23. American Girl Dolls

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Since their introduction in 1986, American Girl dolls have become a prominent marker of
American Childhood’s implications in American consumerism. Often critiqued for their high cost and the consumer culture produced by their wide range of accessories, American Girl has created a brand that simultaneously constructs the notion of American girlhood that it markets. The company's original and continued main focus on a line of historically-contextualized dolls that are accompanied by series of historical fiction books about each character, illustrate what Robin Bernstein has argued is a long-lived and close relationship between children’s literary and material culture. Through these stories, the American Girl characters become models of American girlhood, widely construed, as these characters push against and even break more common understandings of America’s national, temporal and geographic boundaries.

In this sense, American Girl is inclusive, encompassing characters who are hardly “American” in the conventional, national, sense – Kaya, the Nimíipuu/Nez Perce girl from an era before contact with white settler-colonists; Felicity, a colonist whose story starts before the founding of the American nation; Kirsten, a Swedish immigrant whose story begins before she reaches America; Addy, an enslaved African-American girl; Josefina, a girl from a part of Mexico that would only become American after the Mexican-American War. Through such characters, American Girl creates this vision of inclusive, multiculturalist, American girlhood, even as it creates products that are accessible only to girls of relative wealth and problematically relegates the majority of its (relatively few) nonwhite characters to a past before the turn of the twentieth century. It also creates a model of Americanness that is inherently expansionist in its ability to make these historically set characters “American Girls” retroactively, based on later notions of inclusion, citizenship, and the geographical bounds of the American nation.

American Girl, in addition to making a product that works to construct the notion of “girlhood” along intersections of gender, race, class, and history, also produces a metacommentary on dolls and their historical associations with notions of girlhood in America. The historical character dolls have dolls of their own, which reflect their specific historical and cultural contexts. The wealthy Samantha has a porcelain doll, with a pink lace dress; Kaya, the American Girl belonging to the Nimíipuu or Nez Perce tribe, has a doll that comes with a cradleboard; Addy, a formerly-enslaved girl, has a doll with a dark-fabric skin and short, black yarn hair; Cécile, a free *gen de couleur* from mid-nineteenth century New Orleans, has a set of paper dolls made in the image of Jenny Lind, a famous actress of the era. These dolls’ dolls further inscribe doll ownership and play onto practices of American girlhood by making this practice a part of the stories whose characters are then translated into the dolls with which their customers will play.