


2011

“Not One Looks like My Daughter!”: How American Girl Makes History Hegemony

Nicole LaConte

Connecticut College, nicole.laconte@conncoll.edu

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“Not One Looks like My Daughter!”

How American Girl Makes History Hegemony

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Nicole Marie LaConte

to

The History Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College

New London, Connecticut

Spring 2011

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Acknowledgements

Thank you very much to Professor Catherine Stock, Professor Frederick Paxton, and Professor Jennifer Manion of the Connecticut College History Department for all your advice and feedback, and for having faith in this unusual project.

Thank you to all the staff, but especially Rebecca McCue, at the Holleran Center at Connecticut College for helping me integrate this paper into the Program in Community Action.

Thank you as well to the many friends who reacted to my initial idea with excitement and curiosity (and disbelief).

Thank you to my amazing family, for all your love and support and books (and food).

And last but certainly not least, thank you Pleasant Rowland, for creating such an interesting product for me to study!

Abstract

American Girl markets dolls and books toward girls. Their original product line, which features historical characters, mobilizes history to teach moral lessons. This paper breaks down these morals to search for hegemony, a discourse that marginalizes minority readers. In this quest to uncover hegemony, the paper deals with issues of narrative perspective and socialization. Regarding narrative perspective, the paper asks, “Whom do these books deem normal in America? Whom do these books deem other in America?” Regarding socialization issues, this paper asks, “What value and behaviors do these books condone as part of acceptable American Girlhood? What values and behaviors are deemed totally aberrant and unacceptable?” In establishing normative perspectives and trajectories, the books raise issues about race, socioeconomic class, gender roles, religious identities, and nationalism. Given this particular line of questioning, this paper falls under the contemporary historical pursuit to problematize the very idea of historical accuracy, to uncover excluded voices from the traditional canon. The paper concludes that *American Girl* use history to perpetuate hegemony over young women in the United States.

Introduction

Ten Characters, One Mission

Lifelong educator Pleasant Rowland has passionately advocated for literacy development in the primary grades as an essential gateway to achievement for students in the United States. But before she established the Rowland Reading Foundation in 2004, she founded the *American Girls Collection* in 1985. Working with colleagues from educational publisher Addison-Wesley, including author Valerie Tripp, Pleasant Rowland set out to create and sell a toy that would depart from the immorality she perceived in Barbie, along with the emptiness she saw in the Cabbage Patch doll line (Nielsen 2002: 85). Through a chain of retail stores, a widespread catalogue, and more recently, an interactive website, *American Girl* has sold about 132 million books and 18 million dolls marketed toward female children in upper elementary school.¹

The *American Girls Collection* of dolls and books originally featured three characters intentionally designed to represent periods in American history. Kirsten Larson represents the immigrant experience on the frontier in the 1850s. Samantha Parkington represents the Victorian Experience in New York in the 1900s. Molly McIntire represents the homefront experience in suburban Illinois in the 1940s. Added in 1991, Felicity Merriman represents Virginia in 1774; added in 1993, Addy Walker represents the experience of the Civil War in the North and the South. In 1997, Josefina Montoya started representing Mexican America in 1824. After purchasing this company for 700 million dollars in 1998, Mattel added Kit Kittredge in 2000, who represents 1930s Cincinnati; She Who Arranges Rocks (or Kaya for short) in 2002, who represents Nez Perce Native Americans in 1764; Julie Albright in 2007, who represents San

Francisco in 1974; and finally, Rebecca Rubin in 2010, who represents tenement life in 1910s New York.

Along with teaching history, Pleasant Rowland and Mattel have used *American Girl* to teach moral lessons. Through *American Girl*, Rowland and Mattel intentionally and openly “provide modern girls with appropriate role models” (Rowland in Nielsen 2002: 85). To achieve this blend of history and didacticism, the primary lead authors – Valerie Tripp, Janet Shaw, Connie Porter, and recently, Meghan McDonald – have integrated culturally constructed moral messages thoroughly into the books. And as the characters gradually encounter and internalize these morals, the company hopes that young readers will do the same, turning to these morals in times of change and growth to create their own *American Girl* identity themselves. The website explains how the books can serve as a moral compass for young readers.

Gentle life lessons throughout the stories remind girls of such lasting values as the importance of family and friends, compassion, responsibility, and forgiveness. Full of wisdom and encouragement, the stories show girls how to meet their own challenges with strength and courage.²

While reading the books about Addy definitely means learning about American history, the reader simultaneously encounters moral messages intentionally constructed, internally perpetuated, and commoditized through marketing and distribution. This company that integrates social studies and morality does not shy away from acknowledging its intent to socialize young readers. In fact, the company openly defines the books as vehicles for fostering “lasting values.” Although Barbie often receives the blame for influencing young girls, *American Girl* and its

¹ Fast Facts. American Girl. <http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=6>. Accessed 5/1/2011.

² “Books that Educate, Entertain, and Inspire.” American Girl. <http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=16>. Accessed 5/1/2011.

intentional mission to socialize its readership helps make the line just as ideologically laden – and, therefore, possibly problematic – as Barbie (Inness 1998: 169). The next three sections on nationalism, on class, and finally, on gender, will offer some context and content to explain the ideologies perpetuated by *American Girl*.

Breaking Down Citizenship in *American Girl*

The name *American Girl* is an umbrella term implying that all ten historical characters can be reliably classified not only as female, but also as American. In its very name, *American Girl* both creates and claims a nation particular to its own ideological mission of socialization. Locating the characters underneath the umbrella of American nationality constructs a community, a shared identity with common values, over a group of female characters that differ widely in time period, in geographic location, in socioeconomic class, in religious affiliation, in racial identity. In other words, when *American Girl* groups its characters under one nationality, the company simultaneously overrides important differences among the girls for the sake of common identity. Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, suggests that “an imagined political community,” like that constructed by *American Girl*, also constructs a politics of inclusion and exclusion that embraces some as cultural insiders, while excluding some as cultural outsiders (Anderson 1983: 5-7). Adhering to these values – and thereby sacrificing individuality for the sake of a cohesive national identity – not only promises inclusion, but also constitutes citizenship.

Born into the world not yet imbued with societal norms, how do children acquire this citizenship, so dependent on conformity? Through words and behavior, their mentors, at home, at school, at church, at local community centers, and recently, in the powerful media, socialize them to accept certain values, in the Gramscian sense, as unquestionable common sense. The

essence of hegemony, this dominant common sense creates conditions where transgression and individuality go against the flow of conformity to one common identity. And if *American Girl* defines citizenship as conformity to this common identity, the critical consciousness of counter culture has no place in *American Girlhood*. Through its own characters that experience targeted socialization, through its aggressive strategy of marketing this didacticism to its young readers and their affluent parents, and through its presence in schools, *American Girl* actively strives to bring young children under this common identity, away from transgressive influences.

In using the schools to spread their version of citizenship, *American Girl* participates in the legacy of constructing and enforcing a hegemonic national identity in American public schools that has long marginalized minority students. Joel Spring, author of *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, argues that public schools, from the infamous Carlisle Indian School of the past to the insidious English Only Movement of the present, have always participated in socializing their students to norms of Americanization, whether they revolve around religious practices or language or customs. When *American Girl* infiltrated public schools in 1994 through *America at School*, this move into classrooms further normalized this conflation of conformity and citizenship. The *America at School* product line, introduced to third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students in 1994, includes activities and further reading materials to complement the established *American Girl* book series (Susina 1999: 131). By turning *American Girl* knowledge into school knowledge, the company ultimately conflated moral messages, historical information, and ideas about citizenship, thereby cementing their authority.

What does it mean when a product heavily targeted at a youth audience is available for a school to display? Does it not imply that the values and ideas embodied in *the American Girls Collection* should be accepted as historical fact? (Inness 1998: 173).

As the most trusted learning institutions in communities, schools have the power to distinguish legitimate knowledge from fallacy. When schools adopt *America at School*, they identify *American Girl* – its history curriculum and its didacticism – as legitimate, as correct, as appropriate. They participate in – and, therefore, condone – the character education that *American Girl* has clearly delineated in its products. And because *American Girl* also delineates cultural insiders from outsiders, cultural conformists from nonconformists, to establish criteria for nationalistic behavior, the schools participate in this politics of inclusion and exclusion by condoning *American Girl*.

Having examined the vehicles employed by *American Girl* to achieve nationalistic socialization, in Part One of this paper, I examine the values and behaviors that constitute insider behavior, and, therefore, the expression of citizenship articulated and condoned by *American Girl*. In this particular section, both Kirsten and Molly serve as the perfect case studies for exposing these attitudes and actions deemed nationalistic, primarily because both characters start out deemed un-American, though in different ways. But because they ultimately fall under the title *American Girl*, the attributes they acquire through socialization point to the criteria for truly nationalistic Americanization. An immigrant from Sweden settling on the frontier in Minnesota, Kirsten Larson first arrives in the United States not yet an American, by citizenship or nature. As she grows acculturated to life in America, she changes her values and behavior: she moves from materialism to industriousness, a change that connects fully embracing the Protestant work ethic with becoming truly American. In the other example, Molly McIntire, from 1944, originally demonstrates dramatic behavior that causes her mentors to label her un-American. But as she learns to channel her theatricality into duty to war and God, she becomes a symbol of patriotism,

earning the role of Miss Victory in a pageant for returning soldiers. A demonstration of citizenship ultimately requires a demonstration of loyalty to God and country.

Taken together, these characters forge links between citizenship and Christianity, between citizenship and war. Because *American Girl* seeks to construct a national identity, and because they measure good citizenship according to conformity with Christian values and militancy, *American Girl* ultimately excludes both non-Christians and pacifists from full *American Girlhood*, from full membership in their blanket category *American Girl*.

Breaking Down Class in *American Girl*

Given this larger context of citizenship, the particular historical moment that produced *American Girl* also influenced the ideas about class, defined both by wealth and consumption, peppered throughout the books. First published in 1986, the books have inherited a legacy of socialization, a discourse on wealth and consumption that has long characterized children's literature. As far back as classical antiquity, Greek and Roman schoolboys accessed ideas about citizenship through literature, written sources their teachers required them to read, memorize, and even recite (Lerer 2008:1). Aesop's Fables, for example, inundated students with morals that aligned their thoughts and actions with "institutions, individuals, and idioms of everyday experience" that shaped their loyalty to larger state ideals (Lerer 2008: 36-37). As increased educational attainment and rising literacy rates rapidly spiked the demand for books for children from 1700 to 1800, authors and publishers continued to integrate moralizing messages into their written works (Zipes 2001: 46). John Newberry, for example, dominated book publishing during the 1700s with didactic books about characters like Goody Two-Shoes, who overcomes poverty through her virtuousness. In an ironic twist, while promoting the virtue of frugality, his books simultaneously include advertisements for his health products. This duality of frugality and

consumption ultimately creates tension between the intent of didacticism and the intent of profitability inherent in children's literature published for wide consumption (Susina 1999: 130).

American Girl has inherited this legacy of simultaneously promoting frugality and consumerism. *American Girl* blatantly juxtaposes its storylines that value penny pinching and resourcefulness with overt product placements: the consumer who reads the books about Kit writing on her typewriter, or Addy playing with her doll Ida Bean, can purchase those items from any *American Girl* retail provider, in person or online. This imperative to buy comes through most strongly when almost every character – from Felicity to Kirsten to Samantha to Molly – constantly expresses her desire to collect beautiful dolls. As supposedly moralizing tales, the books therefore condone this desire to purchase collectable dolls through this brilliantly executed embedded advertising, ultimately encouraging the readers to desire *American Girl* paraphernalia itself. This tension between didacticism and frugality becomes even more apparent upon considering the hefty price tag that comes with purchasing the dolls, the books, and the many accessories produced by the company. According to the online shopping center, to purchase Josefina Montoya and her six books, the consumer must spend 123 dollars. To purchase her oven and food, the consumer must spend an additional 42 dollars.³ But as Fred Nielsen points out in *the Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, “the irony is that most of the girls in the *American Girl Doll* books could not afford (nor could their families afford) such expensive toys” (Nielsen 2002: 86). The products sold by *American Girl* ultimately create an extremely tangled web of values and practices: affordable only to individuals and families with surplus expendable income, but containing moral messages about frugality, yet encouraging young readers to buy and collect, *American Girl* blatantly demonstrates the tension between didacticism and consumerism historically exhibited by most children's literature.

In offering these competing moral messages about consumption, *American Girl* plays into the larger historical struggle to reconcile consumptive practices, socioeconomic tensions, and citizenship into one American identity. In *A Consumer's Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Lizabeth Cohen perceptively deconstructs the connections, often complicated and competing, between money and citizenship that arose from larger political forces, economic realities, and new cultural movements in America during the twentieth century. The 1930s and 1940s served as the perfect cultural laboratory for Americans to develop new ideas that connected purchasing power with citizenship. After the World Wars and the Great Depression, “the purchaser as citizen” patriotically spent his money to facilitate “economic recovery” contingent upon an extremely “dynamic mass consumption economy” (Cohen 2003: 8). And as Cold War tensions soared, American consumption seemed like “the prosperous American alternative to the material deprivations of communism” (Cohen 2003: 8). This period framed consumption as patriotic.

On the other hand, as Americans moved into the 1950s up through the 1980s, opposition arose to counter this connection between money and citizenship. Major economic crises in the 1970s, such as the war in Vietnam, caused American citizens to lose confidence in their government to spend judiciously, thereby disentangling economic expenditure from the national interest (Cohen 2003: 387-388). Diverse groups described as counter cultural, ranging from the Beats to the Religious Right, have opposed the centrality of consumption in America (Cohen 2003: 11). Even Reaganomics, the deregulation of businesses and cutbacks to welfare, ultimately symbolized a move to disconnect the republic from spending too much (Cohen 2003: 391). The 1990s definitely provided fertile ground for Americans to debate and redefine connections

³ “Shop.” “Dolls.” “Josefina.” American Girl. <http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/static/josefinadoll.jsp>

between purchasing power and citizenship, but both these perspectives ultimately exclude the poor from citizenship, the expression citizenship in the modern world.

Into this historical climate of debate and change, *American Girl* burst onto the market. Coming from the 1980s, *American Girl* ostensibly rejects the connection between capital and citizenship so cherished by the Consumer's Republic, but in so doing, still perpetuates classist ideologies. On the one hand, if citizenship requires spending, creating a Consumer's Republic, then clearly the poor cannot participate in constructing and asserting their citizenship.

Simultaneously, however, if citizenship condemns spending, this discourse associates protest and advocacy for fundamental economic justice with extremely unpatriotic behavior. In essence, to deny the centrality of wealth to accessing full citizenship in America is to overlook injustice, simultaneously denying the poor the forum and evidence they need to advocate for equality. Dissociating wealth from citizenship stigmatizes protest and advocacy, ultimately keeping the poor from rising against oppression. Both perspectives constitute classism.

In Part Two of this paper, I break down how the books ultimately play into this societal effort to suppress advocacy among the poor. Both Samantha Parkington, representing Victorian New York, and Kit Kittredge, from the Great Depression perpetuate ideas that connect (and disconnect) socioeconomic class, material consumption, and citizenship in highly problematic ways. The wealthy Samantha Parkington perpetuates classism mostly through her relationship with Nellie, the child laborer living next door. Developing Samantha, not Nellie, to represent Victorian America suggests that *American Girl* privileges wealth over poverty by mobilizing narrative perspective to allow the reader to connect most directly with Samantha, not Nellie. Her grandmother, a voice of authority, even suggests that Samantha must not allow herself to empathize with Nellie, to become her friend, but rather, Samantha must force herself to regard

the friendship as patronage. This privileging of wealth gives Samantha societal power; this condescension to poverty takes away any agency that Nellie might enjoy. Just as Samantha Parkington initially seeks to befriend her neighbor, Kit Kittredge initially seeks to challenge class realities, questioning why some people suffer from the depression so acutely, and others stay rich. But when she demonstrates this curious critical consciousness, her mentors encourage her to not ask questions, but rather work within the system through resourcefulness to make ends meet. Even though *American Girl* ostensibly includes disfranchised characters like Nellie and features activist characters like Kit, *American Girl* ultimately strips both characters of power, suggesting that the wealthy ultimately retain their privilege, even in the Post Consumer's Republic.

Breaking Down Gender in *American Girl*

Along with constructing citizenship through its titular effort to define American identity, and along with perpetuating class ideologies through perspective and price, *American Girl* says something about gender. In intentionally perpetuating socialization against females – both its characters and its readers – *American Girl* does not demonstrate innovation, but rather, the legacy of most children's literature targeted toward young females throughout history. Children's books have long laid out behavior patterns deemed acceptable by society for readers to emulate. Seth Lerer, author of *Children's Literature: a Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, explains that if gender – especially girlhood – boils down to a public performance of norms, then literature helps provide the script for this gendered enactment (Lerer 2008: 229-230). In both *American Girl* and its historical precedents, this script usually includes an imperative toward change, a process of socialization that girls must undergo to become mature women. L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, first published in 1901, for example, features several adult

characters who constantly chastise Anne for her theatrical nature, encouraging her to behave “more sensibly” (Lerer 2008: 236). Other books, such as *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden*, also include moral imperatives against theatricality, suggesting that young women must avoid expressive behavior – and, therefore, any potentially transgressive behavior – to become mature women (Lerer 2008: 242, 244-245). And because to limit expressive behavior ultimately means to limit true individuality and agency, keeping women humbly quiet and contained, then this literary tradition constitutes sexism. And as Jack Zipes perceptively explains in *Sticks and Stones: the Troubling Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, children’s literature often casts this sexism as morality. “By getting rid of moral sewers” and creating “purification systems” through didacticism, children’s literature equates domestication with morality, ultimately condoning limitations on female power and creativity in society.

American Girl has inherited this legacy of containing and purifying young women. Jennifer Miskec, author of *Meet Ivy and Bean: Queerly the Anti-American Girls*, has articulated a theory to explain how socialization to this gender confinement and cleansing – an act of sexism – functions in *American Girl*.

The *American Girl* character that subverts, even in the smallest ways, the normalizing discourse of ‘good girl’ – where ‘good girl’ typically means such qualities as obedient, patient, and restrained – is promptly brought back into the bounds of ‘normal’ by the story’s end (Miskec 2009: 158).

To deconstruct this theory, Jennifer Miskec suggests that *American Girl* normalizes femininity by identifying certain attitudes and behaviors as organically and unquestionably integral to proper girlhood. These values and actions deemed normal, including such condoned attributes “as obedient” “and restrained,” all confine the character, and through didactic intentions, the

reader, to stillness and silence, ultimately limiting female agency and individuality. Bring readers along for the ride, each character passes through a process of socialization to learn and embrace this girlhood of normalized limited agency, moving herself “back into the bounds of normal by the story’s end.” In essence, *American Girl* purposefully creates sexist hegemony that traps its characters and readers within its constructed web of normalcy, a standard defined by purposeful confinement and containment condoned as wholly universal and normal.

This theory helps provide the structure for each *American Girl* discussed in this paper, but Part Three specifically focuses on these gender issues. Both Felicity Merriman and Addy Walker represent American wartimes, with Felicity coming from colonial Williamsburg during the Revolutionary War and Addy escaping from a plantation to freedom in Philadelphia. Both characters definitely raise gender issues. To mobilize Miskec’s theory, Felicity Merriman starts out extremely independent, but she must learn to temper that independence with patience. Addy Walker must move from expression to suppression, ultimately limiting her potential to question and transgress societal injustices (Miskec 2009: 159-161). Whereas independence and expression show engagement and passion toward life in society, on the other hand, domesticated patience and suppression show withdrawal and silence. Like other children’s literature before it, *American Girl* participates in confining girlhood to passivity and submissiveness.

The First Extensive Analysis

If the company wants to perpetuate certain moral values, we as consumers have the power to forcefully open those moral values to close scrutiny. Surprisingly, however, few scholars have subjected *American Girl* to deconstruction. Several innovative critics, from Sherrie Inness, to Jan Susina, to Daniel Hade, to Fred Nielsen, to Jennifer Miskec, have laid the groundwork for analysis. In 1998, Sherrie Inness, author of *Anti-Barbies: the American Girls*

Collection and Political Ideologies, contributed to the literature by exploring hegemonic ideas about race, socioeconomic class, and gender perpetuated by the series. Just one year later, Jan Susina, author of *The American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History*, historically located this hegemony within the powerful legacy of didactic children's literature. In that same year, Daniel Hade, author of *Lies My Children's Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in the American Girl Books*, expertly furthered this analysis by exposing the oversimplifications committed by *American Girl* in uniting historical content with didacticism. In 2002, Fred Nielsen wrote about the contradictions inherent in *American Girl*, such as the tension between frugality and consumerism, in *American History through the Eyes of the American Girls*. And finally, in 2009, Jennifer Miskec, author of *Meet Ivy and Bean: Queerly the Anti-American Girls*, looks specifically at hegemonic ideas about gender norms presented in *American Girl*.

In this paper, I will continue this previous scholarship by further deconstructing the book series. Several questions will guide this research. What values and behaviors do readers see condoned? And if condoned attitudes and actions ultimately constitute this didactic *American Girlhood*, what values and behaviors do readers see condemned and, therefore, excluded from *American Girlhood*? Do these values, condoned and condemned, ultimately come together to construct hegemony, a marginalizing discourse that normalizes privilege, against minority readers? After examining the evidence, I ultimately recognize that this politics of inclusion and exclusion privileges whiteness over blackness, privileges wealth over poverty, and usually privileges Christianity over other value systems. This privileging of dominance shines through in rhetoric and plotlines about citizenship, about gender, and even about class. Six of the ten

historical characters – Kirsten, Molly, Samantha, Kit, Felicity, and Addy – provide perfect case studies to explore these themes in depth.

Chronology

- 1986 The Pleasant Company releases the three founding characters, all white girls: Kirsten (1854), Samantha (1904), and Molly (1944)
- 1991 Another white character, Felicity (1774), is introduced
- 1992 *American Girl Magazine* publishes its first issue
- 1993 The first – and only – black character, Addy (1864), is introduced
- 1995 The *Just like You* doll line (now called *My American Girl*) is introduced, allowing girls to choose from a limited list of features (brown hair, green eyes, etc) to create a doll that, in theory, looks like them
- 1997 Josefina (1824), the first – and only – Hispanic character is introduced
- 1998 Mattel acquires the Pleasant Company for \$700 million
- 2000 Kit (1934), another white doll, joins the collection
- 2001 The *Girl of the Year* doll line is introduced, putting a series of new historical characters on sale for only one year each
- 2002 Kaya (1764) is introduced as the first – and only – Native American character
- 2007 Julie (1974), another white doll, is introduced
- 2008 *Kit Kittredge: an American Girl* hits movie theaters across the country
- 2009 Rebecca (1914) becomes the first Jewish doll in the series
The Samantha line is retired
- 2010 The Kirsten line is retired
- 2011 The Felicity line is retired after the holiday shopping season

Part One

National Socialization

Is this a giant Barbie Doll? I wondered, tearing off the last shred of wrapping paper to expose a long white box. After all, I was only seven, fresh off the alter from my First Communion in the Catholic Church – I had no idea that I was unwrapping one of the most economically successful, culturally constructed, and powerful consumer products ever created in America.

“It’s an *American Girl*! Meet Samantha!” my aunt enthusiastically explained, pulling off the cover to expose Samantha Parkington. Absolutely beautiful, the doll was wearing a sparkling white dress. “And look, she just made her First Communion as well!” she declared, gesturing toward the dress.

My first experience with *American Girl* speaks to the construction of citizenship presented by the company. Before Kaya came out in 2002, all of the other *American Girls* practice Christianity, a choice in design and marketing that reveals the connection between citizenship and Christianity articulated by *American Girl*. This section will examine the attitudes and actions, usually marked by Christianity, that constitute insider behavior, and, therefore, the expression of citizenship articulated and condoned by *American Girl*. The two historical characters most relevant to examining these issues of citizenship are Kirsten and Molly, both girls who begin their series labeled un-American, whether by their birth or behavior. But because they ultimately fall under the category *American Girl*, the attributes they acquire through socialization point to the criteria for truly nationalistic Americanization according to American Girl.

Arriving in America as an immigrant, Swedish Kirsten Larson provides a laboratory for the reader to see socialization to American values as it happens. As she grows accustomed to life in America, she changes her attitudes and actions: she moves from materialism to industriousness, a change that connects to embracing the Protestant work ethic with becoming truly American. The other case study, Molly McIntire, representing 1944, originally demonstrates dramatic behavior that motivates her mentors to brand her un-American. But as she learns to channel her theatricality into obedience to war and God, she becomes a symbol of patriotism, earning the role of Miss Victory in a pageant for returning soldiers. According to *American Girl*, the demonstration of citizenship ultimately requires a demonstration of loyalty to God and country.

In conjunction, these characters create links between citizenship and Christianity, between citizenship and war. Because *American Girl* seeks to construct a national identity, and because they measure good citizenship according to conformity with Christian values and militancy, *American Girl* actively excludes both non-Christians and pacifists from full *American Girlhood*, from belonging under the umbrella term of *American Girl*. As theorist Benedict Anderson would interpret *American Girl*, true belonging in the *Imagined Community* of America requires Christianity.

Chapter One

Kirsten, 1854: From Materialism to Industriousness

“A pioneer girl of strength and spirit who settles on the frontier”

This chapter will explain how Kirsten, an immigrant, helps expose the criteria for citizenship according to *American Girl*, primarily because she undergoes explicit Americanization. Kirsten Larson, an original *American Girl* dating back to 1986, went into the archives in 2010. Although the company no longer sells the Kirsten doll, consumers can still purchase her books that teach young readers about life for immigrants from Sweden living on the frontier in Minnesota in 1854. Mama, Papa, Lars, Peter, and Kirsten leave Sweden, travelling across the ocean to join their relatives already established in the United States. After arriving in New York City, the family climbs aboard a train headed west for the small farm in Minnesota where their Uncle Olav, Aunt Inger, cousin Lisbeth, and little cousin Anna rejoice at their arrival. For the rest of the series, the plotlines revolve around the family becoming more and more adjusted to life on the frontier and its accompanying challenges. The family goes through many changes: they host a teacher, Miss Winston, who eventually departs for another job; they add another member, baby Britta, to their growing family; they say goodbye to their friends, John and Mary, who journey on the Oregon Trail. All the while, Kirsten progresses through the *American Girl* narrative arc, from the introductory tale, to the school story, to the Christmas story, to the birthday story, to the summer story, to the winter story that brings new changes and challenges.

The Larsons are meant to represent the experience of immigrants in America. In consequence, the books raise issues about perspective. Do Kirsten, her family, and friends really

offer the most balanced perspective on life for immigrants in America? Unlike other immigrant groups, including Chinese and Italians, who faced both prejudice and discrimination starting in the mid-1800s, the Larsons, having immigrated from Scandinavia, benefit from race privilege, along with membership in the dominant religious institution of Christianity. In *End of the Great Migration: Decline, Restriction, and Press Reaction, 1929-1932*, Sture Lindmark of the Swedish Pioneer Historical Society explains that the government considered Swedes racially desirable in the immigration process. According to government officials and some newspaper accounts, the Swedes did not belong to “the so-called ‘less desirable elements from southern and eastern Europe’” that experienced both discrimination, and later, quota restrictions (Lindmark 2009: 40-41). By choosing Kirsten Larson to represent immigrant America for over twenty years, until Rebecca burst onto the scene in 2010, *American Girl* essentially normalized the privileged perspective of racial desirability that most immigrant groups – ‘less desirable elements from southern and eastern Europe’ – never enjoyed.

In addition to silencing other immigrants, the books relegate the indigenous experience to the margins. As the pioneers struck out into the American wilderness, their own quest for self determination ironically encroached upon Native American lands. Even when Kirsten befriends an indigenous girl named Singing Bird whose band must relocate due to territorial losses, she does not question her own role in Manifest Destiny, her own part in disfranchising natives. *American Girl* blatantly misses this opportunity to endow Kirsten with critical consciousness, and instead further marginalizes native perspectives by relegating Singing Bird to silence and secrecy. In *Kirsten’s Surprise: a Christmas Story*, Kirsten lies to Papa to conceal her friendship: “Kirsten didn’t want to tell him about Singing Bird and the Indians” (Shaw 1986: 44). This process of overlooking native perspectives plays into her Americanization: she becomes part of

the race of colonizers who disfranchise native peoples. Why did *American Girl* make Kirsten the representative of 1854, and not Singing Bird? By centering six books on Kirsten, leaving Singing Bird in the margins, and codifying this hierarchy as normal and unquestionable through their own marketing as authoritative history education, *American Girl* contributes to their own blatantly Eurocentric definition of *American Girlhood*.

From Eagerness to Industriousness

Along with these problems of perspective, these books actually provide the blueprint for gaining American citizenship according to *American Girl*. Due to the fact that Kirsten starts out explicitly un-American by citizenship, the reader literally sees the values and behaviors she gains to earn *American Girlhood*. Reading Kirsten, the reader can observe the characteristics and actions that constitute the criteria for citizenship – for membership in the *Imagined Community* of American – according to *American Girl*. What does this socialization – this change – look like? In adopting this new national identity, Kirsten shifts from materialism to industriousness, a change that connotes a connection to Protestantism articulated by venerated theorist Max Weber. In his influential work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the author explains how Protestant denominations have sanctified hard work, elevating industriousness to holiness. Given this ideological connection between industriousness and Protestantism, the socialization process that Kirsten undergoes seems like religious education that conflates American citizenship with Protestantism. In embracing the Protestantism practiced by her family, Kirsten Larson uses religion as an ideological bridge that ultimately connects her to life and citizenship in America. In privileging fully accepting this Protestantism as an important means to fully gain citizenship, the Kirsten books work to articulate an American citizenship rooted in Protestantism, not in secularism or religious freedom.

A Christmas Story sets the stage for this laboratory of American citizenship. From the beginning, the lead character does not demonstrate the work ethic so integral to her native religion, the family religion that will eventually link her to full American citizenship. At first, Kirsten neglects to consider the planning, the processes, and the hard work that turn material goals into reality. To celebrate the upcoming holiday season, Kirsten wants to recreate Swedish traditions in Minnesota. To turn this vision into reality, she needs to recover the trunk – and all the stuff inside it – her family left behind on their original journey out west. “Every night when she said her prayers she prayed that Papa would get the trunks soon” (Shaw 1986: 10). Through this prayer, she turns materialism into her religion. She imbues the trunk and its precious objects with great spiritual significance, believing them to be integral to the celebration of Christmas. For Kirsten, not yet an American, material objects actually serve ritual purposes that connect her back to Sweden.

To pursue her vision, she constantly asks Mama about whether and when they can journey back to reclaim their trunk. “‘I know you miss your doll,’ Mama said. ‘But work comes before play’” (Shaw 1986: 4). According to Mama, Kirsten should prioritize “work” over “play,” implying that she should practice industriousness over materialism. Rather than long for her “doll” – a particularly ironic symbol of materialism located in a series about dolls – Kirsten Larson must channel that energy into work. Although Papa grows impatient with Kirsten for incessantly prioritizing materialism – “‘Don’t ask me again or I’ll be angry!’” – he agrees to help his daughter journey back several miles to where they left their trunk (Shaw 1986: 18). On this winter journey, blizzards threaten, but Kirsten and Papa press on, prioritizing goods over safety. Caught in blinding now, Papa suffers an injury. A moment of epiphany – of conversion – soon follows, in which Kirsten Larson moves herself from materialism to industriousness, fully

embracing the religious work ethic that will bind her to America. In protecting her father, in harnessing the horse, in finding them shelter, and even in sparking a fire, Kirsten relies on work to save the day. ““I was scared. Then I was too busy to be scared anymore”” (Shaw 1986: 50). The value of industriousness brings salvation by taming the wilderness in America. In choosing to work the environment to beat the blizzard, Kirsten Larson mobilizes *The Protestant Ethic* to become master of the land – of the country – to ensure survival. In the spirit of Manifest Destiny – in *The Spirit of Capitalism* – Kirsten Larson takes control and ownership through work, actively mobilizing Protestant values to ultimately seek out her place in America. According to *American Girl*, American citizenship requires industriousness, not materialism.

Both *A Springtime Story* and *A Summer Story* work to reinforce this socialization process. Newly converted to industriousness in America, Kirsten Larson willingly sacrifices her pastimes and even her education to work at home. “Now that there was so much work to do at home, Kirsten had no time to work on her design before bed. Some days Mama’s back ached so badly that Kirsten had to stay home from school to help her bake and cook” (Shaw 1987: 19). In this particular example, she prioritizes her work over play and even over school. This almost religious devotion to work translates into *The Spirit of Capitalism*, further cementing her citizenship in America. In *A Summer Story*, industrious Kirsten “was glad the heavy work of spring cleaning and plating was over. Now, after school and on their free days, there was happier work to do. Like fishing! She thought there must be more trout here in Minnesota than anywhere in the world” (Shaw 1988: 4). As she happily completes these tasks, fully converted to industriousness, she discovers *The Spirit of Capitalism* and entrepreneurship lurking in a tree. Upon discovering a hive of honeybees, Kirsten believes that she can harvest the honey. After some initial difficulty, with help from Peter and Papa, Kirsten Larson successfully prepares the

honey for sale through planning and execution. “She thought the Fourth of July would be the perfect time to sell honey in town” (Shaw 1988: 20). Linking industriousness with Americanization, the stage is set for Kirsten to ride into town, ready to benefit from the fruits of labor and simultaneously rejoice in the birth of America. The emergence of entrepreneurship combines with this most patriotic holiday to produce a new American citizen: Kirsten Larson. Her story suggests that young readers must embrace religious values, particularly industriousness, to become *American Girls* as well. This process of socialization casts America as Christian, a theme that will take on more militaristic overtones in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

Molly, 1944: From Drama to Duty

“Who schemes and dreams on the home front during World War Two”

This chapter will deconstruct the six books about Molly McIntire for ideas about citizenship that connect not only to religion, as they do in the books about Kirsten Larson, but also to militancy. Molly McIntire has surpassed the other original dolls, the recently archived Kirsten and Samantha, to earn the title of oldest *American Girl* still on the market. Molly has successfully maintained her appeal despite changing fashions over the years, probably because she represents the most nostalgic period in United States history: the age of the Greatest Generation that fought and won the epic Good War, the generation now in the position to buy their granddaughters products by *American Girl*. Molly lives in Illinois with her two brothers, older sister, and Mother. Throughout her six books, the reader witnesses the painful struggle that Molly endures because her father is in Europe fighting the war as a doctor. Although she does miss her father, Molly passes through her suburban life of school projects and summer camps basically shielded from the brutal war until her friend, quiet Emily Bennett, leaves England for America to escape the destructive air raids. As the series ends, her father comes home. Both reunited and peaceful, the McIntires suggest that even though the war did cause temporary suffering, most cultural institutions, like the family, came through unchanged.

Regarding perspective, Molly comes from privilege. Coming from an entirely white suburb, the McIntires never encounter any prejudice or discrimination, let alone come face to face with even one person of color. This privilege normalizes whiteness so completely that Molly never even thinks about her race, racial differences, or racism. Unlike black Addy Walker,

who encounters racial issues every day, Molly McIntire never grapples with race, a definite sign of white privilege. Coming hand in hand with explicit white privilege, class privilege also benefits the McIntires. Even with four children to feed, Mrs. McIntire never worked before Rosie the Riveter called her into service on the home front, suggesting that Mr. McIntire brought in enough money to give his family a life of leisure. Like most characters the fall under the exclusive label American Girl Doll, Molly McIntire benefits from societal privileges.

From Drama to Duty

Despite coming from privilege, Molly McIntire cannot avoid the same socialization process that all American Girls ultimately undergo. And as Benedict Anderson might argue, this socialization fosters citizenship, defined as individual conformity to normalized group ideals, to an *Imagined Community* called America. According to Molly McIntire and company, what are these ideals? Based on the evidence, obedience to Christian militancy. In the first books, the imaginative and energetic Molly McIntire we meet often channels her inclination toward theatricality into purely selfish purposes. Whenever she demonstrates this theatrical impulse, her many mentors quickly correct her. They urge her to respectfully acquiesce to the sacrifices that war demands. From her cook to her sister, these authority figures ultimately demand that she actively channel her dramatic flair into patriotic forms, that she move from dramatic defiance to almost militaristic obedience. Over time, Molly internalizes this imperative toward duty. In the last books, she internally motivates herself to direct her theatricality into patriotism. This commitment to duty implies loyalty to God and country. Seamlessly interwoven, religious and patriotic symbolism peppered throughout the books further reinforces the connection between citizenship and Christianity, an idea introduced in the books about Kirsten. By moving from

drama to duty, Molly McIntire helps create the hegemony that equates American identity and citizenship with Christianity.

The very first book offers examples. In *Meet Molly: an American Girl*, the story openly identifies the cook, Mrs. Gilford, as an authority figure on patriotism. To preserve metal for the military, Mrs. Gilford stops purchasing canned vegetables, opting instead to sacrifice her time and effort to maintain her own Victory Garden. ““From now on we will grow, preserve, and eat our own vegetables. It’s the least we can do for our fighting boys,”” she explains (Tripp 1986: 10). She purposefully connects the Victory Garden to helping out the American soldiers, an ideological move that not only connects sacrifice to patriotism, but also weaves her and these “fighting boys” into an *Imagined Community* of citizenship. Into this context of fervent patriotism, Molly arrives for dinner, dramatic flair on display. Upon seeing mashed turnips from the Victory Garden on the kitchen table, her theatrical mind transforms the vegetables into wormy brains. Rather than eat this zombie food, Molly dramatically embarks on an impassioned hunger strike, sitting at the table for hours without touching her plate.

The bastion of patriotism, Mrs. Gilford quickly identifies this selfish and defiant dramatic display with extremely unpatriotic behavior. ““Wasting food is not only childish and selfish, it is unpatriotic. Think of your poor father off in some strange land. Maybe he didn’t have enough to eat tonight. And you turn your nose up at fresh turnips”” (Tripp 1986: 11). In this key moment, we see the military and its fighting soldiers held up in respect, elevated to near sainthood. And as American citizens – members of the same *Imagined Community* – the McIntires must show the military immense, this quasi religious institution, immense respect to maintain their citizenship on the ideological level. In disrespecting these saints by dramatically “wasting food,” Molly McIntire breaks off her connection with this *Imagined Community* by violating the sacred

institution of the military. And because her father belongs to the military, she simultaneously distances herself from him, ultimately violating the sacred institution of the family, an institution ruled by the patriarch even in his absence, just as Mrs. Gilford suggests by rhetorically prioritizing his health and happiness over Molly's. And in wasting resources, Molly violates that sacred work ethic integral to American Protestantism, that imperative espoused by Benjamin Franklin: waste not, want not. Her theatricality leads her to defy her socially constructed duty to America, to patriarchy, to capitalism, to God. The book seamlessly intertwines these institutions into criteria for citizenship – into hegemony. To become less “childish,” less “selfish,” and especially less “unpatriotic,” Molly must move herself from drama to duty.

In the second book, Molly begins to participate in conforming her attitudes and behaviors to this Imagined Community of America, a community conflating God with country. Especially in *Molly Learns a Lesson: a School Story*, Molly McIntire becomes complicit in this socialization process. Her teacher, Miss Campbell, identifies school as a “war duty. Being a good student is as important as being a good soldier” (Tripp 1986: 3). Miss Campbell spells out the means to achieve social belonging at school: by demonstrating patriotic behavior, defined by supporting the war effort, the students will belong to the Imagined Community of America. With Miss Campbell as their General, their public school becomes the battleground where the students begin to earn their national identity. She makes an effort to steer her students, including Molly, toward patriotism, as defined by service to God and country. To achieve this socialization, she requires her students to complete service projects to support the troops. Using her active imagination, Molly channels her energies into patriotism, ultimately spearheading several projects that lead her team to victory (Tripp 1986: 18-20, 31). This victory not only supported

soldiers, but also made Molly socially acceptable – better yet, a hero – at school. When Miss Campbell spells out patriotism, Molly starts conforming herself to that particular definition.

The next installments offer even more explicitly religious overtones. At this midway point in the six books, dramatic play becomes a segue way into socialization, allowing Molly, her brothers, and even her mother to encounter, to absorb, and even to construct connections among their country, their war, and even their God. In *Molly's Surprise: a Christmas Story*, readers see the characters engaged in dramatic play, a highly creative outlet that helps children experiment with roles and values that might ultimately constitute their identities in adulthood. Dramatic play creates space for Molly and Ricky and Brad to negotiate their identities as Christians in America living through World Wars. Imaginatively mobilizing war rhetoric around their Christmas tree, the children forge connections among Christianity, American citizenship, and war, thereby facilitating their transition from drama to duty, from play during childhood to practice during adulthood. For example, while discussing Christmas gifts, the boys seamlessly link war rhetoric to Christianity. Ricky admires American soldiers:

‘Those guys try to shoot down anything that flies.’ He took aim with an imaginary machine gun and fired at an imaginary plane. ‘POW! POW! POW!’

Brad looked up at his mother. ‘Will the Germans shoot down Santa’s sleigh?’

‘Of course not!’ said Mrs. McIntyre... ‘I’m sure Santa will get here safe and sound’” (Tripp 1986: 4).

Underneath the Christmas tree, the McIntire family uses dramatic play to think about the Imagined Community known as America. The rhetoric of war and Christianity helps them distinguish Americans from non-Americans. Brad makes the leap from war to Christianity to America. By identifying “the Germans” as potential Santa killers, he identifies the Germans as

potential Christianity killers. And because Brad knows that America and Germany, diametrically opposed as enemies during war, fight for different ideals, he implies that America must protect Christianity from German hostility. In essence, America must lay claim to uncorrupted, living Christianity. And indeed, Mom promises that Santa – the institution of Christianity – will survive the war completely unscathed, both owned and protected by America. This conversation implies that America relies on its military might to protect and perpetuate its own Santa Clauses – its own religious institutions. Having internalized these connections, Molly decides to decorate the tree. The ultimate Christmas decoration? A flag on top (Tripp 1986: 18-19). This country is Christian; this citizen is Christian.

The connections among Christianity, American citizenship, and militancy become clearer in *A Summer Story*. By attending Camp Gowonagin, Molly channels her theatricality into duty to God and country. An institution of socialization just like the school, Camp Gowonagin purposefully appropriates the forms of patriotism in America, such as patriotic songs, to convey its message that connects social belonging with Christianity and militancy. “One of Molly’s favorite times at camp was Evening Flag Lowering Ceremony. She liked it because all the girls and all the counselors stood together and sang the Camp Gowonagin song: ‘God bless Gowonagin! / Camp that we love! / Raise the flag high, / Never say die, / While the red, white, and blue / flies above!’” (Tripp 1988: 5). This song actively mobilizes the rhetoric of religion, of America, and even of war to conflate these ideas into one normalized identity that perpetuates hegemony against any individuality or nonconformity these girls might express. To demonstrate absolute loyalty to this “camp that we love,” the girls must demonstrate absolute loyalty to “God,” to “the red, white, and blue,” and to the war during which this country will “never say die.” Just as Miss Campbell patriotically prepares her class for negotiating their identities as

citizens, Camp Gowonagin literally prepares its students for war. The camp Color War allows campers like Molly to redirect their theatricality into war. Located in the realm of pretend and imagination, this experience during childhood domesticates violence, socializing campers like Molly to regard the form and content and purpose of war as accessible and safe and natural later on in life. By channeling drama into duty, Molly becomes a General leading troops into battle. “What if our army is captured again? Everyone will blame me. I will be the one who lost the war, she thought. I wonder if this is the way real leaders feel. I bet they felt this way before the D-Day invasion” (Tripp 1988: 47). Only ten years old, Molly carries the burden of war, the mentality of soldiers, the hope of victory. According to Camp Gowonagin and its patriotic song, this burden, this mentality, and even this hope also entails absolute loyalty to God and America. On this theatrical stage of play and pretend, Molly embraces the opportunity to defend her teammates, her fellow harried soldiers in this holy war to defend Christian America.

Changes for Molly: a Winter Story shows the reader the results of this socialization process: Molly McIntire now independently seeks opportunities to funnel her theatricality into patriotism, as defined by duty to God and country and war. As emerging tap dancers, Molly and her classmates cannot wait to perform for soldiers recovering in the hospital. The pageant, “Hurray for the USA,” relies on patriotic forms, like color and song, to demonstrate their loyalty to America. “They were going to dance and sing a patriotic song. They would wear red, white, and blue costumes so that together they formed a giant flag on the stage” (Tripp 1988: 3). Turning theatricality into patriotism, Molly earns the lead: Miss Victory, the ultimate symbol of military might, national pride, and femininity condoned by *American Girl*.

Molly McIntire has moved from drama to duty, earning herself the title *American Girl*. Her process of socialization aligns perfectly with important historical development, both during

her period, the 1940s, and during her creation and release, the 1980s. Just as former president Dwight Eisenhower condoned adding the phrase “under God” overtly into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, her school, her home, Camp Gowonagin, and even the pageant seemingly begin this effort to indoctrinate children into this Christianized and militarized American identity about ten years earlier. And given its release in 1986, the world of Molly plays into this climate of defending Christian America against Communism, the bastion of atheism, during the Cold War. And today, the didactic intent behind the books still encourages young readers to regard this message that conflates militaristic Christianity with America as normal and estimable.

Part Two

Class Socialization

Snip. Snip. Snip. A couple years later, the locks of brown doll hair fell into a pile on my bedroom floor. Using all my creativity as a burgeoning stylist, I was giving Samantha a haircut. A very short haircut. Just as I finished chopping off Samantha's locks, my mother walked in.

"What *are* you doing?" she asked, her voice rising in parental disapproval. "You ruined that doll - who knows how much she *could have* been worth someday?" Ever since this encounter – and throughout this project– my mother has never let me forget that I ruined our ticket to paradise. And true, the recently archived Samantha does sell for hundreds of dollars online today.

But honestly, the expense and collectability of yesterday and today of all the characters definitely reveal something more than my own lack of foresight in ruining my doll: the company definitely targets wealthy consumers. Appealing to this demographic has motivated the company to integrate problematic messages about class into its many products. This section examines how American Girl privileges class and silences – or dehumanizes the poor. The two case studies come from Samantha Parkington and Kit Kittredge. Both characters present discourses that connect socioeconomic class, material consumption, and citizenship in highly problematic ways. The wealthy Samantha Parkington perpetuates classism mostly through her relationship with Nellie, the child laborer living next door. Choosing Samantha, not Nellie, to embody Victorian America implies that *American Girl* privileges wealth over poverty by employing narrative perspective to help the reader connect directly with Samantha, not Nellie. Her grandmother, a voice of authority, even suggests that Samantha must not allow herself to empathize with Nellie

– to become her friend – but rather, class propriety demands that Samantha regard the relationship as patronage. This privileging of wealth gives Samantha societal power; this condescension to poverty takes away any agency that Nellie might enjoy. Just as Samantha Parkington initially seeks to befriend her neighbor, Kit Kittredge initially seeks to challenge class realities, wondering why some people suffer from the depression so direly, and others stay rich. But when she demonstrates this emerging critical consciousness, her mentors demand that she not ask questions, but rather navigate within the system through resourcefulness to make ends meet. Even though *American Girl* ostensibly includes disfranchised characters like Nellie and activists like Kit, *American Girl* ultimately strips both characters of power, suggesting that the wealthy ultimately retain their privilege, even in the Post *Consumer's Republic*.

Chapter Three

Samantha, 1904: From Privilege to Patronage

“A bright Victorian beauty, an orphan raised by her grandmother”

This chapter will discuss how Samantha perpetuates classism, primarily through narrative perspective. Supposedly designed to represent Victorian America, Samantha Parkington came out in 1986. The first original doll to enter the archives, this character was retired in 2009. For over two decades, Samantha educated young readers about life for wealthy New Yorkers in 1904. At first, an orphan, Samantha Parkington lives with her grandmother, called Grandmary, who embodies conservative values, openly opposing the suffragettes and often requiring Samantha to practice her stitching and piano. Later on, she moves in with Uncle Gard, his wife Aunt Cornelia, and, eventually, several friends. Her plotlines focus on elite life in suburban New York. Her days revolve around learning sewing, planning parties, and shopping for presents. Regarding perspective, racial issues definitely appear. The books normalize whiteness, often relegating minority characters to marginality. For example, even though many servants pass through her home each day, Samantha Parkington lives in the bubble of privilege, not even realizing that some servants live under segregated circumstances. For example, although Jessie, the black female seamstress, must live in relatively substandard housing segregated from white people, privileged Samantha has never even heard of segregation. Another servant who lives next door, Nellie O'Malley, cannot believe that Samantha has never faced hardships or inequality. “Nellie looked at her. Samantha was smart about so many things that Nellie was always surprised at what her friend didn't know” (Adler 1986: 41). In this particular moment, Nellie O'Malley recognizes that Samantha Parkington benefits from the most insidious privilege

of all: the privilege of ignorance. Her whiteness and wealth offer Samantha elevated status in society, protect her from suffering, and shield her from socioeconomic realities, meaning that Samantha enjoys the ability to ignore societal injustices because inequality does not harm her.

From Empathy to Patronage

This power to overlook the issues in society shines through most strongly when Samantha befriends Nellie, but Grandmary quickly changes the relationship to patronage. This issue of perspective ultimately privileges the wealth enjoyed by Samantha Parkington as normal and beneficent, but condemns the poverty experienced by Nellie O'Malley as aberrant and dependent. Samantha becomes the benefactor; Nellie becomes the beneficiary. Wealth is sanctified. In purposefully constructing Samantha as the lead character (the norm), and in identifying Nellie as the secondary character (the other), *American Girl* openly privileges elite perspectives. *American Girl* chose Samantha over Nellie despite the fact that both girls could have reasonably existed during this time period, meaning that this company values wealth over poverty. And as Fred Nielsen perceptively explains, “there was probably no chance that Nellie would be the *American Girl* of the series. The wealthy Samantha can plausibly have fine clothes, furniture, and toys. Nellie, by contrast is dressed in rags” (Nielsen 2002: 87). Looking into the past through elite perspectives, the readers ultimately empathize with Samantha. Following Samantha, they move from privilege to patronage.

At first, when Nellie moves in next door, having escaped factory life of even worse circumstances, Samantha shows intense curiosity toward her, especially since she has never experienced material deprivation. In *Meet Samantha: an American Girl*, Samantha cannot relate to the horrors of factory life that Nellie recounts, having grown up in comfort herself. “She was good at imagining castles and jungles and sailing ships, but she had never imagined hunger and

cold” (Adler 1986: 23-24). So far in life, Samantha has dedicated herself to daydreaming, not working herself to the bone to make money for her family. This bubble of privilege might quiver when Nellie talks about her life of deprivation and struggle, but as long as Samantha stays extremely wealthy, it can never break. Not understanding the horror of want, she draws a classist comparison between “imagining castles” and imagining the conditions of poverty, suggesting that for her, the hardships of poverty are no more tangible – or, therefore, urgently pressing – than daydreaming. This rhetoric represents distancing as well: if poverty is intangible, then it is unknowable and foreign, not something that resonates. In viewing the world through Samantha, young readers encounter poverty as startling and unexpected and imaginary as well.

Even though Samantha Parkington benefits from class privilege, she does attempt to make connections with Nellie. Although Samantha originally intends to become close friends with her, due to both curiosity and loneliness, her grandmother tries hard to recast the friendship as patronage. When Samantha grapples with class differences, wondering why certain children cannot integrate, her grandmother suggests that class boundaries are not necessarily evil; in fact, according to her grandmother, they serve the purpose of keeping the rich separated from the poor.

‘Grandmary, why isn’t Edith Eddleton allowed to play with Nellie?’ Samantha asked.

Grandmary looked surprised. ‘Why, Samantha,’ she said. ‘Edith is a young lady.’

Samantha thought that was ridiculous. But all she said was, ‘You let me play with Nellie.’

‘You are helping Nellie,’ said Grandmary, ‘not playing with her. There is a difference.’

Samantha was quiet. She didn't like the difference (Adler 1986: 34).

This scene hints at an emergent critical consciousness growing stronger in Samantha, but grandmother actively attempts to suppress this nascent critical engagement. According to her grandmother, class lines should distinguish the proper "young ladies" of wealth from servants like Nellie who lack any money and, therefore, any personhood or agency. Grandmary is suggesting that the conditions of wealth and poverty are natural and right, not constructed from inequity. As unquestionably organic phenomena, class lines simply cannot - should not - be overcome. This rhetoric of permanence implies that poor people are somehow fundamentally different from elites. The two socioeconomic classes seem to belong to different races, or even different species. Like zookeepers throwing bananas at monkeys, the Samantha Parkingtons and Edith Eddletons of the world may sometimes offer the Nellie O'Malleys of the world some economic help, but never friendship. The hierarchy remains enforced.

As late as the last installment, *Changes for Samantha: a Winter Story*, Samantha's friendship with Nellie has not allowed her to make personal connections to poverty. She seems to approach the realities of poverty with amazement and disgust, as if encountering the exotic other. Accustomed to the life of luxury, Samantha can hardly stomach the tenement in which she searches for Nellie. "Is this where Nellie lives? she wondered. The building was gloomy and horrible. It was falling apart and looked as if it was too tired to stand up anymore. Tattered laundry hung from the windows like grimy flags of defeat" (Tripp 1986: 18). Like Marlow traveling down the river in *Heart of Darkness*, looking at nameless natives with amazement and repulsion, Samantha enters the realm of poverty armed with the privileged perspective of the powerful, seeing the "grimy flags of defeat" that symbolize the disfranchisement and disempowerment experienced by the poor during this time period. Upon encountering the

manifestations of poverty, this level of surprise and disbelief, conveyed in her wonderment and in condescending language, suggests that Samantha still distances herself from poverty. Even though she explores the realm of poverty, she fails to make personal connections. Without this personal connection, she assumes the role of patron, not friend.

In moving from privilege to patronage, Samantha might experience shock and revulsion upon encountering the conditions of poverty, but not one character ever questions the underlying factors that contribute to socioeconomic inequality. Even though both Samantha and Nellie are orphans, Samantha lives in comfort, whereas Nellie winds up trapped inside Coldrock Orphanage, an institution dedicated to grooming girls for servanthood. And as Daniel Hade points out, although Samantha enjoys gift after gift and party after party, Nellie "merits neither a Christmas present from Samantha nor an invitation to Samantha's party" (Hade 2000: 159). No one asks why such wide disparities exist. No one grapples with underlying causes, or seeks fundamental solutions. In crafting Samantha Parkington to represent Victorian America, *American Girl* not only privileged wealth, but simultaneously helped construct a politics of inclusion and exclusion that relegated girls like Nellie O'Malley to marginality. In moving from privilege to patronage, Samantha might encounter poverty, but she does not challenge it. In fact, as patron, her privilege becomes even more entrenched. And although the character presented in Chapter Four does challenge class lines, her mentors prevent her from developing critical consciousness.

Chapter Four

Kit, 1934: From Protest to Resourcefulness

“A clever, resourceful girl facing the Great Depression with spirit and determination”

This chapter will explore how Kit normalizes ideas about class, both by privileging wealth and promoting the virtue of resourcefulness. Kit Kittredge, the seventh historical character to join the collection, came out in 2000. Her books revolve around the hardships faced by her family in 1934, during the Great Depression. Perfectly aligned with the economic recession that hit America in the 2000s, the film *Kit Kittredge: an American Girl*, released in July 2008, brought *American Girl* to movie theaters across the nation for the first time.

Kit lives in Cincinnati with family and friends who all offer messages about class. Functioning as the voice of morality, her mother cannot stop chastising Kit for any transgressive behavior she demonstrates. Extremely class conscious, Mother worries about the family's reputation during the Depression. Her father – her hero – generously donates his money to his struggling employees, but in the process, bankrupts himself. This generosity helps establish a dichotomy between the deserving poor, like Dad, and the undeserving poor. Her kind brother Charlie gives up his savings for college to help his family, thereby demonstrating self sacrifice. Uncle Hendrick and Aunt Millie could not be more diametrically opposed. Extremely wealthy yet stingy, Uncle Hendrick fundamentally opposes showing generosity, even refusing to help the Kittredges pay their outstanding bills. Through her giving spirit, on the other hand, Aunt Millie symbolizes thriftiness and generosity. Classmate Ruthie Smithens, coming from wealth, often acts condescending toward the poor, giving out charity to please herself. In stark contrast,

classmate Stirling Howard, falling into poverty, symbolizes honest empathy by feeling for the Kittredge family, even though he himself faces crisis.

A Question of Perspective

Regarding perspective, the first book in her series, *Meet Kit: An American Girl* (1934), by author Valerie Tripp, embeds several problematic ideas about class. The Kittredges and all their friends, for example, come from an exclusively privileged perspective. By lacking alternative perspectives, the book normalizes relative material comfort in white America. Unlike many African Americans, factory workers, or even recent immigrants during this time period, Kit has no previous experience with economic hardship. “The truth is,” she explains, “I’ve just never given money much thought before” (Tripp 2000: 41). In the beginning, Kit regards poverty as an aberration. Her wealthy background makes privilege normal. As a consequence, poverty seems abnormal. Making poverty seem abnormal also makes the impoverished seem abnormal, identifies them as other. But soon enough, the Great Depression detaches the family from financial security, pushing them into this impoverished space that seems unfamiliar, that seems abnormal. This distancing strategy excludes the poor from full citizenship, making class differences seem extremely taboo.

Despite the fact that many people during this time could not escape the physical reminders of their poverty, from dilapidated housing to tattered clothing to infectious diseases, in the Kittredge world of privilege, discussing taboos like class might connote the otherness, the dirtiness, the undesirability of poverty. In consequence, proper ladies featured in the books refuse to openly mention class differences, identifying poverty as taboo, as almost counter cultural – as un-American. For example, while visiting Mrs. Kittredge, Mrs. Howard uses euphemisms to conceal the struggles her family currently faces. Sneakily eavesdropping, Kit Kittredge realizes

that serious problems lurk behind the ostensibly vague language. “She was pretty sure that all the ladies knew it, too, but no one would say it out loud” (Tripp 2000: 11). This scenario suggests that proper ladies never openly discuss their financial problems, even among friends. Economic class, in essence, is taboo. Interestingly enough, even maintaining this façade represents privilege. Surrounded by their four sturdy walls, their adequately fed children, and their fancy silverware, the ladies deftly talk their way around their money problems. No physical reminders shove their circumstances into their faces. This silence, this taboo, and even this invisibility around poverty ultimately relegate the poor to silence, to marginality, and even to invisibility. If left silenced in the margins, completely unexposed and unrecognized, how can the poor truly advocate for themselves? This hiding of poverty inhibits Kit and readers from questioning economic inequality: how can they challenge an issue too taboo to even openly acknowledge?

The next Kit installment brings poverty out of the margins and into the spotlight, but in stereotypically negative ways that ultimately dehumanize the poor. *Kit Learns a Lesson* associates poverty with neediness, with dependency, with shame, with hopelessness. Throughout the book, Kit and Ruthie frame food insecurity in condescending language. At school, Ruthie proudly reports that ““when hoboese come to the back door,”” her ““mother always gives them sandwiches and coffee”” (Tripp 2000: 21). The teacher, Mr. Fisher, does not move to correct this demeaning language about “hoboese,” passively allowing the children to distance themselves from the poor. Kit describes soup kitchens as places “for people who had been without work for so long that they had no money or hope or pride left, and who were so desperate that they had to accept free food” (Tripp 2000: 23). For Kit, relying on charities like soup kitchens represents the ultimate shame: the “desperate” people waiting for bread lack any “pride.” This interpretation ultimately blames the poor for poverty, offering up a highly individualistic explanation about

people who lack “money” “hope” and “pride,” rather than a more institutional perspective that would talk about issues like the regulation of banks, the backing of currency, or even the lack of societal safety nets. She distances herself from this supposed soup kitchen culture, making wealth the norm and poverty the other by using distancing language like “people” and “they.” Even though many children waited in bread lines each day, why does *American Girl* assert that privileged Kit represents America during the Great Depression? According to *American Girl*, societal privilege is normal, but poverty is other.

The third book in the series, *Kit’s Surprise: A Christmas Story*, plays into this theme. Both Kit and Ruthie distance themselves from poverty, but in different ways. With the Great Depression affecting Kit, but not affecting Ruthie, their friendship experiences tension. To parallel the relationship between Samantha and Nellie discussed above, Ruthie becomes a benefactor by offering an old holiday dress to her best friend, making Kit the beneficiary. “‘Now everything will be okay!’” she exclaims, attempting to place an artificial bandage over the turbulence that Kit feels during this period in her life (Tripp 2000: 30). Ruthie offers the dress to make everything “okay” – to restore the former social equality – between them, but in the blindness of privilege, forces Kit to confront her situation before she is ready. Kit feels only “humiliated, not delighted, by Ruthie’s hand-me-down present. ‘Now Ruthie thinks of me as a poor, pitiful beggar girl,’ she thought” (Tripp 2000: 31). Although Ruthie should have thought twice about flaunting her wealth, Kit still commits classism by fearing the social label of “poor, pitiful beggar girl.” According to Kit Kittredge, being poor is shameful. Being poor carries stigma. Being poor causes humiliation. Being poor means wearing the badge of difference, of inferiority, of otherness. Coming from recent privilege, Kit psychologically and rhetorically distances herself from poverty. So whether the characters identify poverty as shameful and un-

American – the attitude of the *Consumer's Republic* – or hide class differences as taboo – the attitude popular in the *Post Consumer's Republic* – both attitudes still perpetuate classist thought that stigmatized and marginalized the poor.

From Protest to Resourcefulness

To apply the model of socialization proposed by Jennifer Miskec to Kit, I argue that Kit must move from protest to resourcefulness. Whenever Kit questions injustice regarding class, her mentors quickly attempt to make her approach the world not with questioning eyes, but with resourceful eyes. After all, in the *Consumer's Republic*, the institution of a “dynamic mass consumption economy,” inextricably intertwined with citizenship, left hardly any room for questioning or transgression (Cohen 2003: 8). And through their didacticism, the books essentially normalize this transition from protest to acceptance, encouraging readers to follow the exact same path to maturity, to full *American Girlhood*. Whereas protest ultimately represents critical consciousness – the ability to recognize and combat societal injustice – the virtue of resourcefulness ultimately represents accepting circumstances for what they are, working within the system despite its fundamental flaws. To encourage the value of resourcefulness actually constitutes an attempt to keep the poor from rising against oppression, from actively advocating for fundamental changes in society. In turn, to suppress the poor constitutes classism. In moving from protest to resourcefulness, Kit Kittredge demonstrates classism at work.

In the first book, she demonstrates a natural inclination toward fundamental critique. But when she applies the lessons she learns from her favorite story – Robin Hood, the original Marxist hero – to the Great Depression, her mother quickly chastises this questioning and protest.

‘Too bad there isn’t any Robin Hood today,’ [Kit] said. ‘If rich people had to give some of their money to the poor, it would make the Depression better.’

‘It would help,’ said Mother. ‘But I don’t think it would end the Depression...

People will have to work hard. Use what they have. Face challenges. Stay hopeful

...They have to make changes and realize that changes can be good’ (Tripp 2000: 58-59).

In applying Robin Hood to the Great Depression, Kit moves to redistribute the wealth. And if wealth redistribution ultimately attempts to remedy societal unfairness, then in this example, Kit Kittredge has recognized social injustice, has voiced her protest, and has even discovered a solution, an answer rooted in societal change. Upon hearing this emergent critical consciousness, her mother promptly moves to suppress the seeds of activism brewing within her daughter. When Kit wonders whether “rich people” should help “the poor,” her mother suggests that the poor can actually help themselves through simple “hard work,” subtly suggesting that laziness – not injustice – causes poverty. The poor “have to make changes,” but not the government nor the societal elites. In blaming the poor for poverty and absolving the rich from responsibility, Mother moves Kit away from protest, toward resourcefulness.

This emphasis on acceptance, as opposed to protest, appears in Book Two, *Kit Learns A Lesson*. In the beginning, Kit expresses discontent with the boarders who have infiltrated the Kittredge home to help provide the family with some supplemental income. She feels impatient with the chores, the constant sharing, and the politeness needed to successfully run the boardinghouse. Always quick to chastise, Mother demands that Kit stop complaining:

‘All we have going for us is this house and our own hard work. We must do everything we can to make sure our boarders stay. So! Shoulders back, chin up, and put on a cheery morning face, please’ (Tripp 2000: 9).

When Kit expresses discontent over the Great Depression and its resultant hardships, her mother does not engage her in discussion about its underlying causes or its potential solutions, but rather encourages her to do her best – to wear “a cheery morning face” – working within the system. She socializes her daughter into ignoring the underlying societal causes of inequality in order to keep scraping by. According to *American Girl*, to *Learn a Lesson* – to mature – her daughter must abandon this inclination toward critique. *American Girls* do not think outside the box, but rather, they work inside it. This message discourages readers from developing their own critical consciousness.

As all *American Girls* eventually do, Kit internalizes this imperative to conform to the socialization process condoned by her mentors. Upon encountering her father waiting in a line for food, she begins to chastise her own original desire to protest. “She had been wrong about so many things! Instead of resenting the boarders, she should have been grateful for them. Instead of wanting them to leave, she should have been trying to figure out a way to fit more boarders in the house (Tripp 2000: 53-54). After hearing Mother dismiss her emotions as selfish and ungrateful, she gradually finds them selfish and ungrateful too. In fact, she considers them wholly “wrong.” Challenging her situation makes her “wrong”; accepting her situation makes her “grateful.” *Kit Learns a Lesson* that associates her inclination toward critique with immorality, but associates her movement toward acceptance with morality. From Kit, readers learn to associate morality with wholehearted acceptance, not protest.

The next book, *A Christmas Story*, talks about work in problematic ways. The rejection of protest not only condones acceptance, but also elevates work to saintliness, ultimately drawing a distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. During the holiday season, the time when children usually create wish lists for toys and sweets, Kit renounces this pastime,

choosing instead to daydream about work. ‘The last thing I want my family to do this Christmas is to spend money on me,’ she said. I don’t want dresses or outings or presents. The only thing I want is to find a way to make money...it takes work, not wishes, to solve problems’ (Tripp 2000: 14). What happened to the Kit Kittredge that approached the world with such inquisitive eyes that she wished for a modern Robin Hood to rectify societal injustice? This Kit has internalized the message her mother has tried to send: the solution to problems must come from “work, not wishes.” Whereas “wishes” imply imagination, a curiosity that entails the possibility for questioning and transgression, “work” implies stoic acceptance, a stagnation that keeps potential rebels bogged down in pessimism, blind to the possibility of transformation. In accepting her situation rather than challenging it, Kit Kittredge puts on her blinders, ultimately demonstrating and reinforcing her own socialization to the move from protest to resourcefulness.

Happy Birthday, Kit! A Springtime Story reinforces this move. By introducing Aunt Millie, the book simultaneously introduces another model of resourcefulness for Kit to emulate. From raising chickens for their eggs to making underwear from flour sacks, Aunt Millie knows how to stretch every single dollar. To Kit, Aunt Millie seems like “‘Robin Hood. She doesn’t rob from the rich and give to the poor. But she scrimps and saves and then whatever she has, she gives away. She’s thrifty in order to be generous” (Tripp 2000: 60). This shift in meaning revolving around Robin Hood ultimately demonstrates the shift from protest to resourcefulness. Legendary for social rebellion, the first version of Robin Hood presented by *American Girl* and loved by Kit does not operate within the system. He takes decisive action to rectify class injustices. He literally redistributes wealth. The second version of Robin Hood, on the other hand, revolves around Aunt Millie who symbolizes the opposite: Aunt Millie works within the system. She does not reimagine the world, but rather navigates within that world. Robin Hood

has lost his power to transgress. Just as this new economic hero has become utterly domesticated, trapped within the confines of resourcefulness, so too has Kit. The girl who once suggested that the rich give to the poor has moved from protest to resourcefulness.

Part Three

Gender Socialization

Hearing about this project usually inspires my friends and family to remember their own experiences with *American Girl*. Although most usually wonder what could be problematic about such an omnipresent cultural institution that seems so wholesome – nothing like that scandalous Barbie Doll – they usually realize, upon further reflection, its problematic nature.

“My sister loves Julie – she loves her long blonde hair. Even though my sister is Korean, and Julie’s friend Ivy is also Asian American, my sister identifies more with Julie than Ivy,” my friend, curious about *American Girl*, once explained. This example shows that *American Girl* has power in society to construct the norms of girlhood. In promoting Julie as the lead historical character, not Ivy, *American Girl* ultimately allows the white character with blonde hair, not the Asian American, to take center stage – the place of normalcy and identification – to real *American Girls* alive today.

This power to determine the norms of girlhood actually transcends the surface, going beyond skin color to shape and reinforce societal ideas about proper feminine behavior. The theory expounded by Jennifer Miskec, used above to provide the format of analysis for all the dolls analyzed here, applies pointedly to gender, to the societal construction of femininity. *American Girl* makes women, especially Felicity and Addy, the objects of socialization to norms of thought and behavior that emphasize the containment of individuality, of agency, of transgression. To mobilize Miskec’s theory, Felicity Merriman starts out extremely independent, but she must learn to temper that independence with patience. Addy Walker must move from expression to suppression, ultimately limiting her potential to question and transgress societal

injustices (Miskec 2009: 159-161). Whereas independence and expression show engagement and passion toward life in society, on the other hand, domesticated patience and suppression show withdrawal and silence. Like other children's literature before it, *American Girl* participates in confining girlhood to passivity and submissiveness.

Chapter Five

Felicity, 1774: From Independence to Patience

“Felicity: a spunky, spritely colonial girl, full of energy and independence”

This chapter will discuss the norms of gender condoned by *American Girl*, revealed by the process of socialization Felicity undergoes. Archived after the holiday shopping season in 2011, Felicity Merriman spent about ten years teaching her young readers about life in 1774. Living in colonial Williamsburg, Felicity has two parents, one brother named William, and two sisters, Nan and Polly. Felicity and her family identify with the Patriots, but her wealthy grandfather and her best friend, Elizabeth Cole, have declared themselves Loyalists. Along with running a general store and training an apprentice named Ben, the family owns a slave plantation. Over the six books, her family and friends guide her as she bonds with an extremely independent horse named Penny, negotiates an ongoing feud with an alcoholic named Jiggy Nye, and endures the grief of losing her grandfather.

Regarding perspective, the books deal with the tensions between Patriots and Loyalists, but ignore the tensions between masters and slaves. The slaves, including Marcus and Rose, never speak for themselves in the presented dialogue, but rather remain relegated to the extreme margins as the silent others. This silencing suggests an important question: given the fact that the black slave Rose lived during this period as well, why do the books focus on the white girl Felicity to represent Revolutionary America?

Along with making whiteness seem normative, Felicity and her family definitely normalize wealth and material comfort, coming from the wealthy landowning class. In fact, the antagonist, Jiggy Nye, who demonstrates extreme anger and hostility, comes from an extremely

impoverished background, a class status that definitely impacts his moral standing in the community. *Changes for Felicity: a Winter Story* informs the reader that ““a promise from Mr. Nye isn’t worth dust”” because he has landed in jail for debt (Tripp 1991: 13). This criminalization of poverty goes unquestioned by the main characters, who calmly report that ““he’s got no money to buy logs for a fire, or a blanket, or medicine” in the jail house (Tripp 1991: 15). In the same way as Samantha patronizes Nelly, her marginalized charity case, Felicity and her grandfather provide him with necessities, but never question the fundamental injustice that criminalized his poverty in the first place. Wealth retains the position of normalcy and privilege in this book series.

The privileging of whiteness and wealth in this book series comes through most strongly in the fifth book, *Felicity Saves the Day: a Summer Story*: “It seemed to her that life on the plantation was busy and lazy at the same time. There were a great many things to do, all of them pleasant, and there was never any hurry about getting them done” (Tripp 1991: 7). In imagining the plantation as “pleasant,” she reveals her privilege: her wealth and whiteness shield her from the pain that black slaves must suffer every day. The books gloss over competing perspectives that existed during this time period, silencing the enslaved population and criminalizing the poor.

From Independence to Patience

These issues of race and class factor prominently in the Felicity books, but the gender discourse stands out as the most problematic hegemonic idea. Jennifer Miskec explains that rather than chastise the fundamental injustice of the plantation, the books chastise Felicity for her independent spirit and actions, suggesting patience as an acceptable alternative for girls attempting to grow into proper women (Miskec 2009: 159). Her family and friends – even her younger sister – cannot stop force feeding patience down her throat at every possible

opportunity. They contextualize this characteristic within a larger imperative toward womanhood, linking patience with propriety and maturity. This forceful gender discourse plays out both ostensibly and symbolically, with Felicity and her wild horse becoming tame by the end of the series. From independence to patience: this chastisement definitely represents gender socialization.

Throughout the book series, her family and friends both construct and convey the blueprint for the proper behavior that girls like Felicity should display. This behavior involves patience and restraint, a characteristic that Felicity rarely shows. In *Meet Felicity: an American Girl*, her father warns her against acting like an “impatient girl” and her mother admonishes her to “move gracefully instead of galloping about” (Tripp 1991: 2, 7). In evaluating her penmanship, her mother laments that “the first few letters are very fine. But you lost patience when you got to the letter H...Lissie, what am I to do with you?” (Tripp 1991: 12). In *Felicity’s Surprise: a Christmas Story*, Felicity can hardly wait for her mother to finish her new gown. “Mrs. Merriman sighed. ‘Lissie, you know what I always tell you. Haste makes waste. If you want the gown to be perfect, you must be patient’” (Tripp 1991: 30). Her parents quickly identify any expressiveness, or excitement, or aspiration as impatience, as inappropriate behavior for young ladies. They construct a web of prohibitions that constrains her ability to fully express herself. These critiques and chastisements build up, pushing Felicity to rebel.

Felicity expresses her desire for independence by protesting the normalizing gender discourse coming from her family and friends. In talking to Ben, the apprentice who works at the general store, Felicity protests the incessant gender socialization she endures: “‘There are so many things a young lady must not do. I’m told the same things over and over again. Don’t talk too loud. Don’t walk too fast. Don’t fidget. Don’t dirty your hands. Don’t be impatient’” (Tripp

1991: 15). In this particular scene, Felicity recognizes – and resists – the domesticating nature of the gender socialization process. She feels the injustice of the fact that society identifies expressive behavior, from talking “loud” to walking “fast,” as taboo and inappropriate for proper young ladies, as behavior that belongs exclusively in the realm of masculinity. In enforcing behavior standards for girls and women, this society focuses more on prohibitions, on what young ladies “don’t” do, than on future possibilities, on what young ladies might accomplish without constraints. Felicity abhors these limitations reserved for her gender.

In the first book, Felicity resents her undergarments specifically designed to imprison and constrain her emerging female form. “‘I have the most awful itch, Mother,’ said Felicity. ‘I think my stays are laced too tight today. They’re so pinching and uncomfortable’” (Tripp 1991: 11). Her “stays” both exemplify and symbolize the hegemonic behavior expectations that constrain colonial women from the upper class. Just as her clothes restrain her physical movement, domesticating her developing body, societal expectations restrain her independent spirit, domesticating her future possibilities. The “itch” she feels symbolically implies her desire for freedom.

How does she obtain this freedom? To turn this awareness into advocacy for her own independence, Felicity escapes the constraints of femininity, moving into a more masculine space, by changing her clothes. Her clothing takes on symbolic significance, both facilitating and demonstrating her transition from femininity to masculinity, from constraint to freedom.

‘Gowns and petticoats are so bothersome. I’m forever stepping on my hem and tripping unless I take little baby steps. Smalls steps are supposed to look ladylike. But I can’t get anywhere...In breeches your legs are free. You can straddle

horses, jump over fences, run as fast as you wish. You can do anything' (Tripp 1991: 14-15).

Just like foot binding in China, restrictive clothing intentionally creates physical barriers that prevent women from achieving their full potential. To move from limitations to limitlessness, Felicity longs to move from femininity to masculinity, from “petticoats” to “breeches.” To break free from gender constraints, she steals some breeches that belong to Ben. She wears these breeches as she sneaks out in the middle of the night to visit a horse named Penny. “As she ran through the silent streets toward the tannery, her legs felt so free! For once she could run as fast as she wanted to, without petticoats to hold her back” (Tripp 1991: 37). Wearing less restrictive clothing and separated from her critical family, Felicity expresses her independence with no gender expectations “to hold her back.”

Felicity does rebel against these expectations in the first installment, but over the course of the remaining books, this hegemonic gender discourse gradually erodes her resistance. This internalization of oppression comes through in a symbolic way: in taming her horse, she slowly tames herself. In the first book, her family complains about the wildness that Felicity and Penny both demonstrate. Her family laments that the combination of ““a willful girl and a willful horse is more than one family can handle”” (Tripp 1991: 34). For their natural independence and adventurousness, Felicity and Penny become undesirable others in the community. In identifying their personalities and behaviors as problematic, the community pressures them to change – and gradually, they acquiesce. As Felicity uses patience in training the horse, both girl and beast become domesticated. A third important character, a doll named Polly, plays a central role in symbolizing this domestication. As early as the third installment, entitled *Felicity's Surprise: a Christmas Story*, “Felicity felt happier when she looked at the doll” wearing the blue gown that

she passionately desires, implying that Felicity has already changed her interests from horses to dolls, from breeches to dresses, from adventure to nurturing, from masculinity to femininity (Tripp 1991: 32).

In the final book, *Changes for Felicity: a Winter Story*, this doll helps weave a web of femininity around Penny and Felicity. Through the domestication process, the horse gradually loses her independence: instead of following her initial tendency to run free, Penny submits to authority, allowing the farmers to use her for breeding purposes. And as Penny enters the cut of domesticity, so too does Felicity. In childrearing the doll with the blue gown, Felicity prepares herself for the birth. “‘I love taking care of Polly!’ said Felicity. ‘And I’ll love taking care of Penny’s foal!’” (8). Having tamed Penny, having nurtured Polly, Felicity no longer looks forward to removing her petticoats, putting on breeches, and running free, but rather focuses on her future as nurturer – as wife and mother. And given the context of the Revolutionary War, her father suggests that she can apply this constructed domesticity to the war effort: “‘I’m relying on you to help mother with the house and the other children’” (Tripp 1991: 61). To move from independence to patience is apparently patriotic. Just as Felicity nurtures the doll to learn her role in the feminine sphere, *American Girl* hopes that young readers will learn their role as patient – not independent – domesticated girls by playing with Felicity. In the next chapter, this domestication of femininity will assume racial overtones.

Chapter Six

Addy, 1864: From Expression to Repression

“A courageous girl determined to be free in the midst of the Civil War”

This chapter will discuss the ideas about gender, strongly connected to race, revealed by the books about Addy. In 1993, *American Girl* proudly introduced African American Addy Walker, at that time the only minority in the collection. Although Josefina, a Hispanic character released in 1997, and Kaya, a Native American released in 2002, have added more diversity, Addy remains the only African American. Taking place during the Civil War, her stories focus on her experiences in slavery on a North Carolina tobacco plantation, her successful escape attempt on the Underground Railroad, and her new life in Philadelphia. Momma, Poppa, brother Sam, sister Esther, Aunt Lula, and wise Uncle Solomon make up her family. Whereas slavery tears the family apart, freedom in Philadelphia brings the family back together again. Addy makes friends in the North, such as Sarah, another former slave whose impoverished family struggles to survive, and Harriet, whose family wealth and light skin initially work to draw lines between the three girls.

Regarding perspective, the books succeed in sensitively tackling tough issues from many different angles. Although Addy, her family, and friends are black, the books give voice to diverse white characters, both cruel and kind. Although cruel Master Stevens appears in the books, so does the compassionate Mrs. Ford, who offers Addy and her mother employment, room, and board. When Addy asks Momma about whether she should hate all white people, Momma replies: “Honey, if you fill your heart with hate, there ain’t gonna be no room for

love...Addy, all white people don't hate colored people. Not all of them do us bad'" (Porter 1993: 25). The books successfully refuse to homogenize white people.

Along with portraying diversity, the books touch upon important issues that have long affected African Americans, as individuals and communities. For example, the books do not pretend that racism ends after Addy and Momma escape slavery; on the contrary, the books discuss racism in Philadelphia. Addy often thinks about racial prejudice and discrimination: "*Momma, Poppa, and I and all the colored people got a strange kind of freedom here in Philadelphia. There are jobs we can't get and shops we can't eat at just because of the color of our skin. It ain't fair*" (Porter 1994: 9). In a way very different from the other characters in the collection, Addy and her companions do not avoid messiness or confusion or injustice, but rather, actively explore the issues.

The books also discuss internalized racism. Beverly Tatum, quoted in *Diversity, Community, and Achievement*, explains that

The skin color prejudice found within black communities is toxic to children and adults. A byproduct of the plantation hierarchy, which privileged the light skinned children of enslaved African women and white slave owners, a post-slavery class system was created based on color. Historically the black middle class has been a light-skinned group...The internalization of white supremacist standards of beauty and the desire to maintain what little advantage can be gained in a racist system lead some families to reject darker skinned members (Tatum: 44).

In essence, internalized racism, or colorism, occurs among African Americans when dominant racial hierarchies that privilege lightness over dark skin take root, leading to color lines and tensions within black communities themselves. Internalized racism ultimately demonstrates how

powerful and insidious white supremacy really is: when racist constructs infiltrate black communities, those color lines work to undermine the racial solidarity that has combated white supremacist thinking from the beginning.

In the Addy books, we see internalized racism at work. For example, even on the plantation, Auntie Lula, who has light skin, works in the house, whereas Poppa and Sam, both dark, work in the fields (Porter 1993: 13). Another example occurs after the two Walker women have achieved their freedom: at school, Addy meets another girl named Harriet, whose lightness and wealth compels Addy to negotiate racial dynamics. “Harriet had light brown skin, and she wore her hair loose...Harriet had everything that Addy had dreamed freedom would bring her. Harriet had fancy dresses. Harriet was smart. Harriet was sure of herself” (Porter 1993: 26, 36). Although Addy independently recognizes the privileges that lightness and “loose” hair texture have conferred upon Harriet, Harriet herself uses intimidation and humiliation to reinforce “light” supremacy among classmates and friends. Harriet purposefully transplants the plantation hierarchy to their school, for Addy to carry her books: “‘Well, if you want to be friends with us, you have to be our flunky,’ Harriet said...‘Oh Addy, I can tell that you just got off the plantation’” (Porter 1993: 47). Their teacher, Miss Dunn, exposes these tensions among the classmates. She does her best to problematize the growing color lines between them.

‘Almost all of us colored people used to be slaves.’

‘Not me. My family has always been free,’ Harriet said proudly. Addy could see a tense look come over Miss Dunn’s face...

‘One of the reasons there is a war now is because a line exists between colored and white people. That line is slavery. Miss Dunn turned and faced Harriet. ‘We don’t need to do or say anything that draws more lines between people. The entire country has

been divided into two. Let's not make differences based on who was a slave or wasn't, or *anything* else. Is that clear, class?'" (Porter 1993: 42).

Rather than ignore such controversial issues, the books openly engage internalized racism. In fact, the mentor in this particular scene, Miss Dunn, objects to internalized racism, suggesting that the girls should not let color divide them, even though hegemonic institutions, including "slavery," seek to encourage them to internalize white supremacy. Miss Dunn works to bring down plantation hierarchies, an act that requires both bravery and compassion.

Although the books treat these issues with great sensitivity, an important question remains about perspective: why has *American Girl* not created another strong black character to join Addy Walker? By choosing to locate the only black character in 1864, *American Girl* implicitly confines the black American experience to slavery and reconstruction. To gain the most balanced perspective, young readers should have the opportunity to encounter black realities all throughout American history. Why stick to slavery? Why not explore Civil Rights activism? Or even the African American experience during any given period in history, from the Harlem Renaissance to the struggle in the 1980s for equitable public housing in Chicago? Slavery cannot exclusively encapsulate black America.

From Expression to Repression

Even though the books treat most racial issues with sensitivity, they offer a problematic discourse on gender normalcy that is tinged with racial overtones. To apply the Miskec model of gender socialization, this discourse on gender and race becomes apparent when Addy must move from expression to suppression, a move that domesticates her emotionality into the masculine space of stoicism (Miskec 2009: 160-161). By constraining her expressiveness, the books locate Addy, the black representative of *American Girlhood*, squarely within the legacy of suppressed

and contained female characters in literature and history who are publicly criticized or even considered mad for their emotional nature, from Charlotte Brontë's humbled Jane Eyre, to Jean Rhys's institutionalized Antoinette Rochester, to Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, to the passionate Queen Anne Boleyn, to expressive women in the media in the early twenty first century, including Kate Gosselin and Rosie O'Donnell. Telling women to silence and conceal their emotions constitutes sexism by confining and constraining their ability to participate most fully in their own society: emotional silencing inhibits them from voicing their discontent, from protesting societal injustices, from undermining male dominance. By shackling female emotions, society domesticates female power and agency, in turn making women passive pawns in their own subjugation. The silencing of women discourages them from developing their own critical consciousness, an intellectual framework rooted in experience that allows them to actively identify and protest against their own oppression.

This subjugation of women and girls like Addy ties into racial tensions: doubly marked by race and gender, black women and girls suffer from this oppression most acutely. In a display of internalized sexism and racism, sometimes even white women perpetuate oppression against blacks. In ignoring important differences, such as racial status or class, among women, white feminists, such as Betty Friedan, have left the oppressions unique to the black female experience in America both unexamined and unchallenged. In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: a Reader*, Audre Lorde explains that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," meaning that white feminism, having revealed its roots in patriarchy and racism by ignoring black voices, will never bring down institutionalized patriarchy or racism (Lorde in Lewis and Mills 2003: 27). Black women, like Audre and Addy, must have the forum to advocate for themselves – to bring their concerns to attention in the public eye – to make progress toward vanquishing injustice

once and for all. *American Girl* denies Addy that forum, thereby perpetuating racist sexism.

Although *American Girl* does place Addy at the center of her books, in an unfortunate twist, the plotlines constantly silence her voice, encouraging her to move from expression to repression.

This process of socialization originates in the very first book. In *Meet Addy: an American Girl*, when Addy cries out against injustice, her parents encourage her to contain her emotions, to keep her thoughts to herself, thereby inhibiting her power to name and challenge her oppressor. Upon witnessing Master Stevens whip Sam, her brother, she cannot hold back her emotions:

Addy screamed and cried, but her parents did not. They had blank, empty faces that made Addy angry...Finally Addy yelled at her parents, 'Y'all don't care about Sam at all! Y'all not even crying.' As soon as she said it, she felt bad...

'Just because you don't see us crying and carrying on don't mean we don't care. It don't mean we ain't crying, either. Me and your momma crying on the inside. We ain't always free to show our feelings on the outside. But on the inside we is free. There's always freedom inside your head, Addy' (Porter 1993: 6).

In explaining that "on the inside we is free," Poppa does offer Addy an important psychological defense against prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, he also discourages her from bringing her concerns out into the open, from voicing her discontent. "Crying and carrying on" represents expression, an act that holds the potential for naming and protesting societal justice, whereas merely "crying on the inside" ultimately allows the oppression to continue completely unexposed and unchallenged. Due to her gender and race, Addy Walker cannot fully express herself, cannot protest the injustice she sees around her. And given the didactic intent behind the books, this message suggests that young readers must also bottle up their emotions.

Later in this book, Addy begins to internalize this message. As she and Momma escape from the plantation to freedom in Philadelphia, Addy faces one challenge after another to keep her emotions bottled up. Reacting to some noise off in the distance, “Addy screamed and froze. Momma jerked to a stop and clamped her hand over Addy’s mouth. ‘Hush up,’ her mother whispered sharply... Addy remembered what her father had said about not always showing your feelings” (Porter 1993: 37-38). The context of escape, made necessary and complicated and dangerous by issues of race and gender, puts pressure on Addy to suppress her feelings, to avoid voicing discontent. The very next day, upon crossing a river, the water pulls Momma down into its depths. “Addy wanted to scream, but she kept it inside,” just in time to save Momma from certain death (Porter 1993: 43). The plot rewards Addy for suppressing her emotions by keeping Momma alive, thereby forging a connection between stoicism and salvation that resurfaces later in the book.

As she and Momma creep past Confederate soldiers lurking in the darkness, one soldier notices Addy, accidentally mistakes her for his servant, and calls her over to him. Though terrified, she hides her emotions and stoically plays along. “Inside she was shaking, but on the outside she was walking straight and strong past the sleeping soldiers” (Porter 1993: 52). This stoicism, as Miskec perceptively argues, spares them from being “physically beaten or killed,” further reinforcing the connection between suppression and safety (Miskec 2009: 160-161). Momma reiterates this connection, making it even more psychologically rewarding for Addy – and readers – by linking emotional suppression with earning fatherly pride. “‘You kept your feelings inside this time. Your poppa would be proud of you’” (Porter 1993: 53). According to *American Girl*, emotional suppression ultimately constitutes praiseworthy behavior.

This supposedly laudable behavior, dependent on emotional suppression, functions to discourage Addy from exercising her emergent critical consciousness that perceptively detects injustice, even in the North. Whenever Addy points out the prejudice and discrimination she sees, her mentors and friends quickly move to suppress her protests, suggesting that she accept the world – societal injustice and all – “the way things is” (Porter 1993: 17). For example, when she forges connections between race and class, realizing that black people in 1864 seem to suffer from material deprivation more actually than whites, *Addy Learns a Lesson* about suppressing her feelings, thereby suppressing her protests. Even though she recognizes the materially deprived conditions in which she and her mother then live as injustice, her mother’s command to “Hush up” prevents her from voicing her concerns. “She wanted to tell Mrs. Ford about the broken window and the snow on the floor. But Addy knew Momma would not want her to complain” (Porter 1993: 18). This moment casts expression – along with its potential to inspire transgressive activism – as complaining. This framing makes expression seem selfish and petty, not behavior that will help Addy win approval from “Momma.” This portrayal does nothing to incentivize emotional expression; in fact, this scene incentivizes suppression by linking silence to parental approval.

Later books not only incentivize suppression, but also frame expression as futile and pointless. When Poppa joins Addy and Momma up North in *A Springtime Story*, both father and daughter confront prejudice and discrimination. “‘When we was in slavery, I was a carpenter. Now that I’m free, I find out these white people up North think a colored man ain’t good enough or smart enough to drive a nail.’ ‘That ain’t fair,’ Addy said. ‘Sure ain’t,’ Poppa said. ‘But that’s the way it is’” (Porter 1994: 5). Every time Addy realizes that something “ain’t fair” and voices her concern, her mentors, including Poppa, suggest that she accept the world “the way it is”

rather than critically engage with reality, thereby implying the futility of detecting and naming societal injustice. By learning to associate the recognition and revelation of fundamental societal injustices with futility, Addy simultaneously learns to silence herself, to keep her head bowed in submission to unfair institutions from racism to classism to sexism. This moment between father and daughter clearly shows forces like internalized racism and sexism at work to suppress the black female voice.

And as Lorde argues, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” meaning that staying silent and passive and obedient will ultimately only strengthen the walls that support the house of racism, of classism, of patriarchy (Lorde in Lewis and Mills 2003: 27). The white male oppressor and his powerful institutions in society, from the academy to the government, desperately wants black women and girls like Addy to suppress their emotions – to limit their potential for protest and transgression. But luckily, black women and girls like Addy do discover certain tools unique to black communities. And because these tools do not come from the master’s tool shed, they can break down his house. For Lorde, her tools came from her writing, which redirected the nature and intent of feminism to be more inclusive. For Addy, this most powerful tool, unrestrained expression, comes from her experiences at church. “Addy liked coming to church. Anyone who wanted to could take part in the service. If you felt like answering the reverend, you could. If you felt like crying, or laughing, or clapping to the music the choir sang, you could” (Porter 1993: 22). For Addy, the church provides liberation, not only by providing space for emotional expression, but also by allowing the community to form close bonds of friendship and interdependence that transcend racist institutions, for example, by assisting runaway slaves and dismantling institutionalized racism. Although Addy must still

move from emotional expression to repression, she does find community and agency using tools far outside the master's tool shed.

Conclusion

My destination: American Girl Place in New York. Walking along the busy Manhattan streets, I grew increasingly excited, thinking about the adventure into citizenship, into class, and into *American Girlhood*, I was about to embark on.

Passing through the doors, I headed straight upstairs, fighting through hoards of rambunctious children and extremely stressed parents, to reach the eight historical characters then up for sale. With Samantha and Kirsten locked into the archives, the remaining dolls included Kaya, Felicity, Josefina, Addy, Rebecca, Kit, Molly, and Julie, whose long blonde hair had actually earned her two whole display cases to herself.

Wandering about my own personal Mecca of research, I heard harried mothers desperately urging their daughters to choose a doll – just one. I saw other mothers and daughters carry armloads of dolls, of books, of clothes, of accessories. In this veritable theater of girlhood, I saw only one or two uncomfortable fathers nervously fingering credit cards, probably wondering how much these toys will cost (trust me: a lot).

In all the crowd, one person stood out to me. One person, a woman shopping for her daughter, basically encapsulated the entire purpose of my paper in one powerful sentence. Looking through the dolls with disgust and dismay, overcome by their conformity to the same ideals of appearance and attitude, she said, quite simply: “Not one looks like my daughter!” Among all the characters available in the store, not one looked like her daughter, who is a real *American Girl*. The realm of normativity for citizenship, for class, and especially for gender, American Girl actively excludes certain people, like this particular family, from representation.

And if not one looks like her daughter, this woman experiences hegemony, a powerful societal discourse that seeks to normalize certain values and behaviors while making other

attitudes and actions seem aberrant. And given the extent to which *American Girl* has claimed societal power and recognition through commercials on television, through aggressive catalogue marketing, and through its claim to history, American Girl also has the power to enforce this discourse of normalcy. The politics of inclusion and exclusion that determine *American Girlhood*, dependent on conformity to Christian values, adherence to class boundaries, and suppression of transgression, ultimately marginalize the individuals and groups who actually fall outside the box of normalcy perpetuated by *American Girl*.

The company has made some progress toward embracing more diversity, toward including more girls under its definition of *American Girlhood*. In 2002, starting with the release of Kaya, the books jumped off the previously entrenched format of starting with an introduction and then progressing through school stories, Christmas stories, springtime stories, summer stories, and finally, winter stories. Kaya, Julie, and Rebecca have more original titles that suggest their own historical specificity in time and place and culture, such as “Julie Tells Her Story,” “Kaya and Lone Dog,” and “Candlelight for Rebecca.” And though Kaya, Rebecca, and Julie face socialization – for example, Kaya moves from individualism to communalism – at least these books break norms previously canonized as normal, such as the adherence to Christianity or the emphasis on nuclear families. Rebecca is Jewish; Julie encounters divorce. To stop perpetuating hegemony against minorities, *American Girl* must move their line toward this new objective: to represent diverse viewpoints in history as diverse, not essentialized and normalized.

Kaya

1764



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
2002	Janet Shaw	First Native American Doll First Doll To Depart From Standardized Narrative Arc	From Individualism to Communalism

Image Source: http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Felicity

1774



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1991	Valerie Tripp	Retired in 2010	From Independence to Patience

Image Source: http://images.fanpop.com/images/image_uploads/Felicity-american-girl-dolls-161853_400_400.jpg

Josefina

1824



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1997	Valerie Tripp	First Hispanic Doll	From Peaceful to Aggressive

Image Source: http://store.american girl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Kirsten

1854



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1986	Janet Shaw	<p>First Doll Originally From Another Country</p> <p>Second Doll Placed Into The Archives</p>	<p>From Materialism to Industriousness</p>

Image Source: http://toycaptain.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/american_girl_kirsten_larson-300x300.jpg

Addy

1864



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1993	Connie Porter	First African American Doll First Doll To Live In Poverty	From Expression to Suppression

Image Source: http://store.american girl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Samantha

1904



Year Released:	Lead Authors:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1986	Susan Adler and Valerie Tripp	First Doll Placed Into the Archives	From Privilege to Patronage

Image Source: http://images.fanpop.com/images/image_uploads/Samantha-american-girl-dolls-161883_400_400.jpg

Rebecca

1914



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
2010	Jacqueline Dembar Greene	First Jewish Doll	From Drama to Duty

Image Source: http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Kit

1934



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
2000	Valerie Tripp	First Doll to Star in a Feature Film Released in Theaters	From Protest to Resourcefulness

http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Molly

1944



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
1986	Valerie Tripp	Only Original Doll Still On The Market	From Drama to Duty

Image Source: http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

Julie

1974



Year Released:	Lead Author:	Innovations:	Socialization:
2007	Megan McDonald	First Doll To Take Place After World War II	From Shyness to Advocacy

Image Source: http://store.american girl.com/agshop/html/view_larger.html

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