

ALTERNATIVE AMERICAN GIRL: RADICAL READERS, HIDDEN THINGS, AND  
'GIRL-SIZED' VIEWS OF HISTORY

By

MARIKO TURK

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2011

© 2011 Mariko Turk

To my family

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would very much like to thank my chair, Anastasia Ulanowicz, and my reader, Kenneth Kidd, for the insightful guidance and encouragement they have given me over the course of my graduate studies. Their work and their teaching inspired and shaped my research, and their support and enthusiasm assured that my research turned into a finished thesis. I would also like to thank Casey Wilson for being such a helpful workmate, and my family for always happily supporting everything I do.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	8
2 ESSENTIAL, SEQUENTIAL: RECAPTURING THE CHILD READER AND AMERICAN HISTORY .....	12
3 AG'S DARK MATERIALS: RADICAL READERS AND UN-COMMODIFIED THINGS .....	34
4 "GIRL-SIZED" VIEWS OF HISTORY.....	50
5 CONCLUSION: CONSERVATIVE CHILDREN'S TEXTS AND RADICAL POTENTIAL.....	68
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	73
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	75

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

ALTERNATIVE AMERICAN GIRL: RADICAL READERS, HIDDEN THINGS, AND  
'GIRL-SIZED' VIEWS OF HISTORY

By

Mariko Turk

May 2011

Chair: Anastasia Ulanowicz

Major: English

Since the launch of the American Girls® Collection of historical dolls, books and accessories in 1986, Pleasant Company (now known as American Girl®) has surrounded itself with sentimental discourses that simultaneously function as company mission statements and meditations on the essence of girlhood in America. Of course, these sweet and nostalgic discourses have been countered by a critical discourse that is highly distrustful of the collection's portrayal of girlhood and American history, not to mention its emphasis on consumerism. Critical examinations of American Girl® (AG) give us the feeling that to read and play with AG materials is to enter a world where the forces of the AG brand of consumerism work on every level to trap the child consumer/reader in the conservative, normalizing world of the American Girl® series. I do not disagree with this characterization of AG and its goals, but I do wonder if there are other possible ways to exist within the world of AG and interact with its materials counter to the constraining narratives that emanate from both AG and AG criticism.

This paper first examines the very carefully rendered world and worldview of AG. Through close readings of its catalogues and book sets, I will analyze the dominant narratives of the AG series and how they respond to late twentieth century cultural

anxieties about American history education and the child (the child reader specifically). Then I will look for the cracks, gaps, and moments of pause in the AG books that might provide ways for readers to experience the AG world counter to its dominant messages. These possible counter-readings depend upon the objects and moments in the stories that do not fit so smoothly into AG's sentimental narratives about girlhood and history, and therefore are left out of its cycle of commodification and consumption. By first examining the conspicuous aspects that make up AG's ostensibly stable world, and then experimenting with how readers could use AG's less conspicuous materials to potentially destabilize that world, my paper seeks to gain a wider understanding of seemingly superficial conservative children's materials like the AG series, and how they can be used.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

From 1987-1990, the back covers of the American Girls® Collection direct mail catalogues contained a brief vignette by Pleasant T. Rowland, founder of Pleasant Company (now known as American Girl®).<sup>1</sup> “Deep in the basement of a small museum lies a tattered, water-stained doll trunk,” it begins. “Open the dusty lid and the long-ago childhood of some lucky young girl comes instantly to life” (*American Girl*). What is inside the trunk that has the power to bring a long-ago childhood so instantly back to life? According to Rowland, a “beautiful porcelain doll” with “marvelous accessories.” The vignette is accompanied by a dimly lit photograph of the doll resting against an antique trunk, out of which spill tiny accessories galore: a rust-colored pair of gloves, a hairbrush, a parasol, a fan. Rowland writes that she “discovered” this doll not long after she started the American Girls® Collection in 1986, and that it “served as a powerful reminder of why I had begun the collection, and what I hoped it would accomplish” (*American Girl*). What Rowland hoped the collection would accomplish is detailed at the end of the vignette:

At an age when girls are old enough to read and still love to play, they need books and dolls that capture their imaginations. The stories in the American Girls Collection come alive with beautiful dolls and period doll clothes. The doll accessories are replicas of real things found in times gone by. They are quality pieces—not plastic playthings—and are made for children over eight years old to treasure. I hope the American Girls Collection will be dearly loved and well played with and then passed down to other generations of girls tomorrow—a reminder that growing up in America is, has been, and can always be an experience to treasure. (*American Girl*)

---

<sup>1</sup> Mattel® acquired Pleasant Company in 1998. Rowland retired in 2000 (“Our Company”).

Like many of the company's messages to parents and other adults, the back cover vignette exudes sentimentality, and simultaneously functions as a company mission statement and a meditation on the essence of girlhood.

It is also completely phony. According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, the doll Rowland discovered in the basement of the Wisconsin Historical Museum was purchased by Lucien and Mary Hanks for their baby daughter, Sybil Hanks, in 1908. Sybil apparently never played with the doll, and as an adult she "donated it in pristine condition to the society's museum" ("Nancy Hanks" para. 1). This alternative vignette runs directly counter to Rowland's, which claims that the doll was "dearly loved and much played with," and that "her tiny treasures were the cherished possessions of their owner—possessions so special that they were put away until some faraway day when her own little girl could delight in them" (*American Girl*). In this way, Rowland's catalogue vignette not only encapsulates the American Girl® commitment to nostalgia and sentimentalized versions of both girlhood and history, it also demonstrates the almost palpable sense of falseness surrounding the whole enterprise, the emptiness of the company's "inspiration," the phoniness of its loving little slogans (and its girls, and its history).

But we already know that American Girl® is phony. Feminists know, historians know, literary and popular critics know, and even a lot of parents are awfully suspicious. In fact, the rosy, sentimental discourses surrounding American Girl® are countered by another kind of discourse that is also quite well-known. Jennifer Miskec recently described this discourse as "the 'ewww' factor that surrounds the pricey, popular, and

absurdly successful line of American Girl products” (157).<sup>2</sup> Miskec points out that this “ewww” factor has been very well-examined by many critics who are distrustful of the collection’s portrayal of girlhood (its “normalizing lessons about what it means to be a ‘good girl’) and American history (its sanitized, formulaic, inaccurate versions of the past) (158).<sup>3</sup> What seems to really disturb critics, however, are the ways that this girlhood and this history are packaged and ubiquitously marketed: “because the books can be found in most elementary school libraries—and because the big glossy catalogs have a way of showing up on a female child’s doorstep almost as soon as she is born—few youngsters fail to meet these characters eventually” (Dockrell, qtd. in Inness 169).

The two contrary discourses surrounding American Girl® (AG) both seek to protect the child reader/consumer of AG materials. As such, both have ideas about how children read, experience, and use these materials. While AG imagines girls being pleasurably captured by their books, dolls, and accessories, AG critics imagine girls violently captured in a “world of conspicuous consumption” (Inness 165), where the forces of the AG brand of consumerism work on every level to trap the child consumer/reader in the “normalizing world of the American Girl series” (Miskec 157). I wonder, however, if there are other ways to imagine readers existing, even being

---

<sup>2</sup> Miskec is referring to Lisa Schwarzbaum’s *Entertainment Weekly* review of *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl*, the first major motion picture based on an American Girl character. The review states that the movie is “based on stories invented to sell one of the plastic lasses in a very popular line of dolls...So yes, this movie is a slick marketing offshoot of an expensive toy. Ewww” (qtd. in Miskec 157).

<sup>3</sup> For a long list of historical inaccuracies in the American Girls series of books, see Daniel Hade’s essay “Lies My Children’s Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in ‘The American Girls’ Books” in *Voices of the Other: Children’s Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. New York: Garland, 1999. 153-164.

captured, within AG's undoubtedly conservative "world of conspicuous consumption"—ways counter to the restrictive narratives that emanate from both AG and AG criticism?

For instance, if the conspicuous aspects of the AG world (the American Girl® characters, their accessories, the intended morals of the stories) work together to rigidly entrap child consumers in the normalizing world of AG, perhaps its purposefully less conspicuous aspects (the child reader, the un-commodified objects, the darker aspects of the stories) could work together to destabilize that world. Drawing on the work of perceptive critics who read the lessons AG sends out to its child readers/consumers, I will describe how the very carefully rendered world of American Girl® responds to the cultural anxieties surrounding the child and American history during its moment of production. Then, I will imagine ways to exist inside that world, and use its (less conspicuous) materials, in manners that run counter to the dominant discourses of both AG and AG criticism.

## CHAPTER 2 ESSENTIAL, SEQUENTIAL: RECAPTURING THE CHILD READER AND AMERICAN HISTORY

Pleasant Company launched the AG line of historical characters in 1986 with three dolls—Kirsten® from 1854, Samantha® from 1904, and Molly® from 1944—each complete with accompanying outfits, accessories, and six volume book sets. Following the same successful formula, AG added Felicity® (1774) and Addy® (1864) in 1991 and 1993.<sup>4</sup> Through these characters and their stories, AG hoped to “provid[e] ‘girl-sized’ views of significant events that helped shape our country” (“Our Company” para. 3). They also, of course, hoped to “capture” the imaginations of “generations of girls” inside these “girl-sized views.” If we recall the back cover catalogue vignette, we are reminded that the girl reader is the specific target here: “at an age when girls are old enough to read and still love to play, they need books and dolls that capture their imaginations.” Girls who are old enough to read, but who are still young enough to have ‘play’ marked as the most appropriate and natural activity for them (they “love” to play), these are the girls who “need” books, dolls, and doll accessories that “capture” their imaginations. The sentence seems innocent enough (and certainly, AG’s appeal rests on its portrayal and packaging of innocence), but in light of increasing concerns over the child in the 1980s, the fate of the critical and/or reading child in particular, this need to capture the girl reader takes on new meanings.

As Michelle Ann Abate asserts in her study of contemporary conservative children’s literature, the rise in the 1980s of Ronald Reagan and “his conservative

---

<sup>4</sup> My paper focuses on the texts of these earlier dolls, though AG has introduced several other historical characters over the years: From 1997-2009 the company released Josefina® (1824), Kit® (1934), Kaya® (1764), Julie®, and Rebecca® (1914).

vision” set off a “backlash against the social rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s” that had wide-reaching cultural effects (34). This conservative backlash, with its commitment to upholding ‘traditional’ values and recovering essential truths, was a powerful force throughout the ‘80s and the ‘90s as well, as it battled against the “massive social flux and radical cultural upheaval” occurring in American social, cultural, and political life at the time. The growing influences of feminist, multicultural, and LGBTQ rights movements contributed greatly to these upheavals, which shifted and expanded (and to some, fragmented) once-held definitions of values, morality, and identity as well as challenged the very existence of essential truths (Abate 32-33). To those who were frightened by them, these shifts and expansions were shattering all that was once certain and known, causing the degeneration of values on both the familial and national level. Indeed, the essences of both childhood and American history became endangered by these shifts. The American Girl® series, its origins well within the conservative backlash of the 1980s, seeks to recover essential truths about the child (specifically the girl) and about American history by responding to the forces threatening the coherent existence of these two things.

As David Buckingham details in *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (2000), the 1980s were witness to growing concerns about the rise of violence, sexual activity, and general ‘adult’ behavior among children, as well as the “disintegration of family life” (21). Several critics responded to and fueled these concerns by proclaiming the “death of childhood,” the idea “that the safety and innocence which characterized previous generations’ experience of childhood” was now “lost forever” (Buckingham 32, 21). This anxious idea was often accompanied by the

evocation of an idyllic “earlier era” (in which the innocence and safety of ‘true’ childhood still existed), and a desire to recover this period by bringing its values back to the contemporary world (Buckingham 24). Ideas about the specific causes of childhood’s death varied, though as Buckingham points out, most critics cited a breakdown of the once stable line that separated the adult world from the child world, facilitated by electronic media like television which, unlike printed texts, allows for the child’s complete and uncontrolled access to information (27). Buckingham emphasizes that these ‘death of childhood’ arguments “embody a growing sense of anxiety about social change, and particularly about the changing power relationships between adults and children” (25).

The specific power in flux in the relationship between adult and child, according to works like Neil Postman’s *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) and Marie Winn’s *Children Without Childhood* (1984), is the adult’s loss of control over materials and information accessible to children, the loss of power over the “symbolic environment of the young” (Postman 45). While Winn worried that the child’s “critical powers” were being “too early awakened” (qtd. in Buckingham 24), Postman argued that because television exposes the child to the “dark and fugitive mysteries” of the adult world that were once concealed from them, the divide between adult world and child world disappears, thus the death of childhood (Postman 87). The anxieties surrounding the prematurely “critical” child as well as the anxieties surrounding the child who has indiscriminate access to the mysteries of the adult world both depend upon the uneasiness produced by the child existing out of sequence. If the child’s critical skills are aroused “too early,” or if the child is exposed to the mysteries of the adult world

before she is supposed to be, the child loses her 'childhood' and therefore becomes an embodiment of shattered truth, a body that defies the former certainty of its position, identity and essence.

A closer look at Postman's understanding of the act of reading further illustrates the anxiety about the child out of sequence (the child who has critical powers and/or who has access to adult material) and the subsequent desire to relocate her within some past, safe, logically ordered space. Postman views reading as "abid[ing] by the rules of a complex logical and rhetorical tradition that requires one to take the measure of sentences in a cautious and rigorous way, and...to modify meanings continuously as new elements unfold in sequence" (76-77). For Postman, reading is a linear activity governed by sequences and caution. For this reason, reading must necessarily be "learned in stages," stages that govern both what one reads and how one reads it. In terms of what one reads: "books that are read in the fourth grade or seventh grade or ninth are chosen...because their content is considered to contain fourth-, seventh-, or ninth-grade information, ideas and experience." For, as Postman argues, in our past "print-based culture," "a fourth-grader [did] not yet know about seventh-grade experience, nor a seventh grader about ninth-grade experience." In terms of how one reads: Postman points out that "the young reader is expected, at first, only to paraphrase, not criticize" (77).

The well-ordered and comforting sequentiality of Postman's version of reading allows for the adult-controlled development and monitoring of the child's critical capacities, supposedly ensuring that they will not be "awakened too early." It is also comforting in its imagining of the child reader as first, and rightly, a paraphrasing child,

(restating, making clear, mastering the content of the reading material) not a critical one (picking apart, questioning, complicating the content of the reading material). The dichotomy Postman sets up between paraphrasing and criticizing is key to sustaining the adult's ability "to set forth the conditions by which a child was to become an adult" (45). Through adult-determined sequences (of both what to read and ways to read it), the progressions by which the child comes to learn adult knowledge as well as move from paraphrasing to thinking critically about that knowledge are safely under control. Given the fear of the child out of sequence, and the view of reading as an activity of controlled sequentiality, it is no surprise that many 'death of childhood' arguments express the wistful desire to recover the essential child by hearkening back to the materials and "symbolic environments" of earlier "print-based cultures."

The American Girl® series shares these anxieties about the child existing out of sequence (and, as we will see, also shares the view of child reading as a controlled, sequential, paraphrasing activity that can be employed to reinstate the child to her proper sequential place). Instead of mourning the 'death of childhood,' however, AG takes on the mission of reviving it with a vengeance. "A Celebration of Girlhood," an essay by Rowland appearing in the 1992 AG holiday catalogue, echoes concerns about modern media messages that encourage girls to "rush headlong into adolescence" (58), but offers the AG collection as proof and preserver of an essential American girlhood. The back covers of the AG series of books contain the confident message: "Some things about growing up have changed, while others—like families, friendships, and feelings—haven't changed at all. These are the things that American girls will always share. They come alive for you in The American Girls Collection." AG, devoted to

celebrating “girlhood—yesterday and today” (“Celebration” 58), first affirms the existence of an essential, timeless American girlhood that is always recoverable, even underneath alterations made by societal, historical, or technological change. AG then takes up the mission of recovering this essential girlhood for girl readers of AG by capturing their imaginations away from the media messages that desire to speed them out of sequence, and guiding them safely back into a cycle of books, dolls, and accessories, the “symbolic environments” of which are all accompanied closely by AG’s prescribed narratives and methods of play. And so, unlike the gloom and paralysis that characterizes many ‘death of childhood’ arguments, AG’s certainty about the existence and recoverability of the essential American girl produces a world of purpose and energy, fully committed to recovering and celebrating what some had mourned as dead.

The set-up of the AG books and merchandise demonstrates such commitment to essentiality and sequentiality as well as the belief that sequentiality safeguards essential ‘childhood.’ The books, for example, follow the same basic pattern and have the same progression of titles,<sup>5</sup> allowing readers to not only follow the progression of a specific historical AG character, but also to “directly compar[e] one era with another” by reading “the school or birthday or Christmas books of every character” (Nielson 85). The various accessory sets for each character similarly promote these kinds of direct comparisons by including the same sequence of items in each set: 1944 Molly’s® original accessories set includes a beret, a shoulder bag, a monogrammed hankie, a steel penny, and a locket from her father, while 1864 Addy’s® includes a straw bonnet, a

---

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the three most recently added historical characters—Kaya, Julie, and Rebecca (added in 2002, 2007, and 2009 respectively), each character’s six book set follows the same progression of titles: *Meet* [character], [character] *Learns a Lesson*, [character]’s *Surprise*, *Happy Birthday* [character], [character] *Saves the Day*, and *Changes for* [character]. Kaya, Julie, and Rebecca’s sets begin with the *Meet* title and end with *Changes for*, but the titles deviate from the pattern for the middle four books.

water gourd, a kerchief, a half-dime, and a cowrie shell necklace that once belonged to her grandmother. The lesson that AG hopes readers will draw from direct comparisons among stories and accessory sets is, for example, that while Molly's® locket containing a picture of her father (who is away fighting in WWII) is "different" than Addy's® 1864 cowrie shell necklace that used to belong to her grandmother (who was kidnapped from Africa and sold into American slavery), both are, essentially, the same. Both are security objects, looked to and touched in hard times, enabling each girl to gain the comfort and strength needed to deal with whatever historically appropriate adversity she faces. Thus, both girlhood and history are flattened and laid out across the well-ordered pages of a catalogue: "[w]hether the doll character lives on the American prairie in the 1860s or in a Midwestern suburb during World War II, she undergoes the same formative experiences. And those experiences are tied to the dolls' accessories, faithfully reproduced and available through the catalog" (Kowalski-Wallace 154).

Not only do American Girls® and American history unfailingly follow the same essential progressions in the world of AG, but American girl readers of AG (and their parents) are encouraged to progress from books to catalogue in order to be a part of (and uphold) this wonderful tradition of American girlhood. In this way, AG is committed to creating reading and playing experiences for girls that mirror Postman's view of reading and growing up as rigid, controlled processes based on adult-determined sequences that safely develop and shape the critical agencies of the child reader. It is important to note, too, that while the whole AG enterprise is ostensibly based upon the mission to use the American past in order to "let girls be girls a while longer" (Brothers), it is not merely engaged in the nostalgic desire to delay or stunt girls in girlhood, though

it certainly is to some extent. 'Letting girls be girls' also reveals AG's righteous notion that it is not delaying girls per se, but rather restoring them to their logical and rightful stage in the sequence (they are girls, after all). This distinction marks the difference between a backward-gazing, purely wistful, delaying-the-inevitable mission, and a mission that looks back in order to effect a just restoration in the present. It is a distinction between evoking the past as a beautiful yet ultimately irrecoverable place of refuge from a present that is doing girlhood wrong, and using the past to correct what it sees as the wrongful fragmentation or acceleration of girlhood in the present. This use of the past to recover the essential place and essential time of the American girl within the present national sphere marks the AG collection of historical characters as a series with active ideas about how contemporary American girls should interact with the past as well as the present. And also, I would argue, just as AG makes use of history to re-establish the coherent essence of the girl in the present, it also makes use of the girl to re-establish the coherent essence of American history, which was also in danger of fragmentation.

The same conservative backlash (characterized by anxieties over the shattering of essential truths and values) that gave rise to the 'death of childhood' arguments also fueled anxieties about the fate of American history education and the coherence of the national narrative. Not surprisingly, the child was often at the very center of these anxieties as well. As Nash, Crabtree and Dunn explain, the "rash of history wars" that occurred in the U.S. in the '80s and '90s were marked, as usual, by the clash between "two visions of patriotic history." On one side is the conservative vision, which thinks "young people will love and defend the United States if they see it as superior to other

nations and regard its occasional falls from grace as short pauses or detours in the continuous flowering of freedom, capitalism, and opportunity” (15). On the other side is the vision that aims to expand the historical consciousness of the young by including the study of subjects and events that had been previously left out of the national narrative. As Nash et al. argue, those on the conservative side of the history wars feared that these inclusions constituted “the shattering of elite control over history writing,” and “the subsequent widening of historians’ lenses” to the detriment of the coherent, unified national narrative (24).

In these anxieties over the shattering of control and subsequent widening of the once coherent national narrative, there are loud echoes from the ‘death of childhood’ arguments, which similarly worried about the shattering of adult control over the sequentially ordered “symbolic environment of the young” (and the subsequent death of the essential child). Those worried about the new inclusiveness of American history education saw the “elegant, linear, and unconfusing” story of American history, the “immutable national narrative to which all Americans might subscribe,” also being threatened by breakages and the skewing of the sequence. Whereas the traditional national narrative, which “focus[ed] on national politics, elite society, and traditional heroes” (Nash et al. 98), upheld the view of American history as one linear and “continuous flowering of freedom,” the expanding and increasingly analytical historical view “fragment[ed] American history,” made it into “a mélange of isolated, unconnected truths,” and “jeopardize[d] the integrated vision and coherent story line that makes history courses digestible” for the young (Nash et al. 100).

Once again, when the young come into contact with fragmented and incoherent material, unbound by sequentiality, the result is anxiety. This notion is furthered by the connection between the conservative effort to split “content mastery” from “critical thinking” when it comes to learning about history (175), and Postman’s version of the reading child as first a paraphraser and only later, after logically ordered and adult-determined progressions, a critical thinker. According to Nash et al., there is a tradition that persists in American culture (despite the pedagogical research against it) that believes history “consists of ‘the truth,’ a body of fixed information, objectively known, and that the job of educators is simply to train children’s memories in the facts they need to be loyal and industrious citizens.” In this method of history education, a “certain amount of analytical thinking might be allowed...but students must absorb a rich fund of ‘basic facts’ before starting to think about them” (175).

This line of thinking, in which the “basic facts” or essentials of American history must be paraphrased, restated, or memorized before progressing into thinking critically about them, implies the fear (a fear particularly packed with potential) of the child critically examining American history without possessing a clear notion of the “basic facts” that make up the coherent national narrative. This type of interaction with history is so full of potential because of the subversive understandings and uses of history that it could create. However, before we take up questions of what uses could potentially come from engaging analytically with history without having taken in the “basic facts” of the national narrative, we have to examine how the AG stories work rigorously to create stories and reading experiences that promote content over critical thinking, and paraphrasing over analyzing. In other words, we have to examine how the AG stories

work to cohere and essentialize American history and American girlhood through the controlled progressions of both.

Samantha Parkington®, one of the original American Girl® historical characters, is an orphan living with her wealthy and loving-though-strict Grandmary in 1904 New York. Samantha® often divides her time between light childish mischief, helping her friends, and struggling to be ladylike at tea, meals, and her sewing hour with Grandmary. In the first book of the series, *Meet Samantha*, Samantha® meets and befriends Nellie™, a poor girl who comes to work as a servant for Samantha's® neighbors, the Rylands. Nellie™, with her working-class background, provides the Samantha® series with its only source of historical gloominess. Her presence consistently threatens to fragment Samantha's® coherent progression through American girlhood as well as the story's coherent rendering of American history. At their first meeting, Nellie's™ experiences confront Samantha's® girlhood notions, causing a few brief moments of disturbance: At hearing that Nellie™ has never been to school, Samantha® thinks, "Was it possible? This girl had never gone to school?" (Adler, *Meet Samantha* 24). When hearing that Nellie's™ parents had to send her away to work because there wasn't enough food to feed all of the children, "Samantha's eyes were wide with disbelief. She was good at imagining castles and jungles and sailing ships, but she had never imagined hunger and cold. "You mean your parents sent you away? But that's awful!" (23-24). Finally, Samantha® hears about Nellie's™ work experiences: "[i]n the factory I had to work every day but Sunday, until dark. And the air was so hot and dusty, I started coughing a lot. That's why my parents let me come here. The air is good, and I don't have to work so long...Only I don't get to see my family much" (24).

Faced with the reality of a girl who is not moving through girlhood in any recognizable way—Nellie™ does not go to school, she lives without her family (one of AG's "essentials" of American girlhood), she does not even breathe smoothly—Samantha's® vision is sufficiently widened. She is "shocked" by Nellie's™ experiences. Shocked out of her notions of what American girlhood is, and stunned "into silence." The shock and silence, however, last "only for a moment" (24), and then Samantha® is on the move again, her "mind rac[ing]" to come up with ways that she herself can bring Nellie™ into the unified progression of both girlhood and American history. Samantha's® immediate solution is to teach Nellie™ herself: "We can meet here every day, and I'll teach you. The Rylands won't miss you for just a little while, and I'll teach you *everything*" (24). Samantha® seeks to gather Nellie™ up into the coherent progression of American girlhood by means of an educational program that rests upon the erasure of the social injustices Nellie™ suffered in the past and continues to suffer in the present. Since her employers won't miss her for "just a little while" each day, Nellie's™ current position as a servant fails to present a significant obstacle to her engagement with Samantha's® vision of the essential girlhood progression of school. And, since Samantha® will teach Nellie™ "*everything*," her past experiences, though harsh, will not in the end have deprived her of anything at all. Most of Nellie's™ appearances in the Samantha® series are marked by this pattern—brief moments of fragmentation (of girlhood and American history) followed by the swift and sure actions of Samantha®, the true American Girl®, which put everything back together into "one seamless, tidily packaged history" (Nash et al. 100) that also necessarily contains the seamless, tidily packaged girl.

The second book in the Samantha® series, *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, demonstrates the ways in which the AG series uses girlhood to render history a seamless progression, and history to render girlhood a seamless progression, and the consequences of this conflation for civic education and citizenship. The story centers on Samantha's® preparations for a speaking contest, the subject of which is “Progress in America” (Adler, *Samantha Learns* 27). The story also addresses Nellie's™ first foray into public school, and her failure to progress to the appropriate grade level because of her previous lack of formal education. Nellie's™ place out of sequence at the “Mount Bedford Public School” prompts Samantha® to reinstate the independent educational endeavors she established in the first book—again teaching Nellie™ herself in what the girls come to call the “Mount Better School” (26). Better, because Samantha® knows if she “help[s] her, [Nellie™] could move up to the third grade really fast” (19). So while Samantha® takes on the meaning of American progress in her speech, she simultaneously takes on girlhood progress in her school sessions with Nellie™. By the end of the story, progress as it functions in both of these realms, America and girlhood, becomes inextricably linked with the other.

After talking to the adults in her life about her speech assignment, Samantha® decides to dedicate her speech to “Factories in Modern America,” lauding them as “true signs of our progress,” without which “we could not go forward into the twentieth century” (43-44). She performs this speech in her school-wide contest and wins herself the chance to go forward and represent her school in the “Young People’s Speaking Contest,” in which the winner receives a medal from the mayor. Samantha®, like her classmates, wants to win, and knows that she will “certainly try,” for “[w]ouldn’t it be

wonderful,” she thinks, “to be up on that stage and feel that medal in her hand?” (29). Spurred on by the promise of the material and ceremonial markings of her success and progression, Samantha® practices her speech on Nellie™. An interesting choice of audience, since Nellie™ used to work in a factory—a fact which, despite the “shock” it caused her in book one, Samantha® has “almost forgotten” by book two.

Nellie™ obviously has a less enthusiastic reaction to Samantha’s® speech. “It’s very nice,” Nellie™ tells Samantha®, “it’s just not very true” (46). Nellie™ knows from experience that the reality of factory life complicates Samantha’s® superficial understanding of factories as “true signs” of America’s progress. The descriptions Nellie™ then gives of her experiences in a thread factory are jarring, especially considering the usual blithe tone of the Samantha® books and the AG world in general. Nellie™ explains that she “worked in a big room with other kids” but that this “didn’t make it fun,” because they “couldn’t play.” Rather, they had to work “on the machines that wound the thread. There were hundreds of spools. We had to put in new ones when the old ones got full, and we tied the thread if it broke.” Nellie™ explains that the winding and tying of thread often physically injured the children: “My back hurt and my legs hurt and my arms got heavy,” “fuzz and dust...got in my mouth and made it hard to breathe” (46-47). But not only does child participation in the “true signs” of American progress obstruct the proper functioning of the child body, it also can literally fragment it. Nellie™ continues:

The machines were so strong, they could break your hand or your foot or pull a finger off as easy as anything...If your hair was long, the machines could catch it and pull it right out. They just kept winding. Once I saw that happen to a girl. She was just standing there, and then suddenly she was screaming and half her head was bleeding. She almost died...They paid us one dollar and eighty cents a week...That’s why thread is so cheap.” (48)

Nellie™ describes what happens to children when they are made to take part in the operation of progress in America, when they literally get caught up in American progress as it heedlessly winds and winds: they are shattered, pulled apart, and almost die. And even if, like Nellie™, they escape this vicious physical fragmentation, factory work still fractures the essential progressions of childhood (disallowing play and school) which leaves these children dangerously out of sequence. The brutality of progress and its young victims are portrayed here, as Nellie's™ story places the progression of the child in direct contrast with the progression of America. Factories mark not only the progress of America, but also the fragmentation of children.

Samantha® is at first quite arrested by Nellie's™ story: "Samantha stared at Nellie. She couldn't move. She felt numb and cold, but her scalp was tingling and her arms had a strange ache in them" (48). However, similar to their first meeting in book one when Nellie™ first tells Samantha® about her factory work, Samantha's® moment of shocked pause does not last long. The next scene finds Samantha® at the Young People's Speaking Contest, listening to the other speeches that laud inventions and factories, and then walking "to the front of the stage calmly," standing "tall" and looking "straight ahead." Samantha's® poise comes from the fact that she "had learned something more about factories from Nellie™, and now she had something else to say" (50-51). Now, rather than numbness and arrest, Nellie's™ ruthless experiences give Samantha® physical ease, assurance, and certainty on how she must proceed. Samantha's® new speech is mostly a paraphrase of Nellie's™ experiences: "factory machines make things fast and cheap, but they are dangerous, too. They can hurt the children who work in the factories. The machines can break their arms. They can cut

off their fingers. They can make children sick. And children who work in factories don't have time to play or go to school" (51). Samantha® concludes: "If our factories can hurt children, then we have not made good progress in America...And I believe Americans want to be good. I believe we want to be kind. And if we are kind, I believe we will take care of the children. Then we can truly be proud of our factories and our progress" (51,53). Samantha's® new speech seeks to repair the damage done to both childhood and American progress caused by the fracturing collision between them in Nellie's™ story. By paraphrasing Nellie's™ cruel experiences and concluding with beliefs about the goodness and kindness of Americans rather than a criticism of the factory system or the conditions of child labor, Samantha® repairs and re-occupies the position of the essential child (in effect forgetting the unkindness of a system that allows for the literal breaking of children).

Further, by judging the progression of America through the progression of its children, (the only way America can have good progress is by ensuring the good progression of its children) Samantha's® speech rethreads the fragmented national narrative, by reframing it in terms of the narrative of childhood. In other words, Samantha's® speech reworks American history into "one seamless, tidily packaged history" by, on the one hand, inextricably linking it with the progression of the child, and on the other, envisioning it through Samantha's® essential and uncritical "girl-sized" view. While Nellie's™ story demonstrates that children can fragment the notion of American progress and that American progress can fragment children, Samantha's® speech gathers up these moments of fracture and threads them together, re-framing American history through the uncritical vision of an essential American Girl®. In this

way, the “girl-sized” views of history that AG seeks to depict are just as much for girl readers as they are for the adults who feel anxiety over these girls. AG calls upon parents to let their girls be girls a while longer, and Samantha’s® speech (and the thrust of the AG stories in general) reveals a purpose of this mission: to revive the coherent and endangered national narrative through the progressions of the essential child, and to revive the endangered essential child through products about the coherent progression of American history.

In this way, AG clearly sets forth the type of historical consciousness and civic action it wants American girls to have and take part in, which is best encapsulated by what Lauren Berlant calls “infantile citizenship”—an experience of citizenship as “a category of feeling irrelevant to practices of hegemony or sociality in everyday life” (11). According to Berlant, *feeling* your relationship to America allows citizenship to become a broad, vague, but always strong exercise in feeling ‘good’ about America, rather than a critical engagement with the realities of the “national system” (and the discord between the national ideal and the realities of the “national system”) (51). Speaking of the same period and the same anxieties of fragmentation that fueled the ‘death of childhood’ arguments and the history wars, Berlant argues that the conservative “reactionary response” to the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s was worried that the “core of U.S. society” had been “damage[d] and abandone[d]” by the trend of “valuing national criticism over patriotic identification, and difference over assimilation” (3). According to this conservative response, the restoration of America’s essence, its “core,” depended upon “rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture, characterized by strong patriotic identification

mixed with feelings of practical political powerlessness” (Berlant 3). Once again we see the juxtaposition of criticism, which fractures essences, and uncritical sentimentality or identification, which restores them. In order to successfully “reroute” criticism into a “passive patriotism” (51), characterized by patriotic feelings but “practical political powerlessness,” all moments that expose infantile citizens to injustices that fracture the coherent and ideal national narrative (a moment Berlant calls “a crisis of knowledge”) must be forgotten or else somehow assimilated into the coherent national narrative (50). If this happens, the infantile citizen can be exposed to the injustices of American political, social, or economic life, but the exposure will not ultimately break her overall belief in the coherence of the national narrative, nor her feelings of patriotism.

It is very clear throughout the Samantha® series that while Samantha® certainly *feels* the injustices Nellie™ describes (often physically—tingling, aching, going numb), she all too soon forgets or moves on from their impact, or, as in her speech, lessens their brutality with vague beliefs about the “goodness” and “kindness” of America. In effect, while the American Girl® feels things, good and bad, about America, she does not apply these feelings to the “practices of hegemony or sociality” that occur in her “everyday life.” For instance, the chapter (appropriately entitled “Winners”) that contains Nellie’s™ fragmenting factory speech followed by Samantha’s® reconstructive factory speech is the final chapter of book two and ends, in true AG fashion, with a “celebration.” Samantha® has won the “first-prize medal” for her speech, and Nellie™ has “moved to the third grade” (53-54). Samantha® is a winner first for feeling bad for factory children and then for feeling good that Americans, who she believes “want to be good” and “want to be kind,” “will take care of the children.” And Nellie™ is a winner

because the clearly unkind effects of American progress (like her lack of education) are erased by her progression to the appropriate grade level. Everything, in other words, is just where it should be. The narratives of American history and the American girl neatly threaded together, though, importantly, with thread that has ceased to be viewed as an object associated with the brutal fracturing of either girlhood or history.

In fact, this bit of forgetting becomes even clearer in book three, *Samantha's Surprise*, when Samantha® receives a sewing kit as a Christmas gift from her Grandmary, inside of which are “forty different colored threads.” At this moment, instead of recalling the “crisis of knowledge” originally produced by Nellie’s™ experiences in the factory, Samantha’s® past feelings about the injustices of American progress prove to be astoundingly “irrelevant” to her everyday reality, in that they are nowhere to be found. Rather than recollecting dusty factories, thread-winding machines and pulled out hair, Samantha® unthinkingly “love[s] the way everything in the kit was arranged in its own special compartment” (Schur 55). The sewing kit, with its sound organizational structure, and the thread, arranged in its proper compartment, prevent the relapse of the fracturing “crisis of knowledge” originally associated with thread. Samantha® can uncritically love this sewing kit and these threads even after making a speech that disapproved of their modes of production because she is a model infantile citizen, her potential criticism of the factory system “rerouted” into a vague belief in the goodness and kindness of Americans. She is also, however, engaged in what we could call American Girl® citizenship, a particular kind of infantile citizenship in which the acts of forgetting, assimilating, or rerouting criticism of injustices are often encouraged or accompanied by the uncritical love of exciting objects.

For instance, earlier in *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, Samantha® asks Nellie™ if they can meet after school. Nellie™ says she has to “clean the parlor and sweep the mats” at Mrs. Van Sicklen’s house where she works, but that “if I get the table set right away, I can come for a little while before I have to serve dinner” (Adler 30). After this exchange, a girl named Edith, who goes to Samantha’s® private school, snidely asks Samantha® if her grandmother knows that she is “walking home with *servant* girls.” As in many of her experiences with Nellie™, Samantha® is once again “shocked” and “speechless” at this moment that is so indicative of the class injustices Nellie™ suffers under every day (30). Immediately underneath this scene, separating it from the next, is an illustration of a fancy table setting—pretty china bowls, three silver forks, a crystal goblet, an embroidered napkin, and a silver servant’s bell. Given its placement on the page, one is led to think it illustrates the table Nellie™ had to set before she could visit Samantha®. However, the scene that follows reveals that it is actually Samantha’s® table setting: “That evening, Samantha had dinner with Grandmary. Samantha always loved the glitter of the silver and the crystal in the dining room. She loved the little silver bell Grandmary let her ring to tell Mrs. Hawkins to clear the table and bring dessert” (32-33). Once again, Samantha’s® feelings of shock at the prejudice surrounding Nellie’s™ position as a servant do not translate to her own reality, in which she “loves” to ring the servant’s bell. In fact, Samantha’s® uncritical love of the glittering dinnerware (like her love of the sewing kit) effectively pushes out the recollection of injustices that these objects could potentially provoke in her.

Influenced by conservative anxieties about children and the national narrative, AG emerged as a “reactionary response” to cultural shifts in values, rights, and the

existence of certainties. It shows, among other things, a clear commitment to the “project” of “rerouting the critical energies of the emerging political sphere into the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture, characterized by strong patriotic identification mixed with feelings of practical powerlessness” (Berlant 3). And as it turns out, the perfect vessel through which to channel this rerouting of critical engagement with politics and history into an amorphous sentimentality about America turns out to be the American Girl®, who, by virtue of being a paradigm of infantile citizenship, allays anxieties about the ‘death of childhood’ and the fragmentation of the national narrative. As an infantile citizen, the American Girl® has only “a memory of the nation,” but “no vision of sustained individual or collective criticism and agency” about the “national system.” She has “information about the United States,” but no “knowledge that would change anything” (Berlant 51-52). She is a paraphraser, not a criticizer, a memorizer of facts and information, not one engaged in thinking much about them. The American Girl® feels that America is a good and kind place to live, and forgets any evidence to the contrary, in large part helped by her loving relationship with things.

However, the mission of AG is not only to create the essential American girl and place her in various periods of the past, but also, obviously, to “capture” the contemporary girl reader in their narratives, and to have these American girls follow the same route as The American Girls® by similarly engaging them in a loving relationship with AG’s commodified things. But while the superficiality of the civic engagement and historical consciousness of the American Girl® is painfully clear, what is not clear is whether the American girl reader of the AG series must follow the same path. This is the important question, because what is at stake here is not the American Girl®

protagonist's engagement with and use of history, but the girl reader's potential engagement with and use of this history. So while the American Girl® protagonists (and presumably their readers) blithely progress into model American Girl® citizens, loving their country and loving their things, we are allowed to wonder if there are other paths left unintentionally open within the world of AG that girl readers could potentially explore. Think back to the possibilities, for instance, bundled up in the brief moment of crisis after Nellie™ juxtaposes the image of a girl with half her hair pulled out with the availability of cheap thread—the shocked, numbing moment when Samantha® “couldn't move.” We know what comes of this moment for Samantha®, but what if, instead of feeling, forgetting, and progressing on, a reader recalls and does not let go?

### CHAPTER 3 AG'S DARK MATERIALS: RADICAL READERS AND UN-COMMODIFIED THINGS

To fully turn our attention from the American Girl® to the American girl reader, we should first examine some of the ways that the girl reader of AG has already been imagined. AG imagines the interaction between AG book and girl reader as one of benevolent and restorative capture, in which the reader, affirming her girlhood, moves along the narrative path on pace with the American Girl® character. Critics of AG imagine the same kind of interaction, though of course, they view the capture as oppressive. Either way, the reading activities associated with the AG books are characterized by a capturing that moves in one direction only, from book to reader. The seeming lack of openings for readers to challenge the dominant strains of AG narratives are the result of AG's construction as a response to cultural anxieties about the child and history education as well as its status as a particularly powerful commercial enterprise.

In Jan Susina's incisive look at AG's "effective cross-merchandising" strategies, he argues that the AG books ultimately "function" not as stories but as "a series of catalogues": the "numerous accessories that are sold only through the catalogue are the very items that appear highlighted in the illustrations of the books," which directs readers to "constantly refer back to the catalogues" (133). The characterization of the AG books as catalogues denies them the ability to provide readers with meaningful experiences of girlhood or history specifically because of their position within what Marsha Kinder calls a "children's commercial supersystem,"<sup>6</sup> "a network of

---

<sup>6</sup>In *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.

intertextuality...cut[ting] across several modes of image production, in this case books, dolls, video, magazine, trading cards, and clothing” (Susina 133). Since the AG stories form a working part of the AG commercial “supersystem,” they do not, according to many critics, provide the kind of reading experiences that open or broaden ways of thinking about girlhood and history; rather, they keep the reader cycling within AG’s normalizing packages of girlhood and history. In this way, the AG books can be said to not only employ reading as a tool by which to safely control the development of the child reader’s critical capacities in response to cultural anxieties about the loss of the essential child and the essential American history, but also to draw her into, as Jyotsna Kapur puts it, “the mind-numbing tyranny” of consumerism, which by equating history with accessories in a catalogue “demand[s] that we should not take [history] too seriously” (75). Viewing the AG books as a tool to combat conservative anxieties about the girl reader as well as a part of a powerful commercial “supersystem” leaves fearful little space for the reader to make her own movements within the stories.

Historian Fred Nielsen views the AG books more positively, pointing to some of the more disturbing or uncomfortable moments in the texts—for example Kirsten’s® friend Marta dying of cholera during the passage to America, Felicity’s® family owning slaves, the northern abolitionist Mrs. Ford showing “a hint of condescension” to Addy® and her mother, even while she helps them (88-89). Nielsen is right to point out the more troubling moments in the AG books. His conclusion, however, reduces the child reader’s potential experiences with these moments, claiming that girl readers uncritically follow the narrative paths of the American Girl® protagonists as they gather up, undisturbed, the fractured pieces of girlhood and the national narrative and fold them

back into a coherent vision of both of these things. Nielsen argues that the “cursory fashion” in which many of AG’s more troubling moments are presented causes them to elude the child reader’s attention. “Flitting over” the cholera episode, “a reader hardly feels [Kirsten’s® and Marta’s] pain.” Felicity’s® family does own slaves, “but one would never know this from reading her stories” because the narrative works to “conceal” them by only mentioning them in “a single, banal sentence.” Mrs. Ford is condescending to Addy® and her mother, but “young readers may not notice it” (88-89).

The AG narratives and characters certainly do “flit over” the dark and disturbing moments in the narratives, (a crucial part of essentializing American girlhood and history) but it does not follow that child readers flit over and forget them just as quickly. Nielsen concludes that AG’s “cursory” presentations of the darker aspects of history are wholly appropriate for children, because children are “not ready to ‘participate in the historian’s craft’” (91).<sup>7</sup> But we can certainly question this assessment in order to tease out some of the possibilities, buried within the rigid formulas of the books and the rigid formulations of the reader of those books, in which the girl reader of AG might act as historian and interpreter. That child readers are not ready to participate in the historian’s craft falls in line with Postman’s ideas about child readers, and with AG’s ideas about how girls should interact with history—i.e., cursorily. But, we could reconsider this view by imagining the ways in which child readers could potentially work with AG’s dark and semi-hidden materials. If we do this, a counterimage of the child as reader, historian, and citizen emerges, an image of a child reader who works with the

---

<sup>7</sup> Nielsen refers here to a review of Mary E. Lyons’s *Keeping Secrets: The Girlhood Diaries of Seven Women Writers* by Lauren F. Winner. Winner states that Lyons, by “‘inviting her audience to offer their own interpretations” encourages readers “‘to imbibe the story of the past passively but to participate in the historian’s craft” (qtd. in Nielsen 91).

conservative histories and stories AG provides for her, but dismantles and rearranges them into shapes and meanings wholly different than the ones intended.

In order to start imagining ways that girl readers of AG might experience girlhood and history counter to the American Girl® characters, we have to first examine the cracks in the AG “supersystem”—the moments and objects in the stories that do not fit so smoothly into AG’s sentimental narratives about girlhood and history, and therefore are left out of its cycle of commodification and consumption. Specifically, we have to look at the objects in the stories that have not been turned into catalogue items available for purchase, and ask what child readers might “do” with these objects. And since these objects often signal, cause, or otherwise represent the darker moments in the stories—injury, illness, injustice—we can also examine how the reader might ruminate upon these moments in ways unanticipated by the narratives. These dark and hidden aspects of AG have been overlooked because of their relative scarcity. The moments and objects in the stories that offer potential challenges to AG’s “normalized” girlhood and sanitized history are easy to lose amidst the louder proclamations of AG and the quick pace of the stories, and this, of course, is just how AG wants it. But if we are to imagine girls living radically inside the world of AG, using its materials to challenge its dominant narratives, exploiting the cracks in the “supersystem” to destabilize and re-route the coercive path from story to catalogue, we must look beyond the celebratory stories and catalogue items that sustain the AG world, to the dark materials that have the potential to dismantle it.

AG is undoubtedly an “object-obsessed world” (Miskec 158), and the ultimate lesson of the collection might be, as Daniel Hade says, “consuming stuff” (163). But

there are many different types of objects, all kinds of “stuff,” to be found in the AG books, and not all of it can be consumed in the same ways. I find the following classification of things in the AG world, followed by a few (of many) examples, to be helpful: 1) Things featured in the books and for sale in the catalogues: locket, dresses, nightgowns, etc., etc., etc. 2) Things featured in the books and depicted in the illustrations, but not for sale in the catalogue: shackles, tobacco worms, a thread winding machine. 3) Things featured in the books, but not depicted in any illustrations, and not for sale in the catalogue: gutted squirrels, detached fingers, pulled out hair. These categories of objects offer different ways of understanding AG. The commodified things in the first category display AG’s dominant narratives about girlhood and history. The un-commodified things in the second and third categories offer possibilities for resisting these dominant narratives, since they exist inside the books but outside the pages of the catalogue, and thus break down AG’s usual system of cross-referencing.

Walter Benjamin’s ideas about how the child might work with the materials she is given or finds within the adult world provide a useful way into imagining how child readers might interact with the un-commodified materials of AG, and to what purpose. Benjamin says, in “Old Forgotten Children’s Books,” that it “is folly to brood pedantically over the production of objects—visual aids, toys, or books—that are supposed to be suitable for children” (408). As we have seen above, critics and parents have recognized, if not necessarily the folly, than certainly the harmful or constrictive aspects of AG’s pedantic brooding “over the production of objects,” its anxious attention to detail and constant emphasis on its products’ unique suitability for girls. It is a folly to fuss over the objects made for children because, says Benjamin, “the world” is already “full

of the most unrivaled objects for children's attention and use," namely "detritus," "waste products," things thrown aside, ignored, and lying outside the anxious attention of adults. Children are "irresistibly drawn" to these "waste products," for in them they "recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them" (408). And besides being drawn to the "waste products" from which adults carelessly turn away, children use them in ways that not only counter their functions in the adult world, but that create new functions and meanings altogether. In other words, instead of using the waste products of the adult world to "imitate the works of adults," children "bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one" (408).

That children are drawn to the waste materials of the adult world, and that in the act of play they bring these materials together in "new, intuitive relationship[s]" that produce an alternative "world of things within the greater one," also applies, according to Benjamin, to the child's acts of reading. In "The World of Children's Books," Benjamin asserts that the child reading is not "bound by" the "sense" of the adult world nor the subsequent "sense" of the adult authored children's book (435). When reading something like an illustrated ABC book, for instance, the child does not merely, as Postman would have it, memorize the sequential order of the alphabet. Rather, the child reader "searches through" the "higgledy-piggledy" arrangements of the alphabet illustrations (the "Apple, Ape, Airplane, Armadillo..." on the A page, for instance) and turns them "inside out" like she does her "own pockets"—rearranging, recombining, turning over, creating her own stories with these pictures, stories ungoverned by

“sense,” ungoverned by sequentiality (Benjamin, “World” 436). It is clear from this imagined interaction between child and book that, as Klaus Doderer points out, Benjamin “allows his young readers a high degree of independence regarding literature. He considers the child to be an independent reader” (173). In Benjamin’s view, not only is the child reader not at the mercy of the text’s rigid “sense,” she is quite free from it—moving around at will inside the text, using the materials it provides to create alternative stories, an alternative “world of things.”

The enormous potential of Benjamin’s child, as reader specifically and as meaning-maker in general, is clearly evident: she explores unexplored paths, finds overlooked materials, and creates with them endlessly imaginative stories and meanings unbound by adult-defined rules and sense. We can see why this image of the child reader is exhilarating to those seeking ways of shattering the status quo, especially when contrasted with Postman’s sequential, paraphrasing, uncritical version of the child reader. Benjamin’s child reader, as opposed to Postman’s, is invested with active (and to some, frightening) political and civic potential, seen perhaps especially when she reads materials that are supposed to safely consign her to certain normalizing and passive positions within the national sphere. For, though the forces of normalization, consumerism, and political passiveness in conservative children’s texts like AG are strong, Benjamin’s child reader has the independence and waywardness, the creativity and freedom from “sense,” to shatter the formulaic, sequential, object-filled world of AG, and in so doing, shatter the ‘essentials’—childhood, American history, the national narrative—it seeks to restore.

One can, with a little imagination, recognize the un-commodified things that appear in the AG books as the “waste products” of the AG world. These products are wastes because they cannot, for obvious reasons, be put up for sale, and also because many adult readers of AG treat these products as waste by either not acknowledging them or acknowledging them only to say that they are so unessential to the stories, so overshadowed by the explicit lessons of the books (which correspond to buyable products) that children do not have any meaningful interactions with them. But if we follow Benjamin here, and imagine that children are in fact drawn to the “waste products” of the adult world and use these materials to create an alternative “world of things,” we can imagine that children involved in the AG world can be similarly drawn to its un-commodified objects, which are often bound up in the darker moments of the stories. If we do place Benjamin’s child reader in the world of AG and follow her around, we could arrive at ways of countering the dominant narratives of AG through the use of its own (waste) products. Because this child reader, when reading AG’s reductive renderings of girlhood and history, is not in danger of cycling uncritically around in its normalizing “supersystem” but rather is herself a danger to the system, she provides an alternative and liberating way of approaching AG. A way that views AG materials not through the superficial eyes of the politically passive, sequentially-minded, commodity loving, essential American Girl® citizen, but through the eyes of the looking, finding, rearranging, creating, potential girl reader, who is not at all bound to follow AG’s intended sense—not its structure as a “supersystem” (encouraging movements between book and catalogue) and not its essentializing notions of girlhood and history. To begin imagining these potential interactions between AG book and girl reader more

specifically, we can turn to a typical scene in AG, one that seeks to capture the girl reader within the usual constraining narratives of American girlhood (via the American Girl character and a buyable object), but that also introduces the opportunities for a reader to go off path amongst the waste products, to play with AG's dark and un-catalogued materials.

Kirsten Larson®, who immigrates to America in 1854, is, like Samantha®, one of AG's original historical characters. The first book in her series, *Meet Kirsten*, tells of the Larson family's arrival in America from Sweden. In the book, Kirsten® learns that traveling is uncomfortable and dangerous, that America can be strange and scary, and that not knowing English makes things stranger and scarier still. By book's end, however, Kirsten® is sitting happily in a tree fort with her two cousins, believing, as the front flap tells us, "Papa's promise" that "America will be a land filled with happy opportunity for all of them." Kirsten's® smooth and speedy progression from hardships to happy belief in Papa's stock phrase lifted straight out of the coherent national narrative is facilitated by a nice, warm calico dress and her own bed—both available in the catalogue. There are, however, a slew of un-commodified things in the book that the American Girl® Kirsten® may recover from quickly and easily, but which raise questions about the other American girl "at the heart" of this story: the "implied child reader who will encounter an image of childhood on the page," and who is present in all works for children (Reynolds 6). Not only does this scene address this child reader by attempting to capture her imagination, it also (unintentionally) provides alternative things with which she can play.

“Lost,” the second chapter of the book, opens with the Larson’s arriving in New York from Sweden after their long journey on board a ship. Kirsten® is excited to accompany her Papa and her brother Peter into the crowded marketplace on Broadway to buy milk and bread. Her mother warns: “Stay close to your father...Remember, you don’t speak English yet” (Shaw 15). Kirsten® attempts to keep “her eye on Papa’s broad shoulders as she walked down the busy street,” but the scene is hectic and there are many things that draw her eyes away: “Kirsten had never seen so many horses, so many wagons, buggies, carts...there were candy stores, shops that sold tobacco, candles, tinware, cloth—oh, everything.” “Papa,’ Kirsten begged, ‘slow down! I want to look around” (15-16). Kirsten® is ecstatic, she has never seen these things before and there is an intensity to her begging, to her desire to look at “oh, everything.” That is, until her looking gets her lost:

She saw women holding huge baskets heaped with fruit. She couldn’t understand what the women said, but the red berries in their baskets reminded her of the delicious cloudberry her grandmother gathered in Sweden. Kirsten paused a moment by a gray-headed berry seller. Then a boy carrying a tray of silvery fish bumped her. She almost stumbled over a small black boy who polished a man’s boots. ‘Wait, Papa!’ she called over the racket of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestones. But Papa was gone. (16-17)

Women with huge, heaping baskets of fruit (whose language she cannot yet understand) attract her attention away from her father’s broad shoulders and her mother’s sound advice. Then she stumbles over boys and is lost completely. None of these things—the women, the boys, the boots, the tray of fish—is portrayed in illustrations nor, of course, in the catalogues. This moment of the child becoming lost, played out in an 1854 marketplace, recalls the ‘death of childhood’ anxieties of critics like Postman, Winn, and even Rowland, who feared that the media’s glamorization of

growing up, the early development of a child's critical abilities, and the premature introduction into adult knowledge were destroying childhood. Kirsten® is the paradigmatic child-at-risk, the girl AG seeks to preserve—sexually and critically dormant (literally unable to understand the women with fruit or the “babble” of those around her), and in great danger of becoming lost forever: “‘Help me!’ Kirsten cried out...No one even glanced at her. Couldn't anyone in this big crowd understand that she was lost?” (20-21).

Kirsten® remains lost for six pages, all of which are filled with frightening things and off-kilter movement. First, she tucks her heart-shaped necklace from her grandmother (available in the catalogue) inside her collar because her mother told her “there were thieves in New York, a lot of thieves” (19). Once this buyable accessory is out of sight, Kirsten® moves into the dangerous world of AG's un-commodified things, which, unlike the normal AG world, sustained by its connection to the glossy catalogue, is dangerously off-balance. Kirsten® must “climb around pigs that poked their snouts in the trash of the gutter” while “the smell of garbage” makes her “dizzy” enough to feel as though “she were seasick on the ship.” Lost amongst the waste she is helpless, directionless: “Which way had she come with Papa? How many corners had they turned?” (17-20). And most devastatingly, she is without her family: “What if she couldn't find Papa? What if she couldn't find the park and Mama? What would happen to her in this huge city if she couldn't find her family?” (19-20). We get a disturbing sense of what might happen immediately after she asks herself these questions. She “stumble[s]” again, “a dog nip[s] at her ankles,” and then she finds herself “on a different part of the street, where rough-looking men in bloody aprons sold wild game and meat.

Gutted rabbits, squirrels, and deer hung from poles. Sides of pork dangled from sharp hooks” (20).

Kirsten®, surrounded by un-commodified things and without her family (an essential of American girlhood), is displaced and disoriented. Her world goes askew and, frantic and erratic, she runs and stumbles among trash, pigs, rough men, bloody aprons, gutted animals and sharp hooks (all, of course, not illustrated and certainly not cross-referenceable in the catalogue). Kirsten® is soon saved when she draws an image of a ship in the dust on the ground and a kind woman takes her to the docks, where her parents are waiting. She hugs both mother and father, and with her family restored, the world is righted once again. Instead of garbage smells making her dizzy, “Mama’s shoulder smelled wonderfully of soap and dry grass” (23). The reunion scene also frames the incident as all Kirsten’s® fault—her Papa calls her a smart girl for drawing the ship, but then warns: “Be smart enough to stay right beside me the next time. Promise?” (24). The enormous sense of relief once the ordeal is over as well as her father’s moral mark this episode as a cautionary one, one of the “gentle life lessons” AG attempts to teach its readers (“American Girl Characters” para. 2). This lesson might read: do not wander off, do not lose sight of your father no matter how much you want to look at “oh, everything.” You should not be looking at some things—blood and boys and rough men. You are a girl who is to treasure her girlhood by treasuring her girlhood things.

To emphasize this lesson, the reunion scene ends with a particularly blatant bit of book to catalogue cross-referencing, which completes Kirsten’s® return to the AG world proper. When Kirsten® promises her Papa that she will stay right beside him next time

she means it “with all her heart” (24). Below this sentence, and serving as the ending image of the chapter, is a margin drawing of the gold heart necklace from her grandmother—the one she tucked into her collar at the beginning of the ordeal, and the one that is featured so prominently in the catalogues. Kirsten® is a working part of the AG “supersystem” again and is glad to be back. Indeed, she is all too ready to make promises never to leave it again, from the bottom of her heart (and heart-shaped necklace).

But the child reader might not accompany Kirsten® back into AG’s cycle, or at least not so quickly and whole-heartedly. This chapter depicts Kirsten® as the child who AG fears is disappearing and seeks to preserve. However, in the rapid intensity with which the chapter gives its not-so-gentle life lesson (Papa’s warning may be mild, but her experiences while lost are not), a possible splitting occurs between the American Girl and the potential American girl reader. The un-commodified things found on the “different part of the street”—garbage, bloody aprons, rough men, gutted animals—are swiftly employed to scare the child reader into, first, learning the lesson of being careful in crowds and not wandering away from your parents, and second, the lesson of being a good, American Girl® by wanting to remain inside of girlhood and outside of the realms of things you are specifically not supposed to look at yet. However, the things that Kirsten® sees while lost on the “different part of the street” are exactly the kind of things that a child might be drawn to, especially the child as imagined by Benjamin. Perhaps this is why these things are employed so quickly, flashing up to scare but then “flitted over” by the narrative as Kirsten® runs frantically away. There is certainly an aversion to depicting ‘un-girlish’ things in the AG world, but there is also, perhaps, a fear that the

child reader might delay, dangerously, amongst the dead animals. That they might find in the alternative, garbage-filled streets a playground to be lingered in instead of scared out of.

The things on this alternative street, where Kirsten® is “Lost,” pose a great threat to the AG world and everything it stands for. Indeed, the things could almost appear in a kind of anti-American Girl catalogue, where the girl, instead of finding objects and images that affirm AG’s notion of essential girlhood, finds things that explicitly and violently oppose it. For instance, the glossy AG catalogue pages are filled with “quality pieces” and tiny treasures with corresponding catalogue numbers and rules for ordering. This street is filled with trash, the smell of which makes one dizzy, off-balance, and altogether unsure of where to go. The catalogue is filled with crisp little aprons (Kirsten® has three different ones available). The aprons on this street are bloody and worn by men. And since domestic objects like aprons, china, and sewing kits, are used in the AG stories and catalogues to essentialize the experience of American girlhood (all American girls throughout time ostensibly have these things, in one form or another, and they are specifically the things you should “treasure” in order to “treasure” your girlhood) their bloodiness and appropriation here by “rough-looking men” is all the more direct in its threat to AG’s essential American girl. The “rough-looking men” themselves stand in contrast to the demure-looking girls who fill the pages of every AG catalogue. And then, of course, there is all the meat. Particularly the small, gentle, harmless animals that, dangerously dangling, have been turned into meat for devouring. In these images there is again the echo of the at-risk American girl reader—small, precious, helpless, dangling loose from the safety and certainty of her girlhood, turned into ‘meat’

by the social forces that would have her grown up and sexualized too fast. AG uses trash, bloody aprons, rough men and meat to frighten the reader out of that anti-American Girl street and back into the realm of AG's commodified objects and notions of girlhood as fast as possible. Their desire is to cohere the movements of the girl reader with the movements of the American Girl® Kirsten®. But if the reader, unbound by AG's sense of and intentions for these materials, lingers in this street, amongst these things, she is not only playing with "waste products" that are not economically nor ideologically profitable for AG, she is playing with materials that directly dismantle the essential notions and essential movements (from book to catalogue) that sustain the entire AG world.

The things presented on this "different part of the street" (presented in our imagined anti-AG catalogue), produce what Jyotsna Kapur refers to as the anxiety of the "capitalist imaginary" about the child as "fickle consumer" who "breaks and recombines toys rather than mouth the pre-scripted narratives they come with" (107). This kind of child, very reminiscent of the Benjaminian child who seeks out and recombines waste products in new ways that differ completely from adult uses and intentions, is not only undesired by "supersystems" like AG, but poses a great threat to them. As Kapur points out, "children confront the market on their own...they can quite easily turn from desirable consumers into violent predators" (107). When Kirsten® confronts the market on her own, she acts as the "desirable consumer," running fast until she is back on the "pre-scripted" path of catalogue-available items. But the imagined child reader always has the potential to occupy the position of "violent predator," shaking and breaking things up in the orderly world of AG. AG certainly

hopes and even believes that the child reader will follow Kirsten's® desirable example and be frightened by the un-commodified things, but the reader always threatens to “break and recombine” the carefully constructed narrative, always threatens to be more interested in a deer on a pole than a heart-shaped necklace.

The positioning of the child reader as potential violent predator in the meticulous world of AG necessarily gives this imagined reader, with its un(pre)scriptable imagination, a great amount of power. As Kapur states: “Children’s imagination, when not turned into a source for generating profit, becomes a terribly fearful thing that threatens to overturn the economic, sexual, and social status quo” (164). Certainly a reason why AG is so occupied with capturing the imagination of the girl who is “old enough to read and still loves to play” with its buyable products and accompanying narratives. The girl reader who does not contribute to AG’s profit nor conform to its ideas about girlhood and the national narrative, the girl reader who works and plays with AG’s un-commodified things and un-pre-scripted narratives is unquestionably “a terribly fearful thing,” threatening to break apart AG’s profitable and normalizing world as well as the essential ideas of American girlhood and American history that it creates. A terribly fearful thing that nevertheless shadows the marketed and marketable American Girl® in every story.

## CHAPTER 4 “GIRL-SIZED” VIEWS OF HISTORY

There are other things in the AG books, besides the bloody aprons and gutted animals that so explicitly counter AG’s notions of American girlhood, which might provoke the transformation of girl reader from “desirable consumer” of AG’s products and worldview to violent consumer who destabilizes those products and that worldview. While we saw in *Meet Kirsten* that Benjamin’s child reader could potentially dismantle AG’s notions of girlhood with her interest in and play with AG’s un-commodified things, this reader also has the potential to dismantle the coherent national narrative that AG works so hard to keep intact, as well as challenge the girl’s position and purpose within it. As Gerhard Fischer argues, Benjamin’s political interest and investment in the child (and the child’s ways of making meaning) do not, importantly, mark “an attitude of conservative regression,” a turning to the child as an act of “capitulation in the face of the overwhelming sociocultural, political and economic contradictions of modern society,” a “retreat into a fictional childhood which promises salvation and dispenses with the necessity of *engagement*, postponing any attempts at sociocultural practice or political action” (212). Instead of employing the child in politics in order to enable and even celebrate practical passivity, disengagement, and uncritical acquiescence, Benjamin sees the child as having the potential to be immersed “in a daily practice of sociocultural intervention” wherein, daily and practically, “the here and now of the child’s creative-imaginative potential”<sup>8</sup> is used to effect crucial change in the adult world (Fischer 213).

---

<sup>8</sup> Fischer is writing about Benjamin’s *Programme of a Proletarian Children’s Theatre*.

Here we are reminded that Benjamin's mobilization of the child within the political, civic, and national spheres runs directly counter to conservative uses of the child within these spheres (i.e. the child either as memorial of something essential lost, or champion of "passive patriotism" and "practical powerlessness"). Putting Benjamin's child reader, as opposed to the conservative American Girl® citizen, in contact with the small, sometimes hidden, but potentially powerful things, moments, and movements in AG that contain within them latent radical energies, can have devastating consequences for AG's smooth renderings of history. In fact, out of these interactions can emerge an alternative "girl-sized view" of history, one that breaks apart, rearranges and reforms the essential "girl-sized view" upon which AG is based.

The margin illustrations scattered throughout the pages of the AG books present particularly interesting possibilities for readers to have experiences with AG stories that challenge the experiences of the American Girl® characters/citizens. While AG's full page and half-page illustrations depict scenes from the stories, the margin illustrations mostly depict the objects used, described, or imagined by the characters in the text. The margin illustrations appear very frequently (approximately thirty margin pictures per sixty page book), and are placed literally within the text of the narrative. The moment the object appears in the story (is used or mentioned) the margin depiction of that object appears, crowding and moving the words on the page, and sometimes dividing scenes. As well as demanding attention by their placement within the flow of the narrative, many of the margin pictures are also intricately detailed, further encouraging close examination.

The placement and intricate detail of margin illustrations that depict catalogue-available items are useful in, as Susina points out, facilitating easy movements between book and catalogue. For instance, the margins of the Samantha® series are full of tiny, detailed illustrations of catalogue-available items such as Samantha's® wrought iron school desk in *Samantha Learns a Lesson*—the decorative curves delicately rendered, red, blue, and yellow textbooks visible behind the iron, a note from a classmate rolled up and stuck into one of the curves (1). The details of this image encourage a very close inspection, drawing attention to and increasing interest in this buyable item. But the margin illustrations often depict items that are not catalogue available, and these are also placed within the text and intricately detailed. In this way, the techniques used to make the margin illustrations attractive and therefore encourage smooth movements from book to catalogue can also, when the pictures represent non-catalogue items, work to break down these movements and encourage new ones. And we need only recall the interaction Benjamin imagines between child reader and the images scattered over the pages of an ABC book to recognize the potential of the margin pictures to provide materials for making alternative stories within the larger, sequential, and formulaic story.

That margin illustrations of un-commodified things provoke readers to perform different and potentially useful kinds of movements within the text can be demonstrated with the first ten pages of *Meet Samantha*. The very first margin illustration of the Samantha® series, for example, is a lush oak tree, obviously not available via catalogue. If examined closely, a miniscule pair of legs is visible, dangling out of the tree. The text confirms that these legs are Samantha's®: "The leaves of the quiet old

oak tree suddenly rustled and dropped a squirming bundle of arms and legs. Samantha Parkington tumbled out of the tree” (Adler, *Meet Samantha* 1). From the very beginning of the story, close inspections of the margin illustrations are encouraged, even if the illustrations depict non-buyable items. Also encouraged is the movement back and forth between text and margin picture, as readers can look for and find the details of the story in the tiny details of the pictures.

Sometimes the margin pictures also encourage movements back and forth between other, corresponding margin pictures. After Samantha® falls out of the tree and rips a hole in her stockings, for instance, she goes to see Jessie, Grandmary’s seamstress, in order to have her torn stockings repaired. While Jessie works, Samantha® sees “a piece of jelly biscuit on the floor” that she had dropped there the day before. She also sees that “three ants had found” the biscuit and that “two more ants” were “on their way.” Samantha® then decides not to tell Jessie about the dropped biscuit, because it “would be fun to see how many [ants] would come” (6). The initial margin illustration of this event depicts the dropped jelly biscuit with the three ants on top of it. The two more that are “on their way” are found a bit further up the page. Over the next two pages, the margin pictures portray the increasing number of ants in correspondence with the text: “There were seven ants on the jelly biscuit now,” followed by “[t]welve ants were on the biscuit, and three were on the way,” and finally, “[t]here were nineteen ants around the jelly biscuit” (7-8). This series of pictures not only encourages a close interaction with the margin illustrations—provoking the reader to count the ants on top of the biscuit and further away along the margins to see if they match up with the number in the story—it also encourages a flipping back and forth

between these pictures in order to see how the ants increase and how the jelly biscuit increasingly disappears under the crowd of tiny ant bodies.

In the middle of the series of ant illustrations, there is a separate margin picture—a drawn and labeled portrait of Alice Roosevelt—which provokes yet another kind of movement. Alice Roosevelt appears in the margin because Samantha® thinks that “someone like Alice Roosevelt, the President’s daughter” would be a good girlfriend for her Uncle Gard because she “did the most exciting things, and the newspapers were always talking about her” (7). There are no other mentions of Alice Roosevelt in the Samantha® series, but the drawing of her in the margin, with wild hair piled on top of her head and confident, smug expression, along with Samantha’s® identification of her as the President’s daughter and the assertion that she did “the most exciting things,” seems to encourage the reader to find out more, perhaps even to perform her own independent research. Close inspections, referring back and forth between picture and text as well as between picture and picture, outside research—these movements are all promoted by AG’s margin illustrations. Certainly these movements and interactions, when provoked by illustrations of catalogue available objects, can and probably do often function to channel the reader from book to catalogue. But when the pictures represent non-catalogue items, the movements and interactions must necessarily lead somewhere else. Especially when the illustrations represent, appear during, or otherwise recall uncomfortable moments in the stories, particularly moments when Berlant’s “crisis of knowledge” occurs. The interactions encouraged by these particular margin illustrations can potentially re-fragment and revise the notions that AG seeks to keep intact.

For instance, I described in Chapter 1 how Samantha's® uncritical love of the sewing kit with "forty different colored threads" that she receives for Christmas demonstrates her absolute forgetting of Nellie's™ horrible experiences in the thread factory, (where children could literally be broken in order to keep thread prices cheap) and proves AG's commitment to using the American Girl® protagonist's forgetfulness and love of pretty objects as a way to repair and restore the national narrative and American girlhood. However, the margin illustrations that accompany both scenes (Nellie's™ initial story about her experiences in the thread factory and the scene in which Samantha® receives her sewing box for Christmas) could complicate AG's attempt at this smooth restoration. When Nellie™ tells Samantha® about her experiences in the factory, there is a margin illustration underneath Nellie's™ line, "[t]hat's why thread is so cheap," and the description of Samantha's® shock, "[s]he couldn't move. She felt numb and cold." The small picture shows a pretty thread display case, with neat rows of colored spools and a sign that reads "Thread 2 cents" (48). The picture, drawn with the usual amount of detail, is nevertheless very unusual because in this instance the pretty, delicate details, and the close inspection they invite, do not encourage the girl reader to order this item out of the catalogue (it is unavailable there anyway), but rather provoke criticism of its mode production, and perhaps even rouse questions about the way her own things, and the things around her, are produced.

The margin picture that accompanies the Christmas scene shows the sewing kit that Samantha® "loves," complete with a very tiny compartment full of spools of colored threads arranged in rows similar to the "Thread 2 cents" margin picture (*Samantha's*

*Surprise 55*). Because the margin illustrations invite close inspection and encourage movements back and forth between similar pictures, the sewing kit with its compartment full of threads, though it provokes no memory in Samantha®, might trigger the reader's memory, causing her to flip back and recall the first and very unloving depiction of thread and its production. And so even though the narrative does its best to sew up the rips in the story of American progress by viewing this progress through the eyes of the forgetful and uncritical American Girl® citizen, the eyes of the girl reader still have opportunities to catch the instances of fragmentation. And not only catch them but, most importantly, recall or return to them at the very moment that the American Girl®, and seemingly the narrative itself, prove their forgetfulness. The margin illustrations have the potential to instigate this kind of recollection in the reader, which, if successful, would undo the blithe restoration of the national narrative caused by Samantha's® forgetting and reproduce, by way of a Christmas gift, the shock and fragmentation caused by the image of a thread winding machine ripping half of a little girl's hair out.

By practicing the back and forth movements instigated by narrative elements such as the margin illustrations, the reader of AG can bring different scenes of the stories together in new ways that, instead of capturing her in the eternal progressions AG's essentialized American girlhood, allows her to (re)capture the initial shock produced by the fragmentation of once coherent notions about American progress and American girlhood. And if the shock of fragmentation is indeed what is captured and preserved by the reader of AG, she bypasses AG's attempts to capture her in a history that seeks to essentialize her and essentialize history through her, and instead performs Benjamin's explosive interaction with history: "seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a

moment of danger” and thus “blasting open the continuum of history,” and of girlhood, too (“Theses” 255, 261).

Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” challenges the understanding of history as an “eternal” and linear progression of past, present, and future, because this view of history relies on the “oppression” of the past: the forgetting of the victims of progress, the “debris,” the broken fingers, pulled out hair, the bleeding scalps of children (262, 258). And as Adam Lowenstein, reading Benjamin, says, all of this “debris” “languish[es] unrecognized” unless somehow brought forth into the present (14). The only way to bring forth the “oppressed past” (263) into the present is by “blast[ing] open the continuum of history,” which can only be achieved when there is a moment of “shock” (262) in which a memory, something from the “oppressed past,” “flashes up at a moment of danger” and is “seized” and held onto (255).

In Benjamin’s criticisms of the view of history as “eternal,” progressive, and linear, we can see the American history that AG attempts so painstakingly to create through the uncritical and forgetful gaze of the essential American Girl® character. And in the notion that a moment of shock can recall a suppressed memory from the past that can be seized in order to recover what has been forgotten, we can see the potential interaction with history that a girl reader of AG can have. Each moment in AG that recalls, however fleetingly and however unintentionally, a shock from the “oppressed past” is a “moment of danger”—a moment at once filled with the potential to break apart AG’s restrictive visions of history and the girl’s place within it, but also, as Lowenstein puts it, a moment “vulnerable to appropriation by those who wish to manipulate history to oppressive ends” (14). AG seeks to appropriate all moments that fracture the

coherency of the national narrative by folding them into an idea of progression that views history through a celebratory and uncritical notion of girlhood. The fracturing memory that “flashes up” can then very easily be dimmed, especially when followed by the introduction of a new object that flashes even brighter. (The “glittering” silver servant’s bell in Samantha’s® dining room, for instance, certainly flashes brighter to Samantha® than any memory of her servant friend Nellie’s™ hardships.) But no matter how much AG seeks to appropriate these moments and these memories, there is always the potential for a girl reader to capture and wrest them away.

It is not only the margin illustrations that can provoke a flash of memory, a seizing of that memory, and an exploding of “the continuum” of AG’s American history. As Lowenstein writes: the past can “erupt in the present” without warning, some place “where we least expect it,” in the “flicker” of an image or “in a disorienting turn of phrase” (15). The final example I will examine of a “moment of danger” in AG comes from the Addy® series and depends upon a tiny but crucial “disorienting turn of phrase” and the potential memories it might cause to “flash up” and be “seized” by the reader. This final example perhaps even contains heightened possibilities for experiencing AG’s history in alternative ways due to its subject matter. Addy®, a runaway slave from 1864 turned American Girl® in 1993, is at the center of the AG series that works with one of the most contested periods of American history. Also, given Addy’s® position as a slave at the beginning of her series, the shocking experiences often happen directly to her instead of to a friend (as in the Samantha® series). For these reasons the potential for readers to read against the reductively restorative movements of the AG narratives, recall the

shock of fragmentation and thereby “blast open the continuum” of history and girlhood, are even greater.

Ostensibly, Addy’s® addition to the AG collection in 1993 (she is the first non-white American Girl® character) reflects the growing influence of multiculturalism on representations of American history, and the increasing attention paid to the more shameful aspects of the American past. The Addy® series also, however, continues to demonstrate AG’s commitment to portraying a unified national narrative by rendering history, even (and especially) history marked by incredible trauma, through the optimistically unifying eyes of the American Girl®. As critics have noted, however, AG’s attempt to smooth out the fragments of history by looking through the lens of girlhood proves to be the most difficult in Addy’s® case:

It seems far-fetched to suggest that Addy’s real milestones are the normal ones: is the story of her nascent citizenship really served by the six-book series? In the end the horrors of her beginning give way to ‘Church Fair Fun’ (an accessory pack consisting of a puppet show and a slide whistle, \$22) and ‘Addy’s Party Treats’... Thus even slavery becomes a marketable condition, when it leads to the accumulation of the appropriate accessories. (Kowalski-Wallace 156)

It does indeed seem far-fetched that AG can mold the traumas of slavery into a manageable and marketable “girl-sized view.” And although the series tries, the very moment the “horrors” of Addy’s® experiences in slavery “give way” to the accessories that make her an American Girl® (essentially no different from all other American girls) is the “moment of danger” that we need to examine closely. For, it is the moment of potential appropriation into essential categories of history and girlhood, but also of the potential exploding of these categories.

True to AG form, *Meet Addy*, the first book in the Addy® series, does its best to view difficult historical circumstances in terms of girlhood so that the progression of the

national narrative might be fully restored if the healthy progression of the girl is restored. In the first scene, Addy® lies awake in the slave's cabin, listening to her parents whispering about possible escape. Her mother wants to wait, believing that once the war is over, "we all gonna be free" (Porter 8). Her father, however, is "firm" about the immediacy of escape, and his reasons revolve around the disappearance of Addy's® girlhood:

I hurt when I see Addy toting heavy water buckets to the fields...bent over like a old woman. [Her brother, Sam] already fifteen, but she a little girl...She go out in the morning, her eyes all bright and shining with hope. By night she come stumbling in here so tired, she can hardly eat. [Her sister, Esther] still a little baby, but Addy getting beat down every day. I can't stand back and watch it no more." (8)

Addy's® father's description of his breaking point when it comes to slavery suggests that slavery is intolerable because it denies the progression of Addy's® girlhood. Sam is an adolescent and Esther is a baby—categories that are apparently (perhaps because AG claims no essential American teen or American baby) not as in need of protection and preservation away from the system of slavery. But slavery messes with Addy's® ability to progress through an essential American girlhood—hunching her over like an old woman, making her stumble, beating her down—and this is what cannot stand.

This "girl-sized" or girl-centric view of slavery recalls the description of American progress in the Samantha® series, which is only bad if it disrupts the healthy progression of children and so, in the end, good because Nellie™, the former child victim of progress, is progressing just fine. Similarly, by thus evaluating slavery through the terms of girlhood, AG seeks to absolve the horrors of slavery, and absorb the fragmented pieces of the national narrative, by granting Addy® American Girl® status, i.e. by absorbing her into the American Girls® Collection. As *Meet Addy* charts Addy's®

escape from slavery to the attainment of American Girl® status (complete with all the accessories), it will be useful to follow the progression of the narrative in order to see how (and through what objects) AG seeks to make this transition seamless, and contrarily, how the seams might be twisted and ripped open.

Addy's® experiences of slavery as well as her dreams of freedom continue to be marked by her “girl-sized” views of both. As a child slave, one of Addy's® main tasks is to worm the tobacco plants: “carefully pulling green, wiggling worms from the leaves. The worms were as fat as her fingers” (10). Accompanying this description is a margin illustration of a tobacco plant with three tiny, wiggling worms visible on the leaves. Addy® understandably “trie[s] not to think about [the worms]” while performing the task, and instead “dream[s] about the kind of freedom Momma and Poppa had talked about the night before—the kind slaves ran away for” (10). Her first dream about freedom is “learning to read and write,” followed closely by “wearing fancy dresses with lace, nothing like the rough cotton shift she always wore now.” Next she imagines her Poppa getting paid to work and thus having enough money to buy food so that “they would never be hungry,” and also, again, to “buy cloth for her fancy dresses” (10-11). Addy's® dreams of freedom are made largely of fancy dresses, evoked by Addy® to distract herself from the “wiggling worms” she has to pull from the leaves.

The juxtaposition of dresses and worms in this scene—or more precisely, the use of fancy dresses to distract from having to touch the wiggling worms—is significant here, because if fancy dresses largely mark Addy's® notions of freedom, the wiggling worms certainly mark her experiences with slavery. *Meet Addy* does represent slave punishments such as whipping and shackling (her brother and her father both suffer

these punishments, Addy® herself gets a lash while trying to protect her father, and there are also margin pictures of a whip and ankle shackles). Still, Addy's® formative experience with slavery, the one that provides the greatest shock to AG's celebratory, affirmative world, depends upon tobacco worms. The scene begins with another margin illustration of a tobacco plant, this one a close-up drawing of a worm on a leaf. Addy® is once again de-worming tobacco plants, but she is distracted by thoughts of her father and brother who had been sold to another plantation a week before. Because of her worries, she does not check the leaves carefully enough. The overseer catches her carelessness and punishes her:

Holding her wrists in one of his large hands, he opened his other hand. Addy saw what he held—live worms. Worms that Addy had missed. The overseer forced open her mouth and stuffed the still-twisting and wiggling worms inside...Addy gagged as the worms' juicy bodies burst in her mouth."  
(23)

The scene is shocking, sensory, and surprisingly sexual—the “wiggling” of the worms is once again evoked, as well as their “juicy bodies” rupturing in her mouth. The close-up image of the thick, curling tobacco worm in the margins enhances the visualization of the scene. Also, because this horrific incident happens to the main character, it is different from the dark moments of the Samantha® series, which portray Samantha® listening and then reacting to Nellie's™ stories about her traumatic experiences. By channeling the dark moments through Samantha's® reactions to them (she is shocked, numbed, and silenced at first, but then on the move again, ready to fix things) AG seeks to immediately guide reader reactions, though of course this guidance does not always necessarily work. But in this scene, there is no outside American Girl® reaction or interpretation to demonstrate to the reader any way of feeling about the ugly and humiliating incident. The scene ends with Addy® silently “crumpl[ing] to the ground”

(24). The lack of immediate response, apart from a defeated and disquieting crumple, would seem to cause the reader's experience with the image, feel, and taste of the wiggling worms to be all the more independent, and all the more heightened.

And even though sex has absolutely no place within the official world of AG, it is hard not to feel the undercurrents of rape in this scene—the phallic worms, the forcing open, the stuffing, the crumpling to the ground. Even if the child reader does not have a clear conception of the sexual aspects of this scene nor a knowledge about the frequency with which young slave girls suffered rape by masters, overseers, and others in power over them, the scene simulates the violation, humiliation, and disgust connected to these actions (holding, forcing, and stuffing) and these things (twisting, wiggling, bursting worms). And, again, the lack of interpretation offered in this scene, the absence of the restorative American Girl®-sized view, would only work to increase the reader's unsettling experience of this incident by offering no solution to the uncertainty, shock, and shame.

The experience obviously has a traumatic effect on Addy®, and when she does react to it in the next scene, she expresses feelings very rare for an American Girl®: “I hate them, Momma. I hate white people” (24). “Love” is certainly a common feeling expressed by American Girls®—they love their families, their friends and, of course, their things. But “hate” is very rare, and so its expression by an American Girl® is disruptive, fracturing, and quite shocking, just like the traumatic incident that provoked it. Addy's® mother quickly starts working to divert Addy's® dangerous, fracturing energy into love: “Honey, if you fill our heart with hate, there ain't gonna be no room for love. Your brother and Poppa need us to fill our hearts with love for them, not hate for white

people” (25). In order for Addy® to love her family, like all American Girls® do, she must purge her heart of hate for white people. Furthermore, Addy’s® mother concedes that while it was “wrong” for their master to sell her father and brother, “people can do wrong for such a long time, they don’t even know it’s wrong no more.” What is “worse” than this kind of endorsed, entrenched wrongness is “when people hurt each other and don’t even care they hurting them. Like that overseer. He a mean man. That’s what hate do to people. I don’t want you to ever be that kind of person” (25). Once again AG reframes systematic injustices as acts of feeling, and also presents feeling as a corrective to systematic injustices. So as Addy’s® traumatic experiences in slavery are caused by the actions of a “mean man,” the traumas can be erased or appropriated, and Addy® can attain true American Girl® status, by the actions, in this case, of a nice woman.

This nice woman is Miss Caroline, who provides runaway slaves with a safe house, food, clothing, and passage to Philadelphia. It is Miss Caroline who officially enables Addy’s® entrance into American Girlhood through the home and things she provides. Addy’s® night in Miss Caroline’s “small, warm home” reads as her transitional period from slavery to American Girlhood: Addy® and her mother take “long, hot baths” in which the “dirt from their journey melted off them in the warm water,” and they sleep on a “real mattress” for the first time, upon which “Addy tried to stay awake so she could think about how good it felt to be clean and safe, but she was too tired. She fell asleep in Momma’s arms” (58). Addy®, clean and safe, the material and emotional dirt from her arduous journey washed away in the bathtub, asleep in her mother’s arms, is ready to wake up an American Girl®.

And in the morning, the transition is completed. Miss Caroline gives Addy® a pink dress, “prettier than any she had imagined when she dreamed about freedom (58-59). This dress not only fulfills Addy’s® previous ideas about freedom, but also specifically signals her identity as an American Girl®. The pink dress is the Addy® character’s ‘original’ outfit, i.e. the dress the Addy® doll arrives in as well as the one she is wearing on the cover of *Meet Addy*. As such, Addy’s® ‘original,’ pretty pink dress overshadows her earlier, uglier outfits—the “rough cotton shift” that marked her status as a slave as well as the boy’s clothes that marked her status as a runaway, for instance. These outfits do not mark her moment of origin as an American Girl®, and as they are not found anywhere in the catalogue, they do not even mark important “milestones” in her progression through girlhood.

However, although it is employed to signal Addy’s® origin as an American Girl® and therefore erase the pain of experiences that came before, Addy’s® pink dress contains unmistakable flashes of the painful past in its very design: “Addy loved her dress with its wiggly white stripes and white buttons running down the front. It was prettier than any she had imagined when she dreamed about freedom” (58-59). The description directly recalls the earlier scene in which Addy® imagines the fancy dresses that freedom would bring, images she conjures up in order to distract herself from thinking about the “wiggling worms” she had to pull from the tobacco leaves. And then there is that evocative phrase—the dress’s “wiggly white stripes”—that causes the “wiggling worms” Addy® was forced to burst open in her mouth to burst up into the very scene which seeks to erase them. There are multiple opportunities for the reader to grasp onto the memory of the “wiggling worms” as it “flashes up” in the dress: they

could seize upon it here as Addy® receives the dress with the “wiggly white stripes” in the book, and again as they look at the front cover image of Addy® in the dress, and again as they see catalogue images of Addy® in the dress, or receive the Addy® doll, wearing the dress. In any of these instances in which the dress’s depiction of Addy® as an American Girl®, growing up in essentially the same way as all American girls, collides with a remembrance of the worm-eating scene, the girl reader might challenge AG’s foundational theory about girlhood that seeks to equate Addy’s® experiences with her own.

In many ways, Addy’s® American Girl® dress can be understood as a symbol of the AG world, with all of its restrictions and opportunities, all of its moments of danger. Addy’s® experiences of slavery, so associated with “wiggling worms,” and her dreams of freedom, so associated with fancy dresses, combine in the dress that marks her as an American Girl®. The dress, in other words, can be viewed as “a configuration pregnant with tensions” (Benjamin, “Theses” 262), containing AG’s restrictive mission to erase all of the fracturing moments that came before its appearance and essentialize history and girlhood. But also, at the same time, containing the potential materials necessary to re-fragment these narratives, flashing up memories that could be captured by the very girls AG is designed to capture. The dress exists as a thing that is “charge[d]...with a potential future...where the oppressed past no longer languishes unrecognized” (Lowenstein 14). Addy’s® dress, and other things in the AG world—spools of thread, a servant’s bell, etc.—are charged with the potential to overturn AG’s restrictive notions about American history, American girls, and what girls do in and with history. And the

release of this charged potential depends upon the child reader's recognition and use of it.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION: CONSERVATIVE CHILDREN'S TEXTS AND RADICAL POTENTIAL

Recent scholarly attention to the radical and transformative potential of children's literature,<sup>9</sup> which challenges (not by overturning but by forcing open) the view of children's literature as a socially conservative genre, have provided new ways of reading, and new implications for reading, children's texts. Also, attention to the ways in which children's texts have been and are being used to promote various political and social ideologies, conservative or radical, continues to further inquiries into the social and political implications of children's texts. Studying the conservative as well as the radical potential of children's literature not only provides crucial examinations into the materials that seek to position young people within the social and political sphere, but also necessarily speaks to larger questions about the 'nature' and possibilities of children's literature.

Michelle Ann Abate's *Raising Your Kids Right: Children's Literature and American Political Conservatism* (2010) and Kimberley Reynolds' *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007) are two recent studies that, by addressing the social and political uses and potential of children's texts, also examine the conservative versus radical possibilities of children's literature. Abate begins her study by citing the "powerful conservative thread," the "long history of didactic education, socialization, and acculturation," that has continuously run through children's literature (6). She then focuses in on the specific tension this thread takes in the "growing new subgenre" of politically and socially conservative American children's

---

<sup>9</sup> For instance: Mickenberg, Julia L. *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, and Mickenberg, Julia L, and Philip Nel., eds. *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

texts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which aggressively push the agendas of the conservative movement while enjoying mainstream commercial success (27). Reynolds, on the other hand, examines how texts written for children can often be “replete with radical potential,” can “contribut[e] to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by, for instance, encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change” (1). Reynolds argues that despite the conservative impulses of many children’s texts past and present, children’s literature does “provid[e] a space in which writers, illustrators, printers, and publishers have piloted ideas...played with conventions, and contested thinking about cultural norms,” or “offer[ed] quirky or critical or alternative visions of the world” meant to inspire questioning, challenging, and change (3).

Obviously, Abate and Reynolds work with very different archives, but both of their studies focus on texts that, regardless of their messages, are founded upon the “symbolic potential of childhood”—the idea of the child as potential, the child as possible future, in which interpretations, meanings, ways of reading, thinking, and seeing are not yet fully formed or foreseeable (Reynolds 2). Abate suggests that the child’s symbolic potential has become all the more intensified in America as “the ideological division” between the political left and the political right has “become increasingly more polarized” and “exponentially more entrenched.” Both sides, Abate argues, are turning to children as “a potentially more impressionable audience,” an audience whose views are refreshingly (though, of course, dangerously, too) open and un-entrenched (24). Abate argues that the increased political attention paid to children in recent years, in the form of books or other materials, gives an “added agency to a youth demographic that has

historically been seen as lacking in power,” while it also, quoting William James Murray, “simultaneously participate[s] in a growing phenomenon in the United States by which ‘children and childhood have become pawns in an ideological war’” (24). These competing possibilities, the child as social agent and the child as social pawn, depend upon the same contrary energies that make the child’s imagination always potentially productive and always potentially dangerous, always charged with a possible, transformative future and always “vulnerable to appropriation” or capture by any number of entrenched ideologies (Lowenstein 14).

Though Reynolds and Abate focus on opposing ideological impulses within the field of children’s literature, both acknowledge the genre’s simultaneous inclusion of the other. As Reynolds argues, children’s literature is a “paradoxical cultural space: a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked, orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive” (3). Abate, reading this passage from Reynolds, agrees that “the acculturating impulse and radical potential exist as ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ in children’s and adolescent literature” (9). Viewing children’s literature as a “paradoxical cultural space,” containing both conservative impulses *and* radical potential, is certainly valuable for the greater understanding of the wide and varying field of children’s literature. Further, however, I think this “both/and” view can be of value when applied to individual texts, or a connected series of texts, such as the American Girl® series. The texts of AG produce the “paradoxical cultural space” of children’s literature within themselves, as they at once spout orthodox, acculturating messages and contain the materials (however hidden and overlooked) for subversion and resistance. AG uses lovely things, scary things, and the American Girl® protagonist’s

uncritical “girl-sized view” to essentialize American girlhood and American history, but the very moments and the very things that AG uses to capture the girl reader within its essentializing “girl-sized view,” are the same moments and the same things that the girl reader could potentially seize in order to capture a fracturing, liberating, alternative girl-sized view of her own. The conservative world of AG, in other words, is “highly regulated” but contains cracks and corners that, if looked into, could overturn the whole essentializing enterprise. In this way, conservative children’s texts like the AG series, containing as they do strong conservative impulses but also reader-based radical potential, provide a unique location of instances, encapsulate countless “moments of danger,” in which memories and histories briefly “flash up,” for the seizing or for the passing by.

Finally, we will return briefly to Pleasant T. Rowland’s back cover catalogue vignette, in which she imagines, coming to life out of an old doll trunk filled with accessories, a nostalgic image of a “long-ago childhood.” This image, rising out of the old doll trunk, Rowland appropriates for AG’s purposes: to capture girl readers within sequential, essential visions of girlhood and American history. We are recalling Rowland’s doll trunk in order to superimpose onto it a toy chest imagined by Walter Benjamin: “If, though, a modern poet maintains that there exists for each individual an image around which the entire world appears to founder...for how many does that image not rise out of an old toy chest?”<sup>10</sup> (qtd. in Kapur 73). Open Benjamin’s toy chest and find “utopian visions of alternative futures” (Kapur 82), objects that, in a child’s hands, can topple the whole world and build a new one. Open Rowland’s doll trunk and

---

<sup>10</sup> From “Spielzeug und Spielen” (1928).

find objects that, instead of causing the world to founder, steady it by fabricating a line (made of doll accessories) that connects long-ago childhoods to today's to tomorrow's. Steadying and collapsing, once again it is the story of contrary tensions and impulses found within and rising out of the symbolic space of childhood. The point of fusing Benjamin's toy chest and Rowland's doll trunk is to end with one image that speaks to the "paradoxical" space, the "both/and" of children's literature and of specific children's texts. From this one chest will arise stability and collapse, sequentiality and fragmentation, forgetting and recalling, servant's bells and bloody aprons, sewing kits and thread, pink dresses and wiggling worms.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Abate, Michelle Ann. *Raising Your Kids Right: Children's Literature and American Political Conservatism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2010.
- Adler, Susan S. *Meet Samantha*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1986.
- . *Samantha Learns a Lesson*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1986.
- American Girl 1990 Holiday Catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1990.
- "American Girl characters." AmericanGirl.com. 20 Nov 2010  
<<http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=10>>.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Old Forgotten Children's Books." *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996. 406-413.
- . "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 253-264.
- . "The World of Children's Books." *Selected Writings*. Vol. 1. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996. 435-440.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.
- Brothers, Ellen L. "Welcome to the world of American Girl." *American Girl September 2010 Catalogue*. Middleton, WI: American Girl, 2010.
- Buckingham, David. *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the age of Electronic Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000.
- Doderer, Klaus. "Walter Benjamin and Children's Literature." *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Gerhard Fischer. Oxford, UK: Berg, 1996. 169-175.
- Fischer, Gerhard. "Benjamin's Utopia of Education as Theatrum Mundi et Vitae: On the Programme of a Proletarian Children's Theatre." *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Gerhard Fischer. Oxford, UK: Berg, 1996. 201-217.
- Hade, Daniel. "Lies My Children's Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in 'The American Girls' Books." *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. New York: Garland, 1999. 153-164.

- Inness, Sherrie. "Anti-Barbies': The American Girls Collection and Political Ideologies." *Delinquent and Debutantes*. Ed. Sherrie Inness. New York: New York UP, 1998. 164-183.
- Kapur, Jyotsna. *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing, and the Transformation of Childhood*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Kowalski-Wallace, Elizabeth. *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005.
- Miscek, Jennifer M. "Meet Ivy and Bean, Queerly the Anti-American Girls." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 34.2 (2009): 157-170.
- "Nancy Hanks Doll: An Historic American Girl." *Wisconsinhistory.org*. 6 Nov 2010 <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/museum/artifacts/archives/001948.asp>>.
- Nash, Gary B., Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn. *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997.
- Nielsen, Fred. "American History Through the Eyes of the American Girls." *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*. 25.1-2 (2002): 85-93.
- "Our Company." *AmericanGirl.com*. 20 Nov 2010 <<http://www.americangirl.com/corp/corporate.php?section=about&id=2>>.
- Porter, Connie. *Meet Addy*. Middleton, WI: American Girl, 1993.
- Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Rowland, Pleasant T. "A Celebration of Girlhood." *American Girls Collection Holiday Catalogue 1992*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1992: 58.
- Shaw, Janet. *Meet Kirsten*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1986.
- Schur, Maxine Rose. *Samantha's Surprise*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1990.
- Susina, Jan. "American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24.3 (Fall 1999): 128-35.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mariko Turk received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Writing from the University of Pittsburgh in 2007. She received a Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Florida in 2011, with a concentration in Children's Literature and Culture. She will continue her studies at the University of Florida in the doctoral program, where she hopes to further pursue her interests in Children's Literature, American Literature, and representations of history in books for young people.