

## Which Vitamins are in the Chocolate Cake? How American Girl Marketing Has Responded to Shifting Discourses About Gender and Race

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**ABSTRACT:** Pleasant Rowland, who founded the American Girl historical doll, accessory, and book collection in the mid-1980s, claimed that her dolls were like “chocolate cake with vitamins,” enjoyable, but also educational. Although history has always played a part in the American Girl brand, its role has fluctuated over time in concert with changing social discourses about gender and race in American culture. This essay explores how the brand has engaged with these shifting discourses over the last thirty years as it determines how to invite children and their parents to encounter the brand’s retelling of the past. How have the “vitamins” that Rowland imagined for her consumers changed over time as the seventeen historical characters have been created, rebranded, and marketed in contemporary America?

**KEY WORDS:** dolls, American Girl, gender, race, marketing

Pleasant Rowland, who founded the American Girl doll, accessory, and book collection in the mid-1980s, claimed that her dolls were like “chocolate cake with vitamins,” enjoyable, but also educational. She gave her company an eponymous name, Pleasant Company, and set out to “make the stories of the past come alive”<sup>1</sup> through three characters: Kirsten, a recent immigrant from Sweden living in Minnesota in 1854; Samantha, a wealthy orphan living with her grandmother in 1904; and Molly, whose mother has gone to work while her father is away at war during World War II. Each story accompanied a doll whose extended collection included historical reproductions of the period’s clothing, furniture, and other accessories. Over the next thirty years, another fourteen historical dolls would follow, along with contemporary dolls, baby dolls, and advice books, first under the watchful eye of Rowland and later via acquisition by Mattel.

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<sup>1</sup> Pleasant Company, *The American Girls Collection Catalog* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1989).

and race in American culture. This essay explores how American Girl has continuously shifted its messaging about the importance of history as it determines how to invite children and their parents to encounter the brand's retelling of the past. How have the "vitamins" that Rowland imagined for her consumers changed over time as the seventeen historical characters have been created, rebranded, and marketed in contemporary America?

To study the trends in how the American Girl framed the significance of history to consumers, I analyze American Girl product development, narrative development, and catalogue advertising (the main source of American Girl promotion) from 1986 to 2016, along with interviews with the brand's most published writer and a senior brand public relations associate. I have identified four overlapping specific time periods as significant moments of change in the brand's approach to communicating with consumers about the "vitamins" that history offered to girl consumers. The first four dolls, launched between the company's founding in 1986 and 1993, were all white and Protestant, and the brand's marketing focused on using an imagined past as an antidote to a present that sexualized girls and introduced them to other adult themes at a young age. The brand worked to fuse feminism with neotraditionalism as it sold the fantasy of sanitized, relatively safe eras of yore with stories of girls who sought and fought to participate in public life and social change.

Second, beginning in 1993, when the brand produced its first African American doll, to 2002, when the brand's only Native American doll was released, the brand promoted the history of America as one imbued with multicultural narratives. The brand faced the challenge of how to balance the mission of selling dolls with the truth of an American history bound by racism and settler colonialism. American Girl actively engaged with the question of which histories would be included and excluded from their collections as they explored how to maintain the brand image of universal American girlhood alongside stories that demonstrated the diversity of American girlhood. As a result of their discomfort with both a simple celebration of the past and an exclusive focus on the systemic racism woven into the history of the nation, the histories of racism and the experiences of girls of color in the American Girl historical collection were told in an uneven manner; brand marketing, narrative development, and product development lacked a consistent message about racism and its impact on communities of color throughout American history. African American history, told through Addy, who escaped slavery and faced racism as a free girl in Philadelphia, was portrayed as one of struggle and overcoming racism. On the other hand, Kaya, a Native American whose story took place in 1764 before her tribe encountered European settlers, and Josefina, whose story took place in 1824, just as the Santa Fe trail was opening, on land that would later become New Mexico, both have narratives that are set before Manifest Destiny was officially proclaimed and are portrayed as living in rich cultures free from the harm of racism and white supremacy.

Third, in an overlapping arc lasting from 1993 through 2007, the brand used girl power messaging in its marketing, adopting a feminist rhetoric and adding

feminist-inspired storylines and accessories, which suggested to consumers that engaging with the history of strong, sassy girls would be an investment in girls' futures. At the same time, the brand began to increase the number of doll and girl accessories related to beauty, thereby promoting normative femininity and beauty culture in its character development and catalog ad copy. As American Girl began to draw on the feminist histories of Title IX for its 1970s era doll, and to include feminist-inspired accessories, it also began to re-position girls in front of a mirror where they were asked to participate in the labor of self-surveillance and makeover culture.

Lastly, from 2009 through 2016, due to frequent changes with American Girl and Mattel leadership, there was no coherent approach to using history as a selling point for the dolls. In 2014, American Girl rebranded its historical line in pastels and candy tones and severely abridged its collection of historical accessories. Perhaps tapping into the growing youth interest in voting and political organizing in the Obama era, the rebranded line, known as the BeForever collection, positioned its characters as politically active agents of social change. However, the company's new line of beauty and feminine care accessories elevated traditional notions of normative feminine play over the company's previous investment in historical reenactment. Unpacking these varied approaches to marketing girls' history provides a framework that illuminates how American Girl audiences have engaged with public history through the brand's dolls, narratives, and promotional materials.

#### Research on American Girl Dolls

Over the past two and a half decades scholars have analyzed and critiqued the histories told by American Girl. The historiography of American Girl has focused on two core questions: Whose American stories get told? And, what ideologies are communicated in the selection and construction of these histories? In particular, scholars have studied how the brand's stories of racial and ethnic discrimination and white supremacy have often erased histories of colonialism, expansionism, and racial injustice to make the books palatable to a mass consumer readership of girls.<sup>2</sup> Literary scholar Patricia Marina Trujillo identifies this process as "literary gentrification," suggesting that the American Girl stories of the oppressed are mostly sold to and digested by well-to-do white Americans who profit from the cultural capital of the other.<sup>3</sup> Historian Marcia Chatelain, while praising the historical accuracy of the American Girl narratives, identifies the problematic trope of the

2 Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Elli Lester Roushazamir, "Everything We Do is Celebration of You! Pleasant Company Constructs American Girlhood," *The Communication Review* 6, no. 1 (2003): 45–69; Veronica Medina, "Theorizing American Girl" (MA Thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2007); Patricia Marina Trujillo, "Imagineering a New Mexican American Girl: Josefina Montoya (1824)," in *Voices of Resistance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Chican@ Children's Literature*, ed. Laura Alamillo, Larissa M. Mercado-López, and Cristina Herrera (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 17–31; Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

3 Trujillo, "Imagineering a New Mexican American Girl," 2017, 19.

plucky, individual heroine whose happy disposition is meant to combat adversity and, in some cases, systemic oppression.<sup>4</sup> Through a different lens, I have written about the production and reception of the American Girl histories as both profit-driven, safely told histories, packaged for the masses, and *also* as narratives, produced by politically progressive writers and creators, that are attractive to audiences who seek to challenge histories that privilege masculinity and whiteness.<sup>5</sup> This article offers a new perspective by examining how the brand's presentation of history has evolved over time. Although previous studies have explored the American girl books and dolls, as well as girls' experiences with American Girl, none have used analyses of catalogues, marketing materials, and oral histories to understand how the American Girl brand marketing has responded to shifting sociopolitical discourse about gender and race in American society.

#### Family Values and Selling the Past (1986–1993)

When Rowland initially sold the concept of historical dolls to consumers, she was mindful of the increasingly conservative social and political climate in which parents purchased children's playthings. In response to the social change movements of the previous decades, including feminism and the sexual revolution, the United States experienced a moral panic amongst social conservatives who feared the destruction of traditional families and the loss of childhood innocence.<sup>6</sup> Building on conservative movements developing since at least the 1970s, Ronald Reagan ran for president in 1980, and again in 1984, on a "pro-family" platform.<sup>7</sup> Seeking the vote of the religious right who claimed to be the "moral majority," Reagan made the maintenance of the traditional nuclear family a cornerstone of his campaigns. In February 1986, the same year that the American Girl brand launched, Reagan's administration released a report declaring that parents should be responsible for the values education of children who were coming of age at a "cultural crossroads."<sup>8</sup> The council's report, "The Family: Preserving America's Future," argued that it was parents' responsibility to save their children from "the cultural relativism, the value-neutral approach of the '60s."<sup>9</sup> Although both parents were responsible for this morality education, and the report praised working women as "nothing short of heroic," it also engaged in antifeminist rhetoric, positing, for

4 Marcia Chatelain, "American Historian, Meet American Girl," *Perspectives on History*, December 1, 2015.

5 Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*

6 See William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995).

7 Stacie Taranto, *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

8 United States Executive Office of the President, "The Family: Preserving America's Future. A Report of the Working Group on the Family" (Washington, DC: Domestic Policy Council, 1986), 27.

9 *Ibid.*

example, that the best parents are those for whom “caring for children is the most important career of all.”<sup>10</sup>

As is well-documented, Reagan was just one of the voices attributing social ills to working women; many politicians, religious leaders, and other social commentators accused mothers in the workforce of shirking their maternal responsibilities to protect, teach, and care for their children.<sup>11</sup> In an environment rife with panic over women’s changing social status, many feared that popular media would step in to fill the role of absentee parents.<sup>12</sup> Popular culture was portrayed as offering children a glimpse into the seedy adult world of sex, homosexuality, drugs, crime, and divorce before they were emotionally prepared to understand and process mature themes.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, deregulation of restrictions that limited the amount of commercial time during children’s broadcasting opened the floodgates for advertising directed at children, raising additional concerns about their vulnerability.<sup>14</sup>

The question posed by Connecticut Republican Nancy L. Johnson as she raised concerns about the increasing number of working mothers—“Who’s going to take care of the children?”—may have angered feminists, but it excited the toy companies who raised their hands to volunteer.<sup>15</sup> Toy manufactures, as an entity, had no ideological concern over mothers entering the workforce; their concern was how to sell consumer goods in a changing marketplace. Despite the fact that middle-class women’s lives had increasingly migrated out of the private sphere, advertisements for girls’ toys generally situated girls in the home, especially in front of a mirror, stove, or crib, carrying out conventionally feminine roles of food preparation, child care, and beauty work.<sup>16</sup> These toys were advertised as playthings that would teach girls how to be traditional women.

Pleasant Rowland, who had attended a women’s college as the second wave feminist movement was emerging, had a different approach.<sup>17</sup> As the culture wars over feminist social change and family values raged, Rowland’s earliest dolls were a perfect cocktail for the era, imbued with the safety of a seemingly conservative past while reflecting the changing role of women and girls throughout American history. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, amidst concerns about raising girls in an era that mainstreamed pro-sex, pro-pleasure messages, American Girl created

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Marie Winn, *Children without Childhood* (New York: Random House, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> See Colin Ackerman, “Public or Private Interest? The History and Impacts of Children’s Television Public Policy in the United States, 1934 to Present,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 285–304.

<sup>15</sup> R. K. Landers, “Juggling Motherhood and Jobs,” *Editorial Research Reports II*, July 25, 1986, 556, <https://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrrr1986072500>.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 128–29.

<sup>17</sup> Valerie Tripp (American Girl author), phone interview by author, February 1, 2017.

a brand story that celebrated the nostalgia for a less precarious time, the caricature of unencumbered, joyful girlhood, and a unified American people who, despite their differences, shared a common dream.

A Spring catalog from 1988 featuring a white girl with blonde hair who appears to be approximately ten years old offers an example of this approach. Wearing a light blue sleeveless denim dress with frills, she sits cross-legged, nestled against a delicately flowered pillow on a white porch swing, light peeking through the blurred green trees in the distance. The girl's head is tilted down, her light blonde hair in a loose bun, her eyes rest on the book, *Happy Birthday, Kirsten*, in her hands. In the crook of the girl's right arm is the Kirsten doll, her blonde-haired head also tilted so that her eyes rest on the book. This constructed image, of a white girl and her white doll, reading in a comfortable spot—a pastoral garden, a bedroom, a cozy chair by the fire—surrounded by light and floral patterns, was repeated on Pleasant Company catalog covers throughout the Reagan-Bush era and into the mid-nineties.<sup>18</sup> Although advertising tableaux often depict “an ideal modern life” to which one should aspire, American Girl used the imagery of an ideal past to respond to the social anxieties about the present and future.<sup>19</sup>

Inside the catalog, copy was generally written directly to girl consumers, promising them a connection to the collection's fictional girls of the past. On the back of each catalog's front cover, along with an introduction to the first three or four American Girls, the text assured, “You'll see that some things in their lives were very different from yours. But others—like families, friendships, and feelings—haven't changed at all. These are the important things that American girls will always share.” Girls were actively encouraged to enter this safe space by dressing their dolls in various outfits that were close facsimiles to fashions of their respective periods, dressing themselves in full sized matching historical replications of their dolls' dresses, putting their dolls to bed in historically accurate doll-sized furniture reproductions, and re-enacting school and home stories with accessories that matched those represented in the books' stories and illustrations. Although generally written to girls, the promise of shared values and experiences were also addressed directly to parents who had to be convinced that the doll was worth its near \$100 price tag.

In a 1993 catalog message introducing parents to *American Girl* magazine, Rowland directly addressed the project of using public history to stave off an untimely adolescence. Sharing the regret she felt about skipping the fifth grade and entering junior high school at age ten, Rowland remembered, “It was no longer safe to be me—to dress my dolls, put on plays with my friends, learn to crochet with my grandmother, or spend hours flung across my bed immersed in a book.” Instead, Rowland found that her “childhood came crashing to an abrupt end” because she

<sup>18</sup> The first girl of color holding a doll on a catalog cover may have been in 1993, with the introduction of Addy Walker.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 167.

was “surrounded by older girls who were absorbed in boyfriends, make-up, and other mysteries of pre-adolescence.” Rowland used this story to position her company’s products as the salve for the sexualized culture of the 1980s: “Now it seems that a whole generation of girls is being rushed headlong into adolescence. They are overwhelmed by media messages that glamorize ‘growing up’ at the expense of growing. . . . For this reason, I created the American Girls Collection. . . . A celebration of girlhood—yesterday and today,” she wrote. If girlhood seemed to be moving at lightning speed to adolescence, Rowland hoped to persuade consumers that playing with the constructed innocence of the past would slow it down.

Doll stories and accessories from this period were designed to support Rowland’s neotraditional messaging of a more secure American girlhood, but they also educated consumers about the common challenges women have always faced and the benefits of feminist social change, especially pertaining to education, political engagement, and household labor. The books demonstrate how girls’ lives had changed since the times represented in the books and how girls of any era pushed back against the gender norms their mothers tried to impose upon them.<sup>20</sup> Valerie Tripp, who has written over fifty books for American Girl’s historical collection, had been a longtime friend and colleague of Rowland’s when the latter hired her to write many of the brand’s early stories about the historical characters. Tripp used the past in her storytelling as a way to tell readers who are “full of promise and potential” what their lives would have been like had they lived in the past.<sup>21</sup> As a member of the first co-educated class of women at Yale, Tripp identifies as a feminist who seeks, in her writing, “to explode some of the stereotypes about women and women’s roles” in the periods about which she writes. She also hopes to show girl readers that choices matter—not only for themselves as individuals—but also in their impact on contemporary and future society.<sup>22</sup>

Safely ensconced in tales of birthday and Christmas celebrations, baking, sewing, weaving, and doll shopping are stories designed to use the past to celebrate progressive social change in women’s lives. In a story set in the turn of the twentieth century, Samantha’s aunt fights for women’s suffrage while Samantha herself expresses her political voice in a speaking contest by raising awareness of the dangerous conditions of child labor in factories. Felicity, who lives in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1774, loves to ride horses, enjoys playing outside, and also dreams of being an apprentice in her father’s shop, questions her mother’s acceptance of the social norms that limit girls and women and finds small opportunities to resist them. Kirsten and Molly both recognize the value of their mothers’ labor in and out of the home. Further, from its inception, American Girl indirectly addressed social class differences among girls through its books as well as its accessories.

<sup>20</sup> Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 77–81.

<sup>21</sup> Tripp interview, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the company was rightly mocked for selling the full collection—doll, clothing, and accessories—of a struggling Swedish immigrant and, later, a newly freed African American girl for nearly \$1,000, they can also be rightly praised for demonstrating the different experiences and feminine labor afforded to each girl by her class position.<sup>23</sup> The wealthier characters from the owning class, like Samantha and Felicity, were required to take lessons in etiquette while their paid and/or enslaved laborers cleaned up after them and prepared their meals; in contrast, characters on the middle to lower end of the socio-economic strata, like Molly and Kirsten, were required to participate in the upkeep of the home and family businesses.

Yet, these early stories failed to address the history of racial inequity in any significant way. For example, Kirsten befriends an Indigenous girl who is being forced to leave her land due to the ravage that Westward Expansion is causing, but the protagonist imagines her friend's journey to find a new home to be romantic and freeing.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the enslaved people that appear in Felicity's Virginia are background characters caring for her family who are not given fully developed character traits or even dialogue in most cases. Felicity talks of her love for her grandfather's plantation, describing its dazzling light and blue river, and explaining that "there were a great many things to do [on the plantation], all of them pleasant, and there was never any hurry about getting them done" without ever thinking about or remarking on the experiences of the enslaved people who labor there.<sup>25</sup> Further, it is not just the character who fails to address institutionalized racism but the brand itself; in one illustration from a first edition, Felicity and her grandfather sit upon their horses while three Black children pick produce in a field. Given that they are working on a Virginia plantation in 1774, these children must be enslaved, yet there is no mention of them in the text. In Samantha's series, there is a major plot that revolves around the injustices faced by her white Irish working class friend, Nellie, who is forced into factory work as a child, but very little exploration of the disparities between her experience and that of Jessie, the family's Black seamstress who is said to live in the "colored part of town," where streets were dark and narrow with small houses.<sup>26</sup> American Girl's approach to race during this time is largely summed up by an exchange between Samantha and Nellie. When Samantha asks why Jessie lives in this less desirable part of town, Nellie nonchalantly tells Samantha that Jessie has no choice but to live there because "it's just the way grownups do things."<sup>27</sup> Racism is an under-explored (sometimes ignored), minor sub-plot in American Girl stories of this era. Racial injustices and inequities are referenced but the narratives are neither

23 Fred Nielsen, "American History Through the Eyes of the American Girls," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 1/2 (2002): 85–93.

24 Janet Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson* (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 1986), 58.

25 Valerie Tripp, *Felicity Saves the Day: A Summer Story* (Middleton, WI: American Girl, 1992): 7.

26 Susan S. Adler, *Meet Samantha* (Middleton, WI: American Girl, 1986/1998): 40–41.

27 *Ibid.*, 41.

emancipatory nor critically engaged; rather racism remained an unchallenged cultural hegemony.

If American Girl was telling “The Story of America,” as one 2017 compilation book suggested, the history the brand presented served a multitude of purposes.<sup>28</sup> Choosing not to tackle the racial and ethnic injustices and inequities at the core of the American experience, American Girl ensconced its mostly white, wealthy consumers in an imagined, white-washed, safe zone of yesteryear’s childhood while shedding light on the similarities and differences of (some) girls. At the same time, the brand aimed to allay fears of feminist gains by demonstrating how change occurs over time and can have profound and positive outcomes.

### Race and American Girl History (1993–2002)

The 1990s saw a renewed public conversation about how American history should be taught and American Girl quietly participated in these discussions through the stories it created. The rise of women’s studies as well as Black studies and other ethnic studies programs around the country produced a backlash against counter-hegemonic histories and “conservatives charged that multiculturalism in practice was an attack on dead white men and western civilization.”<sup>29</sup> As it had in decades prior, this accusation led to a debate about how to teach American history.<sup>30</sup> In 1992, Lynne Cheney, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities under George H. W. Bush’s conservative presidency, commissioned a revision of the National History Standards. The faculty who oversaw the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles did not share Cheney’s conservative values and the new standards they created outraged Cheney and other conservatives when the standards were released in 1994.<sup>31</sup> Conservative right-wing critics argued that the new curriculum would “highlight the victimization of the country’s preferred minorities, while straining equally to degrade the achievements and highlight the flaws of the white males who ran the country for its first two centuries.”<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, progressive educators lauded the curriculum’s efforts to decenter white heroism and ethnocentrism.<sup>33</sup>

While the nation continued to face the challenge of how to write the legacy of American racism, so too did the brand. It was in the 1990s that Pleasant Rowland created Addy, the collection’s first African American doll; Josefina, the only Latina

28 Tori Kosara and Rona Skene, *The Story of America* (New York: DK Publishing, 2017).

29 Richard Jensen, “The Culture Wars, 1965–1995: A Historian’s Map,” *Journal of Social History* 29, issue supplement (Winter 1995): 21–22.

30 See Bruce J. Schulman, “Out Of The Streets And Into the Classroom? The New Left and the Counterculture In United States History Textbooks,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 4 (March 1999): 1527–34; Charles W. Eagles, *Civil Rights, Culture Wars: The Fight Over a Mississippi Textbook* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

31 Jensen, “The Culture Wars, 1965–1995,” 21–23.

32 Charles Krauthammer, “History Hijacked,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1994.

33 Gary Nash and Ross Dunn, “The National History Standards Controversy” (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1995), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED383607.pdf>.

doll in the historical collection; and Kaya, the brand's Native American doll.<sup>34</sup> To create Addy, the company assembled an advisory group of African American scholars to identify what her story would be. Susan Jevens, a public relations manager at American Girl explained,

The Addy advisory board unanimously agreed that her story *must* start in slavery—that anything else would be an abdication of our responsibility to tell not just the real history of African Americans, but the real story of *America itself*. . . . It was inevitable that her series would portray institutionalized racism as a core theme . . . and we viewed that as our responsibility in helping young readers understand not only that era of history but many aspects of our country today.<sup>35</sup>

The American Girl team determined that the story would chronicle Addy's escape from slavery and life as a free girl and also draw reader's attention to the discrimination that Addy faced in the free North, so that young people could understand the insidiousness of systemic racism and, ideally, use it to understand contemporary society.<sup>36</sup> When the doll was released in 1993, Addy received mixed reviews from critics, consumers, and educators, some of whom celebrated the way in which the doll's story would raise awareness and others who shamed the company for stereotyping the African American experience as one of struggle rather than highlighting the culture's music and art.<sup>37</sup>

In the next nine years, two new dolls would be released that shared the stories of American girls from ethnically oppressed groups, and again the company faced the question of how to tell their stories. Josefina, a Mexican American girl growing up in 1824, was released in 1997 and Kaya, a Native American girl growing up in the Nez Perce tribe in 1764, was introduced in 2002.<sup>38</sup> In both cases, the company, supported by advisory groups from the cultural group being historicized, made the decision to emphasize the vibrancy of Mexican American and Nez Perce cultures left untouched the white supremacist project of Manifest Destiny. Kaya's family has no contact with whites. In Josefina's story, although some members of the community and her family are cautious towards traveling Anglo traders, the depiction of the relationship between them is ultimately positive, featuring generous and

34 The Ivy doll, representing a Chinese American girl who was friends with Julie, was made available in 2007 for 7 years but as a "best friend" doll, without her own full book series; she was never considered part of the central collection.

35 Susan Jevens (Associate Manager, Public Relations, American Girl) email message to author, March 10, 2017.

36 Jevens, email.

37 Megan Rosenfeld, "Wholesome Babes in Toyland," *Washington Post*, May 24, 1993; Brit Bennett, "Addy Walker, American Girl: The Role of Black Dolls in American Culture," *The Paris Review*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/05/28/addy-walker-american-girl/>.

38 2002 was four years after Rowland sold her company to Mattel, and two years after Pleasant Rowland retired from her position as Vice Chairman of Mattel. However, the development of the Kaya doll took five years to complete (See Michelle Healy, "Meet Kaya: The Authentic Nez Perce Doll," *USA Today*, August 11, 2008). There would be no new historical dolls of color until 2011.

kind traders who give gifts to the children of the families with whom they barter and who ride into town with American flags that wave in the sunlight.

Josefina's story takes place just as the Santa Fe trail has opened, nearly twenty-five years before the land on which she lived became a part of the United States. Jevens explains that "guided by [their] advisory board" American Girl sought to "show the historical importance to that region in America's ranching tradition and of Pueblo culture and trade with Mexico, and also to hint at the great changes to come as America expanded westward. . . . [which] allowed her series to depict one Hispanic culture at its peak while simultaneously telling a larger story about the growth and development of our country."<sup>39</sup> For her part, the author of the Josefina series, Valerie Tripp, notes that it was important for her to "show that Josefina is an American Girl, too, even though she spoke Spanish" and to show the "the integrity and strength" of the culture that existed in New Mexico before American colonization.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Kaya's story is located in the Pacific Northwest approximately forty years before westward expansion began. Jevens says that American Girl did consider focusing on "the war against Native peoples; but [felt that] to tell an intimate story from an Indian girl's perspective . . . setting Kaya's story in a time when her tribe was strong and thriving was the most interesting and appropriate way to depict the life of a young Nez Perce girl."<sup>41</sup> This choice was supported by the Nez Perce community in a statement that claimed ownership of the decision regarding the time period, arguing that "because we chose to interpret a time before conflict and tragedy, [readers] will be able to visualize our people at the height of our culture."<sup>42</sup>

The addition of the dolls of color into the brand also complicated the historical play suggested by the catalog and its products. It was innocuous—perhaps even beneficial, if you were seeking to protect girls from a fast-paced sexualized girlhood—for girl consumers to dress up as their favorite historical doll in a prairie school dress or colonial ball gown. But what did it mean for a girl—of any race—to wear an identical dress to her Addy doll? The catalog copy reads "You'll be 'in the pink' when you step out in this classic cotton shirtwaist that matches Addy's." However, in the character's accompanying narrative, Addy's dress was invested with much more meaning than color, material, and style. Addy's pink striped dress was the one given to her at the last stop on the underground railroad after she and her mother had faced an abusive plantation owner, endured her father and brother being sold away from the family, left behind Addy's baby sister for fear that her cries would hinder their escape, crossed a dangerous river, and outsmarted Confederate soldiers during their journey to freedom. By 2002, either due to the fact

<sup>39</sup> Jevens email, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Tripp interview, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Pleasant Company, "Ask the Nez Perce Tribe," retrieved from *Children's Literature Independent Information and Reviews*, <http://archive.is/Cljo>.

that they were unprofitable, or because of the complicated nature of cultural appropriation, the company ceased production of all character's dress-alike outfits with the exception of pajamas.

In a socio-political environment where multiculturalism thrived alongside its conservative backlash, the brand sought to pay tribute to the “established, successful, regionally dominant cultures that were indigenous or settled over centuries” rather than portraying “decades of oppression, war, and disease.”<sup>43</sup> These safe histories no doubt increased the market for the dolls, but they also created a contradictory message about the experiences of people of color in the United States; the story of African Americans was told as one of living within a systemically racist society in which one must find support in family and community and continue to fight for social change, whereas the story of those indigenous to the land became one of authentic, unfettered, cultural celebration that was devoid of racism and colonization.<sup>44</sup>

#### The Past in the Interest of the Future (1993–2007)

In the nineties, language surrounding a moral panic about girls was on the rise from both the left and right. Conservatives launched loosely formal social programs such as True Love Waits and promoted chastity rings and purity balls in an effort to combat what they believed to be the oversexualization of teen girls.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, psychologists and educators were finding evidence that growing up in a patriarchal consumer culture was detrimental to teen girls' confidence and self-esteem, resulting in self-dissatisfaction and sometimes self-destructive behaviors.<sup>46</sup> Like these scholars, a new generation of feminists believed that gender equity and a shift in power relations, and not a pledge of their virginity, was the answer to social change. Identifying as third wave feminists and/or as riot grrrls, these young women produced music, zines, and clothing styles as well as organizations and texts with messaging that challenged gender norms.<sup>47</sup>

The culture industries and consumer market turned these social movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s into girl power discourse, a commodification of the social movement which used feminist rhetoric and symbolism to design and sell products.<sup>48</sup> American Girl, on the forefront of this incorporation, shifted its call to girls to reflect the new messaging. For this iteration of American Girl marketing, which was also shaped by Mattel's purchase of Pleasant Company in

43 Jevens email, 2017.

44 For a deeper discussion, see chapters 5 and 6 in Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*.

45 Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2009), 27.

46 Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads* (New York: Ballantine, 1992); Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1994).

47 Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

48 Ibid.

1998, history was sold not as a vitamin that could spur intellectual growth, nor as one that could protect them in the present, but as rather as a vehicle to empower girls for the future.

By 1993, although Rowland was still referring to protecting girlhood, she also began altering the language in her catalog to reflect the burgeoning girl power media culture. In her revised “Message to parents,” she wrote that her mission was to “*celebrate* the experience of growing up as an American girl” and noted that “we firmly believe that the girls we inspire today will become the women who make a difference tomorrow.” In 1997, explaining the company’s decision to develop a contemporary doll collection and increasingly focus on the present rather than historical American girlhood, the catalog message from Rowland again used a girl power rhetorical stance; her message claimed “We are committed to giving girls a sense of pride, possibility, and power in this, their moment in history.” By 2003, rather than including the familiar message about the American Girl Collection sharing the stories of girls who lived in the past, the text on the inside cover of the catalog, read, “It’s your time to shine—make the most of it!” History, then, became a key to empowering girls and preparing them for a gender equitable future, rather than a way to learn about the past or neutralize a moral panic in the present.

After years of variations on the classic catalog covers featuring girls and their dolls reading together, the change in approach to marketing the past was reflected in a new motif for catalog covers. Frequently, the new covers featured dolls in active stances with no girls holding them; girls, with dolls, smiling directly at the camera rather than engaging in soaking up those vitamins that were hidden in every book; or girls alone, no dolls or books in sight. A 1996 cover features a girl, hands on her hips, sporting a “Proud to be an American Girl” shirt. One cover from 1999 displayed two girls on a rocky mountainside wearing backpacks alongside their dolls, who wore hiking shorts and carried binoculars around their necks. In Winter 2008, a brown haired doll, bundled in a purple ski jacket, stood on her snow board, with the caption, “let it snow—she’s ready to go.” The absence of books in these images suggests the direction of the company’s marketing. Although the authors of the historical novels remained committed to producing historically sound books, history became less significant to the brand’s marketing and product development, even within its signature historical collection.

The introduction of new product lines also reduced history’s importance as a marketing tool. In addition to adding contemporary dolls wearing bright colors and sporty outfits, American Girl added new feminist-inspired accessories to the historical doll collection that portrayed girls of the past as physically active. Molly’s collection expanded to include a sled, roller skates, ice skates, and a percussion set, and Samantha acquired a new bicycle and riding bloomers. Felicity’s collection, which had previously only featured dresses typically worn by girls of the colonial era, expanded to include a horse for her to ride and pants for her to wear while riding. None of these changes are anachronistic or ahistorical; rather they offer

consumers access to history for a different utility than was previously articulated by the brand. These new accessories did not suggest to parents that American Girl could be used to protect girls from the frightening world of the present, as Rowland had initially promised, but that the brand could provide their daughters with the tools they needed to claim their power as girls so they could use it as women in the future.

In 2000 American Girl introduced Kit, whose story is set in Depression-era Cincinnati and in 2007 it added Julie, the 1970s San Francisco doll that catalogs described as having “a can do attitude.” By setting characters’ stories in these time periods, it seems that the brand was hoping to increase purchases by parents and grandparents who sought to use history as an opportunity to share memories and to tell their offspring about their own childhoods; a child who was ten years old in 1934 would have been 76, or grandparent age, in 2000 when Kit was introduced and a child who was ten in 1974 would be 33, or parent age, in 2007 when Julie made her arrival in the collection. At the same time, these more contemporary historical characters increased the brand’s opportunity to incorporate girl power rhetoric into its historical storytelling and material culture by sharing stories of active girls whose lives take place outside the domestic domain.

The Kit character, the first to be sold with chin-length hair, envisions a future as a reporter and takes up the hobby of crafting newspapers. Seeing the unemployment, homelessness, and hunger of the era, Kit turns her hobby into a political act, writing about government welfare policy to the editor of the city’s newspaper. The doll’s extras included her writing desk and typewriter, a photography set, and reporter accessories. Kit’s style reflected that of both a 1930s girl and a millennial; she had some classic silhouettes from the era as well as a pair of overalls (which were highly unlikely clothes for a girl in the 1930s<sup>49</sup>), a scooter on which to ride, and a “Reds Fans Outfit” complete with knee-length shorts, a baseball hat, glove, and ball.

Likewise, Julie, who uses the newly passed Title IX to fight for a spot on her school’s basketball team and runs for president of her school, successfully claims the safety of girlhood even as she challenges gender norms. This long haired doll in a pre-pubescent body can be put to bed at night in a four poster canopy doll bed, in her pink pajamas, all while embracing the pro-girl language and style that was proliferating as girl power media culture. Julie’s basketball uniform, bell bottom pants, yellow clogs, and raglan-sleeved skateboarding T-shirt represented a sporty girl whose styles and activities were not too dissimilar from those of their contemporary owners, and her release in the same year that Hillary Clinton officially declared her entry into the 2008 presidential campaign positioned her well within a history that resonated with contemporary girls and their mothers. The historical

49 Nancy Deihl (Director of Costume Studies MA Program, New York University) interview by author, New York, October 17, 2016; Jo Paoletti (Professor, American Studies, University of Maryland) phone interview by author, October 24, 2016.

periods and storylines of these characters situated them inside a girl power moment and enabled the brand to use history to support the present and future as expressed in its new 2005 logo: “Follow your inner star.”

However, just like the ads targeting girls from nearly a century earlier, as American Girl celebrated girls’ athleticism and strength, it “also worked at deeper levels to encourage a conformist, peer directed sense of self” focused on a beauty imperative that demanded self-surveillance and labor.<sup>50</sup> It was in this era that a vanity table and hair “curl kit” were added to Molly’s collection and some catalogs in 2002 and 2003 featured a two page spread with products under the heading “A Day at the Spa,” including a doll skin care kit, doll spa chair, doll hair care kit, and hairdo helper kit for girls. During this same period American Girl began to add brick and mortar experiential stores which included hair salons with stylists trained to give dolls renewed coifs. The clothing collections also began to mix the past and present together with Kaya’s “Fancy Shawl of Today” and Addy’s “African Dance Outfit of Today.” As the past was redefined as a tool to empower girls of tomorrow, American Girl began to frame girls as active but also as more invested in beauty. In these small ways, American Girl loosened its project of historical situatedness, a practice that became more common in the 2010s.

#### Selling A New America (2009–2016)

Although there is a sense of linearity when mapping the use of history in American Girl marketing from the company’s inception through the first decade of the new millennium, the strategy becomes less clear in the last decade. For the first fourteen years, the company was under the leadership of its founder who had a very clear vision of those vitamins she promised when she launched the company. Following Rowland’s retirement in 2000 she was succeeded by Ellen Brothers, who had worked at the company since 1995, and served at its helm until her own retirement in 2012. During Brothers leadership, Mattel also had a long-term CEO who served for eleven years beginning in 2000. Over the next seven years, however, the brand would find itself under the leadership of three different women and its parent company would have four CEOs, each of whose mandates and visions would change the direction of the company. Nonetheless, there are several significant events in national and brand history during this time that warrant analysis.

In 2008, after eight years of a Republican president, the election of Barack Obama opened the door for a more progressive dialogue about issues of gender, race, class, and the environment. In campaign speeches and policies, as well as in his position as the nation’s first African American president, Obama sought to fight racial inequality in the United States. Further, he made clear that gender equality was a priority when the first law he signed as president strengthened the

<sup>50</sup> Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 129.

prohibition of sex-based wage discrimination. In his first year in office he created the White House Council on Women and Girls which focused on increasing the participation of girls and women in STEM, increasing women's economic security, expanding educational and career opportunities for women and girls of color, and ending violence against women and girls.<sup>51</sup>

During this era, the nation also saw a renewed civil rights movement, which began in 2013 in response to the murders of unarmed Black men and women by police. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement organized nationwide protests and social media campaigns calling for racial justice.<sup>52</sup> The BLM movement asked citizens to confront systemic racism and its long-term impacts on the psychological, cultural, and economic well-being of Black communities and individuals. American Girl began to produce history that mirrored the nation's growing discussion of progressive issues. It was during this era that American Girl introduced, among other dolls, two new African American historical dolls, Cécile and Melody. In 2011, Cécile, a free-born girl of Louisiana Creole descent, from a financially well-established family, was added to the collection, alongside her white, middle-class best friend, Marie-Grace. These best friends, living in 1850s New Orleans, reflect the myth of post-racial harmony that circulated nationally after Obama was elected.<sup>53</sup> Though the American Girl narrative about interracial friendship depicts the racial inequities in the girls' lives, their closeness, commonalities, and social class transcend their racial differences. Then, three years after the start of the Black Lives Matter movement, the brand produced Melody, who worked with her family and her Baptist church community to fight for civil rights in 1960s Detroit. Through product and narrative development of these two stories, American Girl used history to reflect on—and capitalize on—social change in the past and present and to encourage readers to confront American racism.

This era also witnessed a change in how characters' experiences throughout history were represented in the catalog's text and product line. Perhaps in response to both waning sales and to a growing trend in girls' culture, the historical collection was rebranded in 2014. During the 2010s, young women were producing feminist media on blogs, YouTube, and social media; they were educating one another about feminist politics and building communities.<sup>54</sup> A new focus on feminism was welcomed in mainstream politics as well; Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for president in 2007 and again in 2015. In a market ripe for stories of

51 "The White House Council on Girls and Women," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/eop/cwg>.

52 See Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

53 See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, "The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634, no. 1 (March 2011): 190–206.

54 Jessalyn Keller, *Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jessica K. Taft, *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change Across the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

empowered girls, American Girl rebranded its historical collection, now calling it the BeForever Collection. Each character was given a new tag line, many of which positioned them as active social change agents. In 2010, Julie is characterized as “a fun loving girl growing up in the seventies,” but in 2014 her activism takes center stage with the catalog copy, “Now is my time to stand up and fight for what’s right.” Kit who was described in 2010 as a “bright light in the dark days of the Great Depression” becomes 2014’s girl who declares “A better tomorrow is mine to create.” And, Kaya who was once “an adventurous girl who loves riding her horse” is 2014’s environmentalist with the new introduction, “I always take time to respect the earth.”<sup>55</sup> Rather than history being a place of refuge from the present, as it was in the earliest iteration of American Girl marketing, during this era, history was being sold as a tool to inspire girls to become involved in social change and to participate in the shaping of a new America where women’s rights and Black civil rights were respected.

At the same time, the brand became less focused on historical specificity in its dolls and products. In its press release announcing the rebranding, American Girl declared that this makeover would give the collection a “fresh new look” and help contemporary girls connect with history by allowing them “explore the past, find their place in the present, and think about the possibilities” of the future.<sup>56</sup> Many doll outfits were redesigned in ahistorical pastels and girl consumers were encouraged to shop from a new collection of contemporary clothing “inspired by the character’s era” and advertised through a design challenge on *Project Runway*, suggesting that history and feminism were being coopted by consumerism.<sup>57</sup> In addition, each character got a new “my journey” book which explicitly linked the historical girls with contemporary girls who time traveled to meet them.

The lens through which girl consumers were invited to engage with history in this era also shifted as several dolls and most of the authentic doll-sized reproductions of furniture and many other accessories were retired from the collection. For example, Samantha, Kirsten, and Molly were archived or retired. Even before she was made unavailable, Kirsten’s Saint Lucia gown and wreath, which referenced her Swedish roots, were retired from the collection. Although neither the Addy nor Josefina dolls have ever been out of circulation, most of their accessories were retired between the early 2000s and 2016, including in 2013 Addy’s “Ida Bean” doll, meant to represent a homemade doll of the 1860s, Josefina’s weaving loom in 2012, and her “New Mexican table and chairs” in 2015.<sup>58</sup> Although American Girl claimed

55 Comparison of American Girl catalogs from July 2010 and Winter 2015.

56 “American Girl Unveils BeForever™ Line and Connects a New Generation of Girls to Timeless Stories, Inspiring Characters, and Endless Possibilities!” Mattel Corporation, August 28, 2014, <https://news.mattel.com/news/american-girl-unveils-beforeverTM-line-and-connects-a-new-generation-of-girls-to-timeless-stories-inspiring-characters-and-endless-possibilities>.

57 *Project Runway*, Season 13, episode 9, “The History of the American Girl,” directed by Rich Kim, aired September 18, 2014.

58 [Americangirl.fandom.com](http://Americangirl.fandom.com)

that these changes were due to “basic product lifecycle management,”<sup>59</sup> rather than a diminished commitment to history, significant items that framed the cultural and historic specificity of the brand’s older characters were taken out of production and each remaining character was left with a bed and often some food and hair accessories.<sup>60</sup>

Consumers were also shown imagery of contemporary lines mixing with historical dolls as in a 2016 holiday catalog depicting six of the historical dolls with two contemporary dolls. In this anachronistic image, Josefina from 1824 and Kit from 1934, each in their historical holiday outfits, stand on either side of a 1960s style microphone from Melody’s collection, next to a contemporary doll in a golden sparkly top and black leggings. These changes shaped the way girls were invited to play with their dolls; while narratives were increasingly focused on active social change, historical reenactment in play was replaced by the traditional feminine care and beauty play from which Rowland had wanted to redirect girls’ attention.

## Conclusion

American Girl began with the belief that children would benefit from learning about the experiences of girls in American history. The “chocolate cake with vitamins,” as Rowland called it, was a doll with an educational message. As this article has demonstrated, throughout the brand’s three decades, the role of history in the marketing of American Girls has shifted along with socio-political discourses about gender and race, promising at various moments to educate, protect, prepare, empower, and celebrate girls. In its first seven years, from 1986 to 1993, American Girl assured parents that by sharing the past with their daughters, they would be protecting them from the present. This was an era that saw the rise of female sexual expression from performers such as Madonna and a fifteen year-old Brooke Shields in overtly sexual ads for Calvin Klein,<sup>61</sup> as well as deregulation of children’s commercial television. American Girl founder Pleasant Rowland marketed history—an imagined past that was safe, secure, frilly, and decidedly girlish—as refuge from a culture that threatened to prematurely sexualize girls. At the same time, the brand sought to encourage feminist social change with stories of girls participating in public life and rebuking their mother’s insistence that they engage in domestic work. In the next nine years, American Girl used two different approaches to market history. First, from 1993–2002, they engaged with a diverse American experience, examining the end of slavery and the lived experience of institutionalized racism faced by African Americans. At the same time, they presented a white washed history of expansionism and colonialism in its stories about Native Americans and Mexican Americans. Extending from 1993 to 2007, the brand drew upon the rhetoric of girl power media culture, promoting history as a path to an

59 Jevens email, 2017.

60 Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll*, 90–94.

61 Barrie Gunter, *Media and the Sexualization of Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

empowered girlhood and womanhood. Yet, although the historical narratives featured feminist-inspired stories, this era also saw the reduction of historical accessories available to consumers. Instead, the brand produced an increasing number of beauty and food related accessories that had no connection to history. More recently, from 2009 until 2016, American Girl doubled down on the girl power rhetoric and the sales of non-historical accessories, framing its historical characters as social change agents, while using accessories that encouraged young consumers to focus on normative feminine play with hair, food, and room decorating. These shifts in American Girl's marketing of public history as a vitamin to help girls grow healthy have aligned with and constructed fluctuating discourses about gender and race.

In 2020, in the wake of the mass Black Lives Matter protests against systemic racism and police brutality, American Girl reminded consumers that the brand has always been dedicated to sharing “timeless stories that help bridge the past and present” and that “Each [of these stories] demonstrates how strong women can change the course of history—especially during our country's most troubling times—with courage, compassion, and resilience.”<sup>62</sup> They made their stories written by Black women, about Black girls, free online and committed to donating \$500,000 worth of books featuring the Black, Latina, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Jewish historical characters to libraries across the country.<sup>63</sup> What they did not pledge to do was explore racial identities through any new historical characters. As American Girl continues to be a vehicle through which children encounter public history, how will the brand reflect the political polarization of the country and the increased attention to racial injustice? A comparison between a 1990s theater play kit and a 2018 live American Girl show may offer a clue.

The 1990s “Theater Play Scripts” included three short plays, closely following the original stories about Kirsten, Samantha, and Molly.<sup>64</sup> In Kirsten's play, true to her book collection, the protagonist arrives in the United States after a long journey from Sweden. Kirsten wonders about life in Minnesota and expresses fear of loneliness. Shortly after arriving, Kirsten's friend dies from cholera which she contracted aboard the ship, leaving Kirsten bereft. Then the family takes a long train journey after which they have to trudge for miles, leaving behind the trunks that hold most of their worldly possessions, because they cannot afford to hire a horse and wagon. In Samantha's play, the protagonist meets Nellie, an eight-year girl who works as a maid in the neighbor's house. After a short while, Nellie is fired and sent back to the city where her parents will put her to work in a factory. The play's unrealistic happy ending occurs when Samantha's grandmother arranges for Nellie to be hired by another local family who treats her well and the protagonist

62 American Girl website, “Our Commitment to Racial Equality,” 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/equality>.

63 Ibid.

64 American Girl, “The American Girls Theater” (1990); They later added scripts for Addy, Felicity, Molly, and Josefina. The original theater kit was discontinued in 1994. Later scripts were discontinued around 2000.

learns from her grandmother that when you use your voice you can make change and help others. These plays did not include any characters of color nor did they deeply address ethnic identity, marking “whiteness as the default identity for American girls, and by extension, for the imagined girl performers.”<sup>65</sup> Although consistent with the brand’s characteristic sanitization of the past, these plays were rooted in history, sharing stories of brave girls whose struggles were common to the American experience but also specific to their moment in American history (westward expansion, the construction of the first railways, child labor, and the Progressive reform movement).

In contrast, in 2018, for the first time since the American Girl retail stores discontinued their live shows a decade prior, the American Girls came to life again. In this Broadway-style show, the brand’s relationship to history becomes specious. Produced with catchy tunes, *American Girl Live!* revolves around five contemporary girls who go to sleepaway camp at Camp American Girl, each with a doll in a pack on her back. When the girls arrive, they learn that in order for them to have a special night at the Starry Night Campsite, each camper has to earn a Girl Power prize awarded for doing some kind of good deed. To assist them as they earn their badges, each doll in their packs comes to life to teach the campers a lesson. When one girl fears lightening, Nanea, the historical doll character who lived in Hawaii during the attack on Pearl Harbor, comes to life to empathize, sharing that she had a similar fear of loud noises during air raids. When another camper, Nia, does not get a chance to sign up for the talent show in which she desperately wants to sing, Melody, who used her voice to fight for racial equality in the 1960s, comes to life to teach Nia to use her voice to ask for a chance to sing and to stand up for herself. From the dolls, the campers learn important messages about teamwork, confidence, self-esteem, resilience and speaking up for what they want, but they do not learn the significance of history.<sup>66</sup> The play unconvincingly equates speaking up for racial justice with speaking up for a spot in a camp talent show and fearing wartime bombs with fearing bad weather. In this latest American Girl production, history becomes flexible, interacting with the present, and void of specificity and significance.

In 1986, American Girl began by selling the concept of history as a vitamin. While over time the brand has changed the purpose of the vitamin to match shifts in public discourse, it has also managed to provide its audiences with well-researched, if sanitized, stories of American history. One hopes that American Girl continues to value history rather than reducing it to a gimmick, a gummy vitamin packed with sugar, corn syrup, and food coloring.

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65 Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Victoria P. Lantz, “Staging American Girlhood the Pleasant Way: Centering Girls in History and Performance with the American Girl Theater Kits,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 34, no. 1 (2020): 11.

66 Bobby Tanzilo, “5 Questions for ‘American Girl Live’ writer Sandy Rustin,” *OnMilwaukee*, (Milwaukee, WI), May 9, 2019, <https://onmilwaukee.com/family/articles/american-girl-live.html>.

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