economic profiles of the counties in the Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area (KC MSA) are illustrative and lend some small measure of support for the claim that the participants in this essay contest are likely racially and economically homogenous.[68]

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[66] Entrants' names and ages did not always appear in or on their essays so the TMM provided me with the spreadsheet so that I could fill in missing age data, in particular. As discussed in Chapter 3, the essays arrived bundled by age group but both the "Winners" and "14+" bundles contained essays written entrants across a range of ages. "Winners" included essays by girls as young as 8 and women as old as 65 and about half of the essays in the "14+" category were written by women older than 18. Since I intentionally excluded the perspectives of women over the age of 18 and privileged the perspectives of girls in this analysis, filling in the missing age information with the assistance of the TMM entrants' list was crucial.

[67] To protect entrants' privacy, I did not receive entrants' full street addresses.

[68] See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion. As noted previously, Appendix F contains a table illustrating the demographic characteristics of the Kansas City metropolitan statistical area.

A third limitation to this study may also lie in the approach I took in coding the data and conducting the overall analysis. I chose to code the data in the essays by themes that reflected the influence of the questions posed to participants by the TMM itself. In other words, I was looking for both explicit and implicit responses to the essay contest's questions and the prompts. I did not focus on locating themes or issues that were more salient for some age groups and less salient for others. However, even without having conducted an analysis organized or inspired by age, I do agree with Diamond *et al's* (2009) assessment "that there is great variation in girls' ability to use the [American Girl] stories to illuminate their own lives and facilitate the performance of life tasks" (Diamond *et al* 2009:129). With regard to the present study, however, this is largely a function of girls' *expressive abilities*. The amount of detail and explanation included in girls' responses did depend, in some ways, upon their ages. Older girls tended to write better and with more linguistic sophistication than younger girls but there were, of course, exceptions. Some younger girls wrote very well and were extremely articulate and capable of expressing themselves and their perspectives very clearly, with significant detail and elaboration.

The essays provide interesting insights into girls' daily lives, their concerns, their interests, and their apprehensions, and, most importantly the ways in which girls' engage with American Girl stories and dolls. Although it was not a focus in my analysis, many girls' essays discuss why particular American Girl characters are their favorites. An interesting extension of this project would investigate this point more fully to determine what components of individual

characters' stories are most meaningful for girls and why, as well as how they apply those particular characters' stories to their lives. In other words, this type of analysis would lend itself to chapters grounded in an analysis of each character's story and girls' engagement with that character.

The form of these essays is also an important issue to consider, although I did not take it up in my analysis. In some ways, the contest may have constrained the topics about which girls wrote. As indicated in Chapter 3, the American Girl characters featured prominently in the promotional materials for the exhibit itself, as well as the essay contest. In this way, the vast majority of girls did respond to the questions by referencing the company and its characters; this muddied girls' understanding (and in some ways, my interpretation) of the concept of "American Girl." In some instances, it was very clear that girls were talking about how they identified with the company, its goals, and its stories. In other instances, girls seamlessly transitioned from talking about their "identities" as American Girl purveyors and consumers to their identities as "American girls," which focused more on their understandings of nation and citizenship and little on their engagement with American Girl stories and products. This demonstrates that there were, among essayists, tendencies to interpret the question in ways that highlighted their connection to the corporation, the nation, and sometimes both.

Additionally, the Call for Essays advised participants to limit their submissions to 500 words or less and provided prompts about what to write. In some instances, essayists adhered very closely to these guidelines but in some

instances, they deviated from the prompts in interesting ways (i.e. writing about girlhood in other countries). I think it is very important that the contest provided girls with a public forum about which to write about their engagement with American Girl stories and dolls and their experiences about growing up as girls in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, as with any public space in which meaning-making occurs, this lends itself to the *possibility* that essayists are "selective in what they recall and relate, self-serving in their emphases, and sometimes downright deceptive," which of course all researchers who use various forms of narrative sources need to acknowledge (Maynes *et al* 2008:147).

While I do believe that the essayists were generally honest in their submissions, the contest may have inspired them to write in ways or about issues in ways they might not have had the information been collected in a different, less public way (i.e. a private interview, for example). I have attempted to take what Marjorie DeVault has referred to as a "light-handed approach" in my analysis, which "recognizes that some of the truths that emerge from [these essays] are tentative rather than a 'final objective truth'" (Maynes *et al* 2008:153). Throughout the preceding analysis, my aim has been to "broaden the perspectives on which knowledge is built" by incorporating the voices of girls into the existing research on American Girl. The views expressed in the essays cannot, of course, be generalizable to *all* girls who read or engage with American Girl products or who would answer the questions posited by the TMM's exhibit and essay contest, and they are, of course, contingent and subject to revision

through others' analyses. Yet they provide interesting evidence for assertions made by scholars theorizing from texts produced by American Girl itself about the role of the company's stories and dolls in girls' everyday lives.

Although I was (and remain) extremely interested in the evaluation process used to determine which essays were selected to appear in the exhibit itself, I was unable to gain access to the TMM staff to discuss this. In the summer of 2007, while the exhibit was in full swing, I attempted to organize interviews with the Museum curator and staff to find out more about the institutional and organizational features of the exhibit. I was (and remain) exceptionally curious as to how much influence American Girl had in all aspects of the programming and contents of the exhibit. Unfortunately, however, the timing was a barrier to acquiring this information. Although I obtained approval from the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board to conduct interviews with the Museum staff, the intensive schedule of exhibit events (as well as my own limitations with travel, funding, and time) precluded this from happening. From my own perspective, I could not identify any particular qualities among the "winning" essays that facilitated their incorporation over other entries into the exhibit; in this instance, discussions with the staff about the evaluation process and the organizational considerations would have been helpful and fruitful.

Diamond and her colleagues (2009) rely on models of cognitive and moral development to explain the variation that emerge according to age, but from a sociological perspective, I argue that these models are of somewhat limited use. Diamond *et al* (2009) suggest that the texts' "intended meanings may be missed

or uniquely constructed if girls are not developmentally ready to receive them" (pg. 130).[69] Age is certainly an important source of variation in girls' essays, but I would be more interested in how girls' race and class status affect or shape if, when, and how one acts upon American Girl's meanings and lessons. As I noted in Chapter 3, I believe that the sample is likely racially and socioeconomically homogenous. I suggest that girls' failure to discuss *who* they are and *what* they are, in terms of race and class location, works to reinforce Acosta-Alzuru's (1999) claim that the community of American Girl enthusiasts is largely economically and racially exclusive.

While the essayists suggest that they embrace multiculturalism and diversity and that differences, in general, and racial and class differences, in particular, do not matter in friendship, I maintain the position that American Girl's narratives are individualistically oriented. American Girl's stories fail to acknowledge that opportunity and constraint in one's life are predicated on the relationality of privilege and oppression, which are simultaneously organized and reinforced by the state and other institutions. In many ways, girls' essays

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[69] Diamond *et al*'s (2009) interviews and observations revealed that girls younger than 10 "enjoy the literal enactment of these stories or derive pleasure from touching, holding, and dressing the dolls." They tended to fixate on appealing or interesting (but nonetheless insignificant) details of the historical characters' stories paralleling their own lives and, as a consequence, "glosse[d] over moral dilemmas" and "construct[ed] a 'reality-lite." Younger girls in the study also focused on relationships among people "and view[ed] objects as context for situations that involve[d] girls similar to themselves or others who play important roles in their lives." Girls older than 10, however, were more likely to "grasp the abstract relational meanings conveyed by the brand's many stories." Older girls drew inspiration from the American Girl stories because the "provided perspective on challenge[s]" and adversities that a number of girls experienced in their lives. Girls' responses indicated that they understood and could relate to some of the stories' broader ethical issues such as dealing with parental death, living in hard times, and figuring out one's own identity in light of others' expectations (Diamond *et al* 2009:128-130).

contribute to a prevalent color-blind and class-evasive rhetoric that render the structural dimensions of race and class invisible. It is important to recognize, however, that institutions and social relationships are organized by features of race, class, gender, nationality, disability and other characteristics of identity and that failing to account for how these characteristics organize individuals' daily lives means that various structural forms of inequality cannot be challenged.

Directions for Future Research

American Girl's appeal lies in its ability to persuade readers that the characters and storylines are "feminist, multicultural, and educational" because they "draw on 'girl power' discourses in which strong, independent girls solve problems" (Marshall 2009:102). The dolls physically represent a polar opposite to the sexualized-- and by extension, disempowered-- bodies of Barbie and Bratz dolls; the American Girl characters' non-sexualized bodies, as well their age (all of these fictional heroines are nine years old going on ten), "allows [them] a certain kind of freedom" to be strong and spunky (Marshall 2009:104). For however much critics problematize American Girl's representations of femininity as traditional rather than transgressive, the company does attempt to provide "at least on the surface, a more feminist picture of girlhood" (Story 2002:104).

One possible avenue of future research could determine what role, if any, and to what degree, American Girl plays in girls or women's identification as feminists or in their espousal of feminist values. Is there a correlation between exposure to American Girl's stories in youth and one's identification as a feminist in adulthood? If there is, what is the correlation and in what ways does it support

scholars' competing claims about the messages of female empowerment or disempowerment in the American Girl stories? Data on American Girl's relationship to the development (or not) of feminist attitudes could be obtained in a number of different ways. For example, researchers could utilize focus groups in which girls and women who are consumers of American Girl texts and products discuss what they believe feminism is and whether they believe American Girl contributes to those beliefs. Survey research is another possible tool for getting at this relationship; not only would surveys assist researchers in obtaining more information about the degree to which girls and women consume American Girl texts and products, but feminist identification could be measured using a carefully selected scale.[70]

My suggestion for a second direction for future research is inspired by Sarah Eisenstein Stumbar's dialogue with her mother Zillah Eisenstein (1999). In addition to discussing why she was attracted to the American Girl books in the first place (i.e. they provided an antidote to "a culture where it was all boys" and provided a "*herstory"* of America), Stumbar also discussed what she did *not* like about the characters in the *American Girls Collection*. For example, she notes that Addy's ability to read and write quickly and the representations of her family's reunion are "unrealistic" (pg. 91). Samantha is oblivious to her privilege and she is "sometimes selfish and unthinking" (pg. 91). Felicity is "a rich snob"

[70] As a sociologist, I hesitate to suggest which possible scale of feminist identity one might employ in this type of project. I would strongly encourage the researcher(s) who pursue this avenue of study to collaborate with a psychologist who specializes in women's psychology, in general, and feminist psychology, in particular, to determine which feminist identity scale is most appropriate for this line of inquiry.

who Stumbar feels is “selfish and self-centered” (pg. 92) and Molly’s stories fail to address Japanese internment or sufficiently discuss her “feelings about war, or about Hitler, or about the devastation of Europe” (pg. 92). Eisenstein also adds that her daughter “is annoyed that only the Josefina books are translated into Spanish,” demonstrating American Girl’s lack of commitment to “multilingual access” (pg. 94).

Stumbar’s critique of the *American Girls Collection* illustrates that perhaps we need to be asking a different set of questions altogether. What is it that girls themselves do *not* like about American Girl? Perhaps by a more in-depth understanding of what American Girl is *not* for some girls, then we may have a better idea of what it *is* for others. Theorizing from a position that includes girls’ own *critiques* of American Girl might perhaps be more enlightening than asking them what about the stories and dolls *appeals* to them. It would certainly provide insight into the ways girls resist or subvert the values, ideologies, and representations that scholars assert are inherent in the company’s texts.

Discussions of resistance and subversion might also foster an opportunity to investigate if girls engaged in any subversive play with or “queering” of their American Girl dolls. As indicated in Chapter 2, researchers suggest that girls’ play with American Girl dolls generally adheres very closely to the storylines associated with each character so that imaginative play might be limited (Susina

1999; Sekeres 2009).[71] While Diamond *et al* (2009:130) find evidence of literal reenactment of characters' stories in girls' play, they also observed that girls made up their own stories that were not connected to the dolls or their books, yet they say little of what that independent and non-scripted play looked like. If individuals engage in resistance and activism through cultural reappropriations of dolls like Barbie, then in what ways do girls reappropriate American Girl characters and what do those reappropriations mean? As Elizabeth Chin's (2001) research reveals, "queering" white Barbie dolls with "black" hairstyles destabilized racial identity and fixity. In "making white hair black," Chin (2000) argues, low-income African American Girls in Newhallville, a highly segregated and economically marginalized New Jersey community, are participating in "a form of racial integration that for the most part has been unimagined by adult activists, scholars, politicians, or toy manufacturers" (pg. 163). If play with American Girl dolls is subversive, what does it subvert? If play with American girl dolls is queered, what values are being challenged and how?

Additionally, Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel's (2002) suggestion to conduct a study with minority girls and their mothers or with girls who hail from more ethnically or economically diverse communities than those previously sampled remains unanswered. Their suggestion to study girls who have access and exposure to American Girls' stories through schools and libraries but who are

[71] Nardone (2002) observed that heightened awareness of the historical timeline represented by the American Girl characters organized the early stages of her daughter and friends' play with their dolls and accessories. Arguments ensued about 1904 Samantha wearing 1854 Kirsten's clothing; girls excluded 1944 Molly from play because "she was not born yet" (pg. 143)

otherwise unable to purchase American Girl dolls or products has yet to be taken up. These continue to be good suggestions for future research and, as such, I agree that these lines of inquiry warrant attention.

With American Girl's continued growth and development-- through additions of characters to its signature historical collection, with each introduction of a new Girl of the Year, and with its continued expansion of brick-and-mortar stores-- there is likely to be no shortage of research opportunities and avenues to pursue. My hope, of course, is that future research endeavors integrate girls' voices, perspectives, stories, reflections, and critiques. We cannot truly understand the influence of this cultural phenomenon without them.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: American Girls Collection Chronology by Introduction Date

Year Introduced	Doll Name	Year Represented	Era Represented	Year Archived
1986	Kirsten Larson	1854	Great Plains settlement	2010
	Samantha Parkington	1904	Victorian U.S. & Industrial Revolution	2009
	Molly McIntire	1944	WWII/U.S. home front	
1991	Felicity Merriman	1774	pre-American Revolution	2011
1993	Addy Walker	1864	pre-Reconstruction U.S. (African American)	
1997	Josefina Montoya	1824	pre-Manifest Destiny & colonial New Mexico ("Hispanic")	
2000	Kit Kittredge	1934	Great Depression	
2002	Kaya	1764	Northwest Territory, pre-Lewis & Clark (Nez Perce)	
2004	Nellie O'Malley	1904	Victorian U.S. & Industrial Revolution (Irish)	2009

2005	Elizabeth Cole	1774	pre-American Revolution	2011
2006	Emily Bennett	1944	WWII/U.S. home front (British)	
2007	Julie Albright	1974	Feminist 2nd wave (Title IX; divorce)	
	Ivy Ling	1974	Immigrant 2nd generation (Chinese American)	
2008	Ruthie Smithens	1934	Great Depression	
2009	Rebecca Rubin	1914	Early 20th Century European immigration (Jewish)	
2011	Cécile Rey	1853	New Orleans yellow fever epidemic (African American)	
	Marie-Grace Gardener	1853	New Orleans yellow fever epidemic	

Appendix B: American Girls Collection Chronology by Year Represented

Year Represented	Doll Name	Era Represented	Year Introduced	Year Archived
1764	Kaya	Northwest Territory, pre-Lewis & Clark (Nez Perce)	2002	
1774	Felicity Merriman	pre-American Revolution	1991	2011
	Elizabeth Cole	pre-American Revolution	2005	2011
1824	Josefina Montoya	pre-Manifest Destiny & colonial New Mexico ("Hispanic")	1997	
1853	Cécile Rey	New Orleans yellow fever epidemic (African American)	2011	
	Marie-Grace Gardener	New Orleans yellow fever epidemic	2011	
1854	Kirsten Larson	Great Plains settlement	1986	2010
1864	Addy Walker	pre-Reconstruction U.S. (African American)	1993	
1904	Samantha Parkington	Victorian U.S. & Industrial Revolution	1986	2009

	Nellie O'Malley	Victorian U.S. & Industrial Revolution (Irish)	2004	2009
1914	Rebecca Rubin	Early 20th Century European immigration (Jewish)	2009	
1934	Kit Kittredge	Great Depression	2000	
	Ruthie Smithens	Great Depression	2007	
1944	Molly McIntire	WWII/U.S. home front	1986	
	Emily Bennett	WWII/U.S. home front (British)	2006	
1974	Julie Albright	Feminist 2nd wave (Title IX; divorce)	2007	
	Ivy Ling	Immigrant 2nd Generation (Chinese American)	2007	

Appendix C: TMM Call for Essays and Entry Form (2006)

The **Toy & Miniature Museum** *of Kansas City presents*

Win a trip to **American Girl Place** in Chicago!

CALL FOR ESSAYS!

What Does It Mean to Be an ***American Girl?***

The Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City is proud to present ***What Does It Mean to Be an American Girl?*** – *A special exhibit exploring the spirit of girlhood in America, Past and Present.*

This unique exhibit will feature dolls, accessories and stories from the American Girl® historical cast of characters, as well as toys, dolls and miniatures from the Museum collection.

In addition to portraying the triumphs and challenges of girls from yesteryear, the exhibit will seek to capture the essence of modern girlhood. One facet of the exhibit will be devoted to the words and experiences of today's girls. The exhibit will provide a forum for girls, from age 7 through adolescence and into womanhood, to share their perspective on growing up as a girl in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It's our pleasure to invite girls and girls at heart to compose an original essay for the exhibit.

THE FOCUS

Choose <u>one</u> of the following questions to answer in your essay:

- ***What does it mean to me to be an American girl?***
- ***What lessons have I learned from my American Girl® doll or from reading American Girl® novels? How have I used these lessons in my life?***
- ***How have I been inspired by an American Girl® doll or story?***

THE DETAILS

- **Girls from ages 7 through adulthood** are encouraged to submit an essay.
- During the evaluation process, essays will be categorized by age group, reviewed and compared with other entries from the same age category. (For example, an essay written by an 8-year-old will not be judged in the same manner as an essay submitted by a 17-year-old.)
- Essays will be evaluated for honest expression, creativity, originality and adherence to the topic.
- **Essays may not exceed 500 words.** For younger essayists, a few sentences or a paragraph is completely acceptable. Essays should include a title.
- **Essays must be postmarked by February 1, 2007.**
- All essays must be accompanied by an entry form. (See back.)
- Essays may be handwritten or typed. Essays will not be accepted by email. They must be submitted by mail to:
  The Toy and Miniature Museum, 5235 Oak, Kansas City, MO 64112
- Call for Essay forms are also available on our website: **www.umkc.edu/tmm.**
- Submitted essays will become the property of the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City.

YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE EXHIBIT

There are many good reasons to share your story. Here are just a few:

- **Selected essays may become a part of the exhibit** and displayed for visitors to read. What an exciting way to tell the world about the challenges you've overcome, the successes you've experienced and your hopes and dreams for the future!
- **Authors of selected essays may receive tickets to special events** associated with the exhibit including lunch or tea with American Girl® creator Pleasant Rowland, tea with an American Girl® author, as well as other unique opportunities.
- **You even have a chance to win a trip for two to American Girl Place in Chicago.** This prize package includes round-trip airfare from Kansas City, hotel, lunch for two, tickets to American Girl Place and $120 spending money.

ENTRY FORM

See back.

You'll have a chance to win a trip for two to **American Girl Place** in Chicago!

What Does It Mean to Be an ***American Girl****?*

OFFICIAL ENTRY FORM

NAME _____

PARENT/GUARDIAN (IF UNDER 18) _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

AGE _____

TITLE OF ESSAY _____

Essays may be handwritten or typed.
Mail this completed form with your essay to:

The Toy and Miniature Museum
5235 Oak Street
Kansas City, MO 64112

Submit your essay by Feb. 1, 2007

Appendix D: TMM Request for Access to Collections (2009)

TOY & MINIATURE MUSEUM of Kansas City

Request for Access to Collections

Name: Veronica E. Medina Date: 5/21/2009

Address: MU Department of Sociology, 312 Middlebush Hall,

City: Columbia State: MO Zip Code: 65211

Telephone: E-mail: vemm93@mizzou.edu

PURPOSE OF VISIT:

☐ Study Objects

☐ Photograph Objects

☐ Consult Documentation

☒ Other, specify: **Copy American Girl Essays for Dissertation Research**

Request for Access to: (list or describe object(s) or record(s)):
Requesting copies of approximately 300 essays written as part of the 2007 "What it means to be an American Girl" essay contest organized by the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City. Per the agreement the copies will be provided by the museum for a fee of $65 which includes shipping charges. As the essays were written by minors, pseudonyms and identifying characteristics must be changed to protect their identities in any publications or presentations that result from this research. The essay copies are intended for use only by Veronica Medina and shall not be distributed to other persons without express written consent of the Toy and Miniature Museum.

Information/Photographs to be used for the following purpose:

☐ Publication. Title:

Anticipated Date of Publication:

☐ Exhibit. Title, Location, Dates:

☒ Teaching/Research. Describe: **Copy American Girl Essays for Dissertation Research**

☐ Commercial/Other. Describe:

TERMS:

1. I agree to exercise care when handling all objects and documents, and will follow Toy & Miniature Museum guidelines or restrictions.
2. I agree to use the materials listed above only for the purpose stated in this agreement and to abide by any restrictions included herein.
3. I agree to credit the Toy & Miniature Museum of Kansas city as the source of material and to state explicitly that the material are used with permission, in any paper, presentation, or publication resulting from the above described project.
4. I agree to submit a copy of any paper or publication, free of charge, to the Toy & Miniature Museum of Kansas City within a reasonable amount of time after completion.

Signature Date

5235 Oak Street
Kansas City, Missouri 64112 • (816) 333-9328

Appendix E: TMM Contest Submissions by State, City, and County

Submissions Received from Missouri

City	County	Number of Submissions
Belton	Cass	7
Blue Springs	Jackson	1
Columbia	Boone*	2
Dearborn	Buchanan*/Platte	1
Eureka	St. Louis*	2
Excelsior Springs	Clay/Ray	2
Gladstone	Clay	1
Grain Valley	Jackson	2
Grandview	Jackson	7
Greenwood	Schuyler*	3
Harrisonville	Cass	3
Holden	Johnson*	1
Huntsville	Randolph*	1
Independence	Jackson	9
Kansas City	Jackson	59
Kearney	Clay	1
Lee's Summit	Jackson/Cass	27
Liberty	Clay	3
Marshall	Saline*	1
Odessa	Lafayette	2
Parkville	Platte	1
Peculiar	Cass	1
Platte City	Platte	1
Pleasant Valley	Clay	1
Raymore	Cass	2
Raytown	Jackson	6
Republic	Christian*/Greene*	1
Smithville	Clay/Platte	2
St. Charles	St. Charles*	1
St. Joseph	Buchanan*	1
Windsor	Henry*/Pettis*	1
TOTAL:		**153**

* denotes counties outside of the Kansas City metropolitan statistical area

Submissions Received from Kansas

City	County	Number of Submissions
Baldwin City	Douglas*	1
Bonner Springs	Johnson/Leavenworth/Wyandotte	6
Eudora	Douglas*	1
Fairway	Johnson	3
Ft. Leavenworth	Leavenworth	1
Kansas City	Wyandotte	3
Kingman	Kingman*	2
Lawrence	Douglas*	3
Leavenworth	Leavenworth	1
Leawood	Johnson	5
Lenexa	Johnson	12
Louisburg	Johnson	1
Mission	Johnson	1
Mission Hills	Johnson	2
Olathe	Johnson	24
Overbrook	Osage*	1
Overland Park	Johnson	33
Prairie Village	Johnson	9
Roeland Park	Johnson	1
Sabetha	Brown*/Nemaha*	1
Shawnee	Johnson	8
Shawnee Mission	Johnson	1
Stanley	Johnson	1
Topeka	Shawnee*	2
Wellsville	Franklin	1
Wichita	Sedgwick*	1
TOTAL:		**125**

* denotes counties outside of the Kansas City metropolitan statistical area

Submissions Received from Outside of Kansas and Missouri

	Number of Submissions
Manchester, IA	1
Baltimore, MD	1
Omaha, NE	3
LaVista, NE	1
Bennington, NE	1
West Point, NY	1
Bellbroak, OH	1
Grafton, WI	1
Spooner, WI	1
TOTAL:	**11**

Appendix F: General Demographic Characteristics of the Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area (KC MSA)

	Number of Essays Received	% White Persons	% Black Persons	% Asian Persons	% Hispanic/ Latino Persons	Median Household Income in 1999	Median Family Income in 1999	% Below Poverty (with related children <18)
KC MSA (overall)	252	80.8	12.8	1.6	5.2	$46,193	$55,779	9.2
Bates (MO)*****	0	96.6	0.9	0.2	1.6	$38,882	---	---
Caldwell (MO)*****	0	96.5	0.4	0.2	1.5	$39,439	---	---
Cass (MO)	13	95.6	1.4	0.5	2.2	$49,562	$55,258	6.3
Clay (MO)	10	92.5	2.7	1.3	3.6	$48,347	$56,772	5.5
Clinton (MO)	0	96.6	1.5	0.2	1.1	$41,629	$48,244	9.5
Jackson (MO)	111	70.1	23.3	1.3	5.4	$39,277	$48,435	13.9
Lafayette (MO)	2	95.5	2.3	0.2	1.2	$38,235	$45,717	10.9
Platte (MO)	3	91.5	3.5	1.5	3.0	$55,849	$65,236	4.9
Ray (MO)	0	96.5	1.5	0.2	1.1	$41,886	$49,192	7.8
Franklin (KS)	1	95.0	1.2	0.3	2.6	$39,052	$45,197	7.5
Johnson (KS)	101	91.1	2.6	2.8	4.0	$61,455	$72,987	3.0
Leavenworth (KS)	2	84.2	10.4	1.1	3.8	$48,144	$55,805	7.2
Linn (KS)*	0	96.4	0.4	0.3	1.9	$44,379	---	---
Miami (KS)	0	96.0	1.5	0.2	1.6	$46,665	$55,830	5.2
Wyandotte (KS)	9	58.2	28.3	1.6	16.0	$33,784	$40,333	18.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 (kcresearch.org) and
***** U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010 (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html)

Note: Population percentages do not total 100%. I opted to include only the major racial categories included in the 2000 or 2010 Census and used figures for individuals reporting only one race. The exception is the category of Hispanic/Latino, which includes individuals "of all races." See the links above for more information.

VITA

Veronica E. Medina, a native of Kansas City, Missouri, received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and English at the University of Kansas in 2004. She earned her Master of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of Missouri in 2007. In addition to her doctoral degree in Sociology, Ms. Medina earned a graduate minor in Women's and Gender Studies.

While pursuing her doctorate at MU, Ms. Medina was a graduate instructor for Introduction to Sociology, Introduction to Sociology--Honors, Sociology of Family, Social Inequalities, Sociology of Gender, Social Psychology, and Sociology of Work. Ms. Medina also served as an adjunct instructor at Columbia College from 2009 to 2012 where she taught American Social Policy, Sociology of Family, and Women in Society.

Ms. Medina holds membership in the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS) and has held membership in the Association for Black Sociologists (ABS), the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), and the American Association of University Women (AAUW).

Ms. Medina begins her appointment as Assistant Professor of Sociology at Indiana University Southeast (New Albany, IN) in August 2012.