ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION


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This thesis deals with the changing notions of American identity as conveyed and fashioned through children’s consumer products throughout the 20th century. Each case study looks at a different period of time though a sampling of material culture, literature, and entertainment spaces. The thesis begins with the advent of the American toy industry in the early twentieth century and looks at the early implications of linking children’s toys with patriotism and whiteness. Chapter two examines the Great Depression and the ways different groups used children’s dolls and toys to elaborate a vision of the country they longed for during an unstable time. Chapter three looks at the consensus history of America as told through two children’s history books series (Random House’s Landmark Books and Bobbs-Merrill’s Childhood of Famous Americans) published during the Cold War. Chapter four looks at Freedomland U.S.A., an American history themed amusement park that sprang up and then was quickly torn down in the Bronx in the 1960s. The thesis concludes with a chapter that looks at the production of a multicultural, global, but ultimately homogenous American girl through the many facets of the American Girl Brand from the 1980s to the present. Through these objects, books, toys, dolls, and amusement parks, this thesis traces the myths and lessons sold to children in their leisure items, making it clear that childhood is political. This set of cases, each concerned with American history, it becomes clear over the course of the last century, consumerism has
become a primary way children learn to access American democracy and engage in political action.
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DEDICATION

For my parents, David and Kathy, to whom I owe everything.

And for the people who have left and entered this world while I worked on this project:
   To Sophie and Adrienne, who I will always love and miss.
   To Owen, who brightens the future.
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INTRODUCTION

“... history is what the present chooses to remember about the past.”

In many ways the twentieth century is characterized by a search for what it means to be an American, what values are central to the nation’s identity. The story changes as the country does, taking on different meaning depending on the values and politics of the time. Many stories persist – to the point of becoming clichés exempt from scrutiny: This is a country of pioneers who tamed the West and expanded the frontier; a country of rural farmers or of industrial workers; a peaceful nation; a democratic, freedom loving country; a melting pot; a mosaic; a world power; and finally, a country where the American Dream is possible – if people work hard, they can succeed.


Tensions continue to arise when these stories conflict with the realities of darker aspects of the experience of the nation: This is a nation that drove Native Americans off their land; enslaved other human beings; repressed and oppressed generations of African Americans, workers, and LGBTQ people; deported immigrants; dropped atomic bombs on civilians in Japan; interred citizens of Japanese descent during World War II; and tortured prisoners of undeclared wars. Who these stories include and exclude tends to shift over time. Race, gender, class, most frequently determine how people engage with these stories and people learn their role early on in life.

The advent of modern childhood, and the simultaneous production of innocence, is, as Robin Bernstein has pointed out, “part of a 200-year-old history of white supremacy.” Not all children are deemed equally innocent not afforded the luxury of a leisure-oriented, protected, apolitical childhood. The consumer items and spaces that have accompanied the modern conception of childhood have been – overall – complicit in promoting a narrow definition of the ideal American child. As the role of consumer products play in children’s lives has grown throughout the last century, it has become increasingly important to scrutinize the stories they tell, the promises they make, and the limitations they apply.

This thesis explores how children’s didactic amusements (by which I mean toys, books, and amusements that explicitly claim to teach) have been the medium through which adults communicate to children their interpretations of history and what it means to be an American during the long twentieth century. Children’s media offers a particularly useful lens through which to understand how people interpreted their social

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and political situations in different eras, because so often the stories and lessons are simplified or exaggerated. Over the decades the history of the country has been sold to the nation’s youngest citizens, often with only superficial thought about accuracy or nuance. The stories become tools to teach children less about the past and more about the qualities that adults value – independence, innovation, cooperation. These stories ground personal qualities in a mythic thing called “American character.”

Through a series of case studies, covering one hundred years of modern American childhood from different angles, this thesis explores questions of American identity, definitions of “American character,” and what America’s past signifies about its future. These questions may themselves be quintessentially American – the nation is dynamic and complex, with malleable myths that continue to shift with each war, each invention, each political or social upheaval – the search for a coherent identity is far from over.

Each chapter is concerned with consumer citizenship and history that has been ostensibly made palatable for children.

Children begin learning stories about America at an early age – at home, in school, and at play. Although childhood is often conceived of as an experience isolated and protected from the outside world of politics and culture, in fact the values of the country enter the child’s world in many different ways, one of which is through dolls, books, toys and amusements. Children learn what they should think about the country and what their role in this country is. Boys and girls, black and white, rich and poor children all receive the same messages but with dramatically different meaning. Contact with these didactic amusements often become moments when race, class, and gender intersect. Many of the idiosyncratic materials in this thesis are understudied because they
exist outside of formal school settings. Many escaped scrutiny because they are meant for leisure and for children. The educational component of products for children generally earns them praise for going beyond “simple fun” and for promoting the idea of productive leisure. The cases in this dissertation have also never been studied alongside each other since they are not cohesive in form or content. But by putting them in conversation we can see the many ways history-based products and pastimes inform the daily lives of both children and adults, through the ways they both contradict and reinforce each other’s lessons.

Consumerism has unquestionably become crucial component of civic engagement since the late nineteenth century. However, that participation in that form of engagement is complicated and varied, it is a particularly fraught issue for children. On the one hand, parents want to offer their children toys and books that engage them in the world and in the possibilities for the future that toys offer – intellectual, manual and technological skills, the chance to learn on their own. On the other hand, parents turn over to toy companies the choice of messages they want to communicate. Children, too, participate according to their own preferences and abilities, although this thesis focuses on what adults and producers intend to communicate, rather than children’s reception or rejection of those messages. This thesis is not about children themselves, it is about how consumer products inform and reflect the idea of childhood in each era.

The question about how children learn has long been considered by social psychologists. Most notably, G. Stanley Hall took up the study of dolls and what children learn from them in 1897. Hall believed dolls were important because they educated “the
heart and will even more than the intellect…” He recognized that “dolls are found buried along with children in the sarcophagi of the ancient Egyptians. A little girl figure was found in one of the buried cities with a doll clasped to her breast,” and wondered why more attention hadn’t been paid to them in the field of psychology. He argued that their importance was not merely to “keep children young, cheerful, out of bad company,” but “to teach geography, history and morals… in the most objective possible way.” He believed “there should be somewhere (a) a doll museum, (b) a doll expert to keep the possibilities of this great educative instinct steadily in view…” Many of his arguments mirror arguments that the early toy industry in America made – that dolls and toys have historically and traditionally been tools to educate.

Hall’s observations go to the heart of this dissertation and can be broadened to include books, toys, and other amusements. Discussing dolls, he pointed out that a doll’s physical appearance is often imbued with meaning. He hints at the fact that images are often taken as indicators of moral character, an important point for my own study and a key idea behind the famous Doll Study that Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted fifty years later, “Psychic qualities are often suggested by looks, dress, or fancied resemblance to someone thought to have good or bad qualities.” Hall wrote of the ways boys (presumably white boys) interpreted dolls of different races, stating, “colored dolls, brownies, German, Chinese, and other dolls are often fancied, especially by boys because


5 Hall, 62.

6 Hall, 54.

7 Hall, 53.
they are ‘funny’ or exceptional.” This renowned social psychologists attributes boys’ reactions to non-white dolls to their perception that other races are funny and abnormal. Hall himself projects the idea that white dolls are “unmarked” and “normal” and bases his interpretations off of that initial understanding.

Other fields across the humanities have looked at different aspects of children’s culture but I focus specifically on books, toys, dolls and amusements that utilize myths of American history to shape and reshape children’s understanding of nationhood and citizenship. My focus is not on the nature of play so much as it is on what these didactic amusements teach children and how their position in and out of the marketplace shapes those lessons.

These informal sites of learning have not been sufficiently studied. In addition to tracing how American history and identity were represented at particular historical periods, this thesis examines how the children’s leisure industry has repeatedly profited from linking itself to American identity and history.

On the surface, toys and dolls are different from books and all are different from amusement parks. What they have in common, however, is that they are used as the medium through which children learn about U.S. history and learn what attitudes and behaviors ostensibly define an American. For the purpose of this thesis my discussion of children focus on people between seven and twelve years old – the target demographic for these case studies.

The notion of “freedom” recurs in the story of American history as well as in the didactic amusements I study. Moreover, consumer choice has consistently been linked to

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8 Hall, 16.
the notion of American freedom. By looking at the way freedom is constructed in the historical stories these didactic amusements tell and by looking at how the freedom to buy (or buy in to) these stories manifests across race, class, and gender, we can better understand what happens to history when it is packaged and sold. In his study, *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner explains how the definition of American freedom is a constant source of controversy. “Over the course of our history, American freedom has been both a reality and a mythic ideal – the living truth for millions of Americans; the cruel mockery for others.” This holds true not only over the course of our history but within our continued and conscientious retelling, repackaging and reselling of history. Like the idea of American identity in these case studies, freedom, Foner writes “has always been a terrain of conflict, subject to multiple and competing interpretations, its meaning constantly created and re-created.”

In some ways selling history to parents who could afford it enabled manufacturers to ignore groups of children and contending stories of history. In other ways it was a space for widening the stories of history, broadening or changing concepts of citizenship and retooling well-worn American myths. For example, in her book *Kids Rule!* Sarah Banet-Weiser shows how the cable network Nickelodeon approached children as active and engaged citizens and geared news and programming directly to them, refuting the idea that children are only “citizens in training” who “lack of access to political empowerment and engagement.” Her book successfully refuses to see the public and

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private media as inherently good or bad and resists putting them on opposite ends of an ideological spectrum.

In the first two chapters – which outline the emergence of the American toy industry and the production of a nostalgic past through dolls and toys, children are seen as both the embodiment of the innocence of a pre-industrial age, and the source of potential for a comfortable, futuristic modern life. However, different children are citizens of vastly different worlds. Boys are seen as the keys to the future, whereas girls are seen as the guardians of the past. Boys are citizens of America, whereas girls are citizens of the home. African American children are generally left out of the emerging mass consumer culture except as stereotypes rendered for the amusement of white children. The marketing of racist toys that used the imagery of nineteenth century slavery and subservience, transmitted antebellum racist norms to future citizens in the new industrial society.

The first chapter, *Made in America: The Rise of the American Toy Industry*, looks closely at the products, advertisements, and ideological arguments put forth by the burgeoning American toy industry to congress, the public, and the world. It lays the groundwork for understanding the ways that children’s amusements and activities were part of the ongoing debate about what is America and what is “an American.” Manufacturers during the Progressive Era established trends that would be replicated and adjusted for the next century. During this time, consumers were encouraged to buy only American made toys and learned that owning manufactured, store bought toys was an essential part of being an American. Entire groups of people were marginalized and excluded from the toy market.
Not only did large factories replace the home and the local workshop as the center of production but, as Robert Wiebe points out in his book *The Search for Order*, the outlines of the modern nation-state took shape as power shifted from town elected officials to states and then to federal authorities.\textsuperscript{12} The rise of national transportation systems supported the idea of one nation by linking rural America to the commercial cities and industrial centers of the East Coast and Midwest. Growing national media empires like those of William Randolph Hearst and magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Saturday Evening Post* provided the means for advertising the products of national industrial corporations.\textsuperscript{13} This all can be seen as part of nation-building, the process of “convincing” Californians and New Yorkers, northerners and southerners, immigrants and the native born, that they were part of the same country. It can also be seen as part of identifying who would – and would not – be part of this nation: Native Americans, African Americans, the impoverished, certain women, and the newest immigrant groups.

In the second chapter, *Dolling Up History: Toy and Doll Fairs and the Tensions of Modernity*, I explore three different toy-related events took place during the Great Depression in response to the changes facing the nation. The move to an industrial economy left some longing for an earlier time, some celebrating the fruit of industrialism, and some finding themselves marginalized. I first consider a Doll Show put on by a group of upper class collectors in 1938. The collectors, a fast disappearing class of blue blood women, displayed dolls modeled largely on aristocratic European women to promote the notion that American culture was an extension of elite Old World culture. The second


event, an annual Toy Fair sponsored by the Toy Manufacturers of America, offered a substantially different view of the impact of industrialization. The buyers who visited this Toy Fair were introduced to a vision of an industrializing America promising an ever-brighter future of ingenious inventions and greater leisure time during which children could consume more gadgets that industry could produce. Both of these events more effectively showed adults using children’s items to illustrate their conceptions of American culture than showing an understanding of either children or history. The third case concerns Mamie and Kenneth Clark’s famous doll studies (begun in 1935 and continuing through World War II), which documented that socialization into racism affected children from a very early age – showing that children, white and black, preferred white to black dolls. The study pointed to the insidious ways that the racism of the broader culture, reinforced by Jim Crow laws and segregation, was transmitted to children in new consumer culture. Although each of these groups had different motives in using dolls and toys, and one focused on the past, another the future, and the third on the present, when taken together it becomes clear how persistently American citizenship was reserved for a select few.

The third chapter, Cold War Consensus: Childhood of Famous Americans and Landmark Children’s History Books, looks at two sets of children’s historical fiction whose popularity peaked in the 1950s. These series can be seen as part of a broad attempt by historians and scholars to reach a consensus about American identity during a particularly fraught period of national anxiety. Many felt it was important to move beyond the tensions that had characterized the thirties and forties and to create a common idea about America that included a shared sense of history and basic shared values. The
first series, *The Childhoods of Famous Americans*, often popularly referred to as the “Orange books,” was published by Bobbs-Merrill, an Indiana press that consciously sought to glorify and exemplify a “wholesomeness” rooted in a rural, agrarian America. The second series, *Landmark Books*, was produced by Random House, a younger press founded by urban, college educated New Yorkers focused on providing children with serious books about the history of their country. Surprisingly, despite the very different social and regional origins of these presses, these two collections present strikingly similar versions of the country and its history. They both reflect the 1950s “consensus” of what “landmarks” and values made up the American story and what, therefore, made great Americans. This chapter does literary analysis of the books, and looks to oral histories and archival papers from the Random House collection at Columbia University.

The fourth chapter, *Family Fun for Everyone? Freedomland U.S.A., 1960-64*, uses a history-themed amusement park to explore a transitional moment of the early 1960s. Freedomland, located in the Bronx, during a time of massive demographic change, told the history of America in much the same way the children’s history books did a few years earlier, emphasizing well-worn myths like that of the glorious western frontier. But these stories, which had been widely popular during the 1950s, no longer appealed to the American public, particularly in the Bronx, New York, of the 1960s. The park’s search for an authentic but thrilling story fell flat as tensions over race and gender inequality threatened the cohesive narrative that defined the media of the previous decade. As a result, Freedomland met an early demise in 1964 less than five seasons after it opened. The chapter looks to the 1964 World’s Fair, more widely remembered and cited as competition to the Bronx park, as a point of comparison. This chapter relies on local
newspaper coverage and advertisements, as well as informal interviews with people who visited the site.

In the final chapter, *Selling the Multicultural Girl: The American Girl Brand*, I circle back to the story of dolls and the construction of national identity. The chapter focuses primarily on the period from the 1980s to the present, when the American Girl Company’s dolls, books, and other merchandise became monumentally popular among white, middle class girls. The American Girl Company brought attention to the stories of American history, increasingly broadening the stories to include diverse experiences and girls of different ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. But the steep price tags and the company’s success ended up propelling an idea that there is something universal and quintessential about an American Girl – and cultural or social differences were downplayed to the point of erasure. In addition to defining a multicultural America, the dolls taught girls how to be consumers. This chapter relies on advertisements, company literature, an analysis of the spaces in the American Girl store, a discussion of the dolls’ “stories” themselves, as well as scholarship on consumerism to understand the multifaceted ways the company promotes its brand.

**Broader Implications**

The stories that children hear about the past are directed by contemporary political struggles, as well as hopes for the future. Children have historically and continuously been used as potent symbols of innocence for political messages. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as Ann Douglas and Robin Bernstein both point out, “Little Eva was a hub in a busy cultural system linking innocence to whiteness through the body of the child.”

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Lyndon B. Johnson used the image of a small blond girl counting daisy petals just before a nuclear explosion as an effective campaign ad. In 1960 Ruby Bridges became a powerful symbol after she desegregated a New Orleans public school, most famously documented by Norman Rockwell’s painting, “The Problem We All Live With.” This use of children in the media and social reform both uses and undermines the notion of their apolitical innocence.

Many popular images form the 2017 Women’s March showed children holding signs ranging in topics from scribbles to condemnations of the Muslim Registry proposed during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. The children’s cuteness, alongside the their presumed innocence and exemption from blame for the country’s ailments protects them as they accompany their guardians to the march.

Debates about what makes America “great” abound as the new president continuously redefines who should and who should not be considered eligible to be American. Manufacturing and consumerism are at the heart of his arguments on immigration. In his inaugural speech, Trump used the same arguments the toy industry used 100 years ago, “For many decades, we’ve enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry…” He went on, “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies and destroying our jobs.”

Americans have the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in their minds – espousing that


American strength comes from being a nation of immigrants, while closing borders, building walls, instituting bans on people from certain countries, and resentment of the latest waves of foreign immigrants. At the heart of this contradiction are the malleable myths of America’s past.

The focus on manufacturing and job creation during the 2016 presidential campaign infused American identity with a nostalgic industrial tinge. The phrase “Make American Great Again,” props up a marketable American identity. Its power lies in an ambiguous patriotism and erroneous nostalgia – a kind of nostalgia that parallels the ways adults see childhood. The promise for a better future by a return to a re-imagined past, paired with adult conceptions of childhood, forms the crux of this thesis. How is it that we promise children a brighter future, by selling them a re-formulated past?

The line between formal public education and consumer culture is never bright nor is it solid. Today, in Oklahoma the oil and gas industry funds an entire K through 12 Curriculum which, “centers on teaching math and science through oil-centric lessons and labs. That includes things like calculating the mileage of tanker trucks, or the slope of pipelines.” The influence of corporate interests on curriculum is not new, nor is this case unique. Conversely, since the start of the American toy industry, manufacturers have found success labeling their products as “educational.” The need for the oil industry to pay for science and math curriculum and supplies is a sad commentary on the funding of the American public school system but it is also part of a long tradition in America of

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introducing young people to consumer culture and introducing consumer culture into the classroom.

Consumer culture, it can be argued, has allowed for a more inclusive, broader definition of American identity – as attempts to gain a bigger consumer base have encouraged ethnic diversity among toys, dolls, and in the media. Yet representation is not an end in and of itself. It is not enough to create more representative toys if they are only accessible to those who can afford it.

Children frequently intuit and incorporate into their games and rhymes lessons from the world around them. Consumerism has found its way into children’s rhymes and limericks, with evidence of active resistance to it by children themselves who can identify where they are and aren’t allowed. In 1954, Tony Schwartz, a legendary documentarian of sound, recorded the children playing near his home in Manhattan. These children understood consumer spaces were off-limits to them due to their class or race, as the following rhyme indicates:

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\begin{align*}
I \text{ won’t go to Macy’s any more, more, more} \\
There’s a big fat policeman at the door, door, door \\
He’ll pull you by the collar \\
And make you pay a dollar \\
So I won’t go to Macy’s any more, more, more^{19}
\end{align*}
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It is through these didactic amusements that children are shaped as citizens and come into notions of citizenship. It is through childhood amusements, which aim to codify and define what it means to be American, that the holes and problems of the historical narratives are exposed.

Methodology and Primary Research

In approaching this dissertation I employed cultural, literary, and political analyses. I relied on secondary historical material, primarily academic books, for background on the history of the twentieth century, on the history of the historical profession, and for insight into children’s literature. To understand dolls, toys and amusement parks I examined historical newspapers, advertisements, mail order catalogues, radio and television advertisements, relied on oral histories, and looked to congressional records.

The questions I chose to explore in this thesis led me down diverse and fascinating research paths. The primary materials were varied: Visits to the Brooklyn Historical Society led me into the world of blue blood ladies and their doll collections; trips to the Random House archive located at Columbia's Rare Books and Manuscripts Division helped me understand the values of the industry as it evolved in both New York City and Indianapolis, Indiana. Benett Cerf’s oral history in the oral history collection at Columbia gave me greater insights into the politics and pressures that shaped children's views of history during the Cold War; Freedom of Information Act requests helped me understand the background and monitoring of the author’s of the Cold War era children's books. At different points I was both denied access to the American Girl archives in Wisconsin and asked if I’d like to work at the American Girl store in New York. After two months of waiting for an appointment to visit the Bronx Historical Society, which had once staged an exhibit about Freedomland, I found no evidence that they had preserved anything from the park or any of the plans, correspondence, or internal memoranda from Freedomland’s planners. To understand Freedomland’s formulation of
history I had to rely primarily on published media such as newspaper articles, radio and TV advertisements, mail order and manufacturers catalogues and websites designed by a few dedicated amateur historians who had maintain collections Freedomland memorabilia that they share through a Facebook group. The extensive collection on the World’s Fair and Robert Moses at NYPL primarily highlighted how understudied the comparable Bronx amusement park was. As I wandered through the Museum of Play in Rochester, N.Y., puzzling over the miniature Wegman’s housed in its walls, I saw how intertwined American families and American corporations were. The museum’s displays seemed take for granted the influence industries on children’s leisure time, largely ignoring the child’s imagination as a primary factor in play. In this huge monument to American play, there was little documentation of stickball or hop-scotch, the nearly universal pastimes for millions of urban children. In 2015, I participated in a working group on “play” at the National Conference of Public History, led by Mary Rizzo and Abby Perkiss. Through the discussion there and the activities involving memories of play, I was able to more fully explore how children’s consumer culture fits into the larger study of public history.

Secondary Literature Review

My decision to focus my research on particular cases in no way narrowed the scope of possible research areas to pursue. Because this dissertation concerns what is communicated to children about American identity at different periods of the twentieth century, it was necessary to ground my work in an understanding of that history. Although the scholarly literature is bottomless, I found certain books were extremely important in helping me grasp the general way historians have understood the different
eras of the twentieth century. The first chapter examines industrialization and the Progressive Era. To understand the way American identity was understood in that era I relied primarily on Robert Wiebe’s *Search for Order*, a fifty-year-old text that brings coherence to the that tumultuous period. Although it has been critiqued for its underlying assumption of coherence, Wiebe’s work helped me understand the longing for coherence during a time of massive social, political, and economic upheaval.\(^\text{20}\)

Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* uses a series of case studies from the American industrial revolution to trace not only the birth of modern capitalism but also the rise of alternatives to capitalist development. Although the changes in industry appear to sustain to a monolithic economic system, Trachtenberg shows the increasing fragmentation of American society as well as the consumer impulses that undermined the visions of the gilded age (such as nickelodeons and burlesque theaters).

Lawrence Glickman’s work *A Living Wage* and Nancy Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* each take seriously the role of leisure in this period. Glickman argues that the shift to wage labor dramatically altered American consciousness and the worker’s political identity. She frames leisure activities not as a frivolous way to pass time but as a class-conscious and political act on the part of working class women with newfound financial independence at the turn of the century. Both these works point out that there have always been politics at stake in the kinds of leisure and consumption groups participate in.

If the historical literature on the progressive era is huge, if poorly defined, the relevant literature on the Depression and World War II is staggering. Ira Katznelson’s

Fear Itself is a detailed look at the contrasting roles the New Deal played as both a spur to change and sometimes a roadblock to racial equality. David Montgomery’s Fall of the House of Labor helped explain from a very different angle why the upper class ladies I study in Chapter 2 looked back nostalgically on the production of crafts in the nineteenth Century and why they organized the 1938 doll show. It also put into perspective the enthusiasm of businessmen of the early century who promoted mass manufacturing for national retailers and seemed intent on destroying the craft trade unions. Even though early toy industry argued that protective tariffs would protect American jobs, for many national toy brands, mechanization would leave them less beholden to laborers.

The secondary literature about the 1950s and Cold War years for Chapters 3 and 4 was critical for understanding the period when the Orange and Landmark Books were published and Freedomland was opened. Without understanding the evolution of a national story of democracy, freedom, and militarism that evolved in the wake of World War II I could not have understood the particular version of history the books and Freedomland were presenting. Hence, Tom Englehardt’s The End of Victory Culture was a book I found myself returning to over and over again. Not only does he have an exquisite feel for the 1950s, but he is a rare historian who takes toys seriously as reflective of the culture’s social and political values. Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream clearly explained emergence of the consensus story of American history that so dominates the books and Freedomland. Novick discusses what led to the undoing of this consensus history and why the 1950s “consensus” historians were displaced by the “new left” and “social historians” of the 1960s and 1970s. Paul Boyer’s By the Bomb’s Early Light provided background on the Cold War, the underlying tensions that marked the
period, and, for my purposes, its profound effect on children. Ruth Feldstein’s 

*Motherhood in Black and White* neatly captured the paradox of a period when political ideology intersected with conservative notions of gender and motherhood to prop up iterations of mid-twentieth century liberalism.\(^{21}\)

Chapter 5 explores the ways the older narrative of what made an American was replaced by a new narrative of diversity, multiculturalism, and the politics of diversity. This chapter benefited from Novick’s work in another way. He describes how the work of social historians of the 1960s continued to contribute to the undoing of consensus history. They told the stories of those previously left out of the telling of the story American history - women, African Americans and other minorities, immigrants and workers. The sixties and seventies saw a democratizing of the story of America and a complicating of the national narrative.

This democratizing idea of what is and what is not an appropriate subject for the scholar has made room for the study of dolls, toys and amusements. A few particular books were very important to me as models of the possibilities of interdisciplinary studies. Gary Schmidt’s *Making Americans: Children’s Literature from 1930 to 1960* could not be more relevant to my study of the Orange and Landmark books. Schmidt looks at a great number of children’s books written during the mid-twentieth century to see what they teach children about being an American. In his chapter on the Orange books he concludes, as do I, that they present an idealized America characterized by noble deeds in the name of freedom and democracy. He also points out ways that some of

the authors, especially later in this period, tried to introduce children to a more realistic portrayal of America that includes racism.

Julia Mickenberg’s *Learning from the Left* was particularly helpful for understanding children’s literature and politics. She offers an exhaustive analysis of the influence of politics on children’s books in the mid-century. Mickenberg examines why and how children’s literature escaped censorship at the height of McCarthyism during the Cold War, noting in particular that assumptions about the apolitical nature of childhood caused people to ignore what was being written. The protection given to children’s books authors was tentative and penetrable, as I will illustrate through my discussion of the history of Landmark Books’ story of the FBI.

Childhood itself has become a major academic industry with educators, pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, psychoanalysts and legal experts all participating in a huge social enterprise to define “the child” and his or her experience. Even approaching a literature as vast as that produced about the twentieth century child is daunting but a few texts remain crucial to note. Many histories begin where Phillipe Aries’ classic *Centuries of Childhood* ended: the relatively recent invention of childhood. For most of history, Aries maintained, children were perceived as either extraneous distractions or essential members of the economic unit we define as the family. Many American historians agree that the concept of childhood itself was “invented” in the nineteenth and twentieth century and was linked to the country’s industrial revolution. Against this backdrop I sought to understand how this concept has developed, been propagated, and undermined over the course of the twentieth century and in to the twenty-first.
Howard Chudacoff’s *Children at Play* argues that beginning in the 20th century and accelerating in its second half, play becomes much more directed in response to developments in technology, educational theory. He points out that the rural agrarian household did not allow for much leisure time, a crucial point for my look at the arguments given by the nascent toy industry during the nation’s industrialization. Gary Cross’s *Kids’ Stuff* and his other works detail the changing industrial and commercial world and its role in promoting children’s fantasies about their place in the evolving adult world.22

In *The End of American Childhood, A History of Parenting from Life on the Frontier to the Managed Child* Paula Fass defines “life on the frontier” as a period when adults shaped the child’s “autonomy and grit.” This definition harkens back to many of the early twentieth centuries texts that I found that define American character as rooted in the land and in individual gumption. Fass challenges Chudacoff’s central premise that little changed about children until recently. She sees a big change from the nineteenth century when American children were more independent and adventurous (certainly than their European peers) to recent times when they are more restricted under the management of modern parents.23

Miriam Forman-Brunell’s *Made to Play House* is groundbreaking in its examination of children’s agency. Forman-Brunell shows that girls and boys played with


23 Paula Fass, *The End of American Childhood: A History of Parenting from*
dolls in ways that could not have been prescribed or predicted by the people who made them. Even toys that seemed designed to reproduce certain gendered behaviors are retooled and reimagined in the hands of children. Her study leaves off in 1930 but is useful for exploring girlhood in the 21st century. David Nasaw’s book *Children of the City* puts children squarely in the political realm and helped me see children as agents of change, not only consumers of goods.24

Two books were especially helpful in bringing to the fore the uses of children’s literature in shaping character: Anne MacLeod writes in *American Childhood* that children’s literature teaches “abstract moral qualities” that would “function as models for the young citizen of the republic.” Steven Mintz argues in *Huck’s Raft* that children’s books primarily served to prepare children for public responsibilities. It has been crucial for me, however, to add consumer behavior as a replacement for public responsibility to this understanding of how we train children for adult life. The stories we tell are one piece of this training, but the way it is accessed – increasingly through shopping, sends another important message.

In recent years the literature on consumer culture has become especially rich. The widespread availability of American advertising catalogues, industrial reports and marketing materials have allowed a flowering of historical studies on the consumer as citizen. For models on how to read advertisements for what they said about conceptions of the consuming public I relied on Roland Marchand’s *Advertising the American Dream*,

and Charles McGovern’s, *Sold American*. Marchand uses advertising to document the
anxieties and hopes that companies played on to encourage the public to seek solace in
consumption. In *Sold American*, McGovern points out that advertisers regularly asserted
that everyone was part of an “inclusive democracy” in which they were all “equal in their
access to goods…”25 This, of course, does not prove true.

William Leach’s *Land of Desire* provided an invaluable guide to the modern
commercial world into which children’s toys emerged as a mass-produced commodity. It
shed light on how the industry helped shape the “new American” child – replete with its
sometime promotion of militarism, xenophobic nationalism, anti-immigrant and racist
attitudes – in the decades immediately before World War I. Without the department store,
mass marketing and the creation of a national consumer economy the toy could not have
become a force in creating a national identity. The creation of desire democratized the
want for goods while simultaneously limiting access to them. Jackson Lears’, *Fables of
Abundance* details the role advertising played in spurring the evolving consumer
economy and our desire to possess.

Of course, Warren Susman’s work is foundational as he opened up cultural
studies. He wrote in *Culture as History* that the “the story of American culture” was the
emergence of the consumer economy and, with it the shift from a focus on the Puritan
work ethic to one of leisure and the “culture of abundance.”26 His argument that the

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University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98.

26 Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth
1920s and 1930s was a period of ambivalence about the emergence of a consumer economy is embodied in my argument about the ladies’ doll show.

In my examination of material culture and the acts of collecting I was influenced by Steven Gelber’s *Hobbies*, which contextualizes the act of collecting and analyzes hobbies from a market perspective. He suggests that sometimes hobbies reflected resistance to market forces while at other times they stood as an example of the notion of productive leisure. Once dismissed as a signifier of insanity, hobbies soon became a mainstay of productive leisure. Susan Stewart’s careful examination of the miniature in *On Longing* helped me understand the ideas we project on to the miniature and examine how display impacts consumer buying. Lisa Jacobson’s *Raising Consumers*, similarly examines how children are influenced by consumer culture. Her work re-focuses children’s consumer culture on the early 20th century, rather than the post war era so often credited with the rise of consumer culture in America.

Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* helps historicize and contextualize the cultural value/capital that have been uncritically given to certain artforms. His book brilliantly illustrates that the lines drawn between what the masses and the elites enjoy are not nearly as fixed as is so often assumed and should not be taken for granted. Through an analysis of popular culture we can see that contemporary understandings of class

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distinctions in popular entertainment are not derived from the art itself but from our own ideas of what consists of high and low brow entertainment.\textsuperscript{29}

Work on amusement parks and texts on historical monuments and reenactments helped me place Freedomland among the more famous parks and their missions and trajectories. John Kasson’s \textit{Amusing the Millions} helped contextualize the way industrialization and wage earning impacted leisure time. Coney Island will always be a touchstone for exploring modern entertainment. Scott Boehm examines the Smithsonian’s partnership with a corporate funding for an exhibit on American wars resulted in a triumphalist narrative dictated by investors. Amy Tyson explores the work of maintaining the illusion of authenticity and realness in historical re-enacting, which helped me understand the emotional labor of working at Freedomland. Christine Boyer’s analysis of the South Street Seaport is useful for considering the ways an historic site goes through cycles and delivers different messages to different audiences, depending on consumer trends and private corporate investment.\textsuperscript{30}

Finally, the fifth chapter on the American Girl doll, which began this exploration, straddles media studies, girlhood studies, consumerism and globalization. I found post-modernist theorists Frederic Jameson, Arjun Appadurai, and Svetlana Boym extremely

\textsuperscript{29} Lawrence Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America}, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).


helpful in their conceptualization of the way nostalgia with its emotional appeal was used successfully to sell products. The consideration of nostalgia reframed the way I think about how history is told when used in the service of marketing. Paul Grainge has shown in his article, Advertising the Archive, that nostalgia in advertising helped American companies to reposition American national identity as a global one for the twenty-first century marketplace.31

Nancy Martha West’s shows in Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia highlights how snapshots allowed people to “arrange their lives in such a way that painful or unpleasant aspects were systematically erased.”32 This notion was helpful to me in understanding the American Girl Company’s use of photos in their store.

In the last decade Girlhood Studies has blossomed as an interdisciplinary field with a rich literature that employs an intersectional understanding of the experience of young females in America. Angela McRobbie’s work on post-feminism, in particular, helped me understand the ways consumer culture (and notions of “girl power”) can negate or depoliticize movements like feminism. Naomi Klein’s No Logo, shows the subtle and insidious ways global brands have influenced every facet of life.33


Lizabeth Cohen argues in *A Consumers’ Republic* that Americans “emerged as two different kinds of consumers: the citizen consumer, seen as responsible for “safeguarding the general good of the nation, in particular for prodding government to protect rights, safety, and fair treatment of individual consumers in the private market place,’ and the purchaser consumer ‘viewed as contributing to the larger society more by exercising purchasing power than through asserting themselves politically.’”

Cohen points out that Veblen argued “that social emulation expressed through extravagant personal display – not the purely rational economic motives to enrich oneself – motivated all social classes within the capitalist society of the Gilded Age to aspire to the standard set by the elite.” I agree with the widely accepted notion that irrational motives can be ascribed to consumer behavior. However, I believe there are subtle and not-so-subtle influences on consumption less strictly bound to social class and the desire to be one of the elite that guide both child and adult consumption. Too often, though, children’s consumer tendencies and the advertisements that appeal to them have been overlooked for what they indicate about the behavior of future voting citizens. I look in this thesis at examples of what indicators of success and have successfully transferred to children as well as those that have failed.

Like production, consumption is not a passive process. And yet, we often treat it as an inevitable by-product of industrial society. When we are buying leisure items (as opposed to the necessities like food, shelter, and clothing) the process of consumption takes on more meaning. Children are not usually the ones buying food, shelter and

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clothing. They are by and large buying exclusively leisure items – toys, dolls, games and books – and learning each step of the way certain active behaviors. I am asking how we not only raise consumers, but what it means that leisure is what first shapes our role as consumer citizens and how that process is disguised as either purely educational or purely fantastical – when no product on the market is truly either one.

Historians have documented how our history has been shaped through the writings of a wide range of intellectuals from John Dewey to more recent American educators, psychologist, and sociologists. John Dewey modeled what that generation of philosophers and educators thought about the qualities that distinguish our new American citizenry. As noted earlier, G. Stanley Hall wrote on the role of toys in the psychological development of the child as another ways of shaping the new American child. Or, more poignantly, we can look to the early twentieth century writings of W.E.B. DuBois to see the contentious role that race and racism played in relegating certain citizens to the top and others to the bottom.

I see my work as providing another lens through which to understand American identity during different periods of the twentieth century. I view toys, dolls and amusements as objects with cultural significance beyond their role in play. I selected objects that, to my knowledge, have not been the subject of serious study. I found no work done on the Doll Show, nor any comparison with the Toy Fair of the early part of the century. While there is a considerable body of work on children’s literature, Gary


Schmidt stands out for his consideration of the role of that literature in teaching children about their role in American society. It is only in his recent chapter on the *Childhood of Famous Americans* books that this series has received attention, although he sees “quiet challenges to the mythic narrative” in the books, I see a preponderance of reinforcement of consensus history. There has been little else written about the book series. And, more surprisingly, there has been no serious study of Landmark books or, for that matter, about the politics related to children’s literature within Random House in the fifties. Freedomland, a huge history-oriented endeavor, has received no scholarly attention. Finally, the advertising strategies and historical stories of American Girl have been studied but without a consideration of the multi-faceted and changing approach to its depiction of American girlhood. Treated as if it developed from thin air in the 1980s, the brand has not been placed in the broader conversation about historical narratives for children.

Chapter 1

Made in America: The Rise of the American Toy Industry

“An excellent practice… is teaching the child how to make his own toy…. Playthings of great price excite vanity and pride.”

1905

“Toy Manufacturers from all over the country … will be busy this week arranging their samples for the big toy fair…. The fair will be larger this year than ever owing to the anticipated shortage in playthings from the German Empire.”

1915

Written a mere ten years apart, the quotes above exemplify just how quickly toy making in the United States shifted from the home to the factory. In 1905 the Washington Post extolled the value of learning to make your own toy at home. By 1915, toy manufacturers nation-wide were taking advantage of a new market and preparing to expand their consumer base. This chapter, which traces the rise of the toy industry in America, offers an introduction to the major themes of this thesis. It will demonstrate the importance of toys in the lives of children, how the early toy industry positioned itself as quintessentially American and appealed to patriotism to promote its product, how toys reflected the culture’s values as well as its ideas about gender, race, and class and how children of different race and class had different access to toys.

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign Donald Trump remarked that he would bring manufacturing jobs back to the United States. Embedded in the oft-repeated comment was the idea that manufacturing made and continues to make America “great.” This chapter demonstrates that this notion was similarly trumpeted one hundred years ago.

1 “Scientists Say that Toys are the Best Teachers for the Little Ones,” The Washington Post, November 12, 1905, SM10.

earlier when the burgeoning toy industry positioned the toy not merely as a luxury but as a necessary part of the American life. The industry appealed specifically to American patriotism to win protectionist tariffs against foreign toy importers.

**The Progressive Era**

The Progressive Era, the period between 1895 and 1915, brought massive changes to all facets of American life. As the United States shifted from an agricultural to an industrial economy, people moved from rural areas to the city and waves of immigrants arrived on our shores. Every aspect of American life seemed to change. Political power shifted from small town and local officials to city, state and federal governments, and assembly line workers in huge factories displaced home based skilled craftsmen working in small shops. Supermarket chains like A&P and department stores like Abraham & Strauss and Filenes replaced local dry goods stores.

The social forces transforming the country had a particularly profound effect on childhood itself. The child who once provided an indispensable pair of hands on rural farms and plantations to milk the cows, feed animals, maintain the home, pick the cotton, and work the fields, often from dawn to dusk, was not nearly as central to the industrial economy. As Gary Cross points out, children were “no longer automatically inducted into the labor force as they had been when work was done at home.” While some children still worked in the factory, newly arrived immigrants took many of the jobs.

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3 See, for example, the broad literature on Progressivism. For example: Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966).

Furthermore, Progressive Era child labor laws and protective legislation prevented some forms of exploitation of children. The United States Children’s Bureau was created in 1912 to investigate and report on the wellbeing of children. The 1916 Keating-Owen Act prohibited the trade of goods made in factories that employed children and laws began regulating the age at which a child could enter into various trades. Many states also passed laws requiring that children attend school. Holidays, weekends, and after-school hours became free time for most children to play or read. Idle hands – once the “devil’s workshop” – presented an opportunity for the newly emerging toy industry to build its reputation on selling toys that would introduce children to the American way of life.

The Rise of the Toy Industry

Toy making in the U.S. began as a small scale, informal and largely artisan-based enterprise. Rag dolls, homemade rocking horses, hand-carved wooden trains, balls made of scraps of yarn or cloth, were hand-crafted by parents or neighbors. At the turn of the century, some small companies produced toys (tin soldiers, iron piggy banks, wooden dolls) and some larger companies began to grow. Nonetheless, mass produced toys were most likely to be imports from Germany sold to wealthy American families, probably living near the ports like New York City.5

But as the U.S. industrialized it became clear this would change. One 1908 article entitled “Americans Invent Wonderful Toys,” predicted the future success of American industry: “The coming to the forefront of the electrical toys in this year’s Christmas display is a signal for the foreign toy-makers to watch out for American competition.

Practically all the devices with motor and dynamo attachments are of domestic make.”^6
For years, Germany had been the primary toy producer in Europe and for the United States. Dolls, in particular, were by and large imported from overseas and available only to wealthy children.

By the 1910s, the toy industry had grown and was dominated by a number of sizable commercial firms that marketed their products to adults in magazines, newspapers and radio. Manufactured toys became a mainstay of new department stores and mail order catalogues. One New York Times advertisement from 1910 noted, “The Christmas Store is Ready! And Toys are Foremost! ... Toy Store Twice As Big As a Year Ago.”^7 Nonetheless, Germany still dominated the market.

In January of 1913, eight months before the outbreak of World War I in Europe, the United States Congress was poised to reduce the rate of a tariff on imports for toys. The new American toy manufacturers vigorously opposed this reduction and wrote to the House Ways and Means Committee to object. Without this protective tariff, one manufacturer suggested, the “budding doll industry in America would be crushed at once, since we could not hope to overcome by special machinery in this line the advantage Germany holds by its cheap labor.”^8 The company spokesman pleaded, “Under the

circumstances, we trust your committee will not disturb the tariff on toys, and stand by
the people and the good industries of the United States, who are endeavoring to make the
United States the most prosperous and leading nation in the world.⁹

In addition to arguing that their survival depended on the tariff, the toy industry
gave other reasons to support their businesses. They argued, as Gary Cross points out,
that during a time of war, “American-made toys were essential for building homefront
morale.”¹⁰ By introducing the child to the “American way of life” the industry would
support workers, consumers, families, women, and patriotic ideals. In addition, the
industry argued, it was essential to protect the toy industry because toys were
educational. One company spokesman said, “You will note by looking through our
catalogue that we make a large variety of accessories and equipment, all of which go to
make a complete railway and we feel that these items, when handled by a small boy, act
more or less as an educational feature.”¹¹ Remarkably, these arguments proved

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⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, “Tariff Schedules,” Hearings Before the Committee
of The Schieble Toy and Novelty Co., W. E. Schieble, President January 27, 1913, Dayton Ohio.
https://books.google.com/books?id=EE8-
AAAAYAAJ&dq=ways+and+means+committee+toy+manufacturing+1913&source=gbs_naval
ks_s 5218

¹⁰ Cross, Kids’ Stuff, 32.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, Letter to the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Congressional
Hearing 5211, The Ives Manufacturing Corporation, H.C. Ives, Treasurer, January 25, 1913,
Bridgeport CT 5215. Available at:
https://books.google.com/books?id=lp4AAAAYAAJ&pg=PA5216&lpg=PA5216&dq=budding+
doll+industry+in+America+would+be+crushed+at+once&source=bl&ots=qhaDYY5gg2&sig=--
PMe-EhUQYnAnArL-Y-
lbVJznw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjkhqHPm6_VAhWQOD4KHeS1DHMQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=budding%20doll%20industry%20in%20America%20would%20be%20crushed%20at%20once&f=false.
convincing and the protective legislation passed in 1913. The industry won support for
the tariff even when it did not necessarily make economic sense - the tariff would not
necessarily preserve long held jobs, since the industry was young, nor would it guarantee
that the industry would become successful.

Not long after these arguments were put forth the outbreak of the First World War
in Europe halted imports from Germany. In 1913 The Washington Post announced, “Toy
Shops are Silent, Germans at War, and Famine is Feared at Christmas. All Imports
Ceased.”12 The article warned, “Germany, where 95 percent of all the dollies in the world
come from, is at war. Who is going to bother with shipping dolls and lead soldiers and
Noah’s arks when clanking troops have to be transported?”13

Both economic and ideological interests helped propel the American toy industry.
The halt in German imports offered the American toy industry an opening. Although the
government placed limits on other sectors of American manufacturing, the toy industry
was allowed to grow. As Gary Cross explains, “When imports vanished during World
War I and both patriotism and isolationism were on the rise, the Toy Manufacturers of the
U.S.A. won permission from the government to keep producing toys.”14

The passage of the protective tariff in 1913 and the halt in German imports
allowed American manufacturers to secure their place in both the domestic and world
market. The industry promoted its products by emphasizing that they were made in
America and superior to Germany’s. Some toy manufacturers even suggested that

14 Cross, Kids’ Stuff, 32.
German toys were made through the exploitation of child labor. As William Leach argues in *Land of Desire*, “American business relied on whatever stereotypes it could to eliminate German competition.”

The 1914 “Made in U.S.A.” exposition was held to “foster and encourage the demand for goods made in the United States.” In short time American toy makers claimed to “revolutionize” the industry. As the European war continued, demand for American toys had begun to grow both domestically and overseas. In 1916 *The New-York Tribune* reported, “The World Looks to America for Its Toys.” The *Tribune* gleefully predicted that American made toys “will not only find their way into the homes of nearly every family in the United States next Christmas, but the youngsters in nearly every foreign country with the exception of Germany and Austria will be made merry with the products of American toy factories.”

By America’s entry into World War I, the American toy industry had become large enough to form its own trade group - the Toy Manufacturers of America – which lobbied for the industry in Washington and organized advertising campaigns on behalf of the toy manufacturers. The industry continued to appeal to patriotism in promoting its

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18 “‘World Looks to America for its Toys,’” B4.

toys. For example, in 1918, the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A. produced an advertising limerick they hoped would become as ingrained in the minds of young children as the alphabet.20

“The pennies spent on Yankee toys
For Uncle Sam’s own girls and boys
In turn, of course, go back again,
To our native workingmen.
American- the workman’s hand
American- ’twas built and planned
American- in spirit, too,
American’s toy gift to you.” 21

The limerick suggested that buying a toy is a patriotic act. To win the loyalty of consumer-citizens domestic toy manufacturers developed various gimmicks to give children a feeling of inclusion in a patriotic activity. The Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A. even created the “American-made Toy Brigade,” through which they symbolically “militarized” groups of young consumers. Children received a button indicating that, “they have expressed a sincere desire to stick to and ask for American-made toys. The expression of this intention is the only fee there is for membership in the brigade.”22 This is an early example of teaching children to vote with their pocketbooks. It was through their consuming habits that children could show they were active participants in American democracy.

Howard Chudacoff notes that early 20th century toy manufacturers “fashioned many of the era’s mass-produced toys to appeal to parents rather than directly to children


themselves.” Nonetheless, the toy industry imagined a child consumer and focused in on that child’s purchasing power. In 1921, the trade group once again went to the government for continued protection, petitioning the Senate Finance Committee to maintain the high tariff on imported toys from Germany and other foreign countries in order to protect American interests. Spokesmen for the manufacturers “piled high the committee table with toys, ranging all the way from wooden letter blocks to electric trains, to support their argument that they had revolutionized the industry by coupling the educational with the amusement feature for the children.” They argued that the American industry had improved the quality of the toys available for Americans “and had turned from the ‘flimsy, namby-pamby’ things imported before the war to substantial toys that laid the groundwork for the child’s education.” Again, toys became part of a moral crusade against poor craftsmanship, a weak foreign work ethic, and unproductive leisure time.

Manufacturers sought to familiarize Americans with the wonders of their new factory system. A strange film produced by the Ford Motor Company in 1920 called “Playthings of Childhood” attempted to bridge the gap between the magical world of handmade toys and the ingenuity of mass production. The film opened with a text

23 Chudacoff, *Children At Play*, 78.

24 Jackson Lears has focused on how advertisers created irrational and illogical desires but here we see an example of a pragmatic strategies that have economic underpinnings and do not rely on whimsical fantasy. Roland Marchand points out that advertising the American Dream was common for adults before trends shifted to focus on hopes and anxieties rather than logic. The toy industry reflects that shift as well. See: Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

extolling childhood play: “The Joys of Childhood; that Fairyland of memories that hangs forever in our thoughts. An old rag doll or tin train played wonders with the imagination, and everything else was forgotten in – Toyland.”^26

Words like “fairyland,” “imagination,” and “wonders” primed the viewer to recall the magic and fantasy of childhood while the wistful tone of the narrator suggested to adults that although their childhood is past, toys could recapture that experience. The next frame looked to ancient history to legitimize the modern toy industry by steeping it in tradition: “Joint dolls and crocodiles with movable jaws were found in the tombs of Egypt. In 1672 the first English toy invention was patented. Since 1852 patents have come from all over the world.” The film mythologized toys as exotic and ancient (because they existed in Egypt) but also established them as civilized and modern (the current use of patents and their British legacy). The film suggested that toys were part of the backbone of American society – as if they were and always had been a crucial part of both timeless childhood and advanced civilizations.

After this narration about ancient Egypt, the film cut to factory workers on an assembly line making toys. The workers – all white men and women – assembled, painted, sanded, sewed and braided the different parts of toys and dolls. Individual workers each assembled a different part of a toy piano. The film focused primarily on the people themselves, some of whom were smiling at the camera while showing off their work. Although the workers were each shown performing the same task over and over again, the film suggested not the monotony of the assembly line but the pleasure of work in a factory that made objects that made a child happy. Toward the end of the film the 

assembly line process gave way to more intricate, individual work: A worker fine-tuned the keys on the toy piano, screwing them on individually and then testing them. Although the worker performed a standardized task, the implication was that he was an artisan and great care therefore went in to the production of Ford toys.

The film closed with a bizarre stop-motion scene in which the toys came to life: First, a little blond girl goes to sleep and the scene cuts to a toy chest. The toy chest opens and out comes the doll we saw being assembled earlier, and then two baby dolls. The two baby dolls go and share a bed while the “mother” doll prims in front of a mirror before tucking them in and leaving the scene. In the next scene the two baby dolls get in and out of a bath after being washed by a third doll. The next scene shows a small clown and clay elephant performing miniature circus tricks. The film ended with the little blond girl waking up, rubbing her eyes and looking around, indicating that this was all a dream – a dream in which mass produced toys entered the homey space of her bedroom.27

This film touched on many themes of this thesis. It showed how industry attempted to blur the distinction between lovingly handcrafted items and the affordable, mass produced toys of modern industry. It placed mass-produced toy culture within a longer history of individually crafted homemade childhood toys. It attempted to minimize the alienation of the factory and humanize the de-skilled labor that goes into producing Ford products – which, in addition to cars, had come to include toys, dolls and other playthings. Finally, the film minimized the potential alienation of factory work by showing the connection of the work to the children themselves: the mass produced doll

enters the child’s bedroom bringing joy and excitement, just as surely as the homemade rag doll of an earlier era, made by a parent, brought joy to their child.

From this Ford propaganda film we also learn who toys were produced for—who would count as a viable consumer and American citizen. Childhood itself, as Viviana Zelizer has pointed out, was being redefined and sentimentalized in the early 20th century, as families left the farm for cities and children left the workplace for schools. In the Ford propaganda film the white, blond and female child is the quintessential sentimentalized child whose dreams come true through mass production and consumerism. *She* doesn’t work in the factory; the factory works for *her*.

It is instructive to look at the kind of toys being produced at the turn of the century to understand the industry’s importance in promoting ideas about what makes an American. Although these toys do not reflect a coherent narrative about America like that which would emerge in the 1950s, they do carry with them particular ideas about America, gender roles, class, and race. By and large toys reproduced traditional and stereotypical notions of particular races. In his 2008 work on children’s consumer culture, Chudacoff points out that mass-produced toys were designed with white children (and white parents) in mind. During this time toys, when they did depict African Americans, it was as “lazy, greedy, mischievous, and jovial.”

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29 Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 78.

In the wake of the Spanish-American War, which marked the emergence of America as a world imperial power, the Teddy Bear became a signature product of the emerging toy industry. It was famously named after Theodore Roosevelt, the country’s gun-loving, outdoorsman president who led the famed Rough Riders’ charge up “San Juan Hill.” Originally, in 1903, Morris Michtom, the future founder of the Ideal Toy Company sold “handmade cloth bears from his New York candy store.” Soon the Teddy Bear was mass-produced at a factory in New York City and by 1907, Teddy Bears became the mainstay of the new Ideal Toy Company. Not only did the Teddy Bear embody America’s identity as an imperial, if benevolent, power; it also defined masculinity as rugged. The Teddy Bear was “a doll that was acceptable to boys because it was ‘masculine.’” A similar toy produced in 1909, was “Teddy in Africa” which, as one ad announced, showcased the former President performing “remarkable gymnastic feats without losing his pith helmet or his spectacles.” This toy equated power with physical fitness and flexibility, all the while holding on to the markers of strength and civilized intelligence – Roosevelt’s helmet and, of course, his glasses.

In addition to the changes set in motion by World War I (fewer imports, higher tariffs and an emphasis on patriotism), the commercialization of Christmas was a boon to the toy industry. Stephen Nussbaum locates the beginning of the tradition of gift giving at Christmas in the mid-19th century. Christmas, once a religious holiday, was increasingly

31 Cross, Kids’ Stuff, 94.
32 “Union Teddy Bears,” The Washington Post, December 01, 1907, MS1.
33 Cross, Kids’ Stuff, 94.
34 Cross, Kids’ Stuff, 95.
associated with consumerism and specifically the giving of presents. The ritual of Midnight Mass was now followed by the ritual of opening Christmas morning gifts.

Even as early as 1880 Christmas shopping had become a national pastime. Huge crowds packed shopping areas in New York City. One article about Atlanta’s Christmas shopping scene in 1897 noted that decorated shop windows had come to define the feeling of Christmas by serving to “brighten up the streets, to make the children feel that Christmas is really coming…” The article lists the vast variety of store bought toys available for purchase. In a certain sense the display of toys in the store windows came to replace, or at least stand alongside, nativity scenes in church windows as a sign of Christmas.

Certainly by the early 20th century Christmas had emerged as a holiday synonymous with gift giving and consumer purchased, mass-produced, disposable toys entered the lives of millions of American families. Regular holidays provided the imperative for parents to replace store-bought, mass marketed toys at scheduled intervals.

At a time when the nation’s foreign policies oscillated between isolationism and imperialism, the popularity of war toys was indisputable. “War toys!” had become

“foremost in every toy shop in Atlanta, and in the minds of practically every Atlanta

36 “For more than a fortnight thousands and tens of thousands have thronged the streets and packed the stores in their search for articles to be smuggled mysteriously into their homes, which will be brought forth to-day to gladden the heart of young and old alike.” “Yule-Tide Cheer.” New York Tribune, December 25, 1880, 1.

37 “Christmas Toys in Great Array: Atlanta's Shop Windows Are a Delight,” The Atlanta Constitution, December 13, 1897, 9.

38 “Christmas Toys in Great Array: Atlanta's Shop Windows Are a Delight,” The Atlanta Constitution, December 13, 1897, 9.

boy,” announced the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1909. “And the war spirit finds itself evidenced in the Christmas creations which grace the many windows and shops of the city.” The stores were “filled with guns of every description, miniature cannons … bristling with tin bayonets.” The newspaper agreed that, “the displays present an appalling sight” as “the envious eye of the Atlanta boy picture[ing] bloody fields, gallant charges and even death… victory in some dream world.”40 By 1916, even before the U.S. had entered the war, military toys dominated the market.

Many toys were clever replicas of commodities like the railroad or the automobile, which symbolized the progress of modern, industrial America. These toys also appealed to adult consumers who marveled at the modern inventions of industrialism. One 1907 article stated, “There is scarcely a human invention that has not here its toy replica. Many of these are so enticing that even an adult feels a half guilty longing for them.”41 The cleverness and inventiveness of new toys proved to be a powerful impetus to buy them. “The days seem far away when tops and kites and sleds satisfied the Christmas ambition of the American boy,” remarked a writer in the *New York Tribune*. “Now it is toy railroads, telephones, submarine boats and automobiles that fill his Christmas stocking.” The paper was starry-eyed about one inventive toy in particular: “One of the most elaborate of these automatic toys, which appeals directly to the inventive genius inherent in the American, is a railroad, with its equipment of switches, signals, freight houses and stations.”42 F.A.O. Schwarz prominently displayed a

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“numberless” array of “electric and magnetic toys… among the newest [of which were a] mechanical … train of cars, with engine and tracks, stations lighted by electricity, signals, guardhouses and every other appendage of a real railroad.”

Even before there was much of an American toy industry, improvements in toys were reported as reflective of American ingenuity. Childhood play with these toys would help cultivate future industrial laborers as well as inventors. Ingenious toys also garnered a lot of attention, particularly when they were life like. One 1897 article examined dolls and toy soldiers whose “imitations of life is so perfect as to cause great admiration.”

In 1908 The New York Times touted “American ingenuity” as a boon for youngsters and producers alike, “some clever American mechanic hit upon the scheme of substituting electricity for springs, greatly to the joy of the American boy, and at the same time greatly to the advantage of American toy makers.” Notably, it was the boy – not the girl – who had access to America’s future. As the next chapter will explain, girls were primarily seen as guardians of America’s past.

Toy versions of machines were promoted as a way to encourage creativity among American children. “The trend of design of many of the newer toys adheres closely to that of machines of industry. Trucks, steam shovels … highly developed electric train systems…are but a few of the mechanical toys that are being offered to encourage the mental development and ingenuity of American childhood…”

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44 “Christmas Toys in Great Array: Atlanta's Shop Windows Are a Delight,” The Atlanta Constitution, December 13, 1897, 9.


modern American mechanisms were said to appeal “directly to the inventive genius inherent in the American…” These mechanized toys, while certainly appealing to all children, were not available to all. They came with a price tag that would have placed them beyond the financial scope of any but the middle or upper class.

An article dedicated to “Santa's Stock of Toys,” noted a “visual feast” for young boys who only wanted to see “models of aeroplanes which would actually fly.” The article notes that, “Old St. Nick may be old in years, but in other respects he is just as ‘up to the minute’ as any highly enterprising business man… Every year the youngsters find the most up-to-date things in their stockings.”

In America, even Santa Claus was a modern capitalist. One store window displayed a modernized Santa Claus whose sleigh had been replaced by a mechanized car:

Gazing at the tempting displays, both on the streets and sidewalks and behind the show windows, the reminiscent gray beard could not but envy the American boy of to-day, for, whether it was the living show window picture of ‘Santa Claus up to date,’ riding in an automobile whose wheels really revolved and whose warning horn truly sounded, or merely the realistic cardboard model of a battleship, the moral pointed was the same.

While toymakers worked to create more and more complicated, fancy or technologically advanced toys to compete for children’s attention, “experts” and reporters of many varieties extolled the virtues of the simplest toys, arguing that simple, sturdy, traditional toys were the “best” for children. What “best” has meant in different decades has fluctuated – from creativity to entrepreneurship or scientific ingenuity, the message

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of the American spirit has prevailed. But in the early 20th century, despite what the experts said, the growing toy industry was not going to profit from the kind of simple toys once made in the home. Its purpose was to sell the most complicated, sophisticated toys – and at a price.

**Girls and Boys**

Girls and boys received very different kinds of toys early in the century. Both belied the kinds of roles that children were expected to fill in society as adults: the boy’s role was that of a citizen of the nation, while the girl’s was a citizen of the home. Toys for boys re-enforced the notion that boys would be part of American society on both the consuming and producing sides. The toys pushed the limits of mechanics, science and engineering. Girls however, were more limited in their participation as consumers. Their toys harkened back to traditional domestic activities and were less often the medium for ingenuity.

In 1925 the *New York Times* still pointed out the ways that the industry produced toys that modeled adult behavior for boys. “In some cases the manufacturers of the industrial equipment of which the toys are replicas are making and selling them to children in order to familiarize the latter with their products. In this they are following the maxim that ‘the boy is father to the man’ and that what a boy likes or respects because of its merits, apparent to him when a child, will be held in the same regard when he becomes a man.”

Americans would produce more sophisticated mechanical toys for girls but generally toys confirmed that their roles were still confined and girls were excluded from critical aspects of modern American citizenship. Race, was also a dividing

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line for the toy industry, which not only advertised almost exclusively to white children and parents, but used racial stereotypes to sell racist goods.

Even as early as 1908 there were complaints about the lack of interesting toys for girls, although the writer of one *New York Times* article could only imagine interesting toys for girls as those that would “appeal to her natural instincts” by reproducing the activities of domestic life.” This would include kitchen appliances. While everyone “is catering to the American boy, they don’t do as much for his Sister [sic],” the piece observed. For her, “there is just one new kind of doll, a ‘rolopoly.’” Adapted from the Japanese’s, which turns somersaults…” The article goes on, “Nobody makes toy washing machines or bread mixers to teach the little girls the business methods of to-day. Nobody tries to appeal to her natural inclinations.” The reporter goes on to surmise that, “probably this is because nearly all dolls come from Germany, where the Emperor preaches ‘children, church, and cooking’ for the girls.”

Another 1907 article cited an abundance of miniature appliances for girls. “There are toy stoves so alluring that there seems no question about the future generation of women having domestic tastes, provided each little girl can have one of them now.” As Gary Cross explains, “Almost all girls’ toys … were accessories to doll play... But there were no career toys as there were for boys. The exception was the occasional nurse’s outfit.” There “were advances, but again, only in the realm of home appliances. Dollhouse appliances mirrored up-to-date domestic technology.”

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53 Cross, *Kids’ Stuff*, 73.
In 1909, an article in the Detroit Free Press stated that dolls made sure a girl’s “instinct for motherhood is roused,” while railways and mechanical toys drove boys “wild with delight.”54 For girls, the innovations remained inside the house and modernity reached them through new domestic tools; dollhouses were advertised as “including every kitchen contrivance that was ever invented for making housework easier.”55

**Racialized Toys**

Perhaps because most mass produced dolls were white and presumably made for white consumers, home-made toys continued to be made in one particular category—black dolls. Early in the century, the lack of easily available non-white dolls provoked alternatives. In 1908 The Baltimore Sun featured instructions for making a multiracial collection of dolls at home. These dolls, the article stated, could be made “from discarded dolls of the Anglo-Saxon race.” It continued, “It is perfectly possible to paint the white dolls black, brown, yellow or copper colored, and to dye, frizz or braid their hair into suitable wigs. Care must be taken, however, to see that the eyes are dark when the dark-eyed nations are to be represented.”56

In 1882 an “Illustrated Catalog to the Trade” advertised a line products by Automatic Toy Works was published in New York. It contained detailed drawings of pricey (between $2.50 and $4 in 1882, $63 to $100 today) wind-up mechanical toys that featured figures modeled on black people performing different jobs. A number of the

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54 “Toys show Real Class this Year,” Detroit Free Press, December 5, 1909, 9. See the full quote: “Talking of dolls. The instinct of motherhood is roused throughout small girldom. And here again, the toy-makers meet the demand...Tunnels, railways with terrific curves, and scenic railways are only a few of the mechanical toys warranted to drive boyhood wild with delight.”


56 “Dolls of all Nations,” The Baltimore Sun, December 6, 1908, 19.
illustrations are patently racist. Below are two illustrations of toy figures of black clergymen.

The text accompanying the illustration of “The Celebrated Negro Preacher” on the left reads: “He stands behind a desk, and slowly straightening himself up, turns his head from side to side and gestures vigorously with his arm.” As the preacher “warms to his work, he leans forward over the pulpit, and shakes his head and hand at the audience, and vigorously thumps the desk.” This vigorous movement of the preacher is then described as laughable. “The motions are so life-life and comical that one almost believes that he is actually speaking.” It appears that the figure is comical simply because it represented a black preacher. The caption continues, ”The face and dress alone provoke irresistible laughter. He preaches as long as any preacher ought to, and stops when he gets through.” 57 Since nothing about the dress or facial expression of the preacher is actually unusual, it was considered funny, presumably, because the preacher was black.

The text under “Our New Clergyman” on the right reads: “The description on the opposite page applies to this brudder also.” “Brudder,” a derogatory mispronunciation of “brother,” was used to describe these two wind-up toys representing black clergymen.

No differentiation was made between the calm-faced, well dressed preacher on the right and the robed caricature featured on the left – both are “comical.”

The next page of the catalogue features two African American women, “Aunt Chloe. The Negro Washerwoman” doing laundry and “The Old Nurse” taking care of a white baby.58

The first description reads, “Old Aunt Chloe demonstrates that happiness may be found in a wash tub as well as in a palace.” This description conjures up the notion of the happy slave. The text suggests that young ladies, (meaning young white ladies who would presumably own this toy) might learn from her the lost art of laundering. The text goes on to say, “She is faithful at her toil, and we commend her to our young ladies as an

artist of no mean pretentions, after whom they may pattern if they choose to revive and become proficient in one of the lost accomplishments.”

The “Old Nurse” toy is the materialization of the “Mammy” caretaker – a stereotype popular since the time of slavery in the United States. “This mechanical toy is made to imitate an old negro nurse playing with a white child. Her motions are as natural as life. She holds the child in her hands and when the mechanism is started, (by being wound) she leans backward and forward tossing the child up and down in a most surprising manner.” The reader is told that this is a “very pleasing toy for children and is very popular.”

The next pages feature two toys designated as Chinese. The figures look alike, each with a stereotypical long braid. One is doing laundry and the other is ironing. Like girls, relegated to household chores, these depictions of non-white people take them out of the public realm and squarely in the private service industry.


On the left, “Fing Wing, A Melican Man” is accompanied by text that suggests that laundering comes naturally to him, much like the Old Nurse’s motions as a caretaker were “as natural as life.” This focus on naturalness suggests that laundering or caretaking are inherent abilities of the African American or Asian worker. “When at work, he bends over the tub, and rubs the garment which he holds in his hands with a naturalness so perfect he might easily be mistaken for a real Celestial.” On the right, “Ah-Sin, The Heathen Chinese” is depicted as ironing. The ad for these toys stated that, “The mechanism of these novelties is so perfectly made, that only the greatest abuse can put them out of order.” Go ahead, the ad seems to say, treat them as violently as you can.

Another page has an illustration of “The Woman’s Rights Advocate” who appears to be a black woman, standing much as the preachers earlier in the book stands.

Lest this toy seem like an endorsement of an assertive black woman, the text assures its readers that this toy would “not insist upon the last word.”61 With the exception of a boy on a sled and a creeping baby, all of the mechanical toys in this catalogue are of people working. The work they do is stereotypically prescribed for their race. There is the Italian organ grinder (who “frequently passes his cap for donations”). In this catalogue the prescribed roles for adult African Americans are preacher, washerwoman and nurse (nanny),62 and for a person of Asian descent launderer. The only toys without a racialized description are the white artist

61 Automatic Toy Works Catalog, 13.

62 Automatic Toy Works Catalog, 10.
(though he was likened to the Italian artist Raphael) and the white grandmother whose caretaking is not considered work but a “domestic picture” that is “perfect in miniature.”\textsuperscript{63} Whiteness goes unmarked,\textsuperscript{64} presumably because it was a given while European and African American identities are caricatured. Here, black people are excluded from notions of modernity. These mechanized banks which introduced white children to consumer culture and modern banking also taught them the place of minorities in American society.

The dancing “jigger” was also a popular toy for white children who could afford it at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The “jigger” was a painted wooden toy that caricatured an African-American man. Dressed as a bellhop or other low-status worker, the jigger had an exaggerated smile plastered on his face. The child could make the body dance. One advertisement touting the “wonderful” quality of American toys in 1908 proclaimed, “‘Mr. Jigger’ is a many-jointed, wooden figure which jigs to any tune whistled or sung by merely rapping a board in time. The uncanny dancing manikin [sic] draws crowds which tax the imagination of its larker, who proclaims its virtues as an infant pacifier.…”\textsuperscript{65} In addition to reinforcing racial stereotypes this toy allowed the white child to feel racial superiority. He or she could control the dancing black man who was depicted as always smiling, subservient, and happy to entertain the child-master.

Myla Perkins points out that, “One of the most popular commercially printed black rag dolls was the set made in 1910 by the Davis Milling Co., later called Jemima

\textsuperscript{63} Automatic Toy Works Catalog, 15.


\textsuperscript{65} “Americans Invent Wonderful Toys,” New York Times, December 6, 1908, 7.
Mills, Inc.” She explains, “The set, advertising ‘Funny Rag Dolls,’ consisted of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Moses and their children named Wade Davis and Diana Jemima. The complete set was available in exchange for four flower coupons and sixteen cents.” Of course, “pickanniny” dolls, as well as the male “sambo” dolls and figurines, indoctrinated white children with stereotypes of black culture with which they were largely ignorant. Big eyes, rag dresses, eating watermelons, were a staple of the racist culture. Robin Bernstein recently wrote in *The New York Times*, that the pickaninny, a “dehumanized black juvenile character was comically impervious to pain and never needed protection or tenderness.” She argues that these dehumanizing, racist stereotypes make it impossible to see black children as innocent – or even as children.

In 1908 – when catalogues still regularly featured racist pickaninny dolls or windup toys that caricatured educated black men – the Colored National Baptist Association argued that children should have access to dolls specifically reflecting their race. *The Atlanta Constitution*, a white establishment paper, reported that the group, “in solemn conclave at Lexington, Ky., has gone officially on record as favoring negro dolls for negro babies,” a conclusion that this white newspaper heartily agreed with. The newspaper editorialized that “The Indian baby wants a doll that looks like an Indian

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papoose. The Esquimaux [sic] child would probably not know what to make of a doll unless it looked like an Esquimaux. The babies of Holland are furnished dolls dressed in queer little bonnets and wooden shoes, just like the grown-ups wear. The Kaffir child would not take the same measure of delight in any doll baby that did not look like itself.”

This debate over whether children benefit from buying dolls that look like themselves continues today and is considered throughout this dissertation. In the next chapter, we see how adults and children alike see themselves reflected in the dolls they play with or collect and the dramatic consequences – good and bad – that arise from that identification.

This notion that children should have dolls of their own race reflected the prejudiced notion that it was natural for people of different races to stay within their group. Rather than segregation being natural, it was a reflection of the existing patterns of social segregation and race relations at the time. Despite the end of slavery, black people still lived lives separate, and certainly on unequal terms, from whites. In effect, the newspaper took solace in the idea that nature – as well as the Black Baptist Association – seemed so in line with the social custom of segregation. The solution, according to the paper, “In the future the negro baby must have a doll at Christmas that looks like itself” and that doll must not have the “uncomely and deformed feathers” of the black dolls that had been available until then.

This growing awareness of the absence of “attractive” black dolls spurred Richard Henry Boyd, a former slave, to create a black doll company in Chicago in 1911.70 The

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impulse to produce a “pretty” black doll was picked up by other southern papers. *The Nashville Tennessean* reported that a woman “widely known for her kindliness and philanthropic work,” in Nashville was advocating for “pretty black dolls.” “Mrs. Foxhall Daingerfield…has written a card advocating the manufacture of ‘pretty’ negro dolls for the use of negro children, holding that negro dolls of handsome appearance would go a long way toward instilling in pickaninny minds a regard for the beautiful, and resulting in an ultimate benefit of the entire negro race through the medium of these dolls.” While arguing for less racist dolls, she simultaneously used racist language – the name pickaninny – to describe young black children themselves – conflating the derogatory popular image with the children themselves. Holding two seemingly opposed ideas in her head at once, Mrs. Daingerfield both saw the need for more human and pretty black dolls for black children while she used dehumanizing language to describe them.

Christopher Barton and Kyle Somerville analyze the racism of mechanical banks that proliferated at the time. Molded of cast iron, and produced at the tail end of the 19th century and into the 1930s, they generally featured sambo-like characters. A child placed a coin directly in the figure’s hand and pressed the arm that lifted the coin to the mouth. One such “bank” was a squatting man, with big red lips into which coins were deposited. Others were iron-cast “Aunt Jemimas” or African natives. One particularly offensive “bank” was the “Jolly Nigger” penny bank, a very dark figure with large lips. Barton and Somerville concluded that “constructions of race and class … reproduce ideologies of

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71 “Pretty Negro Dolls For Pickaninnies: Mrs. Foxhall Daingerfield,” *Nashville Tennessean*, December 10, 1908, 2
white superiority which contrast with ‘inferior races.’”²² Not only did the mechanical bank introduce children to racial stereotypes, it also introduced them to banking, the heart of American capitalism. While these racist toys had long been a staple of American toy culture, they reached their zenith in the early twentieth century when the advent of Jim Crow laws legitimated segregation and the attendant racism.

What is significant about these toys is that they basically reproduced and presented to white children familiar racist stereotypes thereby normalizing racism as a part of the twentieth century’s modern American identity. In his dissertation and a lecture given at Brown University, Christopher Dingwall argues that these new, mechanical toys essentially took the racist images of white southern antebellum slave culture and incorporated them into mechanical toys, themselves symbols of the new modern American industrial state, thereby normalizing them in the white child’s world.²³ “Tombo, the Alabama Coon Jigger,” a dancing mechanical African-American wind-up toy, became one of the most popular children’s toys sold in the new toy sections of the modern department stores during the Christmas seasons.²⁴ Like a variety of Aunt Jemima

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“mammy” and Uncle Ben “servant” racist toys it helped make racism a staple in 20th century national culture.

**Shopping and Ethnicity in the Toy Marketplace**

While the toy industry had enormous power to shape gender roles and racial attitudes, it was through the activities of shopping and gift giving that American consumers participated in the widespread acceptance of mass produced toys. It was in the act of buying toys that consumers gained some agency. For the most part, those Americans who could afford to purchase toys did; those who couldn’t became observers of this very American activity or recipients of charity. A class and ethnic or racial divide manifested itself in the places and ways people shopped.

A number of articles at the turn of the century suggested that buying or selling toys for Christmas was a kind of rite of passage for immigrants and evidence of assimilation. In this view America welcomes diverse people. They were breaking ties with the “Old World,” in order to become modern, American citizens. One article described a scene at Ellis Island as a, “Babel of tongues singing the Star Spangled Banner at Christmas celebration.”

In this scene, Christmas and American-ness became intertwined; all language barriers were put aside to introduce young immigrants to the national anthem. The biblical reference to Babel is blended with the nationalistic reference to the Star Spangled Banner, lending religious sanctity to the idea of Americanism.

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75 “How the Children of the Rich and Poor Enjoyed Xmas Trees – But in Different Ways; Babel of Tongues Sing ‘Star Spangled Banner’; Immigrants of Ellis Island Gather Around Christmas Tree in Patriotic Service; Newcomers Get Presents; Ritz-Carlton Also Had a Tree, but Only Languid Interest Is Shown by Children of the Rich.”,” *New York Tribune*, December 24, 1912, 6.
An article published on Christmas Eve in 1906 celebrated Christmas as a time when people of all kinds of backgrounds and ethnicities came together. “Christians and Jews, Italians and Chinamen Share in the Zest of the Holiday Spirit.” Christmas displays in store windows became a site where people of all backgrounds would mingle. Elaborate set-ups of modern toys attracted customers and brought everyone together. For example, in 1902 “A vast crowd of both sexes and old and young massed in Thirty-fourth street before a succession of show windows filled with elaborate and costly mechanical toys, many of them ‘in action.’ And the seniors appeared as much interested in them as the juniors.”

Mechanical dolls and toys were often displayed in store windows. “The store windows containing moving figures are the center of attraction and great crowds are always to be seen around these. Children stand for many minutes watching the strange motions of a doll or a toy soldier and the imitation of life is so perfect as to cause great admiration.” One article noted that the police had to ask that the “performance” in the window be stopped during the lunch hour because the sensation caused by the mechanical doll “impeded pedestrian traffic.”

But ultimately class differences determined who could actually afford to go into a store and buy something. In fact, shopping was not an option for many. An article entitled


78 Christmas Toys in Great Array: Atlanta’s Shop Windows Are a Delight ...The Atlanta Constitution, December 13, 1897; 9.

79 “Window Trims for Furniture Dealers,” The Grand Rapids Furniture Record, December 1, 1906, 1.
“Holiday Shopping Crowd” described adults and children standing in front of a display until pleas were made by the latter to ‘just go in and see how much they are,’ a suggestion that in the majority of cases was met with ‘We’ve got to be moving; there’s lots more to see.’

That same article continues to describe a dense crowd of both rich and poor people and suggests that poor people are happy to just look. Among the crowd were “three wretched little bareheaded waifs from the Tenderloin slums one a girl…in rapt, hopeless, fascinated admiration of the delights beyond the plate glass windows.”

The article goes on to claim that despite their poverty the children were happy. “All were grimy, sans mouchoir [without handkerchief], though much in need of one, but happier than any in the throng.” Nonetheless, a wealthy older man is moved to offer charity. He had been watching a little girl and “pushed out of the crowd, returned with his right hand closed, nudged the girl, and when she extended her hand filled it with small change. All he said was ‘Merry Christmas’ and started off. A minute later she divided the largesse with her companions under a streetlight.”

The description of what seems to be an idyllic scene of generosity is actually a sentimentalized and patronizing view of poor children. Although poor children could gaze at the windows, they were often viewed as “other.” Only at Christmas would such an interchange happen between people from different classes; even then the interactions were limited to small forms of charity, which allowed these “wretched little bareheaded waifs” a moment of inclusion in the wealth of America.


Children who lived in tenement houses came to see the shop windows and one article paints a condescending portrait of them. “The only unattended children who were out in the crowd were grimy little ragamuffins of both sexes, who had filtered in from the tenement house districts to gloat on the rare shows in the display windows and exchange in quaint vernacular comment on the eye feasts.”

Although window shopping and window gazing were becoming an American pastime, not all stores welcomed everyone. William Leach argues that glass windows enabled merchants to limit who could enter their stores. As glass panes became larger and more popular for storefronts, they served as dividers, transparent but solid, literally separating the street population from the customer inside a store. More people could be exposed to the beautiful items on display, but, as Leach explains, there were more limits on who could access them as a consumer. “The result was a mingling of refusal and desire that must have greatly intensified desire, adding another level of cruelty. Perhaps more than any other medium, glass democratized desire even as it dedemocratized [sic] access to goods.” The act of looking enabled poorer children to participate in a consumer/citizen activity vicariously. But they were relegated to second-hand participation in the societal custom of shopping. The term “eye feasts” also equates visual and corporal consumption of nutrition.

The custom of Christmas shopping, especially for children, afforded wealthier people the chance to donate to poorer immigrant populations. One article describes the giving of Christmas gifts at Ellis Island. “Those at Ellis Island were proud that at last

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84 Leach, *Land of Desire*, 63.
they had reached a country where they could enjoy civil and religious liberty… And then came the Christmas presents.” The gifts were a sign of welcome for the children. “Not elaborate presents of course, but little things that would serve to cheer the hearts of the new arrivals that would remind them that America would at least be friendly toward them. The toys that were given to the children were those that were already embedded in the American psyche as designated appropriate for boys or girls. “Each little child received a toy. There were dolls for the girls and mechanical toys for the boys, rubber balls for the small ones and even rattles.85

Sometimes charity came with strings attached. While the children of wealthier, generally Protestant, native-born white citizens would be free to play with their new toys, those children receiving charity sometimes had to entertain at the Christmas celebration (basically becoming toys themselves). For example, at Christmas five hundred newsboys received “a regular full course Christmas meal in the clubrooms at 14 New Chambers Street…” In exchange for this charity, however, the young boys “prepared a vaudeville entertainment”86 to perform.

A visit to an ethnically distinct neighborhood was sometimes touted as a kind of learning experience for those with more money or as a kind of tourist destination. One 1908 article in *The New York Times* stated: “The education of the Christmas shopper is far from complete until she has rounded it off with a trip through the emporiums of Grand Street.” The shopper can then see people from every group, “without reference to race,

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color, or present condition of a pocketbook, all the lower east side turns out to do its Christmas shopping.”87 On Grand Street, a tourist could see the native and the foreign born all come together to shop.

Nonetheless, different shopping areas were often ethnically or racially segregated. A New York Times article reported that, “The holiday crowd in Harlem was unprecedentedly large. So was that in Grand Street, which, according to racial tendencies, patronized its holiday offerings.”88 The existence of different immigrant shopping locales reflected the distinctions being made about what was foreign and what was American. Although immigrants participated in consumer society, they were not fully integrated into the imagined idea of America. Often the poor shopped in their local neighborhood and the wealthy travelled to the shopping district. Like today, even as the industry and the press tried to define the American shopping experience as one in which everyone participated together, this was not actually the case.

One article dismissed the glamour of indoor department store shopping and praised, or perhaps fetishized, the virtues of the kind of outdoor shopping available to poor people: “There is very little crowding into hot and stuffy stores, for all the wares are to be had at the street stands…. The method of approach is strikingly unalike. There is no waiting seven deep till the haughty saleswoman has finished her analysis of your clothes and general style, of which she apparently disapproves.”89 Some newspaper articles suggested that the simple toys available to poor children were as good as any wealthy

child’s toy. “Here pyramids of cheap candy, pickled gherkins and humble ‘dollies’ alone
infused the dash of luxury.” With the exception of the doll there is nothing luxurious
about the market. “That rag doll, however, was said to be as good as any expensive toy
and would bring joy to a poor child. Who, moreover, shall say that the pony and chaise
brought more pleasure to the spoiled five-year-old West Sider than the long coveted rag
dolls to the food-starved, love-starved tenement house child…?”

Descriptions of shopping areas would sometimes distinguish between “American”
consumer behavior and that of immigrant populations. News coverage touted upper-class,
American shopping areas as organized modern and respectable compared to the open air
markets downtown. The New York Times offered this description: “In the West Side
shopping district the strings of respectable carriages aligning the curb proclaimed that
Miss Fifth Avenue and C. Park West were buying their presents…” But the description of
the downtown markets emphasized their foreign or exotic nature. “A tour along sixth-ave.
and its lower uptown intersections last evening showed a sight that combined the features
of the Bagdad bazaar, the Nijni [sic] fair and Saturday night in the White-chapel High
Road in one mammoth aggregation.” The descriptors in this article - Bagdad bazaar,
mammoth aggregation – suggest an exotic scene that is huge, unknowable, and vaguely
threatening and suggest that the American-ness of this kind of shopping was still in
question. The article describes a chaotic scene in which toys are “whizzing perilously”
between ankles and toy monkeys climb “dexterously from a piece of twine tied to the

90 “City's Christmas Eve, Final Shopping Rush East and West Side Streets Filled with Happy

eyelet of a peddlers shoes up to the level of his chest…”\textsuperscript{92} This “less American” section of town is viewed as hectic and disorderly and the toys potentially dangerous.

One \textit{New York Times} article about shopping described a Chinese merchant this way: “The Chinese clerks had imbibed the spirit along with the others of the cast aside. ‘Melly Clistmas’ was offered to every buyer…”\textsuperscript{93} While ostensibly celebrating everyone’s participation in Christmas, the article emphasized the clerk’s status as one of the “cast aside,” emphasizing his status in a marginalized community and caricaturing his foreign accent.

Sometimes geography restricted the access of different classes of people to particular areas. One \textit{New York Times} article emphasized the effort it would take to travel between the shopping district and tenement area. One would have had to take a “flying trip over the West Side shopping district [and then have]… boarded a downtown subway car, and alighting, say, at Bleecker-st., [have] crossed the quadruple tracks of the Bowery and plunged into the lower East Side…”\textsuperscript{94}

Also, the way store items were transported home reflected class differences. Wealthier people had their purchases delivered, a modern service that department stores like Macy’s offered at that time (New York was expanding geographically and acquiring the modes of transportation that characterize the five boroughs we know today). In 1906, by Christmas Eve, the downtown area was still bustling with shoppers. “But uptown, on the west side, Sixth Avenue, Twenty-third Street, Fifth Avenue, were deserted. Long

\textsuperscript{92} “City's Christmas Eve:” \textit{New York Tribune}, December 25, 1904, 2.


lines of delivery wagons, waiting at side doors of the great stores, were the only visible signs that this was the Sunday before Christmas.”

Wealthier customers shopped in the daytime and had parcels delivered. “The crowd yesterday was what is generally known as a parcels delivery crowd, those who select and buy and have their purchases sent home. Ninety per cent of the night shoppers took what they bought away with them.” The working class shoppers came at night. “It was a crowd humanized by the sentiment of the season, jolly, good-natured, well-behaved, made up largely of family groups, husband, wife, and children, out to spend part of the gains of the breadwinner for the week or hoards of the frugal wife or the accumulation of doles in the ‘savings banks’ of the young folks…” During the Christmas season, the working-class family was “humanized.”

Despite these class differences, however, the market places sometimes overlapped. Booths were not relegated to tenement districts during Christmas time. “Sixth-ave. was lined with the carts and temporary booths, along both curbs, from Fourteenth to Twenty-third-st. here were fancy baskets, Christmas cards, toys of every description, gorgeous jewelry…” The city, these articles seem to claim, united through one thing, shopping.

**Conclusion**

It took war, protective tariffs, ad campaigns and patriotic symbolism to make the domestic toy industry a distinctive and formidable presence in the nation’s economy. The creation of the department store, the development of mass produced toys, the

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identification of the “perfect consumer” and the identification of who could and could not participate in the new consumer economy were central to the new modern American identity. With concerted effort from the industry, mass produced toys were integrated into everyday life. Statistics eventually proved how successful the industry was. Leading up to 1914, 50 percent of the toys purchased here were imported. By 1939, 95 percent were “American-made,” by Mattel, Ideal and a number of other companies in factories.97

As the country emerged as an international economic, military and industrial power, toys played a role in identifying who was and who was not American. Children no longer were encouraged to play with the rag doll and wooden wagon made in a home, by a parent or local artisan in an earlier, rural, agricultural society. Instead they learned to play with more sophisticated mechanical and electrical toys that reflected the industrial, innovative, forward-looking nature of the growing, industrializing and urbanizing country. At the same time the toys produced by the industry suggested to girls and boys the roles they were to play in the modern world. An American boy would eventually be involved in the world of work where he would operate the trucks and trains and machinery of industry and commerce. An American girl would tend her home, watch her babies and cook. In many ways these toys were replicating the gender divisions of an earlier time. For the most part these toys were intended for white boys and girls.

The toy manufacturers did not seem to pay much attention to representing black boys and girls in the toys they produced. There were not many manufactured dolls or toys that were marketed to the small number of black families able to afford them. There were toys that presented black people in stereotyped, generally demeaning ways and marketed

97 Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, 32.
to whites. Insidiously, the toys were meant to reinforce existing racist traditions among whites in the new industrial order, not to provide amusement, education or even socialization to African Americans. Aunt Jemima, the “jigger,” and mechanical banks featuring exaggerated “negro features” were a means of assigning blacks “their place” in the new world – as an outsider, entertainer, servant or slave. As we will see, suggestions about the place of blacks and whites or lack thereof in American society would continue to be offered by the toy industry in the coming decades.

The next chapter explores tensions about the nature of American identity as they played out during the 1930s after the worst economic depression in American history. These tensions were reflected in the dolls and toys produced. Different groups of people would have very different ideas about America and being American. A group of upper class doll collectors would view America as an extension of an elite, aristocratic Europe. A group of toy manufacturers would celebrate the country as modern and innovative, a land of industrial opportunity. In contrast, black psychologists would see how central attitudes about race were in children’s understanding of their identity as Americans.
Chapter 2

Dolling Up History: Toy and Doll Fairs and the Tensions of Modernity

“Dolls have so long been one of the chief toys for children, and are now so nearly universal among both savage and civilized peoples, that it is singular that no serious attempt has ever been made to study them.”

As the toy industry emerged in the early part of the century, the toys it produced suggested to children certain ideas about what it was to be an American in a new commercial culture. Playing with sophisticated, mass produced, mechanical toys, American children learned what desires they should have, what pasts they should learn from, what present behavior they should practice, and what the future should look like. This new industry wielded the power to dictate tastes and behaviors to the next generation. For the first time the United States outstripped the European nations in miles of railroad track, tons of coal mined and steel produced. The “booming ‘20s” had witnessed the emergence of General Motors, Ford, United States Steel and other American industries as among the largest in the world. The toy industry was a part, albeit a small part, of this larger transformation. From a home and craft based industry often associated with skilled workers in woodworking and furniture manufacturing a number of toy companies emerged from World War I more influential than ever.

During this period guns, helmets, and tanks, joined bows and arrows and hatchets to convey to children, especially boys, the country’s involvement in war. Meanwhile girls were treated to dolls that could move and close their eyes and miniature household appliances that prescribed feminine gender roles. In addition, the unavailability of black

dolls and the distorted images of black people to which children were exposed taught
them about class and racial differences, as did their largely segregated shopping
experience.

The optimism of the early century, however, came to a screeching halt with the
collapse of the stock market in 1929 and the Depression that followed. America’s
diminishing national income accounted for more than half the world’s decline in
industrial production. Between 13 and 16 million Americans were out of work by 1933.99
The Depression revealed a world in the midst of financial and political chaos. It was a
period of fierce reckoning, a time when the limitations of the great industrial and market
forces of the previous century were coming into full view to millions of Americans from
all walks of life. The cultural and social tensions that had been largely suppressed during
the “good times” of the 1920s emerged full-blown.

Historians have focused on how the strikes of organized labor and other mass
movements brought into high relief the crisis of industrial capitalism.100 They write the
political history of the 1930s as that of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal’s attempt to
right the listing economy, quell social unrest and employ people through government-
sponsored programs like the WPA, the CCC, and Social Security. And yet, although
these actions generally ushered in a more optimistic feeling of economic recovery,
growth remained tentative. It would take World War II to stimulate enough production to
fully restore America’s economy.

Toward the end of the 1930s, as the country began to emerge from the Depression, different groups conceived of the country in different ways, depending on their social position, class and race. Each would tell their own story of America. This chapter will explore three narratives that reflect very different experiences of America at that time. While in the 1950s a consensus would emerge about the nature of American identity – that the United States was an industrial, world power, interested in spreading democracy around the world, in the 1930s massive disruption left people struggling to define their place in American society. There was no consensus about what it was to be an American.

This chapter focuses on dolls and toys not as objects that children themselves played with, but as objects used by adults as vehicles through which they expressed their views about the nature of American identity. The idea of children is far more powerful in these cases than real children.

The first case in this chapter involves a group of upper class doll collectors who felt their social position threatened in a democratizing and industrializing country. They organized a show of antique dolls that were dressed like the wealthy women of an aristocratic Europe where elites had a privileged place in society. Through their show the collectors promoted upper class manners and mores. The second case involves the American toy manufacturers who sponsored a toy fair in which they introduced modern, mass produced toys to buyers. They looked toward a future America full of opportunities to expand and acquire wealth. The third case focuses on the psychological studies done by Mamie and Kenneth Clark using black and white dolls to understand the process of identity formation among black and white children. Their conclusions would be pivotal in
the passage of Brown vs. Board of Education which would legally ban racial segregation in schools. These three very different cases seen together suggest how divergent were the experiences of different groups of Americans in the late thirties and points to a few important things about the Depression. It demonstrates how important toys had become as the purveyors of cultural values. It highlights how the changes that had taken place early in the century were so rapid that they left many feeling like they did not belong – particularly the doll collectors and black children. The white upper class ladies were threatened by the changes brought by industrialization – factories, immigrant workers, strikes, while the predominantly white male toy manufacturers were ecstatic about the possibilities commercial culture offered them. The black psychologists were less sanguine about the progress of the United States and perceived that not everyone was valued equally in this new, industrializing world.

The Doll Collector’s Show

New York in the 1930’s was a city of extreme discrepancies in wealth. “Shantytowns” were scattered across the city and occupied by people who had lost everything in the Depression. From the “encampment of squatters lin[ing] the shore of the Hudson from 72nd Street,” to Red Hooks’ city dump filled with sheds made from wrecked cars and barrels – the Depression’s effects showed on the city’s landscape. But not all wealth disappeared in the 1930s - mansions still lined Fifth Avenue and other avenues of the city. But many people found their social position undercut. Among

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them were a group of doll collectors who began to display their collections of rare and antique dolls annually starting in 1938. Feeling frustrated with the Depression and resistant to industrial change, they became interested in antique dolls at this time.  

Given the suffering of so many people during the Depression, it’s hard to imagine that a show of antiques dolls would attract much attention. And yet, in July of 1938, more than 40,000 people visited the doll collectors’ show in a building right in the center of midtown Manhattan on 34th Street, just off of Fifth Avenue. They were not visiting the nine-year old art deco Empire State Building but instead the building right next door at 22 West 34th Street where the Spear Auditorium was located within a furniture store.

The building that housed the Doll Show was itself the picture of modernity, much to the chagrin of preeminent architectural critic Lewis Mumford. He not only found the building’s design offensive but he felt that the entirety of 34th Street was “architecturally the one really comic street in New York. Here you will find all the latest fashions promptly embodied and caricatured, sometimes by the best architects.” In 1938 he called the Spear building the “perfect example of the fake functional.” He argued that “its sturdily severe façade, with banks of windows, slightly projecting beyond the brick, looks like the German work of the mid-nineteen-twenties” leading the observer to “believe that it was real but for the fact that a huge vertical sign covers the bank of windows that faces Sixth Avenue.” He had only disdain for “the yellow neon lights on a blue foreground and

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104 Lewis Mumford, *New Yorker*, April 30, 1938, 68.
the simple entrance portico” which might “make sense to a furniture dealer, but it’s the sort of thing that drives an architectural critic crazy.”

The exhibit of dolls inside this garish building, however, was decidedly not modern. Thousands of dolls, mostly antiques or rare figures, were on display, having been loaned by the blue-blooded ladies of the National Doll Collectors’ Club, a loosely knit collaboration of upper class doll collectors from Boston, Baltimore, New York, Chicago and elsewhere. These dolls were not for sale; they were on display for an enthusiastic public. Mary E. Lewis, the National Doll and Toy Collectors’ Club founder, “not only showed her own collection,” but also coordinated this exhibit “of more than 2,000 dolls, dating from the 16th century to the present day, dressed in costumes of the world.” The dolls were described in the newspapers as elegant and informational and were repeatedly credited as examples of the fashions, habits and details of life in the past.

What was it about these dolls that made the show so popular? In her book On Longing, Susan Stewart writes, “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday world.” She argues that “as an object is consumed, the miniature finds its ‘use value’ transformed into the infinite time of reverie.” She notes the “capacity of the miniature to create an ‘other’ time, a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality.” For the many

105 Lewis Mumford, New Yorker, April 30, 1938, 68.

106 “Now Mrs. Lewis Has Time for Family of Dolls: But as a Girl She Played Marbles with Boys-Has 200 In Collection.” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 4, 1937, 3-A.

visitors who came to the show, the dolls transported them out of the daily reality of the Depression.

The Doll Collectors’ Show merits attention for its presentation of history, the reception it received, and the values it espoused. First, the presentation of antique dolls hearkened back to an idealized past whose customs and behavior were offered as a model of femininity for girls in 1930s America. These dolls were valued because they were handmade, of high quality and unique as compared to the modern machine made, identical dolls being mass-produced by the toy industry. Although the nineteenth amendment had been passed twenty years earlier, these dolls were decidedly anti-modern. They represented a longing for the past with its traditional notions of femininity and indicated a rejection of the modern notion that women should have equal and public roles in society. Second, the major focus on European dolls and the celebration of royalty suggested that, for these collectors, Europe, with its aristocracy and hierarchal structure, was somehow superior to the more hardscrabble, democratic United States, at least in terms of fashion and manners. Third, the distortion of historical facts and the omission of dolls that represented little other than white aristocracy resulted in a history cleansed of the more complicated and uglier aspects of American history. By hardly including dolls of different races, the show excluded certain women and children from its definition of citizens.

Warren Susman notes that there was an increased awareness in the 1920s of the importance of defining “America as a culture, and that by the 1930s this awareness had become a crusade.”

Show can be seen as part of the effort to “create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding.” Leslie Paris has noted in the book of essays, *Acts of Possession*, that the “All-American” events that were so popular in the extravagant 1920s transformed in the 1930s to “a national mythmaking machine that communities could harness, for their own purposes, on a smaller scale.” In many ways the Doll Show was just this kind of event. It offered visitors the myth of a past, aristocratic time of order and good manners.

Although no actual images from the 1938 Doll Show can be found, other doll fairs illuminate the way dolls were typically presented by collectors. As you can see from the photo below, often doll collectors presented their dolls as rarified artifacts displayed in a museum. This photo appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and shows a collector exhibiting her doll to children in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

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In it an older woman holds and displays a doll to two young children. The doll is, notably, placed on a pedestal as an ancient artifact might be placed in a museum. It stands on a pedestal taller than most children and therefore seems out of reach and to be admired. The two children strain eagerly to look closely at the doll. They place their hands on the pedestal but do not dare touch the doll directly. Mrs. Schott, who owns the doll, wears a pearl necklace and a large hat, both items that suggest her status and wealth. A socialite with homes in both Santa Barbara and New York City, she, with her husband, supported the Women’s Club in Santa Barbara and hosted parties.\footnote{James F. Dorrance, “Two Fetes Assemble Barbarenos: Tea And Festival In Channel City Launch Season,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, July 12, 1942, C6; Rosario Curletti, “Club Will Fete 62nd Birthday: Santa Barbarans To Mark Event With Open House Today,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Oct 2, 1954, 15; Fund's Interest Aids Clubwomen, \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Apr 6, 1935, A7.} The doll stands in
the middle of the picture, connecting the three people. It is also the most prominent figure in the scene, embodying, it would seem, perfection. The children look up to this doll as they might an idol. The display magnifies and glorifies the importance and beauty of the doll.

Behind this scene there is nothing but a white wall. The doll is not in a market or a crowded outdoor space. The children viewing the doll understand that the rules in this museum-like setting differ from those in a toy store where they might be able to reach out, touch, dress, hug or throw the doll. The doll is literally and figuratively out of their reach, removed from the commercial market. The whiteness of all the people in the photo emphasizes another aspect of this doll’s exclusivity — in the segregated world of the 1930s this doll would not only have seemed unattainable for the young white girls in the picture but even more out of reach for young black girls.

The show that opened on July 11, 1938 was intended to close on August 6th. However, its life was extended two weeks past its original closing date to accommodate the high number of visitors which included men, women and some children interested in the first installment of what would become an annual show.113 The Christian Science Monitor wrote, “Clearly, there is something about dolls, since the National Doll and Toy Collectors Club is able to report that of the 40,000 persons who have visited its first show … which opened two weeks ago, only 18 percent were children.” Many adults came not as chaperones to children but out of a genuine interest in these relics from the past. The

show was so popular with adults that time had to be set-aside for youngsters to visit and see the dolls for themselves.¹¹⁴

The gender and age distribution of the visitors was just as interesting and mystifying as the show’s popularity. Many of the visitors were men. Newspaper reported that “the history-ranging, world-wide character of the exhibition [brought] plenty of men observers.”¹¹⁵ An article from the New York Times noted that “[m]en have flocked in.”¹¹⁶ Although the show’s location within a furniture store did require the public to walk through merchandise in order to view the dolls, no entrance fee was charged and no dolls could be purchased.

The popularity of this show suggests that it offered people a diversion from their lives and the chance to immerse themselves in an ordered, stable and beautiful world. At the show a number of women collectors presented dolls from their collection of dolls from around the world. “On display are dolls from Greece, Algeria, Brazil, Russia, France, Switzerland, the United Sates, Great Britain; dolls made of paper, wax, china, wood, silk stockings, tin, yarn, straw, nuts, fruit and rubber; pretty dolls, ugly dolls; dolls representing actual personages; antique dolls and modern dolls, dolls made by amateurs and dolls made by professionals.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ “40,000 See Dolls In 2 Weeks of Show Here; 82% of Visitors at Display are Adults,” New York Times, July 24, 1938, 28.
¹¹⁷ “Queen’s Own Doll in Exhibition Here: Plaything of Victoria, Made in Her Likeness, Only One of 1,800 in Club Show,” New York Times, June 20, 1939, 16.
Dolls highlighting specific geographical areas and particular regional customs appealed to the 1930s audience. One *New York Times* article described a collection this way: “Every doll…is authentic. There is Mr. and Mrs. Arabia, for instance, a couple of pretty rag dolls that represent modern Arabs.”¹¹⁸ As David Whisnant has shown in *All That is Native and Fine*, selling authenticity – of both foreign or isolated and regional cultural products – was very popular in the 1930s.¹¹⁹ Although this kind of attention to foreign lands was probably more typical of wealthy Europeans, these collectors did share an interest.

Lewis and other women collectors were participating in what Kristin Hoganson has called *The Global Production of American Domesticity*, wherein middle and upper class women were able to travel vicariously to other countries by importing foreign goods and incorporating them into their homes and social lives, thereby bringing the world to them.¹²⁰ Steven Gelber points out that between 1928 and the 1940s the idea of collecting had broadened enormously and become an acceptable hobby (outside of fine art collecting).¹²¹ He writes, “The identification of hobby with collecting deepened during the great hobby boom of the depression.”¹²² He notes that in 1931 *St. Nicholas* – a children’s magazine – published a list of items that could be collected.

¹¹⁸ “Now Mrs. Lewis Has Time For Family Of Dolls: But As A Girl She Played Marbles With Boys- Has 200 In Collection.” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 4, 1937, 3-A.


While collecting dolls from other countries may have been an expansive activity, the art of collecting was also a way to keep control and reframe a changing world. Warren Susman has noted that the concern for “realism,” “authenticity” and “Old World traditions” coincided with a conservative trend in 1930’s pastimes. The “search for the ‘real’ America would become a new kind of nationalism,” meant to “reinforce conformity.” Immigrants were pouring into New York. People were living in the street. New York was becoming an industrial city and dolls were being mass-produced. In the face of all this, these women saw their world changing. Their collections could present a different world – a fading world of aristocracy, wealth and privilege. By participating in an upper class activity like collecting they could keep alive for themselves their upper class way of life.

At the same time that the collectors were looking to a past with very defined and restrictive roles for women, they were engaging in a modern, feminist activity. By educating people about the customs and behaviors of people from other countries they were acting as experts and transforming what had been a hobby into a area of expertise. They became involved in public life – arranging shows, giving talks and advocating for museums to house historical dolls. Ironically, despite their longing for a past time when women had little public authority, they entered the public arena where they actually gained some power and influence.

Lewis, who organized the antique doll show was also the founder and President of the National Doll Collectors’ Club. Lewis resided, with her many dolls, on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. She was a woman of considerable means. Her collection grew

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123 Susman, 172.
each year and by 1951 she lived in a “10-room house in Brooklyn with her husband and
3,000 dolls.”124

In 1947 Mrs. Lewis published The Marriage of Diamonds and Dolls which
offered descriptions and illustrations of some of the dolls from her collection among
others. The book was published by H.L. Lindquist who collected stamps and was also a
member of The Collectors Club of N.Y. founded in 1896. The Marriage of Diamonds
and Dolls served to connect these two elite clubs through a mutual interest in collecting.

Mrs. Lewis’ book combined advice, historical research, nostalgia, material culture
and consumerism into a chronological narrative of bridal traditions. Susan Stewart writes
that a dollhouse “has two dominant motifs: wealth and nostalgia.”125 The same motifs
certainly were represented in this collection. The very title of this book, relating
diamonds and dolls, links wealth, childhood and tradition of two kinds – weddings and
collecting. In this book, Mrs. Lewis goes from collector to archivist and researcher to
storyteller.

Articles written about the Doll Show note Mrs. Lewis’ achievements as an
educator, expert and Brooklyn socialite. Lewis organized charitable benefits for children.
Knickerbocker News reported that, “The history of what Brooklyn women are doing,
world- wide, in philanthropic work is most inspiring … Mrs. Mary E. Lewis of 798
Ocean Ave., is co-ordinator of a pageant-benefit for tubercular children in Greece.”126
Her identity as a doll collector was matched only by her identity as a member of the

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124 Katherine A. Van Epps, “Doll Collector Collects Data On Wedding Costumes,”
Knickerbocker News, January 23, 1951, B-5.

125 Stewart, On Longing, 61.

social elite of old Brooklyn, the once-independent, proud, “City of Churches” and “City of Homes,” which was seen by many of its older residents as a contrast to New York, the behemoth of corporate power (and sin) with which it had merged only forty years earlier.

When Lewis wasn’t travelling, she hosted parties for both foreign and NY elites where she could show her collection. These events were often coordinated with visits to institutions like the Brooklyn Children’s Museum which also housed a display of dolls. Mrs. Lewis entertained “members of the National Doll and Toy Collectors Club at her home…[t]he guests will visit the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, where there is a permanent display of international dolls, and will return to Miss Lewis' home for supper.”

In the 1930s these doll collectors began to sponsor events to introduce people to cultures beyond the borders of the United States. The youngest member of the Doll Collectors’ Club, Mabelle Cremer, age 7, hosted an international festival of children, with “dolls on every hand representing all races and most of the periods of world history … There were New York City children and some visiting from other places, and then there were those from the New York consulates, wearing costumes of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, Latvia, Mexico…. “

Again, there is a certain irony in the fact that these collectors celebrated the diversity of people from around the world while feeling threatened by the diverse people arriving at the gate of New York.

Some dolls for the show were already in New York but others were shipped in from farther away. The Boston Globe announced that, “Antique dolls dating back more

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than a century are to leave the Children’s Museum in Boston for New York today to participate in the first national show.” The article went on, “Dressed in old-fashioned gowns which attendants have pressed up and restored for the showing, the dolls will make the trip in an ancient horsehair trunk.” The dolls were emissaries, according to the article, with “a ‘mission’ to perform. They are intended to make doll collecting so popular that New York will support a doll and toy collectors group, just as Boston had.”\(^{129}\)

In 1938, just one year after its formation, the National Doll Collectors’ Club tried to assert its power, lobbying the city government for a permanent home for a doll museum. It was noted that Mrs. Lewis and Anna Billings Gallup, who founded the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, attempted to establish a permanent home for doll collections, emphasizing the educational and cultural promise of such a site.\(^{130}\)

In the 1930s there was also a movement to establish children’s museums for all major U.S. cities.\(^{131}\) The \textit{New York Times} reported that the National Doll and Toy Collectors Club, “composed of women who collect dolls as a hobby, announced plans yesterday for the establishment of a national museum, exclusively for dolls of all ages and nationalities.”\(^{132}\) They even approached members of the New York City Government with a view to arranging for museum space in some existing municipal museum or other

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\(^{132}\) “Women's National Doll Club Plans to Pool Varied Toy Collections in Special Museum,” \textit{New York Times}, November 3, 1937, 25. The museum they envisioned was one that was inclusive of all kinds of dolls, though not necessarily all kinds of people.
building. The *Times* announced that “municipal officers… are in wholehearted agreement that a comprehensive national doll and toy collection would serve a useful educational and cultural good, not only for children but for their elders as well.”\(^{133}\)

It was exactly the dolls’ historically specific and regional characteristics, not their modern and mass-produced ones, which made the National Doll Show so popular. Depicted as historical artifacts, but also as stand-ins for real women, the dolls, some a century or more old, were brought to life in this *Christian Science Monitor* article. “’Life is beginning at 140 [years old], at 100, and at 75 for a dozen ladies out of Boston’s past who are busily preparing to leave town tomorrow for a month’s visit to New York City.’” The article refers to the dolls’ ages and acts as if they are real women. This elite newspaper extolled the exodus with a tongue-in-cheek characterization of the blue blood dolls who were “accompanying” them: “To many New Englanders a trip to Manhattan may be a casual affair, but for these twelve—all beloved dolls—it is the most exciting experience since the Civil War when they were in their prime.”\(^{134}\)

The dolls were not only meant to represent the women who collected them; they also stood for the city they traveled from. The same article noted that, “great preparations are under way at the Children’s Museum in Jamaica Plain to restore coiffures and the dignity of ruffles and bustles so that the delegates will do credit to Boston.”\(^{135}\) The dolls were treated as diplomats, representing old Bostonian traditions on their voyage to New


\(^{135}\) “Boston Doll Delegates Named For National Show in New York: Turning Back Pages of Dolldom History,” 12.
York. They were dignified delegates bringing New England tradition to the modern world of Manhattan.

What is noteworthy and relevant to this discussion is how thoroughly oriented the doll collectors were toward an old aristocratic Europe and the trappings of wealth that went with it. As an upper class woman in New York City, Lewis saw herself as part of an American elite holding on to an older European order, even as poor Italian, Irish and Jewish immigrants poured into New York and the streets were filled with protests and strikes.

Reports of Mrs. Lewis’ collection often emphasized that her love of dolls began with a doll from Denmark. “I had to have dolls from other Scandinavian countries to keep the little Dane from getting lonesome, and this led to my buying dolls in typical costumes wherever I could find them. Going to Europe the purser on the boat got interested, and soon I began to meet other doll collectors.”136 Lewis stated, “‘I decided that I must have another from another European capital….’”137

Lewis admired the European dolls for their connection to royalty and Old World traditions, the rich materials of which they were made, and the sedate beauty that represented femininity to her. Mrs. Lewis’ connection to royalty was personal. The year Diamonds and Dolls was published, the Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported that Mrs. Lewis was invited to a tea party with Princess Elizabeth. Since so much of Mrs. Lewis’ book concerns the royal family and weddings, she sent a copy of her book to Princess Elizabeth in honor of her wedding. In excited tones the Eagle held Mrs. Lewis

137 “Queen’s Own Doll In Exhibition Here: Plaything of Victoria, Made in Her Likeness, Only One of 1,800 in Club Show,” New York Times, June 20, 1939, 16.
responsible for making sure “Brooklyn wasn’t forgotten,” when the invitations went out around the world.\textsuperscript{138} Because World War II made travel impossible Mrs. Lewis couldn’t attend the tea or travel to Europe for vacations or collecting. Nonetheless, she continued with her pursuits. She had dresses made here to replicate what she saw as authentic representations of European fashions.

One of Mrs. Lewis’ favorite European dolls was her “Pretty Parlor Doll: Edythe,” from 1870. A “little Victorian ‘parlor doll,’” little “Edythe” reminded her “of the wedding dolls that … commemorate[d] the nuptials of members of the Royal families.” “My doll is not a representation of any famous person nor a doll that any little girl ever played with,” she reminded the reader. “Dressed in the manner of a bride of 1870,” she “stands sedately and safely under her glass bell on a little wooden platform.”\textsuperscript{139}

Like the ideal Victorian woman this doll stands apart and isolated from the dangers and contaminations of the world. She sits in the parlor, frozen in time. As Stewart writes, a doll behind glass remained in a “miniature world” which was “perfect and uncontaminated by the grotesque so long as its absolute boundaries are maintained.” “The glass eliminates the possibility of contagion, indeed of lived experience, at the same


\textsuperscript{139} Lewis, 78.
time that it maximizes the possibilities of transcendent vision.\textsuperscript{140} This boundary, as Susan Stewart notes, rarefies the doll, keeping it out of reach from the viewer and other forces of nature.

It is interesting to reflect on the relationship of the doll collectors to their audience; they were not interacting as equals with visitors to the show. The collectors were the experts, bringing knowledge to the people. The very existence of the show reflected the collectors’ desire to maintain class distinctions. Interestingly, Mrs. Lewis’ preoccupation with royalty came at a time when, as Michael Denning and other scholars have pointed out, radical politics and celebrations of the average man were gaining popularity.\textsuperscript{141} Mrs. Lewis was not interested in celebrating the average man.

Another Victorian doll introduced as “To the Queen’s Taste: Victoria, 1830” represented Harriet, the Duchess of Parma. This doll actually belonged to Queen Victoria when she was a child. Interestingly, Mrs. Lewis does not seem to idealize this doll as she did the Victorian parlor doll. Instead she describes her as “a lonesome little girl without brothers or sisters.”\textsuperscript{142} This was one of Lewis’ prized dolls but she was less enthusiastic about the commonness of the doll’s material. “Basically, she is just a painted wooden figure and not half so pretty… The doll seems to have been made of a turned piece of wood with a funny little nose put on afterwards. This was the way furniture pieces were made, and it is quite possible that one of the palace cabinet-makers also supplied the

\textsuperscript{140} Stewart, 68.


\textsuperscript{142} Lewis, 20.
Princess with her dolls.”

Mrs. Lewis owned a doll dressed as Mrs. Lewis was dressed for her own wedding. Lewis was imitating a European custom whereby miniature doll versions of royalty were created. “Having no daughter to wear my dress and veil and gloves,” she explained, “I thought one way to preserve them would be to create a miniature Mrs. Mary E. Lewis. So, I got out my wedding pictures and had Lulu Kriger copy my dress and veil for the doll.”

Although Mrs. Lewis purported to trace American history through her book, most of her dolls are European and none of her dolls are black. Essentially she was tracing only a sliver of American history. Perhaps in an effort to be inclusive, Mrs. Lewis did display two, but only two, non-Anglo Saxon dolls in her collection. The descriptions of these dolls reflected certain prejudices and imperial attitudes. Mrs. Lewis valued the California Mission doll, Dolores, from 1835, not for being American but for her connection to the Spanish aristocracy. Although Mrs. Lewis noted the attire of peasant brides “who wore strand after strand of silver beads and long chains of reliquaries, medals, charms, and amulets pinned from the shoulders,” she preferred her aristocratic doll. “My little California bride is an aristocrat with nothing about her to suggest the peon or the Indian.” All of her finery “would have come hundreds of miles overland from Mexico or direct from Spain.” Mrs. Lewis, while loving this doll, refers to her

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143 Lewis, 20.
144 Lewis, xiii.
145 Lewis, 27
146 Lewis, 24.
condescendingly as “my little Spanish Bride-doll,” a phrase that denotes ownership.\textsuperscript{147}

In what might be seen a display of tokenism, Mrs. Lewis includes “A Little Island Bride: Maria, 1940.” Dressed in the style of 1940s Puerto Rico, Maria seemed to “represent all native brides in the islands under Uncle Sam’s protection.”\textsuperscript{148} For Mrs. Lewis this doll represented America’s role as a colonial power. Mrs. Lewis treated this doll as “Uncle Sam” treated its protectorates. She acknowledged it was different from others in her collection in that she was “a modern doll of the kind that children really love to play with. She has a soft, plump, unbreakable body of flesh-pink cotton and her little head is also cloth. The head represents a new process in American doll manufacture.”\textsuperscript{149} This doll was manufactured, not handmade and compared with the white dolls included in this collection, the Puerto Rican doll was described as appropriate for throwing, touching and playing. This is the only time this kind of treatment is prescribed in the book.

The Puerto Rican doll was the only exception to the generic whiteness and wealth characteristic of the other dolls. Despite the book’s claim of comprehensiveness, Mrs. Lewis chose to omit mention of any other non-white, non-wealthy dolls. Essentially Mrs.

\textsuperscript{147} Lewis, 24.

\textsuperscript{148} Lewis, 160.

\textsuperscript{149} Lewis, 160.
Lewis wrote other races and classes out of her history altogether. At the very least, her omission suggested that black dolls did not merit placement in the book or the admiration afforded the other dolls.

The conspicuous absence of any black dolls in Mrs. Lewis’ book points not simply to a perceived deficit in well-made black dolls but to their exclusion from the story of American history. People did sell and buy black dolls so it is noteworthy that Mrs. Lewis had none in her collection. But the absence of black dolls which would have represented black women and children, seems to indicate instead that Mrs. Lewis didn’t consider black people to be American in the same way that white people were. They certainly did not fit her ideal.

Mrs. Lewis claimed to pay great attention to historical accuracy and she clearly did a great deal of research for her book. As one article states, “Dolls and toys, because they reflect so faithfully the customs and costumes of an era, are favorite material for antique collectors. To the connoisseur these playthings are more than sentimental mementos of another day; they are valuable records of period influences…” The collectors were considered experts who could “tell you when the painted wood doll went out of fashion, when bisque and wax heads came in.”

Mrs. Lewis claimed the dolls accurately portrayed various time periods from “hand carved Swiss dolls made about 1750” to “Colonial dolls still dressed in the faded textiles of the time, with the characteristic voluminous skirts. Some, attired in

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151 “Queen’s Own Doll In Exhibition Here: Plaything Of Victoria, Made In Her Likeness, Only One Of 1,800 In Club Show,” New York Times, June 20, 1939, 16.
costly embroidered silks, come from wealthy households; others, more simply dressed, once belonged to some little girl of humbler family;”\textsuperscript{152} There was even a “‘bisque doll from Paris, 1875,’ in a black taffeta gown with a hoop skirt.”\textsuperscript{153} As the headline “Antique Dolls Tell a Story” suggests, the value of these dolls lay in their historical narratives. Americans were consuming Mrs. Lewis version of history with little thought as to what might be omitted or distorted.

Mrs. Lewis presented the history surrounding her dolls in a more orderly way than history would have had it. A doll Mrs. Lewis calls “A Little Bride: Yvonne, 1750” is a rare doll, one of Mrs. Lewis’ most valuable. Mrs. Lewis explained that various parts of a doll’s body often dated from different time periods. Mrs. Lewis decided this doll was from 1750 while admitting that the doll’s hands were likely from a later era. These inconsistencies highlight Mrs. Lewis’ attempt to reconfigure history into a more orderly arrangement. In fact, her decision to overlook the inconsistencies seems to have reflected her approach in general. Her desire was to offer a history that made sense and was orderly, as a reaction to the chaotic events surrounding her.

Mrs. Lewis’ presentation of American dolls goes beyond tinkering with the dates of their costumes. She presented the portrait doll, “A White House Bride: Sarah York Jackson, 1829,” as if the doll were European royalty. This doll was made from a collection of pictures, portraits and documents of “authentic costumes in the Smithsonian


Institution in Washington D.C., where the dresses of First Ladies are exhibited.” Mrs. Lewis describes the Lafayette balls that Sarah Jackson would have attended. She also describes the bride’s father-in-law, Andrew Jackson, as popular, like British royalty, thus ignoring Jackson’s forced removal of Native Americans from their lands.

In her attempt to trace changes in American culture Mrs. Lewis discusses the Kewpie doll (pronounced Cu-Pee, and playing off the word Cupid) which was explicitly recognizable as mass-produced and commercially available. The photo’s caption reads, “Coy little Kewpie bride dressed in net and ribbons by a child, about 1912.” In her chapter on, “Kewpies and Other Characters: 1912,” Mrs. Lewis recognized that these dolls were not meant for display or as models of femininity but were toys to be played with. “Kewpie dolls were toys, prizes, favors, table decorations and statuettes. Millions of them were sold.”

Kewpie dolls were one of the more popular character dolls in US doll history. Although created by an American, they were originally made in Germany and imported back into the United States. Kewpies were modeled on babies and designed to appear androgynous. In her history of dolls Made to Play House, Miriam Forman-Brunell notes that “unrestricted by clothing and other

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154 Lewis, 17.
155 Lewis, 131.
symbols of the society they criticized, the wise Kewpie boys [were] often mistaken for compliant girls” because “the naked Kewpies” were “without [male] genitalia.” Even as sold with clothes, “what little clothing the Kewpies wear is easily mistaken for feminine frocks.”

In *The Marriage of Diamonds and Dolls* Mrs. Lewis reconfigured the Kewpie doll as a grown woman and bride. She took this androgynous, mass-produced doll and dressed it in traditional, feminine garb. Forman-Brunell points out that Kewpies were often distorted in this way. “Kewpie dolls blended into a euphoric elixir whose source ingredients were nostalgia, romance, affection and religion. The result was a generic antidote to ill feeling, an ideal market item.” Mrs. Lewis undoes all of the original ambiguity of the Kewpie doll by making it a model of femininity.

Much like the Ford video and early efforts of the toy industry, Mrs. Lewis placed this commercial doll of America in the company of ancient civilizations and elevated the doll by giving it a history. At the same time, she acknowledged precedent in history for actually playing with dolls, not just admiring them. She wrote, “While all authorities agree that the doll was first associated with religious services, they also believe that children played with toy dolls from early times. In Egypt and Greece little girls played with their dolls until marriage and then placed them at the feet of the Goddess Venus.”

The 1920’s speakeasy dolls appear to have been particularly offensive to Mrs. Lewis’ aesthetic and moral ideals. Named after the speakeasy bars that sprang up during

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158 Lewis, *Diamonds and Dolls*, 133.
Prohibition, these dolls were associated with vice and debauchery. Instead of silks and satins, the two dolls shown in this chapter on the 1920s were a couple dressed in clothes made of linen and “stiff white paper.”

“Composed of celluloid and wire, they were a shade grotesque and foreshadowed that whole generation of exaggerated, long-necked characters which appeared in store windows, advertisements and fashion illustrations following the exposition of “art moderne” in Paris in 1925.”

While uncritical of the luxury of royalty whom she admired and wished to emulate, Mrs. Lewis described the decade of the 1920s as, “a time of extravagance and irresponsibility.” Calling the dolls “exaggerated” and “grotesque,” Mrs. Lewis indicated her disapproval of the particular type of femininity this bride doll conveys. “The bride is too thin, too dead-white, her bobbed hair too brassy-red, her cigarette too obvious. She symbolizes a strange, hard type of femininity that we called the flapper… This was a ‘low brow’ era in more ways than one.” How different from the stately, distinguished and elite femininity that Mrs. Lewis prized in her other dolls.

Nor did these dolls exhibit the kind of craftsmanship Mrs. Lewis admired. As Stewart suggests, craftsmanship was a large part of the nostalgia presented by the

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159 Lewis, 142.
160 Lewis, 142.
161 Lewis, 142.
miniature. She writes, “We cannot separate the function of the miniature from a nostalgia for preindustrial labor, a nostalgia for craft.” The “rise in the production of miniature furniture [occurred] at the same time that” real furniture was also being “reproduced in mass and readily available form.”

To Mrs. Lewis, dolls represented history while also informing contemporary behavior. Her collection and the Doll Show were part of her attempt to teach the manners and mores of an earlier time to the American public. She hoped her dolls would model traditional, feminine behavior and would inspire Americans to adopt the style of wealthy, aristocratic Europe. Hers was perhaps a desperate attempt to stave off the reality of a diverse, ethnically and culturally diverse America. By imagining a seemingly more stable past, however, she was imagining a period when so many women, especially those without financial wealth, would have been relegated to a subordinate social position.

**The Toy Fair**

Mrs. Lewis’ vision of American history and hopes for American culture were a contrast to the vision offered at the Toy Fair which took place nearby a few months later. Just over ten blocks south of the Spear building where the Doll Collectors staged their show, the annual toy industry show went up. The Fair was situated in a monumental building called the “International Toy Center” on a more fashionable stretch of Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street near the Metropolitan Life Insurance tower and the famous Flatiron Building. The Toy Fair represented all that was new and modern. Unlike the Doll Show, which was open to the public and emulated a museum exhibition, this Fair was designed for the industry so buyers could come and see the newest toys. The Toy Fair offered a

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162 Stewart, 68.
very different definition of America. For those who visited, it was a shining example of all that was modern and ingenious, like the United States itself.

The Fair displayed thousands of the mass-produced toys then pouring out of modern factories from companies like Louis Marx and Company and the Ideal Toy Company. This annual industry event displayed the newest, most innovative, modern and exciting toys on the market. For example, as seen in the image below, a small boy dressed as a pilot played with flying toys in front of a large model of a city.

While the Fair offered toys that replicated objects of everyday life like household appliances or trucks and cars, they were generally very sophisticated, mechanized replicas, displaying cutting edge technology. The toys were promoted as innovative, modern, streamlined and “product-tested” by children. The New York Sun marveled,

163 “Gates of Toyland Crashed By Adults,” New York Times, April 21, 1936 25. A portion of the toy show took place at the Hotel McAlpin, on 34th street and Broadway, near where the doll show would be held mere months later.
“Every new streamlined train, automobile or airplane design has its toy counterpart… Plump baby dolls are drinking from bottles…”

This Fair aimed to promote its vision of a futuristic world even as the country was emerging from the worst economic depression in its history. As the New York Sun proudly reported, “The Fair of this year will top the records of the fair of [pre-Depression] 1929 by 10 per cent.”

Like the Doll Collectors’ Show the Fair offered a vision of America that was different from people’s everyday lives. It was offering an industrial American future, not a Victorian and European past.

Reviews of the Toy Fair centered on the progress-oriented and modern educational qualities of the toys. Children could learn everything about how the modern world worked. As the New York Times reported, “The seven acres of exhibits included countless practical playthings designed to teach youngsters up-to-the-minute developments in building construction, scientific experiment, transportation, metal working, fashion and art.” Included were “miniature trailers, equipped to the last detail,” which would “roll behind the latest in streamlined bicycles and express wagons.” There were also models of sleeper transcontinental airplanes and clipper ships.” These toys suggested that boys were citizens of the nation.

In contrast to the action toys for boys, the toys for girls reinforced traditional, feminine roles. Girls learned about the domestic world, albeit now a more mechanized one. The New York Sun noted that “dolls have been taught a number of new tricks. Doll voices are clearer and proof against laryngitis. A new style walking doll has no windup


machinery, but raises her feet gracefully when propelled from behind.” This new technology allowed the girl to see “smiling and pouting dolls, dolls that cry and dolls with fingernails” which provided “a new thrill for the juvenile mothers.” The newspaper noted that the new dolls can “have their diapers changed” as well. These dolls scripted girls’ actions to take place mainly in the home. Susan Stewart describes this as a “bourgeois public immersed in the discourse of the ‘petite feminine.’”

While the toys at the Fair would have provided a diversion for New Yorkers, the Fair was not open to the public but only to buyers who intended to advertise and market the toys to children. The Toy Fair still happens today and its audience continues to be made up of buyers. The Times reported in 2008 that, “the International Toy Center always sounded like just about any child’s definition of heaven. But very few children — and not that many more grown-ups — ever got inside the two great fortresslike [sic] showroom buildings on the west side of Madison Square Park.” The Toy Fair was international not because it displayed rare and foreign objects like the doll Show did but because “More than 3,000 buyers from every State [sic] in the Union, as well as Canada, England, France, Holland, South Africa, Australia and South America, are expected to

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168 I am using the idea of scripted behavior put forth by Robin Bernstein in “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race<” Social Text 27(4), 2009, 67-94.


attend the fair." Given that children and most of the public were absent from this show, the producers, rather than the consumers, had control of the exhibits.

Still, the ultimate goal of the Fair was to get the toys to as many children as possible. The mass manufacturing of these toys transformed them from luxuries that only wealthy children could own to commodities available to almost everyone. Toy ownership had been democratized. In 1937, one report noted the rising popularity of toys despite the depressed economy and the fact that the population of children was shrinking. One *New York Times* articles noted that the industry was doing better than it had since the economic collapse of 1929. Another announced that, “with less money in our pockets and a million fewer children in our homes than in the gilded era, we today cram into our youngsters’ stockings Christmas playthings.” The article claimed that the richest and poorest alike should have toys in their home, “From the overstuffed nursery of a Hollywood baby star to the hovel of the Southern tenant farmer, toys have taken on a new quality and a new importance in the design for living.” In the 1930s the toy industry’s health was often described as a signal of the country’s recovering economy.

While newspaper coverage of the Doll Collectors’ Show focused on individual women collectors identified by name, address and accomplishments, coverage of the Toy

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174 “Christmas Toys Reach 7-Year Peak,” 2.
Fair focused instead on general trends in toys; it rarely mentioned a specific manufacturing company and even more rarely a specific person.\(^{175}\)

The people in charge of this Fair were mostly men from the industry interested in selling American toys around the world. Four hundred manufacturers participated. With the exception of the oft-quoted managing director of the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A, James L. Fri, these men remained rather anonymous. With profit in mind, the toy sellers were not personally invested in individual toys as the doll collectors had been in their dolls. Toys were seen as consumer products relegated to the realm of economics, business and industry. The human element of these toys’ creation, production and origins was now erased and mass marketed toys became the thing to own.\(^{176}\) The decision not to invite the “consuming public” to the Fair, is indicative of the way the industry viewed their mission – as controllers of children’s leisure time.

Part of what the American toy manufacturers wanted to display was abundance. The Toy Manufacturers of the United States, which had gained recognition around the time of the First World War, sought to disassociate itself from Europe and emphasized the abundance made possible by modern manufacturing techniques. Its message was that America is about wealth. Fri announced that, “Every aspect of the more abundant American life has been reproduced in realistic miniature at low prices…”\(^{177}\) There was no question about abundance; the pure quantity of toys had grown a staggering amount.

\(^{175}\) “7 Acres of Toys in Yule Preview: 15,000 Playthings,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1937, 11.

\(^{176}\) Idea clarified by Professor Beryl Satter, December 2013.

In 1937, fifteen thousand new toys that will delight youngsters next Christmas morning were put on display…”\textsuperscript{178}

Unlike Mrs. Lewis’ dolls, the dolls of the 1937 Toy Fair were billed as distinctly modern. Aimed at young girls and future mothers, the dolls were touted as life-like, stylish and authentic. Here authenticity was defined not as the accurate reproduction of historical details but as the successful reproduction of even the movements of a real child. Modern manufacturing techniques made it possible to produce these life-like dolls.

There, of course, will be the usual number of dolls for the young mothers, but brought now to such a perfection that they are difficult to tell from the real babies. A new drinking doll can consume the contents of her bottle lying down. Doll voices have been tuned until you wouldn’t trust your own ears if you happened to be in another room when one was made to cry.”\textsuperscript{179}

Not only did the Fair reinforce gender roles; it also reflected a culture of consumption.\textsuperscript{180} The dolls came with their own toys and accessories. “One really stylish doll has twenty pairs of shoes, clothing to match them all and luggage made to scale as to style and weight for riding in the sleek air liners...” Dollhouses were becoming more technologically advanced. Clearly neither the dolls nor the children needed all these accessories. We see here the development of the culture of consumerism. Children were learning to want more and more and better and better toys. “Doll houses have gone modernistic, from skyscrapers to tourist camp cabins, with the larger ones equipped with elevators that get an authentic lift with an electric motor.”\textsuperscript{181}


Coverage of both the Doll Show and the Toy Fair in 1937 emphasized the educational benefits of these dolls. By playing on parents’ educational concerns, the Toy Fair helped define its products not as luxury items but as necessities. In addition, manufacturers promoted toys as “tested” as a way to make the toys something more than playthings. According to the *Times*, “all the new toys being introduced this year had been tried out by youngsters before they were put into production to check their age suitability, fun appeal and educational value.” 182 The testing of toys was emphasized to be done with “realness” in mind: “[v]ery few makers have offered new playthings this Christmas without testing and retesting them with real children in real play.” 183 Involving the children in testing did give them some amount of agency in that they determined what toys were most interesting. This use of the designation “education” as a tool to sell products will continue to be a way to promote consumerism in the decades to come. An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* noted, “‘The 1937 toys, tested for age suitability, safety and educational value, illustrate dramatically the 20 years of evolution of modern toys from holiday novelties to everyday necessities.’” 184 It becomes clear that in only twenty years from the beginnings of the toy industry, the efforts by manufacturers to incorporate toys into everyday life as a necessity had been successful.

Although the Depression put an end to a large number of toy companies in the 1930s, other mass media, such as the radio, Disney cartoons, and movie stars like Shirley

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Temple helped promote licensed character toys and dolls, which grew in popularity as children were recognized as active consumers.\textsuperscript{185}

\textit{Mamie and Kenneth Clark’s Doll Study}

The conspicuous absence of any black dolls in Mrs. Lewis’ collection and in the futuristic presentation of the Toy Manufacturers of America pointed to the long tradition of excluding black people from the story of America. Black and white Americans had been offered a narrative centered on white people and largely ignored the history of African Americans and other people of color in America. Although there were a few companies producing black dolls, the market was dominated by white dolls. To combat the caricatures and stereotypes embodied by the few black dolls available on the market, a former slave named Richard Henry Boyd founded the National Negro Doll Company in 1911. These dolls, too, were touted as educational items, “Every race is trying to teach their children an object lesson by giving them toys that will lead to higher intellectual heights,” one advertisement stated.\textsuperscript{186} This ad ran in \textit{The Crisis}, founded only one year earlier as the official publication of the NAACP. Despite exceptions like Boyd’s company, and the general notion that positive and negative images of people might impact children, Mamie and Kenneth Clark’s famous doll study that drew attention to the real life consequences that the absence of images, at least positive images, of African Americans wrought on children. At the time the study was indicative of how the definition of American children did not include blacks. The study was critical in the

\textsuperscript{185} Cross, \textit{Kids’ Stuff}, 103.

consequent Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education, which made school segregation illegal in the United States and paved the way for a narrative that included African Americans in the country’s history.

G. Stanley Hall’s understanding of the cultural importance of children’s playthings, reflected a broader movement in American social psychology and educational thought during the early twentieth century. In 1922, John Dewey wrote *Human Nature and Conduct, An Introduction of Social Psychology* in which he outlined what he believed were some of the foundational philosophical beliefs undergirding childhood education. Writing in a language that seems arcane to the modern reader, Dewey outlined the virtues that he believed made up the character of twentieth century Americans and that had to be communicated to children through education. Dewey took aim at the notion of inevitability, the idea that humans could not control the future and that nature moved in a direction undeterred by human decision making. Instead, he argued that “the environment in which a person lived would determine, in many ways, what the person thought and how that person acted.” He noted that, “Honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility are not private possessions of a person” \(^\text{187}\) but a product of the “interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out – door world.” Dewey argued that personality traits were not innate but were in large measure shaped by the child’s environment. Dewey was suggesting that the qualities that would characterize the new American would in large measure be taught through formal and informal school and play.

Children’s creativity played a central role in the shaping of the child and had to be encouraged.

When Kenneth and Mamie Clark embarked on their famous Doll Study in the 1930s they were following in the footsteps of G. Stanley Hall, John Dewey and other educational and social psychologists who would show that children internalized racial prejudice at a young age.

In the 1930s when the Clarks did their study, the United States was still segregated by law or practice. The rigid racial divisions that emerged during reconstruction and were solidified in Jim Crow in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century still continued. In the southern white mind former slaves were portrayed as fearsome, particularly in areas of the “cotton South” where African Americans outnumbered their former slave masters and where slave rebellions decades past had terrified the white planters. Elsewhere, where their numbers or social position did not pose any seeming threat, black people were stereotypically labeled as “comical.”

By the 1930s, the rigid racial divisions that emerged during Reconstruction and solidified in the Jim Crow era were being challenged by changes in the labor market. As mechanization of farm equipment began to eliminate the need to keep black people on the farms and in the fields huge numbers of African Americans moved north where there was an increasing demand for labor in urban industries. As the black populations of northern cities like Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York expanded, new art forms like jazz and growing urban communities brought more

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188 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction.*

189 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction.*
attention to the experience and place of African Americans in the broader culture. Although some of the most pernicious forms of segregation began to break down especially in cities like Chicago and New York, and other northern industrial communities, prejudice against black people was woven into the culture.

Toys reflected the segregation of the time. In *Black Dolls: An Identification and Value Guide* Myla Perkins points out that black dolls were segregated into two distinct markets for black dolls – those “made for and marketed to black children” and dolls “representing blacks to white children and parents.”

During this period the discussion about black dolls begun earlier continued. Notably the argument for black dolls was shaped in terms of the dolls’ effect on the child’s identity. A 1927 article in the *Pittsburg Currier* reported, perhaps too optimistically, that it was no longer uncommon to see white and black children playing with black dolls. “The Negro parents who desire to see their child grow up unashamed of the hair and color with which nature has endowed it, and having pride, affection and loyalty for the people possessing these characteristics, should start very early in instilling this group pride and loyalty. There is no better way to start than by purchasing the child a

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190 Myla Perkins, *Black Dolls: An Identification and Value Guide*, Book II, (Kentucky: Collector Books), 1995, 25. Perkins herself, as a black woman, contrasts with the 1930s doll collectors. Yet she describes herself in a similar way, proclaiming the seriousness, and educational value of her hobby. It wasn’t until 1993 that the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “Black Memorabilia Get First Midwest Show And Sale.”190 One collector of black dolls, Barbara Whiteman, also noted the seriousness of her doll collecting efforts, stating, “I want to make it clear. I am not home playing with dolls. I am collecting for historic purposes.” Interestingly, the 1993 convention was themed “Dolls Are Forever, they are us, they are you,” starkly different from the 1930s show and more closely resembling the American Girl Company’s attitude towards dolls that is discussed in the last chapter of this thesis. It was also “primarily promoted in trade journals and other industry-related periodicals” making it a bit more like the industry Toy Fair than an exhibit like the 1930s Doll Show.
black doll.”¹⁹¹ Black newspapers had long advertised ‘negro’ and ‘colored’ dolls to their readers, implicitly acknowledging that young children should see themselves reflected in the toys with which they play.” The newspaper proudly announced that the Standard Company in Harlem, “has for the past several years devoted all of its resources to developing the doll trade among Negroes” marketing the “Harriet Tubman” doll, which was dressed in a blue silk dress with silk bows and patent-leather slippers and said “mama” and cried.¹⁹² It was at this moment, when demand for inclusion was increasing and there was growing recognition of the importance of toys on children’s self-esteem, that social researchers turned their attention to the construction of racial identity in black children. Ruth Horowitz, a professor of educational psychology at Columbia’s Teachers College, published one of the earliest social psychology studies of the way race shaped children’s identity. Her study, “The Racial Aspects of Self-Identification in Nursery School Children,”¹⁹³ was a new chapter in the ongoing study of child development that was a hallmark of early twentieth century personality theorists and developmental psychologists like Piaget and Freud. In her study Horowitz used both photographs and line drawings of people of different races and asked twenty-one white and “Negro” children to nod, point or use language to identify the representation that was like them. She then tabulated the “correct” or “incorrect” choices and observed that as the children got older their identification with “white” or “black” became more “accurate.” For Horowitz this meant that racial identification was a stage in the development of


personality. She failed to consider that the correct answers of the children might have come from their focusing on height, weight, expression or clothing in identifying the characteristics “most like them.”

Nonetheless, Horowitz’ studies were timely and provoked interest among other social and developmental psychologists in the question of racial identity. Mamie Clark, a graduate student writing her master’s thesis at Howard University, began a study of racial identification of African American children utilizing some of the same techniques that Horowitz pioneered. But, unlike Horowitz who saw racial identification as an inborn developmental process, Clark identified a child’s social surroundings as critical. As she related in the paper she co-authored with her husband, Kenneth Clark, in 1939, she employed “a modification of the Horowitz picture technique,” testing “150 Negro children in segregated Washington, D.C. schools.” A year later she again joined with her husband to write a much more direct critique of the developmental psychologists entitled “Skin Color as a Factor in Racial Identification of Negro Preschool Children”

Questioning Horowitz’s conclusion that racial identification was a phase in the development of consciousness itself, they instead posited that race is a social concept that children learn from their environment.

Over the course of the coming years, the Clarks refined their methodology using black and white dolls to test out a series of assumptions about the role segregation played in damaging the self-image of “black and white” children. By the late 1940s, the Clarks had turned to dolls as a better proxy than drawings for “self-identification” among children, both white and black. A major innovation in their testing was the use of dolls.

Dolls offered a three dimensional, more life-like appearance than did line drawings or even photographs. As compared with experiments that involved coloring and drawing, the results of the doll test “tend to support previous results, although the trend was seen more definitely with the Dolls test.”\textsuperscript{195} The questions that they used in their famous “doll studies” revolved less around the question of “who looks like you” and more around value questions like, “who is prettier, this doll or this one?”

Mamie Clark’s master’s thesis appeared in article form in the \textit{Journal of Social Psychology} and the Clarks published a second “Preliminary Report” titled “Segregation as a Factor in the Racial Identification of Negro Pre-School Children” in 1939.\textsuperscript{196} This study specifically identified segregation as the variable they wanted to study. They explained that, “some Negro children from mixed New York nursery schools were compared with the main group of Negro children from segregated Washington, D. C. nursery schools.” The Clarks hypothesized that “such a comparison would give an indication of the possible effects of segregation as a factor affecting the problem investigated.”\textsuperscript{197} They concluded, “it appears that where the child brings up the subject of


\textsuperscript{196} See: Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, ”The Development of Consciousness of Self and the Emergence of Racial Identification in Negro Preschool Children.” Journal of Social Psychology, 10 (1939) 591-599; Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, “Segregation as a Factor in the Racial Identification of Negro Pre-School Children: A Preliminary Report,” \textit{The Journal of Experimental Education}, 8, December 1939, 161-163. Reflecting the sexism of the day, while these studies were based on Mamie Clark's work, Kenneth Clark, then entering graduate school as the first African American doctoral student ever admitted to the Psychology Department at Columbia, was listed as first author. See: Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, \textit{Children, Race, and Power: Kenneth and Mamie Clark's Northside Center}, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

race at all, his [sic] expressions are indicative of negative attitudes toward the Negro race.”

Some of the data was used to quantify the responses of black and white children who picked out “pretty” white dolls over “ugly” black dolls. But some of the most damning information came from the listings of responses that both black and white five year olds had when asked to explain their preferences: Why was the brown doll rejected by the child? “Because him foot [sic] ugly,” “looks bad all over,” “cause him black [sic] – cause his cheeks are colored – it’s ugly,” responded children from a southern state. Children in the north were not more subtle or progressive: When asked why they rejected the brown doll they simply said, “I don’t like brown,” or “cause it looks like a Negro.” Drawing out broader implications of their study, the Clarks concluded that, “it is clear that the Negro child, by the age of five is aware of the fact that to be colored in contemporary American society is a mark of inferior status.”

The Clarks’ conclusions were stark and damning. The children in the segregated Washington, D.C. schools had rigid distinctions between “white” and “Negro,” “pretty” and “ugly.” But the children from New York where white and black children attended school together showed a much lower tendency to identify themselves by associating the color in the pictures with themselves. They were more likely to focus on a variety of characteristics and subtleties in skin shading in their identification of “white” and “Negro.” In the segregated group racial identifications were made for the most part upon the basis of the skin color of the subjects.” But, the Clarks observed, “there was no tendency whatsoever toward this trend in the mixed group.” They began to shape the

argument that would prove so critical in the Supreme Court’s 1954 striking down of racial segregation.

Some things did begin to change. In 1948 Langston Hughes noted that manufacturers were producing more attractive black dolls, a fact he attributed to the potential for profit. Sometimes ethical choices make economic sense, even in the world of dolls. As Langston Hughes acknowledged, it was not just a moral imperative to produce “respectable,” “well-dressed” or “pretty” black dolls, but a profitable one as well. He wrote, “Apparently the doll companies have learned that Negro dolls need not always be funny in order to sell. This season, not just in Harlem, but in many downtown shops, beautiful brownskin dolls are on display. Not only do Negro doll companies now make colored dolls, but several other companies as well are making and selling them.”

The new visibility of black people in American society was forcing a re-evaluation of the racism of the previous generations of children’s toys and dolls: “Formerly one saw humorous Topsy dolls or Mammy rag dolls on display in most downtown shops. Now I see pretty grown-up debutantes in sepia dressed in lovely ballroom gowns on the toy shelves, and sweet little dimpled brown baby dolls that white parents as well as colored parents are buying. The colored doll is no longer manufactured just for colored buyers.”

Writing at Christmas, shortly after the war and in the midst of a growing civil rights movement, Hughes argued that “Santa Claus is a great interracialist so I am sure the old

199 Langston Hughes, “Brownskin Cards, Sepia Dolls, All Mean a Merrier Christmas,” Chicago Defender December 25, 1948, 6.
fellow is well pleased this year with the wide selection of dolls he will have to choose from for little girls who hang up their stockings on Christmas Eve."

A few years later, in 1951, right before Brown vs. Board of Education was argued in the Supreme Court a reporter for the *Baltimore Afro-American* outlined the dire implications for children of the Clarks’ doll studies: “The venom of Jim Crow [sic] seeps even into the minds of infant children and its harmful narcotic follows them from cradle-to-grave.” Reporting on the Clarks’ studies, the newspaper told of “the now famous test by psychologist [who tested] a group of youngsters, colored and white, [showing them] black-and-white dolls.” The children, he reported, were “told to choose the ‘‘good’ doll,” and the overwhelming majority of them chose the white doll. “Thus by the age of six, American children of all races, discovered to be colored must mean to be ‘bad’ and that happiness and freedom is reserved for the lights.” The reporter of this article made sure to point out the significance of the doll study. “Thurgood Marshal, the NAACP lawyer, [is using] the doll experiment as an illustration of the idea that segregation is immoral.” He paraphrased Marshall saying, “that it is time we recognize discrimination for what it is.” Ultimately, the Clarks’ doll studies were a crucial piece of the Supreme Court’s *Brown Vs. Board of Ed* decision to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the infamous 1894 Supreme Court decision that had established the “separate but equal” justification for legal segregation. American history was forever changed by dolls.

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On May 17, 1954 the Clarks were working at the Northside Center, the child development center they had founded. Kenneth was preparing to give a speech and Mamie was in her office when she heard the news bulletin about the unanimous decision in Brown vs. Board of Education to outlaw discrimination in schools. “A spontaneous party broke out as the Northside staff celebrated the momentous nature of the long sought victory. Staff members brought in children they were working with, and, as reported later, felt that this would change everything.” The Court’s decision, with its huge ramifications, would, in a sense, be the culmination of their efforts.

When G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s argued for the importance of dolls and noted how little dolls were studied, he could not have foreseen how the Clarks’ study would actually change history and the story to be told.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined three events that took place between the Depression and the Second World War. First, a doll show organized by white, upper class ladies offered a New York City audience a nostalgic, romanticized and feminine vision of a past in which Americans extended aristocratic European norms and where social class divisions were still intact. Second, a Toy Fair which displayed mass-produced, mechanical toys offered boys a vision not of the past but of a future world of technology, science, and progress. Finally, Mamie and Kenneth Clark’s psychological study of the children’s internalized racism through dolls, almost seems to highlighted for a still segregated America exactly what was wrong with the Doll Show. All three show that the popular conception of the quintessential American child was time and time again, white. Looked at together, these

202 Markowitz and Rosner, Children, Race, and Power, Chapter 3.
three different experiences all show how adults used children’s consumer products to instill certain visions about American history and it’s future identity. The toy industry persisted through economic hardship, wealthy women looked to dolls for stability, and psychologists saw in dolls the opportunity to demonstrate the terrible consequences of an exclusive American identity. The effort to identify a “consensus” about what the country represented was shaped by the Cold War as patriotic fervor, militarism and economic ascendancy. As the futuristic appliances and technologies entered daily life, suspicion and fear and about the future also made children’s media even more important for instilling pride in America’s past.
Chapter 3

Cold War Consensus: The Childhood of Famous Americans and Landmark History Books

“Will you please tell me what matters more than what children read? What other books [than children’s books] are as much lived in, acted out, and, if they are remembered at all, remembered for as long?”

“It wasn’t like it is now with a TV in every room or hand held video game,” remembered Florrie Binford Kichler in an interview about her attempt to re-print the Childhood of Famous Americans books. When she was eight years old and confined to bed, she recalls that her aunt bought here, “an orange biography of Mary Todd Lincoln. That was it. I was hooked.”

Similarly, an early reviewer of Landmark books identified the important change they represented. “I remember my own study of American history at the age of ten,” Katherine Shippen wrote. “Then the voyages of Columbus were simply three black lines drawn on a map. The causes of the American Revolution were a list to be learned.” But the new literature was significantly different – relating fictionalized stories to young readers in ways that grabbed their attention and taught them important civic lessons. “The writing of history for young people,” she noted, “has certainly come a long way since we first studied it. The publication of this series of books is in itself a landmark in that progress.”


who grew up with these orange biographies and Landmark history books recall them. These books represent both a serious attempt to engage and educate children and a wistful impulse to find unity in a checkered past.

In his book *Making Americans* Gary Schmidt explains that “a large purpose of children’s literature in the mid-twentieth century would be to define what America meant, what democracy in America meant, and what being an American meant for a child of the twentieth century.”

This chapter looks at two series of historical fiction for children – Childhood of Famous Americans (popularly known as the Orange Books) and the Landmark Books - that were immensely successful in the 1950s. Published by two very different presses, Bobbs-Merrill and Random House respectively, with very different social and political orientations, they each focused on many of the same heroes and landmark events and they depict the history of the U.S. in very similar ways. They present a democratic country where a peaceful people sacrificed to protect the ideal of freedom, where progress westward was for the purpose of establishing democracy, where women took care of the home and supported their husbands, and where slaves were generally content. The stories highlighted rugged individualism, whiteness, and masculinity as symbolic of American identity. Although the American public held far from uniform values or opinions about the country’s identity, the books primarily strive to tell a united story, even if it meant excluding the experiences of so many Americans.

This chapter considers the stories told by these book, the ideological underpinnings of

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5 Schmidt sees in some of the Orange Books some attempt to address racism and sexism in a few of the books. Ruth Feldstein points out that the fomenting Civil Rights movement contradicts the oft-repeated cliché that the 1950s was a time of conformity and apathy (*Motherhood in Black and White*, 1).
these stories, and why it was at this time that two publishing houses put so much effort into telling American history to children. The 1950s were no less politically complex than any other period of American history and yet it was at this time that the narratives that are still repeated today were solidified.

This chapter proposes that this coming together of the story of America in children’s books reflected a few things that were going on in the 1950s. First, after the chaos of the Depression and World War II there was a general feeling that the country, no longer united against a common enemy, needed a narrative that would hold the country together. Second, the children’s history books mirrored professional historians’ narratives of the fifties in producing what came to be known as a consensus history of the country. Through a triumphant, positive lens, the same lens that seems to have been used by the writers of children’s books, they told the story of America as one of admirable deeds performed by heroic leaders from the time of the American Revolution through the Civil War and two world wars.

The dolls and toys examined in the previous chapter, while objects of child’s play, were discussed as the medium through which adults expressed the cultural and political values they would ultimately communicate to children. The two series this chapter considers very directly reached and influenced millions of children in the 1940s and 1950s, providing them with a common historical narrative of the American people. Each focused on those famous Americans and events that had come to be seen as quintessentially American. The Orange Books, published by Bobbs-Merrill and designed for boys and girls aged eight to twelve are “familiar to baby boomers across the country” who fondly remember “their bright colored jackets, their neat binding and numerous
illustrations,” which were a “tempting display for [any child] to look through.”

The Landmark Books, published by Random House, primarily between 1950 and 1962, were geared toward slightly older girls and boys, though more toward boys, ages ten to twelve. They presented history as an adventure, different from the way history was often taught in schools. Both series promised to deliver exciting versions of historical narratives – a common trope in the advertising for history-themed commodities. By lending these sometimes heavily fictionalized stories the label of history they were given a certain amount of gravitas. And yet, their young demographic exempted the stories and authors from strict scrutiny by scholars and government agents alike. Despite their importance, neither series of historical fiction has been the object of extended study, nor have the series been compared to each other.

Because no literature is created in a vacuum and children’s literature is not immune to the ideological beliefs of its author, it is useful here to consider what has been called the politics of assent. In his article *Hidden Persuaders: Political Ideologies in*

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7 A note to Senior Editor Bob Bernstein, reviews a proposed Landmark book on the history of architecture and doesn’t recommend it for publication precisely because “The writing is dull and the reading is heavy going. Both stories are told in a kind of vacuum without any reference – historical or other – that would make it come alive to a child reader. They both give a rather accurate but dry chronological amount of the various styles with lists of names, dates, and places that are not sufficiently relived by an imaginative presentation of the subjects.” (Letter to Robert Bernstein from Fabio Coen, Subject Cassell & Co., Feb 18, 1963, Archives at Columbia University.)

8 For background on the 1950s, the Cold War and the history of the history profession itself, I rely on academic history books. For background on Bobbs-Merrill, the publisher of the Orange books, I rely primarily on a paper published by Jack O’Bar entitled “The Origins and History of the Bobbs-Merrill Company.” The archives of Columbia University provided me with access to the records of Random House and Landmark Books and to the oral history and papers of Bennett Cerf, the editor of Random House. The literary analysis of the children’s books considered in this chapter focuses on the themes and morals of the stories being told.
Robert Sutherland explains that “‘assent’ is ‘an author’s passive, unquestioning acceptance and internalization of an established ideology, which is then transmitted in the author’s writing in an unconscious manner.’”\(^9\) He explains further, “The politics of assent not only affirms the status quo but continually reinforces it. Since its underlying ideology is rendered invisible to authors and readers alike…”\(^10\) This notion of assent is particularly applicable here as the books considered certainly express the predominant ideology of the period. These stories offer the history the authors accept, one which is largely absorbed from their culture and is imbued with the values of the author. Sherrie Inness maintains that, in fact, “Children’s books are particularly susceptible to the politics of assent because a large segment of society prefers to believe that children’s books are naïve, simple, and non-ideological.”\(^11\) With this in mind, it is important to consider the publishing houses that printed each of these series to understand how these historical stories reflect the beliefs of the authors and publishers. The books were authored by many different people and for this reason it would be difficult to assign any particular belief system to the entire set of books. However, the publishing houses’ missions can help illuminate the political and ideological underpinnings of each series as a whole.

\textit{Bobbs-Merrill and Random House}


\(^{10}\) Sutherland, 155.

Bobbs-Merrill, the publishing house that produced the Orange Books, got its start in Indianapolis in the nineteenth century, decades before Random House was founded. Beginning in the Midwest in the nineteenth century, Bowen-Merrill (which became Bobbs-Merrill) “would gradually evolve from an organization mainly concerned with local and regional wholesale and retail sales of books and stationery into a trade and specialties publishing house of national stature.” The heyday of the company was in the late 1800’s and although it continues to publish books, it “ceased to be among the country’s leading publishing houses” by the late 1950s.

Although it had an office in New York, Bobbs-Merrill considered itself a midwestern press and maintained its identity as that of a wholesome publishing house somehow different from its East Coast peers. Still, it had an office in New York. Jack O’Bar argues in his paper on the origins and history of Bobbs-Merrill, that it was “never really outside of the great centers at any time during its period of success with popular literature,” Still, O’Bar points to the press’ conception of its role in sustaining and promoting a healthy community: “Aware of the remoteness of Indianapolis from the Eastern centers of culture, the writer found consolation through asserting ‘the condition of the bookstores in a place is a sure index to the intelligence of the people.’” If Indianapolis had good books its populace would be intelligent.

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12 Inness, 4.


14 O’Bar, 7.

15 O’Bar, p.3.
Bobbs-Merrill books were largely conservative in language and story and offered “good, clean fiction and corking good tales.” O’Bar describes the press’ success in this way: “It is its very middling quality, which the state has passed on to its writers, that has made them and their fiction acceptable to wide audiences, North and South, East and West. It certainly can be argued that wide popularity of novels does depend on their expression of ideas not too alien to their readers.” Bobbs-Merrill dedicated itself to publishing “clean, wholesome, and spirited manuscripts.” According to O’Bar, David Lawrence Chambers, the editor of the Orange Series, “indulged a nostalgia for the genteel literary expression. He had no use for the rough language and realism of younger writers such as Ernest Hemingway, James T. Farrell, and John Dos Passos” who are today regarded as literary icons of America and modernity.

Each year from 1900 to 1939 the number of best-selling novels nationwide that came from Indiana was second in number only to New York (whose population averaged almost four times that of Indiana). While the heyday of the Hoosier literary movement, as O’Bar calls it, was over by 1940, Bobbs-Merrill found a new outlet in the Childhood of Famous Americans series. These Orange Books helped get the Trade Department (under which children’s books were published) through the difficult financial years of the Great Depression.

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16 O’Bar, 27.
17 O’Bar, 10.
18 O’Bar, 10.
19 O’Bar, 26.
20 O’Bar, 9.
21 O’Bar, 10.
Chambers preferred to work with female authors because he found them to be more “compliant than men.”\textsuperscript{22} One female writer, Jessica Mannon, was a social conservative who dismissed books she considered inappropriate for children as not of lasting value. “Only a few of the Bobbs-Merrill’s children’s books have been thought by critics to have permanent value as literature.” The early successful books from the turn of the century were primarily about children who “were inordinately good.”\textsuperscript{23} The Orange Series was significant as one of the few available to “introduce young readers to history and biography” and its success “did much to bring into focus the market potential for children’s nonfiction series.”\textsuperscript{24} Not surprisingly, the series began with a book about the most famous mid-western native, Abraham Lincoln, and 208 more individual books followed.

Random House, in contrast to Bobbs-Merrill, was a liberal, New York publishing house. In 1925 Bennett Cerf, a young Columbia graduate, proposed to college friends that they publish “random” books, often classic books and poems in the public domain and therefore not subject to royalty payments to long-dead authors.\textsuperscript{25} With their early efforts to reproduce cheap editions of “modern classics,” Cerf and his friends began to build one of the great publishing houses of the twentieth century.

A brief review of the huge deposit of Random House records at Columbia’s Rare Manuscripts collection shows how successful they were. Over the course of the next half

\textsuperscript{22} O’Bar, 27.

\textsuperscript{23} O’Bar, 28.

\textsuperscript{24} O’Bar, 9.

century Random House published a colossal number of America’s most influential authors, playwrights, poets, political leaders, critics, academics, and intellectuals. In the archive are 1,681 boxes, 702 linear feet of correspondence, reviews, editorial files, and manuscripts of “the most important novelists and short story writers in American and European literature,” according to the notes that accompany the papers. Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, Sinclair Lewis, Andre Malraux, Gertrude Stein, Thornton Wilder, W.H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Lillian Hellman, Erle Stanley Gardner, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Toni Morrison are just a few of the names that leap out of the finders aid for the collection.26

Random House almost immediately established itself as a defender of literary free speech by challenging censorship laws that had banned the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the United States because of its “obscene” language. In 1934, ten years after *Ulysses* was first published in Europe, Bennett Cerf arranged to have an edition of the book seized by U.S. Customs officials when it was brought into the country by boat. Random House then challenged the U.S. government’s obscenity statutes in court on first amendment grounds and won a “monumental decision” in District Court” in 1933. The press published “a beautifully made” American edition and became known as a defender of the first amendment.27

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It can reasonably be argued that Random House was central to creating the intellectual agenda of the nation. Academic political scientists, economists, and historians like Richard Hofstadter, John Kenneth Galbraith, C. Vann Woodward, Arthur Schlesinger and Arthur Jr. all published with the House as well. The records contain correspondence with public figures like Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, J. Edgar Hoover. Books on virtually every conceivable historical subject and time period appeared under the imprint.\(^\text{28}\)

Having founded Random House, Cerf continued as editor and later envisioned the Landmark Series. While on vacation with his family at Cape Cod in 1946 Cerf and his ten year old son had argued about whether the Pilgrims landed in Provincetown or in Plymouth Rock. Finding no books about the Pilgrims at the local bookstore or beyond, Cerf realized there were none of any substance and certainly none for ten year olds. He set out to produce serious books about history that would be accessible and interesting for kids, “I began thinking about this, and then the idea suddenly struck me about this series of books … on some great episode in American history. By the time we left Provincetown, I had a list of the first ten titles and the name of the series, Landmark Books. My thought was not to get juvenile authors for this. I was going to get the most important authors in the country.”\(^\text{29}\)

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28 It is difficult to convey the breadth of the material available in this collection. There is a doctoral thesis on the publishing industry, and American intellectual and political life, awaiting here.

He spoke first with Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a feminist social reformer and author of novels that centered on independent young girls and women overcoming societal limitations. She agreed to write the first two books including one on the Declaration of Independence and another on the Constitution. In succeeding months Cerf corralled John Mason Brown, a well-respected Broadway and literary critic for the *Saturday Review* and other publications and author of eight books to write the Landmark *Daniel Boone*. According to Cerf, this book alone sold “millions.” Not until 1963 did Random House halt production of any Landmark books and then only those that sold fewer than 3,000 copies a year. The press continued to reprint many of the books well into the 1980s and many are still available today in paperback and ebook format.

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30 Dorothy Canfield Fisher, in Wikipedia. See also the listing and summaries of her books in Amazon. They include *The Home-Maker, Understood Betsy, The Bent Wig, The Brimming Cup, Seasoned Timber, A Montessori Mother, Mother and Child* and others. According to the summaries in Amazon, with the exception of *Seasoned Timber*, all were novels built around a young woman protagonist overcoming the biases and strictures of their families and communities.


33 Random House Records, New York: Columbia University Archives. Letter to Bob Bernstein from Walter Retan, Subject: Landmarks, March 28, 1963. “As I mentioned sometime ago, I think we should not try to keep all of our Landmarks in print…. I have had a list made of all Landmark titles selling under 3,000 copies either last year or so far this year. This list is attached, and on it I’ve indicated the titles which I think we should consider distributing in just the Gibraltar binding. It is my hunch that the orders are coming almost entirely from schools and libraries. A few I’ve marked for continuance in trade edition because I think the bookstore sale in those cases is larger than the educational sale…. I have also marked several more to let go out of print. Several of
It is noteworthy that, despite the very different history and orientation of Bobbs-Merrill and Random House, they produced remarkably similar stories about American history for children. This fact suggests that in the 1950s a more cohesive story of American history had emerged and become part of the public understanding of the country’s history. It was during this period that what had come to be known as “consensus history” had developed among historians.

The differences between the two series consist mostly of format. While both the Orange Books and many of the Landmark books focus on famous people’s childhoods, the Landmark books carry the stories into adulthood. The Orange Books often end with brief descriptions of the adult accomplishments of the protagonists, as if to say that it is their moral character and early training that mattered more than the accomplishments that lent them fame as adults. They often include timelines of events as well as a section addressed to the reader asking “Do You Remember?” about details from the story, “Help With Words,” and “Important Things to Look Up.” The Landmark Books do include indexes at the end of the books – a rare addendum to a child’s fiction books but one which added historical seriousness to the work of fiction.

*The 1950s*

After World War II there was an urgent need for the country to come together. Certainly there were many different interpretations of American history. Civil Rights and Women’s Movements activists recognized a country plagued by inequality. Joseph McCarthy and HUAC saw the threat of communism everywhere. And yet, in the popular imagination there came to be a general consensus when looking back about what
America was about. The song, “The House I Live In” expresses that consensus. It begins with the line, “What is America to me?” In a short movie of the same name Frank Sinatra explains to a group of boys of different faiths and backgrounds that America is a land where people respect their fellow citizens, no matter what their faith, race or ethnic background. “America: was “the people” and, the song went, “a certain word, ‘democracy,’ that’s what America’s to me.”

Popular media exposed children to the story of America as the defender of democracy and its themes were strikingly similar to those of the children’s books. As this chapter will show these children’s books depicted Native Americans as the enemy, westward expansion as admirable, women as confined to the home in the role of support to their husbands, and African Americans as slaves. In the 1950s children could watch endless TV shows in which white male settlers brought democracy and civilization to untamed lands - Roy Rogers, Gunsmoke, The Lone Ranger, The Deputy, and Maverick and killed Native Americans in the process. Other shows presented law enforcement agencies as protectors of our freedom who “always caught their man.” Shows like Wanted: Dead or Alive, 77 Sunset Strip, The Untouchables, The FBI, or I Led Three Lives, reassured Americans that government was protecting them from dangers both foreign and domestic. And TV shows like Father Knows Best, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, and Leave it to Beaver which featured the suburban white, middle class nuclear American family with June Cleaver, the supportive stay at home mother. African Americans were rarely depicted on television in roles other than as servants or foils for

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34 See, “The House I Live in,” based on the song written by Abel Meeropol, who along with his wife, Anne, adopted the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who would be put to death a few years later. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F57G6wzUuEE, Accessed: March 12, 2014.
stand-up comedians like Jack Benny who had a “valet” “Rochester” who appeared with him on his variety show. Black children were even more rarely seen on television. Amos and Andy, a 1950s adaptation of the vaudeville act, presented stereotyped visions of black life to a wider audience than ever before.

The 1950s also saw explosive growth in the popularity of comic books, which often replayed the scenario of good triumphing over evil so characteristic of children’s stories (though analyses have shown them to be subversive as well). Albert Kahn pointed out in a 1953 article that, “During 1952, more than 100,000,000 copies of comic books were sold each month [sic] in the United States—a total of well over a billion copies for the year.” The forces of good fought against evil in the person of the vigilante Batman, the wholesome and righteous Superman, and the not-so-subtly patriotic Captain America.

Many adults worried that the violence in these shows, even when good triumphed, was detrimental to children. Dr. Fredric Wertham, organizer of the Lafargue Clinic, a mental health center in Harlem for African American children, was a major critic of violence in comics and believed these 10-cent magazines encouraged violence. In “The Comics … Very Funny,” his 1948 essay published in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Wertham described little girls tortured by boys or weak children pushed off roofs by other children who learned the wrong lesson from Superman. He believed children were


37 Albert Kahn, “Comics, TV, and your Child,” *Masses And Mainstream* 6, June, 1953, 36.
getting hooked on drugs and crime because of the glorification of drugs, or at least their enticement, in comic books.

A great deal had gone in to solidifying this notion of America as the defender of freedom. Massive propaganda efforts mobilized people to join the war effort. Films, posters and educational campaigns encouraged men to join the Army, women to take jobs as welders in airplane and shipbuilding, and children to join in collection drives for scrap metal, paper and string. America was fighting for what Franklin Roosevelt called “the Four Freedoms,” – freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear.

Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* films explained why “our boys” from every region, ethnic group and social class in the country should join to fight the goose stepping Nazis to save the “free world.” Other films depicted the Japanese as “emperor worshipers” who blindly followed orders without the independent thinking that characterized Americans.38

As Tom Engelhardt states in *The End of Victory Culture*, “As every child learned in school, our history was an exclusive saga of expanding liberties and rights that started in a vast, fertile nearly empty land whose native inhabitants more or less faded away after that first Thanksgiving…” He goes on to say, “If occasional wrongs were committed, or mistakes made, these were correctable; if unfreedom existed within American’s borders,

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38 Frank Capra, Director, “Why We Fight?” series, In the YouTube description of this series of seven films we learn: “’Prelude to War,’ Chapter I of Frank Capra's "Why We Fight" series, describes World War II as a battle between the ‘slave world’ of fascism and the ‘free world’ of American liberty. In the ‘slave world,’ the entire populations of Germany, Italy and Japan have been hoodwinked by madmen, opportunists who capitalized on their people's desperation and weakness to rise to power. These demagogues promised revenge for past losses.” See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm3GsSWKyso, Accessed: July 30, 2016.
it was only so that – as with slavery – it might be wiped out forever.” In the consensus story the America, injustice is always temporary, solvable, and was, in a word, history.

This American story, according to Engelhardt, proved to be the lens through which major events – particularly wars – could be viewed. Through that lens the nineteenth century Indian wars were necessary to bring civilization to a barbarous people. The American Revolution and the Civil War were wars in which “whites had fought each other reluctantly, with great heroism, and for the highest principles, whether in rebellion against a British king or in a civil war of ‘brother against brother.’” Pearl Harbor came to be described in this way: “At the country’s periphery, a savage, nonwhite enemy had launched a barbaric attack on Americans going about their lives early one Sunday morning, and that enemy would be repaid in brutal combat on distant jungle islands in a modern version of ‘Indian fighting.’” Whatever the situation America was not the aggressor but a peaceful, democratic place where people would fight ferociously to defend their values if attacked. The attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II fit perfectly into this paradigm, (although it would take more work to fit dropping of the atomic bomb on civilians into it).

The fight against fascism in Europe rallied Americans of all ages, races, religions to battle for freedom and to fight against the intolerance and the belief in racial

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40 Engelhardt, 4.

41 Engelhardt, 5.

superiority that characterized Germany at that time. Understood as a fight for good against evil, the war made the battle between democracy and totalitarianism tangible and urgent and the whole nation was on board. When the war ended newspaper editorials, government officials and mass media defined America’s new role as the “arsenal of democracy,” building a peaceful world through military strength, scientific superiority and unassailable democratic ideals. The country asserted its role as leader in the defense and reconstruction of the “free world.”

Julia Mickenberg points out that by the late 1940s the study of American history had become a requirement for most high school students. She explains that the narrative generated in textbooks about America’s history bolstered the Cold War notion of exceptionalism and white supremacy, “...in most cases that study was explicitly intended to further current national imperatives and to naturalize the existing social order.” It was in this context that both Bobbs-Merrill and Random House signed on to the task of publishing this kind of consensus story.

**The Development of Consensus History**

Historians of the decades before the 1950s, known as “progressive” era historians, had acknowledged that American history was fraught with conflict. Charles Beard, Frederick Turner and Vernon Parrington had all seen class and social conflicts as central to the American story. As Peter Novick outlines in his authoritative book on the history of the history profession, things changed in the fifties when academic historians rejected the scholarly work of these earlier historians and set out to develop a “consensual”

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approach, which would identify the commonalities in ideology, goals, and traditions that tied Americans together.\textsuperscript{44}

These new, consensus historians tended to downplay or even reject acknowledgement of some of the conflicts identified by earlier historians. They rewrote the story of America not as one of conflict but as the story of a nation held together by agreed upon values of democracy, freedom and equality.\textsuperscript{45} The “progressive emphasis on social conflict was rejected not just as overdrawn but as fundamentally wrongheaded; historians’ focus shifted from the conflict of classes to a consensus culture.” Novick points out that “‘consensus’ became the key word in postwar attempts to produce a new interpretative framework for American history, focusing attention on what had united Americans rather than what had divided them.”\textsuperscript{46}

The consensus historians were far from an ideologically coherent bunch. They ranged from liberal, sometimes radical, Richard Hofstadter\textsuperscript{47} who argued for “a reinterpretation of our political traditions which emphasizes the common climate of American opinion” and who admired the New Deal and the role of the state to Daniel Boorstin’s rabid anti-communist interpretations.\textsuperscript{48} But all held some core beliefs about


\textsuperscript{46} Novick, 325-330.

\textsuperscript{47} Hofstadter’s early work certainly had a radical tinge. See such works as: “Anit-Intellectualism in American Life,” \textit{Social Darwinism in American Thought}, (1944), and \textit{The Paranoid Style in American Politics} as examples. These are noted in: Susan Baker, \textit{Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s}, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985).

\textsuperscript{48} Novick, 332-333.
American history – that we were a nation whose basic underlying creed was and always had been improving on an imperfect past, to protect and spread democracy and freedom. Most historians of the 1950s agreed about this narrative and projected this idea of America onto the past, viewing significant events through this lens. This was certainly true in the books examined here. Whatever did not fit this uplifting story of America - whether it be slavery, the destruction of the American Indian culture, the internment of Japanese, or nativism was considered a minor aberration in an otherwise general story of expanding democracy and freedom first throughout the nation and then throughout the world.

The consensus historians rejected what Hofstadter called the tendency of earlier historians “to place political conflict in the foreground of history.” They saw “the fierceness of the political struggles” as a mischaracterization of the political process. All, on every side of every political divide, believed in the “sanctity of property,” the “right of the individual to dispose and invest,” “the value of opportunity,” natural evolution of self-interest…into a beneficent social order.”

What we now see as relatively simplistic and incomplete consensus historical accounts in the Landmark Books – Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s Our Independence and The Constitution or Paul Revere and the Minutemen, Jane Mayer’s Betsy Ross and the Flag and Sterling North’s Abe Lincoln: Log Cabin to White House – were considered decent, albeit dramatized and fictionalized, reflections of the new academic historiography that was emerging in the post war years.

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49 Novick, 333.
According to Novick, historians reacted differently to the consensus history that developed during the forties and fifties. Some saw these relatively bland historical accounts of the political and social history of the country in benign, “apolitical” terms. Others found this to be a particularly repressive period, one in which relatively critical traditions, some Marxist, others merely progressive, were either openly repressed by the state through HUAC hearings, state investigations, firings or blacklists or, alternatively, through self-censorship by those fearful of exposing themselves to such oppression. They were clearly conscious of the political and ethical whitewashing required by authors if they were to be published or win tenure.

Some were enthusiastic supporters of this consensus story that characterized American history as devoid of conflict. They sought to identify, even purge, those they considered leftists or communists from the profession. Daniel Boorstin, the American historian who would be recruited to write the final book in the Landmark Series in the late 1960s and who then became the Librarian of Congress, for example, is identified as a particularly partisan warrior in the attempt to purge the profession of those critical of American political history. Called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1953, he named many members of the profession he suspected of being communists or having close affiliation with the Communist Party. In his testimony he “agreed that no Communist should be allowed to teach at an American university.”


51 Novick, 328.
Despite the complex reality of the 1950s and even some question among historians about the adequacy of the consensus story, this was the story of America offered to children through textbooks, the media and children’s books. The stories largely, but not entirely, told triumphant stories about America and ignored the country’s extermination of the Native Americans, its widespread dependence on slavery, its oppressions of African Americans, other minorities and women and its aggression toward other nations.

*The Childhood of Famous Americans (Orange) Books and the Landmark Books*

Despite the tensions in the 1950s, and despite the very different orientations of Bobbs-Merrill and Random House, these two presses published children’s books with strikingly similar subjects, plots and morals. While Bobbs-Merrill was a conservative press and Random House a liberal one, they each tell many of the same stories in much the same way. What accounts for this? Perhaps the focus on great Americans and events lent itself to a particularly triumphant presentation. Perhaps the authors had absorbed the prevailing consensus ideology whereby American was always on the side of good. Understandably, Bobbs-Merrill, as a conservative press, was invested in an idealized past with little mention of conflicts. And perhaps Random House, intent on offering a broad range of books to teach American children about their country focused on what had come to be seen as the pivotal stories of America. Or perhaps, in part, the red baiting atmosphere of the fifties caused them to adhere closely to the earlier, patriotic consensus history to avoid looking suspicious.

The authors of the Orange books imagined how particular famous people came to possess the traits that had made them become great leaders or, as Gary Schmidt put it,
they “set out to flesh out those clichés” of American history – “that George Washington was a great general, or that Ben Franklin was intelligent and inventive, or the Daniel Boone was a great frontiersman.”\(^52\) For example, according to a Chicago Tribune reviewer in 1949, the author of the book about Miles Standish, having few records of Standish’ childhood, “brings him to life as a strong-willed, independent youngster who didn’t like fancy clothes.” Similarly, the story about Harriet Beecher’s childhood “revealed the generosity and the sense of justice that were later to result in her writing ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’” Abigail Adams, described as a child who was a keen observer of people and events, was portrayed as humble, probably never envisioning her writings of such importance that they “would one day be collected into a book.” Oliver Perry, also of humble origins, lived in sight of the Atlantic Ocean and had a seafaring father who prepared him to take on the British on Lake Erie.\(^53\) There were those who objected to this fictionalizing of famous people’s childhoods. They argued that children would not be able to distinguish between what was true and what was not true and that books that confused fact and fiction should be labelled as fiction. Despite such controversy the books have continued to find success and new biographies still appear today – the most famous titles printed now by Simon & Schuster. Schmidt points out that “by 1953 Bobbs-Merrill had sold 100,000 of its first title… it added another seventy volumes to its series in the next twenty years… The series would eventually extend over 200 volumes.\(^54\)

\(^{52}\) Schmidt, Making Americans, 97.


\(^{54}\) Schmidt, 96 - 98, summarizes this discussion.
While the Orange Series focused on biographies, the Landmark Series was somewhat broader, integrating biography and landmark events. Random House published over 120 non-fiction historical accounts in the Landmark Series between 1951 and 1963. The first “landmark” focused on early European adventurers and Christopher Columbus. This was followed by books about the Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth Rock, the story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith, Paul Revere, and then the Declaration of Independence. These were the founding origin stories of America, which, to a large extent, continue to be taught today as the “beginning” of the nation today, despite an increased understanding that native people were here long before Europeans.

In her 1951 review of the first ten books in the Landmark Series, Katherine Shippen’s descriptions read like a summary of consensus history. “Here again is the discovery of the new land, the settlement, the struggle to attain freedom, the building of the new nation, the push across the mountains to the West, the conquest not only of the land but of the air.” She describes the imperfect but engaging characters in the books. “They are not stock people with set virtues. Many of them are rough, some are intelligent and thoughtful, and some are clever and ingenious.” But Shippen points out what unites the characters. “They are all alike Americans, with American roads to travel, American problems to face.” The qualities that make the characters American are their heterogeneous, but overwhelmingly northern European origins, their search for freedom and the drive to tame a wild continent.


Shippen points out how well-chosen the authors were for their particular subjects. Armstrong Sperry, a well-regarded illustrator and Newberry Prize winning author of numerous adventure books for children wrote *Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. James Daugherty, another established writer of children’s adventure books and winner of the Newberry and Caldecott prizes for children’s literature wrote *The Landing of the Pilgrims*, ostensibly using original sources, including passages from William Bradford’s diaries. Daugherty also linked adventure, conquest and entrepreneurship in *Trappers and Traders of the Far West*. He touted his understanding of the value of free enterprise and described how John Jacob Astor started out in fur-trading. He writes, “Strangest of all is that this world-embracing dream of free enterprise, with all this stupendous effort, should … rise again as a rich twofold empire….”

Many of the books were authored by established liberal writers including Robert Penn Warren and Mackinlay Kantor, a journalist and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist. Whatever their political views, the authors all signed on to the task of teaching children about American history through the particular lens of consensus history, even though that history did not always reflect the realities of American life then. In general the books failed to tell the story of America’s less noble ventures – the wiping out of Native Americans, its long history of slavery and racism, the neglected history of women and African Americans. This triumphalist formulation of American history would not be challenged in a major way until the late 1950s Civil Rights Movement and early 1960s student and antiwar movements.

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It was not always easy to make an exciting story about an event about when few details were available. Samuel Hopkins Adams, a muckraking journalist who himself wrote about the difficult nature of writing history in the forward to *The Pony Express* points out that “detailed data on the Pony Express are scanty, vague and often contradictory. With a few exceptions it is not even known with certainty what men rode what routes.”\(^{58}\) For this reason he finds ways to embellish the story. “Permitting myself a certain license of treatment, the better to round out the picture, I have attempted to present in broad outline the character and atmosphere of an enterprise which, short-lived though it was, proved to be a vital link in the development of our transportation system.”\(^{59}\) He wrote the story as one of “young riders who carried the mails in relays from California to St. Joseph, Missouri, across mountains and desert, through snow and scorching heat, and of their encounters with Indians and outlaws along the way.”\(^{60}\) America’s history was told as one of expansion, conquest, adventurism and innovation.

It is clear how seriously Random House took the publication of children’s books during in this period of ferment about the meaning of history and consensus. In the mid-1940s, the press began a short lived series of “Wonder Books” that focused on youngsters between two and five, publishing such classics as “Mother Goose,” “Peter Rabbit,” and lesser known fables like the “Greedy Little Puppy” and “How the Rabbit Fooled the Whale.” Random House also published more uplifting books - a “Children’s Shakespeare” and a series called “Children’s Digest” that included serious short stories.

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\(^{58}\) Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Pony Express*, Forward.

\(^{59}\) Hopkins Adams, Forward.

\(^{60}\) Shippen, “The Landmark Books,” 98.
and reviews for slightly older readers. Perhaps the most famous children’s author was Theodore Geisel, “Dr. Seuss,” who published “The Cat in the Hat” and “Horton Hatches the Egg” and whose biography was published by Random House. The press also offered Barbie books, baseball cards replete with statistics, brief biographies of famous ball players, a history of the US for Young People, and a book called FBI – Young Reader’s Edition.  

Landmark books, which began just a few years after the establishment of Random House in 1948 and continued publishing until the early 1960s, represented Random House’s most sustained and important long-term effort to attract younger readers to serious intellectual and historical issues. From the first it was clear that Random House was not just trying to “cash in” on a new children’s market but had grander things in mind. Unlike the Orange books whose authors had little intellectual heft, Random House actively sought to get serious “adult” authors to turn their attention to young readers. Cerf, the series editor, approached some of the press’ own well known writers to produce enticing but serious histories of the “landmark” historical events. Pearl S. Buck, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Good Earth*, wrote, the Landmark book *The Man Who Changed China: The Story of Sun Yat-Sen*; John Gunther, the well-

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62 Some sources say that the series continued until 1970, but it is clear that the vast majority of the books were published in the period 1953-1963. Following that, reprints with new covers appeared and a few original works, including a 1968 volume called “Landmarks of American History” written by Daniel Boorstin. The following year he would publish an edited collection, *The Decline of Radicalism* with an essay “The New Barbarians,” that was a clear attack on the New Left and New Left historians: arguing that they were destroying the country and were intent on pulling down the country. See: Daniel Boorstin, *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections on America Today*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), which includes the essay entitled: “The New Barbarians: The Decline of Radicalism.”
respected author of the *Inside* series of studies about world politics and nation states, wrote *Alexander the Great*.\(^{63}\)

While Landmark titles included world events and historical figures, the heart of the series were those that focused on the United States. Of the 185 titles published in those years only forty focused on non-American subjects like *Cleopatra* by Leonara Hornblow or *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Harry Emerson Fosdick (who also wrote *The Life of St. Paul* for the Series).\(^{64}\) Van Wyck Mason and C.S. Forrester, both authors of serious and popular fiction and non-fiction, often centering on military battles, also were called to write for Landmark.

Of 120 or so Landmark books forty-two of them were specifically about war, including twenty-four about World War II and eight about the Civil War. Notably these books play down the ideological tensions behind the wars and focus on the battles, weapons and technology instead. World War II was the most popular subject of the Landmark books – a war that became the symbol of America’s righteousness in the face of evil. Books about World War II focused on military tactics, specific battles and strategic maneuvers. For example, in *The Story of D-Day, June 6, 1944*, little attention is paid to the competing ideologies behind the war but much attention is focused on how

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\(^{64}\)“Landmark Books – First Rate History Series for readers and Collectors,” Old Scrolls Blog, Available at: [https://oldscrolls.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/landmark-books-first-rate-history-series-for-readers-and-collectors/](https://oldscrolls.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/landmark-books-first-rate-history-series-for-readers-and-collectors/), Accessed: June 21, 2017. Also, see the various short biographies of these authors in their Wikipedia entrees.
American troops approached the beach at Normandy. The books about the Civil War rarely mention slavery but focus on specific battles, generals and political leaders.

Forty-one Landmark books mention a white man by name in the title and most of the others prominently feature white men. The books are primarily aimed at young boys, as evidenced by the content and by the fact that Random House tested some material for their books in magazines like Boys Life. Only nine female protagonists were featured and only one book focuses on an African American figure – George Washington Carver. The major themes in the Landmark Series revolve around white men versus native peoples, the acquisition and annexation of land, the importance of land acquisition and of private property, the superiority of democracy and free enterprise, and the possibilities of science and technology.

Native Americans

Both the Orange books and the Landmark Series include many stories that involve Native Americans who are usually referred to simply as “Indians” with no acknowledgement of the existence of different tribes with different languages and customs. Native Americans were primarily portrayed as savage aggressors, impeding white men’s progress across the country.

In The End of Victory Culture Engelhardt looks at the way the original story of settlers and Indians was turned on its head so that the settlers were seen as good and the Native Americans as bad. He quotes an early description of the Massacre of the Pequot

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Indians in 1637. In this telling the English stormed a fort of the Pequots who then, amidst the cries of their women and children, shot their arrows back at the English and were pretty effective. The English responded by starting the wigwams on fire and four hundred men, women and children were killed. According to Englehardt, all that was known from initial reports of this event was that there was a sneak attack, an assault on the fort, the use of fire and a savage killing. He maintains, however, that the story came to be told by the Americans who were the victors as one in which the Native Americans were the aggressors and the Americans were merely defending themselves. Over time, all the violent qualities were attributed to the Native Americans. The settlers’ slaughter of the Native Americans was justified by the Indian’s “treacherous ambushes, their torture of captives, their savage use of fire and other hellish modes of killing.” Englehardt points out that from a 1906 silent movie right up through the 1950s it was a convention of movie westerns to depict an attack on a white fort and Indians shooting flaming arrows.

Early nineteenth century schoolbooks graphically described the cruelty of the Native Americans in their treatment of white captives. According to Ruth Miller Elson, these texts contained graphic illustrations of Indians with “tomahawks raised, about to murder and presumably scalp a helpless white mother holding an infant in her arms.”

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67 Engelhardt, 16.

68 Engelhardt, 306.

In the Landmark Series this generally accepted depiction of the Indian as a savage aggressor is seen in a number of the books. The story of Abraham Lincoln contains a scene in which Abe’s grandfather and his sons were working in the fields when Abe’s grandfather was shot. “In a few moments he was dead…[Tom] turned to see an Indian dart from his ambush and come racing toward him across the field. Would the Indian take him captive? Would he kill him on the spot?” Tom’s brothers kill the Indian with no remorse nor acknowledgement of his humanity. “Tom’s eyes were glued to a shining medal which dangled on the Indian’s breast. A moment later he heard another shot—this time from the stockade. Just below the medal, blood oozed from a bullet hole as the savage pitched forward at Tom’s feet. Tom’s brothers were sharpshooters who could hit the eye of a squirrel.”

Both the Orange and Landmark Series include stories about Narcissa Whitman. The Orange book is called Narcissa: Pioneer Girl while the Landmark book Heroines of the Early West, which includes a chapter on her. Narcissa was a white woman missionary who, along with her husband, Dr. Marcus Whitman, travelled west from her home in Massachusetts over the Rocky Mountains to Oregon where they set up a mission for native peoples and a settlement to assist other travelers coming West. Ultimately the Whitmans were killed by Native Americans. It is surmised that the native peoples grew suspicious of the doctor and his wife when they noted that more Native Americans were dying from measles than were white settlers. According to both accounts, the situation was misinterpreted by the Indians. Neither book acknowledges any legitimacy to the Native Americans’ interpretation of their suffering as having any link to the imperialist

impulses of the white settlers. Only ignorance, concluded the Orange book guided their actions, “Poor mistaken people! They killed their best friends.” 71

Interestingly, even in these staid, insensitive depictions there is some indication that the consensus narrative is beginning to break down. For example, at times there is an acknowledgement that some Indians are friendly. The Orange Book about Martha Washington makes a distinction between Indians who were their friends and those who were dangerous or a nuisance and needed to be chased out alongside unwanted animals. In one scene Martha’s Aunt Mary screams when she sees an Indian standing in the doorway. “No one else was frightened. They were used to Indians. The Pamunkey and the Chickahominy tribes where their friends and neighbors.” As the narrator explains, “They kept unfriendly Indians away and drove the wild animals out of the Dandridge woods and fields.” 72

In the Orange biography there is an interesting discussion about whether there are friendly Indians or not. Narcissa, curious about Indians, listens to the conversation of two missionaries who are staying with her family. One of them, Mr. Stoner, wonders why people who are curious about Indians are not willing to go help them. The other missionary, Mr. Johnson, replies, that “it's no wonder people are unwilling to go into Indian territory… A white man is in constant danger when he works among the Indians." He argues that, “The threat of danger is never over – no matter how long we live with them.” He then tells the story of his friend, a doctor, who lived happily with a Native American tribe for more than a year and then they killed him. Mr. Johnson goes on to

surmise that, “perhaps there was serious illness that my friend couldn't cure. The Indians have queerer ideas about illness. When things happen that they don’t or can't understand, they blame the missionaries. The Indians say that white men bring trouble to their villages.’ ‘In times of trouble they forget that we do much to help them,’ Mr. Stoner added. ‘They need doctors. They need schools. They must learn how to farm. They can't always be killing off the game and then moving onto fresh hunting grounds.”\(^73\)

In this Orange version, Narcissa’s brutal death is mentioned briefly but the focus is instead on her legacy. The images in the book are largely of domestic scenes of family and friendship. The book ends with a pretty image of flowers that cover Oregon today, “The poppies are bright symbol of all we owe to that brave Pioneer woman.”\(^74\)

The *Landmark* book seems intent on re-enforcing the notion of Native Americans as violent and includes significantly more violent scenes. At one point in the chapter, Marcus talks about how he had to maintain the “Biblical rules of ‘turning the other cheek,’” as if towards a stubborn child when an Indian “took hold of my ear and pulled it and struck me on the breast ordering me to hear…”\(^75\) The book describes Narcissa’s death in vivid detail: “a number of bullets entered her body as the settee dropped to the ground. An Indian rushed up, overturned it, and thrust her down into the thick November mud.” The text continues. “Another Indian lifted her head by its long pale golden hair and struck her face viciously with his leather quirt. No one knows how long it took her to

\(^73\) Narcissa Whitman, 33- 34.

\(^74\) Narcissa Whitman, 192.

The images below show just how much the Landmark book emphasized the “savagery” of the Native Americans. On the left, an image from the Orange Series depicts Narcissa acting cordially toward Native Americans. On the right, the Landmark book presents a detailed depiction of an Indian killing Narcissa.

In the Landmark book *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* the author describes the fear of Native Americans in 1600 Salem. “The Indians were a constant danger,” the author proclaimed. And “a man working alone in a field was easy prey for them.” The farmers had “to keep weapons by them always” for “there had been killing by Indians around many of the small villages nearly every year, and as late as 1691 it had been

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76 *Heroines of the Early West*, 86-7.

necessary for the county of Essex to establish a corps of twenty-four scouts for protection."$^{78}$

In another *Landmark* story, *Trappers and Traders of the West*, the mission and the right of the U.S. to expand its territory is made explicit. “Across the Allegheny Mountains, Democracy was spilling out of its cradle to raise tall corn, huge hogs, fabulous mules, and fast horses in the Ohio valley,” James Daugherty, the book’s author, proclaimed. “Jefferson and Congress had declared the Northwest Territory forever free, and revolutionary generals and veterans were chasing Indians out of Indiana and Illinois.”$^{79}$ In the *Landmark* book that traces the brief history of the Pony Express, the white people working to establish the mail route face the invisible threat of the Indian’s arrow. These descriptions assume the whiteness of the reader, conflate all Native Peoples into an unspecified mass, and relegate them to the status of “other.”

Being killed by an Indian was considered a threat that came with the terrain, no different from the possibility of starvation or freezing to death. “Every trip was an adventure for hardy men and brave women. The course was marked with grim reminders. Here and there were rough boards marked with the sad words: ‘Died of Arrow Wound July 8,’ ‘Perished Here of Thirst,’ ‘Buried Where Found Frozen.’”$^{80}$ In the *Landmark* book *Heroines of the Early West* Native Americans are included on the list of the dangers lurking in the West. “Nothing could seem to hold the women back –not even terrifying stories about cannibal Indians, fever-ridden swamps, strange wild beasts, poisonous


snakes, mountains too high to climb, rivers too deep to ford, forests that were trackless jungles.”

When not viewed as dangerous, as part of nature, native people are treated as a pesky pets or bothersome animals. In *Heroines* white women are praised for their spunkiness in chasing “Indians” away. The author, Nancy Wilson Ross, states in her introduction that “stories of spunky women and thieving or just plain annoying Indians often amaze us. At the end of their patience these women would suddenly chase Indians from their kitchens with brooms.” Nothing frightened them. They would “slap their uninvited guests’ hands as they would naughty children’s when they were caught greedily reaching for a freshly baked pie: or they would scold them soundly for not going home to help their own squaws with the hard labor.”

Even the curiosity of the Native Americans was viewed as a nuisance. Wilson Ross, states that “Indians who were not hostile could be very troublesome too because of their great curiosity… They were particularly interested in the mystery of rising dough at bread-making times.” And they were unclean. “They enjoyed poking their unwashed fingers into the strange white balloons.” The author moves from describing the Indians’ “peskiness” to their “grotesque” and loud ways, which would be frightening to timid white women. “Even when friendly, their grotesquely painted faces, their half-naked

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81 Nancy Wilson, *Heroines of the Early West*, (New York: Random House), 1960, 14. The idea that Native Americans are not people but are part of the land and nature has persisted in children’s popular culture. In the 1995 Disney film *Pocahontas*, the title character is animated as part of nature; she becomes the wind, birds fly about her as if arising from her, plants light up under her touch. Her grandmother’s spirit is embodied by a Weeping Willow tree.

82 *Heroines of the Early West*, 14.

bodies, their wild war whoops, their rough, husky, unintelligible speech must have been a nightmare to timid young girls and anxious mothers.”

*Land, Empire, Colonialism and War*

The books about conquering the West stay close to the consensus story. The books view America’s expansionist tendencies as a positive force, bringing civilization to the natives and establishing private property and democracy. These stories bring to mind the notion of Manifest Destiny, the underlying American rationale for its expansion across the continent. White men were glorified as heroes, particularly for taming the wilderness. A large part of what they did was establish private property. “Wild Bill Hickok was the man, more than any other, who tamed and quieted the border settlements,” declared Stewart Holbrook in his 1952 Landmark, *Wild Bill Hickok Tames the West*. “He performed his great pioneer work single-handed and with rigid honesty and supreme courage.” Hickok was given credit for establishing order. It was “little wonder the West continues to honor the memory of its incomparable peace officer, who was the landmark of order in the midst of turbulence and crime.”

In *The California Gold Rush*, the author, May McNeer describes a prospector’s proprietary feelings when he comes upon “the sun spread across the windblown fields of grass and turned them all to shining, gleaming gold. A golden earth! Golden streams! A golden land! It should be his. Hadn’t he found it?” The land, in this description, is commodified. The land itself

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84 *Heroines*, 13.


is commodified. It is golden, can yield gold to make a person rich. The protagonist feels he “found” the land and it should belong to him.

In *Trappers and Traders of the Far West*, various heroes move ever westward, expanding America’s reach. The book shows an illustration in which beavers hold up the globe, a ship traverses the ocean and a bald eagle wraps the world in its wings. This image frames the natural resources, trade and idea of American power in a global, imperialist context. Each undertaking to acquire land was important for supporting the idea that America could tame, handle, improve and nurture land.

Yet within the Landmark books are some indications that not everyone agrees that expansion is good. In *Heroines of the West*, it is noted that “Mr. Daniel Webster was just one of many famous statesmen who was convinced Americans should not even bother their heads about the vast unknown territory that lay beyond the Rocky Mountains. He rose in the United States Senate and made some remarks on the subject which now seem very funny indeed.”

The author, Harry Castor, in the book entitled *Teddy Roosevelt and the Roughriders*, questions the imperialist rationale for the Spanish American war and instead considers it a point of pride that America had few colonial holdings. Castor argues that it would have been wrong to forcefully annex Cuba and agrees with President McKinley who said “‘Forcible annexation (of Cuba) would be criminal aggression.’”

Castor goes on to say that, “Sensible people agreed. After all, we had to admit that the Cubans had been fighting for years for real independence. If we had seized their country, the action would have been outright theft.” He offers the analogy, “It would have been

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87 *Heroines*, 4.
the same as if France had claimed our own United States because she had helped us fight England during the war.”

While Castor recognizes the war made the United States an imperial power, he points out that it did not make many friends for the U.S. “England,” he explained, “needed support against sword-rattling Germany and so was drawn into closer friendship.” But, he argues, “The Germans, the French, and naturally the Spaniards, called us hypocrites and bullies. So did most of the South American republics, who felt sorry for their motherland, Spain.” The idea that the U.S. was a defender of freedom was slowly coming into conflict with a recognition following the war that many of our actions as a world power seemed eerily similar to the imperialist models we opposed.

In explaining the context for imperialism Castor states, “We owned only Alaska. And in those days you had to have ‘natives’ scattered around the globe and working for you if yours was to be considered a first-class nation.” But he notes that Roosevelt was proud that America had only “a few Eskimos, and they worked for themselves.” He wrote that “even during the Spanish-American War there were many good, respectable people who were ashamed of it. They felt that the whole thing had been entirely unnecessary.” The author goes on to note that “Among these people were former President Grover Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison – one Democrat and the other Republican. Others were Mark Twain, the humorist, and art Andrew Carnegie, the financier.” In addition, “The presidents of Harvard University on the East Coast, and a Stanford University on the West Coast, both condemned the war.”

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Women and Their Roles

In 1950s America tensions were developing about the role of women. After the war women returned from the labor force to resume their traditional roles as support to their husbands and keeper of the home. Ruth Feldstein calls the traditional 1950s view of women “gender conservatism.” 90 Returning GIs, often with the benefit of government support and sympathy, replaced them in a variety of skilled positions. Rosie the Riveter became the suburban housewife brought to the American public in sitcoms, movies and even ads for kitchen appliances in the 1950s.

But women were demanding that their place in American history be told.91 There was evidence in the media that a different narrative was beginning to emerge. One 1950 advertisement for Whirlpool washing machines demonstrates this tension between the role of women as overseers of the domestic sphere and the growing demand for liberation from those roles. Entitled “Mother Takes a Holiday,” the ad shows three young girls working on a homework assignment about – as the commercial put it – “women’s liberation, et cetera” and what it means to be a modern, emancipated young woman. After being unable to agree on a topic, they looked around the kitchen at the appliances and and decided to write about how the new “freedom in our own home,” “comes from emancipation from home chores…. That’s the kind of emancipation any woman can understand.”92 Their line of “Imperial” kitchen appliances, in this case refrigerators, was


91 Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, has been identified as a signature book marking the a serious critique of women’s situation in the 1950s.

sold by calling them “independent” and “free-standing.” These kitchens were also described as “blending in” seamlessly, much as a new immigrant might. 93

The women in these books are not so different from the TV version of their 1950s counterparts – submitting to their husbands, concerned with domestic chores, well mannered. Schmidt does discern some attempt in the Orange Books to write about women who were successful outside the home 94 but, generally in the Landmark Books the women are housekeepers performing tasks which are described in great detail. In the story about Abraham Lincoln, his stepmother’s housekeeping skills are lauded. “With good-natured efficiency she went after the tangled hair and grimy clothes of her new children. She scrubbed the cabin…No moth-eaten bearskin hanging in the doorway would satisfy Sarah. She insisted on a weather-tight slab door with leather hinges.” 95 The reader hears more details about her tasks, “Sarah emptied the old ticks, washed them, filled them with fresh cornhusks and over these put her feather beds and clean bedding. She did the same for the boys’ beds in the loft.” And, the reader is reminded, all of these efforts were meant to assure success for Abe. “This new stepmother, who was to encourage Abe in all his ambitions, seems to have been a woman of tenderness, charm and courage.” 96

In the Landmark story of Narcissa Whitman, her primary legacy was not that she ran one of the first white settlements in the West but she “could make the western trip


94 Schmidt, Making Americans, 103-110.

95 Sterling North, Abe Lincoln: Log Cabin to the White House, 31.

96 Sterling North, Abe Lincoln, 31.
and set up homes in that remote outpost.”97 The Heroines book told of “plucky women
‘emigrants’ from the East Coast and the Midwest who, in time, gave the United States its
strongest claim to the vast stretch of western country.” But this strength was quickly
contained. The fact that white women were part of the expansion “offered proof to the
world that Americans were not traveling so far from civilization just to make quick
fortunes in gold or furs” but “to establish homes and raise children.”98

Generally the women were there to support the men. In the Landmark book about
General Custer, his mother is depicted as both a strong frontier woman and a meek wife,
“She was a pioneer woman, and pioneer women always swallowed their tears. Besides,
she knew that her big husband was always right.”99 A woman showed strength by
suppressing her emotions. In the Orange book series, on the one hand, young girls are
depicted in ways that are distinctly modern – as spunky, rebellious. Young Narcissa is
quoted as saying, “‘I know all about ladies. They stay home and take little street stitches.
They brush and brush their hair. They keep neat. They’re forever washing their hands.
Boys go places. That’s what I want to do.’” Ultimately though, Narcissa accepts her role
as a woman and concludes that, “it’s not so bad.”100

The Orange book about Martha Washington similarly acknowledges
adventurousness in the women but ultimately praises them for being well mannered,
domestic and respectable. While partaking in adventures with her brothers Martha still

97 Landmark, Heroines, 78.
98 Heroines of the Early West, 5.
99 Custer’s Last Stand, 8.
manages to behave in ways considered proper for a young lady. Early in the book Martha is rowdy with her brothers but after her mother’s reprimand she is able to “smile and curtsy for her Aunt.” Aunt Mary was pleased. “‘My little niece has some manners after all.’”101 “Still she looked the same, tiny and dainty.” Elsewhere Aunt Mary noted, “‘She’s as quiet as a mouse in the house, but let her get on that pony and she’s like a whirlwind.’”102 But this same Aunt Mary still had hope that Martha would outgrow her adventurous ways. She reminded herself about “‘how quietly Patsy [Martha’s nickname] worked at home – how stiff and straight she sat. ‘She may turn out to be a lady yet,’ she thought.’”103

In 1965 one young female reader objected to this limited portrayal of women. She wrote to Robert Loomis, the author of The Story of the U.S. Air Forces in 1965, asking, “I have found your book The Story of the U.S. Air Force very good and factual, but there is one complaint. I have not found anything on what part a woman has played, do they not fly?” She goes on, “I think that something should have been said on the woman’s place in the Air Force. For you see I would very much like to make the Air Force a career (and fly). I hope you will take me seriously on a woman’s place in the Air Force is important. Sincerely yours, Dorothy Johnson.”104 One can guess that others felt unsatisfied with this narrative in which girls can be adventurous but ultimately not step out of her traditional role.


103 Martha Washington, Girl of Old Virginia, 46.

Although there are few books that are primarily about women, Random House did recognize the need to include women in the Landmark Series when it published *Heroines of the Early West*. Each chapter is dedicated to a different famous American woman. Interestingly, the cover demonstrates the conflict about women’s role that was characteristic of the fifties. Looking defiant, the heroine carries a rifle, a symbol of bravery and engagement in the world while wearing an apron, a sign of domesticity. When the courage of pioneer women is depicted in these stories it is given a particular twist. These women had travelled thousands of miles under incredibly difficult conditions for the sole purpose, it seems in these books, of reestablishing themselves in domestic life. As Ross states, “If these pioneers had not had the courage and the strength to travel thousands of miles across unknown land, on foot, on horseback, or in crude covered wagons, in order to set up primitive housekeeping among wild animals and savage Indians, the United States would not appear on a map as we now know it.”

It is useful to briefly examine the question of historical fiction written for women. The famous *Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder were published between 1932 and 1943 and have remained popular for almost a century. *Little House in the Big Woods* begins “Once upon a time, sixty years ago.” “Once upon a time” indicates that the reader is entering a fictive world without a set time or place – a fairy tale. However, with the words “sixty years ago” and the mention of Wisconsin this vague time

105 *Heroines of the Early West*, 3.
and place is made specific. These books have been classified as historical fiction.

Meanwhile, the Orange and Landmark books, based on some historical research, have been classified as non-fiction. What is surprising is that debates about Little House on the Prairie books, designated historical “fiction,” are often concerned with historical accuracy while the Landmark books, designated as “non-fiction” have gone largely un-scrutinized.

The *Little House* and Landmark Series are both lauded as successful teaching tools. It appears that the different classifications have to do with the gender of the reader. The *Little House* books for girls are thought of as romantic depictions of a family in the past, whereas the books for boys, though equally romanticized and fictive, are treated as “serious” didactic tools for teaching history.

*African Americans in the White Narrative*

The consensus view of African Americans as seen in these books entirely glosses over the reality of slavery. Like Native Americans, African Americans are most often depicted as slaves or servants, inferior to white people, in need of civilizing, and supposedly the grateful recipients of the largess of their white masters. Schmidt sees within the Orange Books series some conflict about the depiction of African Americans and racism. In the 1944 book *George Carver: Boy Scientist* there is discussion of why, as a child he can’t attend school. But six years later the Orange Book *Booker T. Washington: Ambitious Boy* is almost entirely about “happy slaves.”

*Washington: Ambitious Boy* is almost entirely about “happy slaves.”

Meanwhile Random House, despite its liberal reputation, the Civil Rights Movement and the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs. Board of Ed*, continued to portray African

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106 Schmidt, 114-118.
Americans without any mention of the exploitation of slaves, beatings and lynchings or the arbitrary and cruel breakup of families.

There was plenty of controversy on the forties and fifties over the depiction of African Americans in textbooks and, to some extent, in children’s literature. In an article entitled “Brown-ing the American Textbook: History, Psychology, and the Origins of Modern Multiculturalism” Jonathan Zimmerman describes the efforts of a group of African American leaders to address the skewed depiction of African Americans in textbooks. In 1944 they met with school officials in New York City. Acknowledging that efforts were underway to create anti-prejudice programs in the schools, the black leaders pointed out that these efforts would be useless if textbooks still referred to happy slaves and applauded the Klan for keeping “‘foolish Negroes’” out of government, as one textbook did. According to Zimmerman black leaders were trying to address distortions in texts in all subject areas – including a geography textbook that praised colonialism (“because the native people…are very backward”) and a music book of songs by Stephen Foster that were full of slurs.107

The South vigorously resisted these attempts by black leaders to get textbooks revised. In fact, after Brown vs. the Board of Ed, editors tried to delete mention of African Americans in their textbooks all together. They turned on its head the argument taken up by black leaders that segregation damaged the black self-esteem of black children and negatively affected the formation of their identity. In response southern

white conservatives “argued that any negative material about their own past would harm” the delicate psyches of the white child. 108

The pleas of black leaders to have textbooks revised were generally ignored. Some of those who resisted revision argued that research showed these texts did not contribute to prejudice. Others accused black people of being overly sensitive. The Washington Post referred to efforts to remove Little Black Sambo from a school curriculum as “humorless touchiness.” Zimmerman explains that, “Starting in 1950… African Americans petitioned well-known race liberals Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Eliot Morison to revise their popular textbook, Growth of the American Republic, which declared that the American slave – or “Sambo,” as the text called him – was “adequately fed, well cared for, and apparently happy.” 109 Although he privately mocked privately about these complaints from African Americans, Morison did remove the term “pickannines” in future editions but “insisted upon retaining “Sambo,” “Uncle Daniel,” and several other images of slave docility.” 110 His comment was, “I’ll be damned if I’ll take them out for…anybody.” 111

Meanwhile, southern segregationists who had found even Morison’s original textbook too friendly to black people, stepped up their resistance to change and blocked any sympathetic depiction of African Americans. In 1952 a group of southern whites


demanded the removal of a textbook chapter entitled “Minority Groups Should Share Equally with All Others in the American Way of Life.” The governor of Alabama declared the text an “insult to Southern traditions.” The publisher altered the text to please southern critics and ultimately dropped the chapter when the Board of Education threatened to drop the textbook from the curriculum. Alabama officials also demanded that the school drop The Rabbits’ Wedding, a story about the marriage between a black hare and a white hare. The KKK condemned a book called Two is a Team, which depicted a black and white child playing together. The goal was to erase any reference to slavery, black people, or integration.

This controversy about textbooks indicates that there was discussion among publishers about the depiction of African Americans in the 1940s and 50s. But there is little indication that Bobbs-Merril or Random House paid attention to these issues. When African Americans do appear in the books they are almost always as happy slaves overseen by benevolent slave owners. One Landmark book on George Washington Carver features a black protagonist but generally black people appear as mostly nameless characters in the background. The image of the happy slave appears again and again as does the picture of benevolent slave owners; and when the work of slaves is mentioned, the credit is given not to the slaves but to the masters.

The Orange books make a big point of giving credit to the mistress of the plantation for the work her slaves did. For example, in the book Martha Washington: Girl of Old Virginia it is acknowledged that slaves took care of the animals on the plantation,

but the mistress is given credit. “There were slaves who did the hard work, but her mother told the slaves what to do and showed them how to do it.”\textsuperscript{113}

Mammy Tuck is the slave who looks after Patsy (Martha’s nickname) and the other children while Patsy’s parents are away. Despite the fact that she is given primary responsibility for the children, Mammy Tuck is viewed as inferior and subject to orders that the young Martha gives her. She is given no credit for her own abilities. Instead, her competence is seen as a sign of the good training she received from the mistress of the plantation, who, in fact, performs little labor herself.

As in other Orange books the white characters often speak condescendingly about the slaves, as if they are ignorant or are children. Martha’s mother explains to her that she must not appear to be afraid because in her position as superior she needs to set a good example. “The slaves haven’t been in this country long. They're afraid of lots of things. They don't know any better. You have to be their leader. They learn from watching you.” Even the slave’s kindness is not her own but is a reflection of the mistress. “Our slaves ought to be good and brave and kind, then,” said Martha, “because that's what you are.”\textsuperscript{114}

Throughout the book, Martha is being trained to be a benevolent mistress and her job is to help civilize her slaves. Her mother explains that if she ever wants a slave to be her cook she had better learn to cook herself. Because Mammy came to her “straight from the jungle” she had to teach her how “to clean kettles, to clean her kitchen, to clean the food, even before she taught her to cook.” She goes on, “‘Mammy had never known

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Martha Washington}, 15.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Martha Washington}, 113.
before how to wash her hands. She just licked her fingers and wiped them on her waist." The passage continues with Mother saying, "Mammy was smarter than most slaves, and she loved me so dearly that she learned quickly. You won't find a cleaner, better cook anywhere." It is, apparently, Mammy’s love for her mistress that encourages her to learn quickly. Martha comes to appreciate the success of her mother’s lessons. “She saw… that Mammy was mighty particular about clean kettles and clean hands” and she concludes that “Mother had been a good teacher.”

Later in the book, the adult Martha is given credit for her ability to win the loyalty of slaves. When she took over her deceased husband’s estate she was told that, “The slaves will run away. They’ll steal everything they can leave their hands on. What they don't take, the Indians will get. No woman can live alone.” The passage goes on to state that, “they didn't know Patsy. No slaves ran away.”

In another scene Martha’s parents return from Williamsburg with gifts for their children and the slaves. “After supper the field slaves came up to the house and everyone of them got something, too – a present from Williamsburg. ‘It’s almost as good as Christmas!’ they all said.” The slaves have no personalities in these stories other than as good servants, appreciative of the charity given them and resilient in the face of hard labor.

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115 *Martha Washington*, 139.
116 *Martha Washington*, 139.
117 *Martha Washington*, 143.
118 *Martha Washington*, 80.
In the Orange Series, the “Story of Eli Whitney: Boy Mechanic,” Eli observes enslaved people struggling to pull the seeds from the cotton as he considers how to make the cotton gin. “He watched the Negro slaves pull the fluffy fiber from the boll, and patiently pick out the seeds.” But what identifies the slaves to Eli is less their work and more their singing. “They sang to relieve the tiresome job…He listened to the songs of the Negroes drifting up from the slave quarters a mile away. He planned a cotton gin in his mind.”\(^{119}\) Songs, in this story, are the only voice the slaves have in this book. The author highlights the cultural products of slavery over the hard labor of the slaves.

The story of “Alec Hamilton,” in the Orange Series, however, does demonstrate a more complicated understanding of the situation for African Americans. Here Alec (Alexander Hamilton) is close to Poleon, but their relationship is still one of master and slave. This is not made explicit, though, instead the author introduces Poleon as “a native West Indian and just Alec’s age” who “stood behind Alec’s mother’s chair waving a palm branch over the table. He did this at all the meals. It was his job to keep the flies away.”\(^{120}\) Nonetheless the author implies that Alec has a general uneasiness with slavery. Poleon serves him, cares deeply about him (and Alec cares for him as well), and is delighted by Alec’s stories. At one point Poleon “rolled in the grass laughing.”\(^{121}\) At the end of the book, when Alec leaves for America, Poleon is among those waving goodbye from St. Croix. But he is not really included in the group of friends; he stands apart from


\(^{121}\) Helen Boyd Higgins, *Alec Hamilton: The Little Lion*, 156.
them: “Then Alec began to shout, too, for there were his four good friends and Poleon.”

Again, the question is why these presses, particularly Random House which was publishing liberal and even radical books for adults, continued to offer children these stories of aggressive Indians, passive women and happy slaves into the 1960s. The Civil Rights and Women’s movements had by this time brought the issues of inequality to the forefront.

**The Cold War**

While consensus history largely held up throughout the fifties, certain events stood as a reminder of its misrepresentation of the nature of America. Perhaps the first questioning had come with the end of the war itself. In August, 1945 the United States used the atomic bomb, the celebrated symbol of technological power, not to fight off German Wehrmacht or the Japanese army on the island of Iwo Jima but to kill thousands of Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two largely defenseless, civilian cities. This action had undermined an important rationale for the militarization of the nation and the common cause that had provided a diverse nation’s unity.

Returning African American soldiers who had sacrificed for the very ideals of the Four Freedoms also faced the realities of a nation still plagued by racism, segregation and lynchings. Coming home, these veterans were not met by parades and praise nor were they even given the benefits accorded to returning white soldiers. According to historian

122 *Alec Hamilton*, 163.


124 Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*. 
Ira Katznelson, of the 67,000 home mortgages provided to returning veterans under the G.I. Bill, only 100 went to non-white veterans.\(^{125}\) Racial segregation and Jim Crow dominated many sectors of American life, from schools to voting booths, swimming pools and even water fountains. The obvious inequities had invigorated a civil rights movement that demanded the country live up to its stated ideals.

The urgent need to find unity following the war was answered in part by the Cold War that pitted a “free world” led by the United States against an “enslaved world” dominated by the Soviet Union. Communism became the new enemy around which the country could coalesce. Here was the opportunity for the United States to once again be united on the side of good.

Ultimately, however, the Cold War only covered over but did not allay anxieties during a decade of uncertainty and fear aroused by the possibility of nuclear war. Children felt this fear as palpably as did their parents. Paul Boyer writes in *By the Bomb’s Early Light* that children incorporated this fear into their daily lives and their play. He cites an article from the *New Yorker* in 1945 describing how “For years [during the War] the playground in Washington Square has resounded to the high-strung anh-ahn-ahn of machine guns and the long-drawn-out whine of high-velocity shells.” But, Boyer noted, recently the play had changed: “The machine guns of World War II gave way to the more certain and deadly atomic bombs of the post war period.” One child declared, “‘Look,’ he said, ‘I’m an atomic bomb. I just go ‘boom.’ Once. Like this.’ He raised his arms, puffed out his cheeks, jumped down from the seesaw, and went ‘Boom!’ Then he led his army away, leaving Manhattan in ruins behind him.” Practice drills for an atomic bomb drop

were a common occurrence in classrooms across the country. “The first ‘surprise attack’ drill in New York City took place on February 7, 1951. In the middle of a lesson or recreation period, teachers in schools throughout the city suddenly cried, ‘Take cover!’ and children flung themselves under desks with their hands covering their faces.”

As Mickenburg points out:

> Children’s literature in the postwar period is striking particularly because [it incorporated] so much of the anxiety, fear, and panic that characterized the discourses of the Cold War and McCarthyism. In a time of rapid social and technological change, atomic insecurity, and great uncertainty about the future, the child became a focal point for national anxiety…

Parents across the country expressed concern about the fact that war was on the minds of their children. Psychologists, educators and government employees all weighed in on the merits and perils of war games. “The playing of war games should not be forbidden, but rather viewed as a natural outlet for emotional tensions,” said Dr. Lois Meek Stolz, a professor of psychology at Stanford in 1950.

Others felt that the playing of war games was detrimental to children.

While most of the Landmark books offer a bland version of consensus history, there are a few books that starkly reflect the Cold War mentality, particularly the book called The FBI. They are markedly right wing and clearly represent a defensive reaction on the part of Random House to the Red baiting of the 1950s. For this reason it’s important to recall the paranoid atmosphere that had developed during the decade.

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127 Mickenberg, 132.

128 Speech by Dr. Lois Meek Stoltz, Professor of Psychology, Stanford University, December 4, 1950 as cited in The Game of Death: The Effects of the Cold War on Our Children, by Albert E. Kahn, 9.
Certainly Joseph McCarthy, the Republican Senator from Wisconsin and HUAC (the House Un American Activities Committee) which worked hand in hand with him, had instilled fear in the country with his anti-communist campaign. Artists, directors and writers were particular targets and were being called to testify before the committee.

Of particular interest for this discussion are a series of pamphlets published in 1948 by HUAC to be distributed to the public to warn them of the danger of communism lurking in their schools. One such pamphlet was called, “100 Things You Should Know About Communism and Education.” These pamphlets minced no words in emphasizing the threat of Communism in formal school settings. It begins,

1. What is Communism?
   A conspiracy to conquer and rule the world by any means, legal or illegal, in peace or in war.
2. Is it aimed at me?
   Right between your eyes.
3. What do the Communists want?
   To rule your mind and your body from the cradle to the grave.  

The blunt and frightening opening continues with increasingly dramatic warnings about communism and its threat on children.

79. What do they [Communists] teach?
   Such courses as history, economics, public speaking, art, drama, and music—all Communist corrupted.
80. Is any of it on the level at all?
   No. Every course is just so much window dressing for Soviet theory and propaganda.
   The whole thing is aimed at luring loyal Americans into becoming Communists.

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The pamphlets stipulate that communists are “active teaching in public schools, private schools, and church schools, from kindergartens to colleges, they run some schools outright.” Question seventy-five of the 100 anticipates skepticism. “You mean there are actually Communist schools in this country? Yes.”\textsuperscript{130} The framing of the pamphlets as a list of questions and answers suggests that the reader/citizen had specifically asked for this document. It lists particular schools that were identified as communist including the Walt Whitman school of Social Science in Newark, NJ, the School of Jewish Studies in Philadelphia, the Jefferson School of Social Science and the George Washington Carver School both in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{131}

McCarthy and HUAC investigated the authors of children’s textbooks and materials for teachers. But, interestingly, they did not target the writers of children’s books. In fact, as Julia Mickenberg points out, children’s book publishing was in some ways a haven for radical and left-leaning authors.\textsuperscript{132} Perhaps HUAC’s suspicions about formal education and materials like textbooks drew attention away from children’s literature. According to Mickenberg, the authors of children’s books “met dramatically different fates from that of textbooks that showed liberal orientation of teachers whose associations or, far less often, whose teaching suggested a left-of-center orientation.”\textsuperscript{133} Perhaps this was because the world of children’s books was considered “an innocent

\textsuperscript{130} 100 Things you Should Know, 1948, 14.

\textsuperscript{131} 100 Things you Should Know, 14.

\textsuperscript{132} Mickenberg, 136.

\textsuperscript{133} Mickenberg, 136.
realm uncorrupted by the forces that had defiled mass culture and education.”¹³⁴

Mickenberg writes that while the left learning authors of children’s books were often monitored by the FBI and cited in HUAC hearings, the books themselves, “are usually mentioned only incidentally in authors’ FBI files, if at all.”¹³⁵

While most of Random House’s authors were not overtly political but were part of the broad mainstream of liberal thinkers, its list did include some books by political radicals. For example, during the 1930s and 1940s Random House published Edgar Snow’s book *Red Star over China*, an account of the communist revolutionary movement, as well as his *Stalin Must Have Peace, Red China Today, People on Our Side* and *The Long Revolution*, These books, which were sympathetic to the socialist movements of the era, raised eyebrows and the ire of right wingers during the Cold War. By the end of the 1950s, Snow himself was blacklisted and in 1959 moved to Switzerland to escape Cold War America.¹³⁶

Given Random House’ publication of these books, it is not surprising that the press was viewed with no small amount of suspicion by the FBI during the 1950s. In Cerf’s oral history, he recounts the pressure put on him and the press to demonstrate their anti-communist credentials as defenders of “true” American values, as defined during the New Deal and World War II: freedom of speech, defender of democracy, belief in individual rights, and protector of the free world against all forms of oppression and dictatorship.

¹³⁴ Mickenberg, 136.

¹³⁵ Mickenberg, 139.

Cerf recounts that in the 1950s George Sokolsky, an old college friend whom he had befriended when George was a wild-eyed, revolutionary, reappeared in Cerf’s life. Far from being a radical, Sokolsky had become a rabid right winger who had developed close relationships with some of the most despicable characters in McCarthy’s own entourage. Cerf reported that George “was really closely connected, I’m sad to say, with McCarthy and with Shine and [Roy] Cohn and he had had a lot to do with outrageous black-listing a lot of decent actors and writers. He was very powerful.” Cerf and Sokolsky had had brief encounters over the years where George had called him “the pinko publisher,” but one lunch at the Stork Club was especially memorable: “I made a reservation for a table way in the back of the room, in the Cub Room of the Stork Club. When I got there--George was there ahead of me, sitting at the table, he said, ‘I see that you got a table in the back of the room so nobody would see you with me.’ I said, ‘You're absolutely right, George. I'm not going to lie to you. Your activities have made you a suspect character with a lot of people who believe the way that I do about life.’”

Sokolsky berated Cerf for his politics. “You know, you're one of these liberals that gives me a pain in the ass. A liberal is supposed to be in the middle. At one end is the communist. At the other end is the reactionary like myself. You're the liberal in the middle. I've met lots of liberals like you.” The problem he announced, was that liberals were often indistinguishable from fellow-travelers, non-party members who facilitated and abetted communists: “If you lean over, you never lean over to the right side. You always lean over to the left side. Every liberal that I know is a little bit on the left of center, not to the right of center.” Cerf objected, saying “'That's a lot of bunk.'”

137 Cerf, Oral History, 418.
argued that he not only published the likes of Edgar Snow and Lillian Hellman but also “we print a lot of books that some people might call me a fascist for publishing.” To which his friend retorted: “The whole bunch of you are damn fools. You're all supporting causes that are against your own life and your own way of living and your own philosophy. You love the good things of life. You're a capitalist to your fingertips, and yet you are supporting causes that are out to destroy you. This is true of all of you liberals.” Despite his protestation, Cerf had to “admit there was a great deal in what he said.”

As the lunch went on it became apparent to Cerf that Sokolsky had an agenda. He challenged Cerf by saying, “if I ever come to you with a book on the right side, if it’s good enough, will you publish it?” to which Cerf responded “You’re damn right I will.”

In 1954 Random House published a Landmark book called *The FBI*, the forty-sixth title in the series. It was authored by Quentin Reynolds, who was a prolific journalist who covered battles in France and England during World War II and wrote 383 articles in only six years. Reynolds had been accused of being a communist. Reviewing a biography of Heywood Broun, Reynolds had quoted a passage in which Broun critiqued Westbrook Pegler, a staunchly anti-union columnist at a nationally syndicated Hearst paper. Pegler was among the political pundits who, as Victor Navasky explains, “used their newspaper columns as vehicles for tainting, painting, and turpentinining alleged reds.”

As revenge against Reynolds for quoting Broun’s critique of him, Pegler

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138 Cerf, Oral History, 417-419.
139 Cerf, Oral History, 418-419.
attacked Reynolds in the Hearst-owned newspaper *Journal-American* in 1949 and accused Reynolds of immoral behavior (proposing to the wife of Heywood Broun the day of his funeral) and being a sympathizer of, if not a communist himself. Pegler also called Reynolds “a degenerate” who associated with “communists, blacks and others Pegler regarded as undesirables.”

Reynolds quickly hired Louis Nizer, once the highest paid lawyer in the United States (his *New York Times* obituary called him a “lawyer to the famous”) and author of *The Implosion Conspiracy*, which chronicled the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, to sue Pegler for libel. As a result of the 1954 trial, Reynolds was awarded $175,000—the biggest libel suit settlement that had ever been won. This settlement was awarded the same year Random House published Reynolds’ fawning 180 page story of the FBI, replete with twelve black and white photographs of the FBI in action and a forward by J. Edgar Hoover. Reynolds’ authoring of the FBI book served two objectives for Cerf: it


146 By 1954, Reynolds had already published three other books in the Landmark Series including *The Battle of Britain* (1946); *The Wright Brothers* (1950); *Custer’s Last Stand* (1951). He also published *The Man Who Wouldn’t Talk* (1953) with Random House and would go on to publish
ingratiated Random House to Hoover and it cleared up any doubts about Reynolds’ loyalty. What greater act of patriotism could Sokolsky and the FBI have asked for than an homage to the very organization that was terrorizing the left?¹⁴⁷

This incident in Reynolds’ life and career is notable because it suggests that Reynolds, a liberal author, worked on the FBI book to prove that he was a loyal American, fighting, not sympathizing with, Communists. Reynolds’ book was produced with the approval and cooperation of the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover himself. No doubt Reynolds so feared being blacklisted as a journalist that he agreed to work on this project with Hoover.¹⁴⁸

The FBI book that Reynolds wrote portrayed the FBI in a positive light. The FBI agents were the ultimate sleuths, tracking down criminals and traitors in all areas of American life. Using new laboratory technologies from fingerprints through blood analyzers, the FBI protected Americans from dangers they didn’t even know existed. Invisible Soviet spies as well as bank fraud were as much a threat as bank robberies and kidnappings. American freedoms needed protecting and the FBI was there to do it.

Since Landmark books focused overwhelming on people and events from the past, the FBI book that chronicled a contemporary event was an anomaly. While it reads like a history book, in fact it is an ideological effort to inculcate in children a fear of

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communism. By including it in the Landmark Series Random House bestowed on the FBI the authoritative label of history and of Random House. In addition, most Landmark books, while implicitly ideological, are not explicitly striving to inculcate a vision. The FBI book was different. While it purports to describe the creation of the FBI, its message to readers is explicit and ideological; Communists, like bank robbers, murderers and kidnappers, are the enemy and must be hunted down wherever they are hiding.

The FBI book is explicitly propagandistic. Full of the adventures of G-Men and robbers, it describes how important good early behavior is to becoming an F.B.I. agent—or at least a good citizen. The book holds out an invitation. “J. Edgar Hoover is always looking for bright young men to join his department.” It goes on to describe what it takes to become a G-man and that when Hoover considers an applicant he investigates their past, going “way back to his records and behavior at school.” Hoover’s experience “tells him that ninety-nine times out of a hundred a decent, healthy boy with a fairly good school record will grow up into a decent, healthy adult.”

Children are encouraged to be suspicious and fearful since communists can hide behind a show of patriotism. The book goes so far as to suggest that the subterfuge used by the German Bund is the kind of subterfuge Communists use, thus equating Communists with German fascists. In other words, America needs to fight Communists in the same way it fought German fascists. “The Bund member always carried American flags in their parades, just as the Communists do today. This practice was good camouflage. The Bund was no more American than the Communist Party is today.” Children are warned that, “it fooled a lot of well-meaning German-Americans who

though that the organization was trying to promote friendship between this country and Germany.”

This kind of straightforward fear mongering in the FBI book is very much like the fear mongering in the pamphlets released by HUAC. For example, the pamphlet cited earlier warns that spies act friendly to gain your trust. “Suppose the American spy works in the War Department. He keeps his eyes and ears open for every bit of information he can learn. He goes out of his way to be friendly with others who might know something of value.” In addition, “He snoops in the files and records when no one is looking. He learns a lot this way, because no one knows he is a spy.” The FBI book insists that communist spies are deceiving and they are especially active during peacetime, and J. Edgar Hoover knew that there were plenty of German spies in this country in the 1930’s.

Hoover went on to emphasize that good agents are shaped in childhood. “We can teach a new Agent to shoot. We can teach him what he needs to know about fingerprints. We can teach him the importance of the most minute bit of evidence.” But, he goes on, “there are some things required of the Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which cannot be taught; they must be developed from childhood. They are the qualities that are embodied in our motto—Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity.” Hoover goes on. “We want to know if he was truthful, dependable, and if he played the game fair. We

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150 Reynolds, 91.


152 The FBI, 90.
want to know if he respects his parents, reveres God, honors his flag and loves his country…”  

An FBI agent “Reveres God, honors his flag and loves his country.” In the context of the fifties this motto translates to mean that he is not a Communist, not an atheist and not a traitor.

As an example of what happens to boys who don’t behave properly, the book tells the story of Alvin Karpis, suggesting that his criminal behavior as an adult can be traced to the fact that he didn’t participate in the Y.M.C.A. At the end of the story of his capture the book states, “Alvin Karpis, spending the rest of his life in prison, must wonder now and then how different his life would have been if he had accepted the invitation of the Y.M.C.A.” Hoover then “investigated and discovered that all of the boys who had joined the Y.M.C.A. are respected citizens of Topeka. They are lawyers, doctors, businessmen – not one has ever been accused of any crime.” To this Karpis replies, ‘they were the smart ones. I was the dope.’

Children are warned in the book that “criminals” wanted by the FBI will not get away with their crime. The criminal “trembles [upon hearing that he is wanted by the FBI] because he knows that although hundreds like him have changed their looks and have hidden in remote places, the F.B.I. has always caught up with them.” That character is terrified because “He remembers what happened to Alvin Karpis, John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelly, and the other Public Enemies. All are dead or serving life terms.” Even these clever criminals could not escape the FBI. “These men disguised

153 The FBI, ix.

154 The FBI, x.

155 The FBI, 79-80.
themselves. They had plenty of money and good hideouts. Yet one by one they were found by the men of the F.B.I.” The author goes on to say “That is why the man who has just broken the law can’t sleep.” 156

The American Jewish League against Communism, organized during the 1940s, was described in an article in the Chicago Tribune entitled “How U.S. Jews Unite to Fight Reds.” The League disseminated the FBI book and paid to have the book sent to over 1500 of its members. 157 Executive Director Rabbi Benjamin Schultz requested that “In each book you are to insert a suitable slip of paper reading: “In the cause of human rights, this book is sent to you with the compliments of the American Jewish League against Communism.” 158

The success of The FBI led Random House to consider publishing more books on the subject. In an undated letter from Fred Rosenau, an editor at Random House, to Paul Lapolla, another editor, he explained that Random House had tested the popularity of a new FBI story for children in the magazine Boys’ Life but acknowledged that there was already a Landmark book on the same subject. He wrote, “If the test does well in Boys’ Life, we will want to make a cheaper edition (For Young Readers), but I don’t want to invest in new plates or a rewrite.” Rosenau concluded that, “It would make sense if we didn’t have the Reynolds Landmark already, of course.” But he thinks of another

156  The FBI, 4. Fears about children misbehaving seem to have been of major concern to the FBI, second only to uprooting communists: Julia Mickenberg points out that “a 1947 editorial in Life magazine on threats to the American family declared, ‘J. Edgar Hoover’s No. 1 job is protecting atomic secrets; No. 2 is curbing juvenile crime.’” Mickenberg, p.133.


audience - boys of a slightly older range - 12-16 years old. Clearly the original FBI book was a good seller.

It is interesting that children who read these stories did not necessarily grow up to be FBI agents, according to Mickenberg. In fact, she argues that they actually grew up to reject entrenched institutions. “The young people who… sat studiously in the public library reading Landmark books… were part of the generation that grew up to reject established authority and to challenge deeply entrenched institutions.”\textsuperscript{159}

Cerf’s lunch with Sokolsky led Random House to publish The FBI as well as another volume for adults on the history of the FBI, also “giving the good side of the FBI.” Donald Whitehead’s The FBI Story: A Report to the People was published in 1956. Whitehead, a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter with the Associated Press, was given editorial feedback by Hoover who also wrote its forward, deeming the book the FBI’s “certified” history. It certainly was, in his oral history interview, Cerf recalls that his friends at the Associated Press had been “ordered” to release Whitehead for six months to write the book for Random House.\textsuperscript{160} Random House continued republishing these admiring books about the FBI for almost another decade.

Hoover autographed copies of this book and sent congratulatory messages to editors at Random House when Whitehead’s book received accolades. In 1957 he wrote to Paul Lapolla, Random House’s editor. “Mr. Nichols has called to my attention the award which Random House received from the American Booksellers Association for its handling of The FBI Story. This is most attractive, and I am sure it is one which your

\textsuperscript{159} Mickenberg, 275-6.

\textsuperscript{160} Cerf, Oral history, 421.
associates and you were most happy to receive.” He goes on, “The fact that you want to share it with the Bureau is most thoughtful, and we are happy, indeed, to have it. With best wishes and kind regards. Sincerely yours, J. Edgar Hoover”

Whether or not there was a political tinge to the historiography that emerged during the 1950s, the Landmark books present a clear example of how politics and ideology infiltrate the child’s world. To sell books Random House went out of its way to appear politically correct, even involving the director of the FBI. Children assume that what they are reading is factual, particularly books that are designated as historical. Yet the Landmark Series demonstrates that interpretations of historical events reflect the particular moment in which they are being offered.

In 1963 Random House published under the “Landmark” series name, two volumes on American history authored by a dean of the consensus historians, Daniel Boorstin. By this time a new generation of social historians had begun writing a new version of “history from the bottom up.” They wrote histories of women, labor, immigrants and other groups that had been left out the works of previous historians and they implicitly critiqued the United States for its treatment of Native and African Americans, other minorities and women. Boorstin, in these two volumes, responded angrily to these new versions of American history. He critiqued interpretations that acknowledged the horror of slavery. While admitting that abolitionist literature had awakened northerners to the evils of slavery, he went on to attack them for making people “hate slaveholders.” He suggested that they made readers “lump together all people in the south as if all Southerners wanted slavery.” Boorstin even argued that

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northerners were responsible for southern violence, “As northern propagandists became more and more violent, more and more unreasonable, Southerners too became more and more unreasonable.”162 Essentially, Boorstin bemoaned the fact that the “stable” world of happy slaves, beneficent masters and well-functioning plantations, the world as depicted in Gone with the Wind, was being disrupted. 163 The first volume of this history reads like a defensive attempt to hold on to a historical narrative that is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

**Conclusion**

In her review of the Landmark books Shippen asked, “Will a youngster reading these volumes find in them matters that he has not understood before? Will he be able to see beyond the world of the immediate present, into a world whose existence he did not fully realize? Will he gain sympathy with people who have long since died and, having it, will he better understand the people who are around him?” 164 She answers that the books will do all of these things but the answer is more complicated. As these two series demonstrate, books, like any historical account, reflect the orientation of the writer and of the press itself. In the case of the Landmark book about the FBI, children are reading not about historical events but about a contemporary institution and they are seeing it through the eyes of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Random House’ wish to use the book to prove

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162 *The Landmark History of the American People From Plymouth to Appomattox* by Daniel J. Boorstin, 1968, p.157. A number of reviews on eBay for this book state that parents today continue to use it for homeschooling their children.

163 Boorstin, 157.

its anticommunist credentials led to the publication of a book that was more propaganda than history.

The books considered here told children that America was defined by westward expansion, wars, famous statesmen, generals and inventors. The United States was depicted as a righteous country bringing civilization to uncivilized people and spreading democracy around the world. To tell this idealized story of a heroic past required that the authors ignore the exploitation and killing of Native Americans, the enslavement of African Americans, the dropping of the atomic bomb on civilians, and even the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. While there were indications within the stories of tension and disagreement about some parts of this narrative, it remained fairly intact, offering essentially the same story of American that had coalesced in the 50s.

As demonstrated in the next chapter on Freedomland, this particular, 1950s idealized version of the past was still being promoted into the 1960s, even in the face major of conflicts over civil, women’s and labor rights. But the response to Freedomland would prove far less enthusiastic than the response to the Orange and Landmark books had been. Given the changing demographics of the city and the country as well and the demand of minorities, women, labor for equality, this version of American history would prove no longer viable. It would need to be replaced by a history (or histories) that included the stories of those who had been left out of or misrepresented in this idealized version.
Chapter 4


Freedomland, the world’s largest entertainment center. Freedomland where the story of America comes to life in 205- fun filled acres. Ride a correspondence wagon through the shot and shell of an authentic civil war battle. Enjoy the fun and gaiety of a Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Take a space ship ride. [explosion sound] 35 exciting rides at Freedomland…. Antique cars, stage coaches iron horses, sternwheelers.¹

Radio Ad, 1960

The Bronx is cheering. This is unusual, for there is very little cheer about in the Bronx… Why are they cheering? Freedomland is open. In case you hadn’t heard, this is one of those artificial islands of escape. No, it is not surrounded by water. Just the Bronx.²

Los Angeles Times, 1962

For the first four years of the 1960s, the Bronx was home to what the New York Times called “an animated history book in which cowboys will soon fret, stagecoaches will be robbed, and Chicago will burn—every twenty minutes.”³ The article describes Freedomland U.S.A., an eighty-five-acre amusement park shaped like a miniature continental United States. If you were to fly over Freedomland, you would have seen previously been empty marshland now filled with rides and buffered by a 120-acre parking lot. Fredomland was ostensibly an East Coast answer to California’s Disneyland. Touted as an amusement park constructed around the history of the United States, Freedomland gave its visitors a tour of the landmarks of American history.


³ “Animated History In East Bronx's Freedomland Is Revealed In A Preview,” New York Times; Apr 29, 1960, p. 64.
Freedomland was shaped like the continental United States and divided into 7 thematic (and vaguely geographic) areas: Old New York, Old Chicago, The Great Plains, San Francisco, The Old Southwest, New Orleans, and Satellite City.


While this amusement park is very different from the toys and books examined throughout this dissertation, it bears attention as a kind of extreme example of using history to make money. Although Freedomland was touted as an activity for the whole family, in fact it was for children. The history lessons were simplistic for parents or teenagers and the rides were designed for kids. Toys and books focused on history making had made money for manufacturers and sellers for half a century and the successful Orange and Landmark books were mainstays of their publishing houses. But Freedomland was something different – it was a world unto itself. The park unabashedly used kitsch to make money. It took the exciting elements of consensus history and stripped them down to their most basics for the purpose of creating amusements. The park was about money from its inception to its end. History was merely its cover. And in the end, its clever displays proved insufficient for the audience that had abundant options for thrill rides on the one hand, or history exhibits on the other. The park merits attention in part because it was such a colossal failure. While it is clear that Freedomland’s closing was due to insurmountable financial problems, it failed on a number of ideological levels to capture the city’s and nation’s attention. The park failed to tow the line between a believable-but-mythic world and authentic history. Instead it offered an experience so thinly veiled by historical narrative that it neither captured its visitors’ imaginations, nor satisfied intellectual curiosity.

Freedomland’s stated mission was to re-tell the history of the United States geographically. To do this, it combined the conventions of historical exhibits with the entertainment of amusement parks. Visitors entered through the “port” near “Little Old New York,” on the eastern edge of the park and made their way across to the Great
Lakes, to Chicago, and then to the West, conquering and “taming” the wild frontier as they went. A visitor could also travel “south” to the cotton fields of Alabama and Mississippi or visit America’s agricultural past filled with buffalo and cows. In addition, Freedomland offered visitors the chance to survive violent disasters like the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 or the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Streetcars, steamboats, railroad trains, horse drawn carriages, canoes, and tug boats all crisscrossed the terrain of Freedomland. One reporter stated, “For the history bug with a family that likes amusement parks, Freedomland is the ideal combination. Skip the battlefields for once and take a ride on a stage coach of the Old West or a Great Lakes trip on a stern wheeler.”

Ultimately the combination of historical exhibits and amusements proved unsuccessful. Freedomland closed its doors forever in 1964. People have offered a variety of reasons for the failure of the park – financial mismanagement, the changing demographics of the Bronx, competition from the World’s Fair, the rise of social movements and a changing political climate. Freedomland’s approach to history and entertainment resulted not in a more in-depth or appealing experience but a watered down version of each. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the consensus version of history offered by Freedomland had begun to feel irrelevant by the 1960s and perhaps rang false to visitors. While the consensus version of history succeeded for Random House, its representation at Freedomland failed.

At its best, it sought to “enable parents and teachers to give youngsters an entertaining way to find out about our American heritage,” announced the president of

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the company as it opened in 1960. “Textbooks and lectures fall short of showing the kind of daring and imagination it took to build our country. Here at Freedomland,” he argued, “we’re bringing the highlights of our history to life—vividly and excitingly. Every youngster who sees the re-creations we have to offer will look at our history with new eyes.” 7 What’s more, the eye-opening will go for the entire family—grown-ups, too.

Freedomland attempted two things: By creating a literal miniature nation, which required the purchase of tickets for entry, it hoped to make consumer citizenship the primary mode of engagement with US history for both children and adults; and, by recreating and miniaturizing the past for spectacle, it hoped to make the tumultuous, violent and conflicted past controllable, simpler and victorious. In fact, the physical manifestation this view seemed boring and tacky. Michel-Rolph Trouillot helps explain the value of the imagined historical site. He views history as composed of two parts: the facts of the matter, and the narrative of the facts. 8 He argues that people create narratives according to their needs. One of the devices used to generate a unifying narrative is the concept of nationhood. In its literal mapping out of history, Freedomland relied more heavily on the narrative of the facts than the facts of the matter. Although some people truly believed it taught history, many took that promise with a grain of salt. 9

By the early 1960s, the nostalgic, romanticized vision of the country that had been promoted in books, movies and television began to fray. Given the rise of the social movements of the 1960s and the questioning of consensus history among historians, it


8 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, (Boston: Beacon, 1997).

was difficult to buy a history that completely ignored, and actively erased, the nation’s history of extermination of the Indians, of imperialism, and slavery.

**Precursors To Freedomland**

The developers of Freedomland were not the first to use history to market a museum or amusement park. It was unique, though, in its explicit use of history for modern mass entertainment and not just for education. Although historic sites offered activities and crafts, they didn’t offer the kinds of rides and “thrills” that Freedomland promised. In the summer of 1946 in Massachusetts, Sturbridge Village was opened on the old site of a colonial New England village. A full blown historical reconstruction, it offered blacksmith shops, homes, grazing land for cows and goat. Employees played the role of blacksmith, store keeper, weaver and common laborer, all dressed in colonial era garb. Sturbridge Village told the story of a peaceful people freed from British oppression who had established a “commonwealth” and “settled” a wild New World filled with dangers and savages.

Similarly, older historical sites in the South like Colonial Williamsburg—a site endowed by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1926 and under construction for decades—were expanded into entire faux “plantations” and touted as family oriented tourist destinations. Here again the triumphant presentation of American history was told as the story of white men building the country. Not did Colonial Williamsburg make any attempt to include slavery in its history.10

Why did these historical sites survive while Freedomland didn’t? For one thing, the pressure to be “entertaining” and profitable were less dramatic at these purely

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educational sites. Although these sites claimed to “bring history to life” in various ways, their endowments and non-profit status meant there was less need to make the exhibits exciting in order to make a profit. Visitors to these sites expected them to be more didactic in their presentation while Freedomland’s visitors also expected excitement.

Freedomland did borrow some of the conventions of these older museums. Employees played the part of historical figures: “three thousand employes [sic] will be part of the scenery, always dressed in the custom of the period…” But unlike the employees at Sturbridge and Williamsburg, they received little if any historical training since their role as historical interpreters was secondary to their costumes and role as promoters of the commercial goals of the amusement park.


13 Interview with David Rosner whose brother, David Podell, was among the first teenagers to be hired at Freedomland.

14 This is not to say that modern museums have escaped the pressure to use history and to shape its meaning to a specific narrative. Today, and in the recent past, for example, the Smithsonian faced enormous pressures from the public and politicians alike. See Scott Boehm, “Privatizing Public Memory: The Price of Patriotic Philanthropy and the Post 9/11 Politics of Display,” American Quarterly, 58(Dec. 2006), pp.1147-1166 in which Scott Boehm notes that the Smithsonian exhibit The Price of Freedom, an exhibit about America’s military history, “illuminates how the privatization of public space privileges triumphalist interpretive frameworks when militantly patriotic donors demand a say in how their money is spent.” In his analysis, “national history museums function as cultural technologies that legitimize state violence when they promote visions of history that reinforce the patriotic mythologies of manifest destiny and historical exceptionalism.” He attributes this choice of interpretation to the museum’s incorporation of more and more private funding, “The casual privatization of the Smithsonian,” he warns, “illuminates how private capital can help to preclude productive civic debate.” Boehm, 1150. Also, the struggle over a show about the depiction of the Enola Gay, the plane used to
Paralleling the development of these historical museums was that of the amusement park. In the first half of the twentieth century Coney Island, the famous park still attracting visitors to the southernmost part of Brooklyn today, opened its boardwalks to millions of people crowded into the tenements and apartments of New York. Its carousels, parachute jumps, roller coasters, and bumper cars attracted millions of working and middle class people who travelled there by trolleys and buses in the late nineteenth century and by the newly built Independent subway line in 1904.

It was not that amusement parks were new to the area around New York City. Freedomland competed with Luna Park on Coney Island in Brooklyn, Rye Playland, just to the north in Westchester, and Palisades Amusement Park across the Hudson in New Jersey. But to the local politicians and eastern boosters, Freedomland promised more bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War II almost led to the defunding of the Smithsonian in the mid-1990s. See, Philip Nobile, ed., *Judgement at the Smithsonian: The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, (New York: Marlowe and Co., c.1995).
Employees dressed in period costumes to lend an air of “authenticity” to the park’s historical narrative. Here, a group of white visitors raise their hands in surrender to an employee dressed as a gun-toting Indian.\(^{15}\)

meaningful educational possibilities along with rides. Although the park was not a municipal project like the 1964 World’s Fair that famed city planner Robert Moses would build, its stated educational mission and cultural message lent it the kind of weight that made it easy for politicians to support it. In fact, despite its profit driven mission, Freedomland sometimes mirrored a charitable organization. Its opening gala benefited “the Children's Village, a residential school for troubled boys, located in Dobbs Ferry, N.

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\(^{15}\) *New York Daily News Sunday Color Magazine*, July 16 1961, 27. Accessed, June 23, 2016. Thanks to the diligent investigative work of the creators of the Freedomland Facebook Group, who located and shared the article containing this image.
Y.,” although none of those “boys,” primarily African American by that date, were invited to attend.\textsuperscript{16}

The real inspiration for Freedomland, however, was Disneyland, which successfully combined the characteristics of both historical museum site, imagined worlds of the future and amusement park; it offered lessons in history along with rides and amusements. Disneyland was built around three parallel themes represented by “Frontierland,” “Tomorrowland” and “Fantasyland.” A visitor could walk down “Main Street, U.S.A.” to “Frontierland,” the world of Davy Crockett and other frontiersmen. There, a child learned of the rugged individuals who conquered an unruly nature filled with threats from “wild Indians” and wild bears. Visitors to this area, like Freedomland, could not participate in the action but could only watch from a guided boat ride that glided by.\textsuperscript{17} The narrative of Frontierland, in fact, was quite similar to that of Freedomland and Landmark books. Frontierland focused primarily on the western frontier – featuring spaces for “friendly Indians” and elk, and a burning log cabin with a woodsman who had been killed by an oversized Indian arrow.

Disneyland, however, offered some additional features. A visitor who finished touring Frontierland could then take a nineteenth century steam locomotive to “Tomorrowland,” a future America built around invention and science, medical discoveries, technology, space travel and gadgets. Here a child could ride in a space capsule that shook as it took off, while he or she gazed out portal windows to see stars


\textsuperscript{17} “Across the Street from Disneyland,” \textit{This American Life}, WBEZ, Available at: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/259/promised-land?act=1, Accessed: June 12, 2016.
speeding by. Finally the child could stroll over to “Fantasyland,” a magical world where Disney characters lived. All of the three lands were to be experienced in the three dimensional “reality” of wagon trains, space ships and encounters with Snow White, Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters already familiar to children from film and television. Nonetheless, the variety of activities, especially scientific displays and Disney characters made for a more satisfying experience.

Freedomland’s solitary focus on recreating an imagined past left it more vulnerable when the story it was telling failed to engage people. There were no exciting inventions or Disney characters to compensate for the irrelevancy of the dated exhibits.

The Development of Freedomland

Disneyland’s popularity and financial success stood as an appealing model to the designers of Freedomland, although those who pitched the park suggested only an equivalent to Frontierland without the other two components. In fact, the original pitch

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and design for Freedomland came from C.V. Wood, the former general manager and vice-president of Disneyland who fell out with Walt Disney before moving back to the East Coast. He enthusiastically pitched his idea for a historical theme park to William Zeckendorf and his company, Webb & Knapp.

Zeckendorf was a major New York realtor who owned large parcels of land throughout the city including the one on which the United Nations stood as well as hotels around Rockefeller Center. Despite his immigrant background, he had risen to the height of the New York real estate world. Zeckendorf had purchased the land Freedomland would sit on from the State. He was obviously taken in by Wood’s enthusiastic pitch.

Zeckendorf wrote, “Wood put together a masterful presentation of his Freedomland idea. The idea was to create a star-spangled amusement park, America-in-miniature, to which hordes of Easterners would flock. It was a great idea, beautifully presented.” While Zeckendorf ultimately downplayed his enthusiasm for Freedomland, he was sold on the idea in the beginning. “Wood is a promoter’s promoter, a terrific, enthusiastic idea man

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Interestingly, William Zeckendorf begins his autobiography by locating his family on the frontier (rather than beginning his story in New York, where he became famous or in Germany, where his family immigrated from). Amidst all the features that Freedomland portrays. “We New York Zeckendorfs are actually misplaced Westerners. My grandfather, a frontier merchant, lived, traded, and sometimes spot with the Indians in Arizona territory. Second door wagon trains carried the mail and delivered supplies to the many mining camps ringing Tuscon...” He goes on to emphasize this American background: Zeckendorf writes, “…Grandfather had become a deep-dyed frontiersman—he had even scalped an Indian caught rustling cattle… In the war against Geronimo’s Apaches, Grandfather served as aid-de-camp to General Nelson Miles. In 1886, after Geronimo’s surrender, he was Tuscon’s parade marshal for a gala honoring the general. I still cherish an old photograph of him, a big, broad-shouldered man, once again in uniform for this occasion.”

20 Zeckendorf, 291-2.
who could sell snow to Eskimos.”

Considering the success of Disneyland which depicted many of the same historical events, Freedomland must have seemed like a slamdunk for investors.

Freedomland was envisioned not as a small project aimed at hosting local visitors looking for something akin to a county fair. Rather, this was a private enterprise with millions of dollars behind it, situated on a large tract of land that would prove to be immensely valuable. Freedomland was constructed on a swampy, empty piece of land in the Bronx with the aid of the State of New York which paid for draining the land, building roads and installing services from sewers to highway exits. It cost $65 million and people believed it would last a long time. In 1960, the New York Times reported that, “its permanent structures have been built to last fifty years…”

The name “Freedomland” reflected the large vision the developers had for this undertaking expecting that the idea of freedom would certainly resonate with visitors. As Eric Foner points out, “the idea of freedom was understood by most Americans as synonymous with America. In fact, “by the end of the 1950s, the idea that the level of freedom was the defining characteristic of American society has become fully incorporated into the popular consciousness. So overwhelmingly did Americans respond to statements about freedom…that ‘a far reaching consensus’ on its value had been achieved... freedom emerged as the ‘masterword’ in critical writing on American culture...”

In addition, as we have seen, in the 1950s as tensions with the Soviet Union

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escalated, the Cold War subtly reshaped freedom's meaning and practice, identifying it with anti-communism, ‘free enterprise,’ and the defense of the social and economic status quo.”

Freedomland, like the Orange and Landmark books, was intended to embody the story that its name announced – the story of American freedom as that story was constructed in the 1950s. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “imagined communities,” created to unite groups through the idea of a shared language and culture. Anderson specifically looks at the map, the museum and the census as tools for creating a sense of shared identity and history. Certainly, Freedomland intended to play on the possibilities for creating a sense of shared identity and history and to make money doing so.

The amusement park would celebrate freedom. It would conform to the 1950’s “consensus” history of the United States and celebrate America’s greatness, democracy and prominence in the world. It would highlight the same landmark events that the Orange and Landmark books described for their readers. The rules were simple – there were good guys and bad guys, cowboys and Indians, sheriffs and outlaws. Freedomland operated on what Tom Engelhardt has explained were the assumptions of the 1950s that all children understood, “Who was good and who bad; who the aggressor and who the defender; who could be killed and under what conditions were accepted facts of a childhood world that drew strength from a World War II adult culture still in the home.”

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26 Engelhardt, The End of Victory Culture, 72.
To build Freedomland the landscape had to be physically reconfigured. Freedomland straddled an environmental line, sitting on a soggy marsh land between a huge metropolis and a growing, sprawling suburb. Construction crews had to adjust the topography of this land to mirror the natural qualities of the United States that its managers deemed desirable. They built a miniature version of the Rocky Mountains. The governors of New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin all “sent along bottles of lake water to be poured in on opening day” to fill the miniature Great Lakes, as if the construction of the park were as significant as the opening of the Erie Canal. While Freedomland celebrated the frontier and recreated the Wild West, it simultaneously – and maybe confusingly – also celebrated urbanization in its recreation of “Little Old New York” in the style of an idealized Lower East Side of the 1890s.

On opening day, June 20, 1960, throngs of people clogged two highways in the Bronx that led to the park. A crowd of 61,500 people jammed both highways, the parking lot and the park itself, “with as many as 40,000 on the grounds at one time.” The park’s popularity “caught the management unprepared and forced the suspension of ticket sales for nearly an hour early Sunday afternoon.” Within hours, “the parking lot was also filled to overflowing and caused police to close all roads leading to the park for hours. It also caused congestion on the Hutchinson River Parkway.”

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The New York Herald Tribune reported, “Freedomland was dedicated in the Bronx yesterday with all appropriate hoopla and ballyhoo plus cowboys and Indians and pirates.”30 There would also be a fantasized future of spacecrafts. For children in New York for whom the wagon train and the locomotive, even the West itself, were abstractions seen on television or read about in books, Freedomland would bring these things alive.

Visitors to Freedomland, U.S.A. were greeted by a huge sign 9½ feet tall and 4 feet wide with enormous letters that was supported on poles capped with flags that stood 14 feet apart.31 The New York skyline is nowhere to be seen in photos or advertisements of Freedomland. Instead, only greenery and sky loom over the park in ads. Visitors entered the park in New York and followed a path that went in a circle, moving west across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains and then turning south to head back across the Southwest and New Orleans. It would take a visitor a considerable amount of time to traverse the park’s eighty-five acres and visit more than thirty different rides.

The dedication ceremony featured notable politicians like Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Senator Jacob K. Javits, and Senator Kenneth B. Keating. In his statement during the park’s dedication, the park’s president, Milton T. Raynor, distinguished Freedomland from the established and more famous Coney Island. He pointed out that unlike Coney Island (but like Disneyland), this park “would have a policy of ‘cleanliness and wholesomeness for the whole family.’” In fact, boosters like Bronx Borough


31 Artkraft Strauss Sign Corporation Records, New York Public Library Manuscripts & Archives, MssCol 17768.
President James J. Lyons said that beside it, “Disneyland will be a sideshow.” A reporter from the *NY Herald Tribune* claimed that Freedomland made “‘obsolete’ conventional amusement parks, freak shows and games of chance.”

But it was New York City Mayor Wagner who explained Freedomland’s broader meaning. “Our millions of residents, and the additional millions of visitors, are living proof of the democracy and freedom enjoyed in our land, which is symbolized by the Statue of Liberty guarding our harbor,” the Mayor began the day it opened. “And, as the home of the United Nations, New York City is the capital of the world, the host to diplomats and visitors from every corner of the globe.” He noted the importance of the city as a location. “We feel, therefore, that the creators of Freedomland have chosen wisely in selecting New York City for the home of this great park.” The Mayor paid homage to more than Freedomland’s size and location. Freedomland “will be entertaining, we know. But more importantly, it will educate our young people and our older citizens, and the newcomers to these shores to the greatness that is America.”

Here, Wagner linked national identity and the education of American citizens to child’s play and amusement. The hubbub around Freedomland, and an opening day that included such major politicians speaks to the power of the nostalgic story it told.

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34 Robert F. Wagner Documents Collection, Speeches Series, Box # 060087w, Folder #8, Text Of Speech –Dedication Ceremony Of Freedomland, June 18, 1960. LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.

35 Robert F. Wagner Documents Collection, LaGuardia and Wagner Archives. Dedication Ceremony of Freedomland.
Certain contradictions were built into Freedomland from the beginning. This oft-run advertisement signaled who was most welcome at the park – white nuclear families, with two parents and two blond kids – a girl in pigtails and her brother whose pose mirrors his dad’s - leaning forward in excitement.

While this image of the prosperous nuclear family predominated during the Post-War era, in reality this kind of family did not reflect many people’s experience, particularly that of those who had been shut out of the middle class by race or economic status. Furthermore, the America that was celebrated in Freedomland told the story of a white America, of men conquering the West and leading the country. Despite Freedomland’s location in the increasingly Puerto Rican and African American Bronx, a borough that would soon be infamous for civil strife, poverty and burning buildings, the designers of Freedomland imagined a very specific, predominantly white audience who had a particular idea of American history that did not include the story of African Americans, immigrants, or poor people.

Advertisements for the park touted the fact that Freedomland was accessible by public transportation, unrealistically claiming that the trip was only 30 minutes from
Times Square. To get there by public transportation, a visitor had to ride 45 minutes on the IRT subway and then another twenty minutes by public buses, hardly an enticing prospect for working people on their day off. Travel to this site was much easier for suburbanites coming by car. Because Freedomland was located at the border of suburban Westchester, Connecticut, the Bronx, and between two major highways, the Hutchinson River Parkway and the Cross Bronx Expressway, most of its visitors, even on opening day were coming not from the city but from the suburbs. The park’s 10,000 car parking lot quickly filled to capacity and nearby roads were clogged. While the park’s position in the Bronx could have also attracted city kids with a few dollars to spare, the difficulty of the trip kept many away.

Despite the fact that white suburban families seemed to be the target audience for Freedomland, certain days were reserved for poorer, city kids. According to *The Amsterdam News*, “The management of Freedomland, U.S.A. and the Locality Mayor’s Committee will sponsor a big two-day round of entertainment and excitement on August 26 and 27 for some 15,000 of New York’s underprivileged children at the entertainment center. It will be Freedom Day for the youngsters.” Harlem’s children would be “taken [there] by chartered buses for a round of thrills and pleasure as only the facilities of Freedomland can provide.”

This publicity helped bolster the notion of the park as an educational place as well as a treat for youngsters. Ads that only featured white families indicated that black citizens were not the target audience. Just as producers of dolls and books might not seek to actively exclude people of color from buying their products, the

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absence or underrepresentation of people of color in ads and in the park itself essentially
discouraged their visiting.

The attractions in Freedomland were theatrical and intricate. One reporter
described the following scene, noting how all of the senses were enlisted to make the
park’s story feel real: “ear-splitting report of rifles fills the air as fur trappers and Injuns
shoot it out on the banks of the river. Farther on, a bear climbs a tree and a skeleton
dangles a fishing line into the water.” The reporter went on to explain the mechanics of
the exhibit. “Sound real? Well it is—or almost. All of the creatures are animated
mannikins [sic] triggered by photo electric cells that react as the boat sails by.” With
enthusiasm the reporter announced that "the fur trappers ride of the old Northwest … is
one of 35 rides scheduled to open Sunday at Freedomland in the Bronx … the largest
amusement center in the country…” “There are 150 livestock on the grounds and a real
blacksmith really shoes them in his shop. Tobacco, tomatoes, lettuce, grapes and corn
really grow.37

Many attractions at Freedomland involved transportation. A pamphlet and seven
minute video introducing children to Freedomland listed trolleys, steamboats, tug boats,
bull boats, trains, mining cars, horse drawn carriages, a moving lake walk and even a
spaceship as ways to travel around Freedomland. The video begins with children
“moving along the lonely road through Indian Country, heading west.” It shows visitors
“riding shotgun” across the Great Plains, standing at the bough of a steamboat, paddling
“an authentic Chippewa canoe,” and spotting the Santa Fe Special heading west. The
viewer was told that “Travelling along you can get a good idea of how our country

looked.”\textsuperscript{38} This description of different means of transportation provides a glimpse into the way history was used. By combining and conflating huge expanses of time to create one generic “past,” it merely created confusion. Any specificity or even continuous narrative was lacking. In its stead was a medley of the great hits of consensus and consumer history.

What did Freedomland leaders mean when they spoke of authenticity and spectacle? Certainly Freedomland did not present American history as thoroughly as a museum like Sturbridge Village did. By authenticity Freedomland seems to have meant simply that it referenced actual events of American history. One journalist alluded to the contrasts with Disneyland: “perhaps the principal difference between Disneyland and Freedomland is that the latter is united on the single, general theme of great action stories of this country.” The park also offered recreations of particular landmark scenes.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{The Nature of the Exhibits}

Despite all its promise Freedomland ultimately failed. Certainly this was due in part to the nature of the exhibits themselves. The amusements, burdened with the promise of being historical, ended up seeming corny. For example, at the Chicago Fire attraction, actors would select people from the audience to participate in putting the fire out. People who actually saw the exhibit remember how phony it seemed. One person reminisced, “I was selected to help pump one night & so we started pumping and all of a sudden, the pump started moving by itself – it was motorized! As a 12 year-old, I was crushed by the


fakery." Still, even today, some adults recall experiencing something real about the past. "The one [memory] that does stand out was the vivid realism of The Chicago Fire. That's the thing about Freedomland [sic], you didn't just go to a theme park, you experienced periods of American history. It was almost like going back in history courtesy of Freedomland's time machine."

Another disappointing aspect of Freedomland was that visitors passively observed rather than actively participated in many of the scenes. Children watched as cowboys and Indians shot at each other. They did the same during the Civil War battle re-enactment. Nor were they asked to think critically about the actions that were re-enacted. Instead, they were relegated to the role of passive observer.

Freedomland relied largely on nostalgia to attract visitors. A December 2016 a New York Times reported that many visited Santa’s Workshop out of nostalgia: “Today, “the park’s Technicolor slope-roofed buildings and non-thrill rides are a kitschy throwback that draws dedicated fans fueled by nostalgia, who return with their children or grandchildren to share their childhood experience of seeing Santa and his reindeer.”

One visitor explicitly noted that the out-of-date feeling was what attracted her to visit. “The old-school feeling is what appeals to us,’ Ms. Curtis said. ‘And Santa, of course. ‘He’s a sweet Santa,’ she said. ‘He takes the time with them. It’s not like other commercial places.” Mr. Waterbury, the owner of Santa’s Workshop, found that the


biggest challenge to the park were “the weakening hold that the story of Santa has on children today.” “In the 1950s ‘a 13-year-old might still believe in Santa Claus,’ Mr. Waterbury said. ‘It’s unusual today that a kid over 7 or 8 still believes. There’s an urgency to get families to bring their kids here before they grow away.’” Much like this contemporary amusement, Freedomland offered stories that no longer seemed believable to its audience.

In addition, the arrangement of exhibits representing different eras or places were a hodgepodge. One article announcing places to eat in Freedomland suggested a steak house, pizzeria and Plantation House side by side as equally acceptable eateries with no differentiation between the cuisines or the historical periods. “Beer will be served at several restaurants, including the popular Brass Rail Steak House in Chicago, the little Pizzeria in San Francisco’s Italian Village and the Chuck Wagon inside the Western Stockade. The Plantation House in the Old South will continue to serve its $1.90 complete dinner with all the trimmings. Both the Steak and Plantation Houses will feature seafood dinners on Fridays.”

The destruction of cities was a big part of the park’s narrative, but the destruction was controlled, manageable and triumphed over. In Freedomland the Wild West was free of real danger and New York was free of dirt and poor people, and tragedies like the Great Chicago Fire were free of fatalities. Nonetheless, this vision failed to maintain visitors’ interests for very long. Removing the fear and violence from these scenes of...


44 David Lowenthal “The Past as A Theme Park,” in Eds. Erence Young And Robert Riley, Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents And Variations, pp.11-12.
American history left visitors with an experience that felt campy and lacked the adrenaline rush that other parks provided. The complicated history of the country was turned into a staged movie plot.

What Freedomland created was less an authentic reproduction of history or “mundane landscapes” and more what David Lowenthal calls “wishful geographies of the mind.” For example, one film promoting Freedomland U.S.A. opened with the image of a group of boys moving along a trail through what looks like arid rocky terrain. The narrator said, “Up on top you could be anywhere, the trail doesn’t have any signposts after you leave Fort Cavalry. You could be anywhere on the Great Plains in the 18 hundreds when the west was really wild.” The historical events did not capture the imagination of children but the excitement of the journey, the imagined freedom do.

Irrelevance of its History

Towing the line between making historical stories entertaining and authentic is not as simple as translating facts into roller coasters. Often the relationship between commercial culture and history resulted in a simplified, idealized history—one devoid of conflict. In her essay about South Street Seaport, Christine Boyer highlights the conflicting motivations inherent in an activity that combines historical presentation and profit making. “The private sphere of nostalgic desires and imagination is increasingly manipulated by stage sets and city tableaux set up to stimulate our acts of consumption,


46 Freedomland Promotional Video, 1963, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNx5fZXu-YM.
by the spectacle of history made false.”47 The difference between older sites like Sturbridge Village and Freedomland was that the former’s mission was explicitly educational and the emphasis was not on entertainment. Freedomland hoped to enjoy the luxury of straddling that line – reaping the kudos for being “historical” while treating history with the flexibility that accompanied an “amusement park.” In her essay “Tolerance as a Museum Object” Wendy Brown relates that visitors leaving the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles wrote in the guest book that they had seen the Holocaust “firsthand.” Freedomland sought to conflate the experience of a museum exhibition and the “real thing” – and to profit from this comingling of goals.

Despite the fact that Freedomland was a hodge podge of sometimes silly artificial exhibits, it might have succeeded at an earlier time. Certainly the stories it told had made Landmark books a success - the story of cowboys and Indians, the conquest of the West, the growth of cities, the triumph of the “American way of life.” When Freedomland was planned it seemed like an appealing, infallible story, one that was told in schools, churches, movies and homes, nationwide. Simply put, it was the story of progress, of an industrious, freedom-loving people who had come to a primitive, undeveloped nation and settled it, expanding ever westward, bringing with them the spunk, hard work, and values that ultimately made it a prosperous, successful country.

This narrative made a kind of sense in mid-twentieth century America. Baby boomers grew up watching it play out in westerns and combat films. The story of good triumphing over evil, not so different from the story of the triumph of democracy over

communism, became part of the post-war explanation for the Cold War. The United States military was the cavalry defending our homeland and promoting the values of democracy and freedom in the face of oppression and aggression. The very nature of American history as it was told then held a simple, childlike quality that was appealing through World War II. As Tom Engelhardt explains in *The End of Victory Culture*, in his discussion of what he calls the American war story (i.e. the story told about U.S. wars early in its’ history) “was especially effective as a builder of national consciousness because it seemed so natural, so innocent, so nearly childlike and was so little contradicted by the realities of invasion or defeat.”

But all this changed in the late fifties and early sixties. The demography of the Bronx was changing. The sixties saw the height of the Civil Rights movement in the South and massive social protests in northern African American communities as well. The growing antiwar and student movements were also beginning and the vast changes in science and technology made Freedomland’s celebration of a past of pioneers, cowboys and Indians seem outdated and irrelevant.

It is difficult to find serious reflection on the history lessons Freedomland was trying to teach. It seems likely that the developers simply grasped on to earlier romanticized, iconic stories of the Wild West and southern plantation life, assuming they would be familiar to visitors. To the extent that native peoples were included in the story, they were either “redskins” who had to be “civilized” by the cavalry, or noble, “friendly” Indians who served as scouts or sidekicks. Slavery was notably not mentioned in this story. The attractions revolved around a familiar set of masculine stories. Progress was

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48 Engelhardt, 5.
seen to depend on violence, physical action and scientific achievement, all qualities designated as male. It was the lone cowboy, technology and war that moved the narrative along, not a diverse people. Women’s roles in the story of America were negligible.

**Changing Demographics**

Construction on the Cross Bronx Expressway began in 1948 and lasted until 1972, leaving behind a Bronx that had been cut in two. Large numbers of Puerto Ricans and African Americans had moved in to older white Jewish, Italian and Irish enclaves in the South Bronx as white flight began and programs like the GI Bill drew more white families out of the city and into the newfound suburbs. In 1955, the *New York Times* reported, that “nearly 200,000 Negroes and Puerto Ricans have moved into the Bronx south of West Tremont and Westchester Avenues. They make up nearly 30 percent of the area’s population, and they are continuing to arrive.”

Eric Avila cites in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, a number of reasons for the decline of attendance to Coney Island, but specifically highlighted the increase in African American visitors as a cause of lower overall turnout. This was anecdotal evidence gathered from the people who worked at the concession stands.

This influx of non-white groups reflected massive changes in agriculture in the American South as well as Puerto Rico. As the cotton picker, and the mechanized harvester and enormous combines transformed agriculture, huge numbers of sharecroppers and their families were forced off their land and onto trains heading north.

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Men and women, impoverished by centuries of servitude on southern plantation’s picking cotton, growing tobacco and doing the manual labor that kept the southern economy functioning, were displaced. African Americans took trains from Mississippi to St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit and Milwaukee while those in Georgia, South Carolina and other southern states moved up the East Coast to Newark, Baltimore, Newark, and New York. Faced by new forms of de facto residential segregation they moved into crowded slums and districts often devoid of services. As the farmlands of Puerto Rico were taken over by sugar companies, small farmers there were displaced and a mass migration of peoples to New York and other cities began.

In New York, older, more established African American communities like Harlem were soon overwhelmed and new neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx became home to these displaced people. “In many areas of the lower Bronx, they are displacing the Jewish settlers who displaced the Germans, in others the Irish who displaced the Jews,” commented the Times reporter. “The story of the lower Bronx in 1955, as it has been for most of its history, is a story of shifting populations.” In the seven years from 1950 to 1957 the number of white, non-Hispanic residents of the Bronx dropped by 148,500, while the number of Puerto Ricans increased by nearly 90,000 and African Americans increased by 33,000. This accelerating demographic transformation in the 1950s resulted in housing crises, school conflicts and climbing delinquency rates. By

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1957, African Americans made up nine percent of the borough while Puerto Ricans made up 10.5 percent.\textsuperscript{52}

Not only was the lower Bronx affected but the upper Bronx, close to suburban Westchester and Connecticut, was also pressed by an influx of ethnic whites, blacks and Puerto Ricans from the southern reaches of the Bronx. “Historically, the upper Bronx has been the top of an escalator on which successive waves of population rode from bargain basement living in teeming lower Manhattan [for] ‘a better life,’” declared the Times in a second article on “Conflicts in the Upper Bronx” that detailed the transformation that was occurring in the mid-1950s. “The escalator [has] kept moving, latterly bringing up Negroes and Puerto Ricans.”\textsuperscript{53} Freedomland’s suburban market was in the midst of a demographic upheaval that the planners barely foresaw. Whatever logic its ‘story’ once had, it made little sense to populations of desperately poor people from the rural South and Puerto Rico.

\textit{Social and Political Upheaval}

In the late fifties and early sixties the efforts of African Americans in the South to integrate schools, parks, bus stations, public transportation and swimming pools had led to massive resistance. Riots erupted when children tried to attend school in Little Rock Arkansas. Four little girls were killed in the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Three civil rights workers were murdered by the Klan in Philadelphia, Mississippi. All of this was witnessed by the American public on their new televisions,

\textsuperscript{52} “Negroes 9 Per Cent, Puerto Ricans 10.5 Per Cent of Bronx,” \textit{Amsterdam News}, April 11 1959, 16.

the signature invention of the 1950s. They saw churches bombed, schools closed, and national guardsmen occupying towns and cities.

Freedom took on a new meaning, Foner writes,

With their freedom rides, freedom schools, freedom songs, freedom marches, and the insistent cry ‘freedom now,’ black Americans and their way allies reappropriated the central term of cold war discourse and we discovered its radical potential…Together, they restored to freedom and the critical edge often lost in cold war triumphalism, making it once again the rallying cry of the dispossessed.54

Given this new definition of freedom, not as that of the Revolutionary War but of the Civil Rights movement, the stories that Freedomland promoted made little sense. At the same time, the Vietnam War began to heat up and student protests in Berkeley, Wisconsin, Michigan and Cambridge showed parents throughout the country that their own children were questioning the consensus message that Freedomland had sought to sell. As Richard Slotkin has noted, stories of good and evil, white supremacy and American virtue wavered when faced with the realities of the war in Vietnam.55 As Tom Engelhardt put it, “The answers of 1945 dissolved so quickly into the questions of 1965. How could a great imperial presence have come to doubt itself so?”56 He continues, “the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war in Korea, and especially the war in Vietnam, left Americans disillusioned with the story of victory they had been told for generations.”57

54 Story of American Freedom, 262.

55 Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation.

56 Engelhardt, 10.

57 Engelhardt, 10-12.
Even in the popular realm, the view of the country as conflict-free was dissolving. Books like Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* all appeared between 1961 and 1964, signaling cracks in the myth of the American Dream.

At the same time historians began to reject the consensus story of an America moving toward greater freedom, equality and justice. William Appleton Williams wrote a history of foreign policy that painted the U.S. not as a peaceful country spreading democracy but as a traditional colonial power. Gabriel Kolko viewed social legislation like workers’ compensation and even labor laws as forms of cooption of more radical social movements, not as a step forward in the nation’s struggle to be the land of the free. The space race was reinterpreted as another Cold War military effort. Chemical companies promised progress but soon became associated with DDT and napalm.

Not only was Freedomland out of touch with the social and political climate, it was also out of touch with the climate of excitement about scientific and technological development. Much like the doll collectors who celebrated the past while the Toy Fair organizers looked to the future, Freedomland recreated the past while Americans were focused on all that was modern and technological. New kitchen appliances, air conditioning, large, fast automobiles, transistor radios, color televisions and new gadgets were the marks of progress and privilege. Freedomland essentially paid homage to the very past that the new America was rejecting and trying to forget. Technology and chemistry, the space race and chemistry, newness and possibility were the future. “Better

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Living through Chemistry,” was Dupont’s slogan, plastered on billboards and advertisements for everything from new floor waxes to new medicines; General Electric boasted that “progress” was “our most Important Product.”

The country itself was focused on massive scientific endeavors. Still smarting because the Soviet Union launched its satellite before the U.S., the new President Kennedy promised to get Americans to the moon before the Russians. The space race was the stuff of daily headlines as the Soviet Union and the United States launched Sputniks, Vanguards and a host of other rockets into space. After an initial burst of interest, even the white suburban families that Freedomland wanted to attract lost interest in a dated and nostalgic vision of the country.

The Cold War kept technological advancement at the forefront of many minds. Science museums presented an exciting vision of the future not so different from, although far more sophisticated than, that offered by the International Toy Fair in the early part of the century and the Landmark books about great scientists and inventors in the 1950s. These science museums which had as their explicit purpose the education of children about the extraordinary success of America’s scientists and inventors like Thomas Edison and the Wright Brothers, were becoming places of great interest at a time when Freedomland was failing.

Financial Difficulties

No doubt financial difficulties played a significant part in the demise of Freedomland, but those difficulties stemmed largely from a miscalculation about how

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popular such a historical/amusement park would be in the Bronx at that particular moment in time. The park’s decline began early in its short life. The cost of building the park was so huge that by the end of the first season Freedomland was already facing some financial troubles. The constant repairs and embellishments taking place in the park meant operating costs significantly exceeded the park’s original budget. One article noted that “Spokesmen for the park have said that attendance during the first summer season has been satisfactory, but the construction costs and pre-opening expenses have exceeded the budget.”60

By the second season, “The historical re-creations of the great areas of America’s past that attracted so many tourists last season have been completely refurbished.”61 Yet by its second season Freedomland faced declining attendance. Turnout was disappointing. The *Times* reported, “About 8,000 persons went through the turnstiles in the first four hours, compared with 40,000 in the same period on last year’s sunny opening day.”62

In 1962, the park hired Art K. Moss as the park’s general manager and he orchestrated the park’s operations as if on a movie set.63 For Moss, the park was a little country unto itself. He is quoted as saying “sometimes I just feel like the mayor of a city.”64 As one reporter noted, “Mr. Moss who has done everything but sell heaters to the

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citizens of the Sahara, sells Freedomland enthusiastically. He sounds, in fact, like a politician on a campaign binge.” The Brooklyn Daily dubbed Freedomland “The United States of the Bronx.” Moss was an experienced salesman who became the face of the park. He also had experience in the film industry and emphasized the dramatic qualities of the park. One would have – and many did – expect success for Freedomland.

But by the second year the historical “re-enactments” were seen as a jumble of time periods and places. The park added references to historical events far outside the United States but more for the purpose of spectacle than teaching history. A live action show, “Colossus,” merged time periods and geographic locations: ancient Rome was paired with 18th century France, Medieval England with 19th century Cossacks. As the New York Herald Tribune put it, “‘Colossus,’ a new outdoor spectacle, will present a live reenactment of great scenes of world history as depicted in motion pictures.” These scenes were all mixed together. “In a new 3,000-seat amphitheater guests will see chariot races from the days of ancient Rome: the Three Musketeers in a sword fight against Richelieu’s Guards; jousts and hand-to-hand combat of the Knights of King Arthur; and an exhibition of the greatest horsemen of history, including the Bengal Lancers, gauchos, Cossacks and Tartars. “Colossus” stars many of the outstanding stuntmen of Hollywood. The creation of such an outlandish spectacle indicated the desperation of Freedomland’s promoters. They wanted to make money and clearly would do anything they could to make that happen. For them distorting history was not a concern of theirs.

This big, confused amalgam of “the past” further undermined the accuracy of the park’s historical narrative, the one characteristic that could have distinguished the park from its competitors - Coney Island, Palisades or Rye Playland. *The Amsterdam News* reported on the potential problem with this approach: “The mammoth Freedomland feature, still in preparation, will present a historical kaleidoscope. Characters from all history will participate either in scenes that actually occurred or ones requested by individual photographers from a director on the scene.” The reporter noted that, “This could result in such odd and offbeat scenes as Japanese samurai warriors charging Mexican bull fighters or Roman charioteers fighting American Revolutionary War soldiers.”

In 1963, adding to the potpourri quality of the park, Mr. Moss was lent the Wax Museum from the Seattle World’s Fair which featured “15 uncanny three-dimensional sculptures of classic paintings, among them a breath-taking portrayal of Leonardo DiVinci’s [sic] Last Supper and a life-size Mona Lisa tableau.”

Because of the park’s popularity in its first season Freedomland did not see the need to renew its advertising contract with Ellington and Co., the firm originally hired to promote the park. In the face of the second season’s troubles, however, Zeckendorf hired a new advertising firm, Cole, Fischer & Rogow which quickly shifted the advertising strategy away from Freedomland’s historical focus. “For the opening season, Ellington

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had won the account and later based its campaign on selling the park for its historical and educational values. It will not be the tack taken this year.”\textsuperscript{71} The \textit{Times} reported, “Cole, Fischer & Rogow is aiming at selling fun and excitement with very little emphasis on history and education.”\textsuperscript{72}

To downplay Freedomland’s focus on history the new firm employed a generic tagline: “A World of Fun for Everyone.” One advertisement from 1961 read, “A galaxy of completely new thrill rides. Freedomland, a glittering array of sparkling live entertainment features. Freedomland, a round-the-clock cavalcade of giant live spectaculars. Freedomland, a breathtaking parade of special gala events!” Newspaper ads targeted adults and television targeted young children. Radio focused less on children who were the original target audience and more on teenagers, hoping this new demographic would help fill the park in the evening. “Take a date to Freedomland! A wonderland of young and gay evening hours. Dance to big name bands. Sit under the star in a romantic river boat. Enjoy exciting jazz concerts. Hob-nob with stars at celebrity and “personal appearance” nights featuring famous disc jockeys.”\textsuperscript{73}

Although the historical exhibits remained a staple of the park, more and more

\textsuperscript{71} “Advertising: Freedomland Picks Cole, Fischer & Rogow.” p 58

\textsuperscript{72} “Advertising: Freedomland Picks Cole, Fischer & Rogow.” p. 58; The new advertising firm, was under suspicion of “running with the mob.” The head of the agency, Martin Cole, was to be “convicted of trying to intimidate a federal grand jury witness” planning to talk to the FBI. The federal investigation was about the use by the mob of the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas in laundering millions of dollars illegally gained in that city’s casinos. See: “Agency Spy: The List of 10 Diabolical Deeds,” Available at: http://www.adweek.com/agencyspy/the-list-of-10-advertising-diabolical-deeds/2989 , Accessed, July 2, 2016. See also, United States v. Cole, 329 F.2d 437, 9th Circuit, March 16, 1964, Certiorari Denied June 1, 1964, See 84 S.Ct.1630.: http://www.leagle.com/decision/19711088325FSupp763_1934/UNITED%20STATES%20v.%20COLE and https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/F2/329/329.F2d.437.18807_1.html

\textsuperscript{73} Display Ad 70 -- No Title, \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, Jun 4, 1961, D5
emphasis was placed on thrills and popular entertainment. Moss assured people that
“Freedomland will maintain its essential character as a panorama of American history
and geography, but is broadening its base to include more thrill rides and fun attractions.”
In fact thrill rides, not history, were becoming the point. Moss noted that they were
adding a Monorail Roller Coaster to the Mardi Gras area of the New Orleans section
“where one can look for the utmost in hilarity.”

74 Write-ups about the second season list the park’s historical themes as an afterthought. “A full scale circus, a state fair midway, dozens off thrill rides, all-star big bands, top singing idols, the world-famed dancing waters and exciting spectacles from the colorful American past are only a few of the fabulous attractions on the nonstop fun agenda at Freedomland this summer.”

Famous musicians became a main selling point for the park. Duke Ellington and
Louis Armstrong performed on the main stage, the Moon Bowl. “A talent budget of 1,200,000 had been set aside for Freedomland when the entertainment center opened its fourth season, April 13. Record [sic] talent already booked at the park includes Nat King Cole, Bobby Darin, Patti Page, Paul Anka, Tony Bennett, Xavier Cugat and Abbe Lane, Della Rees and Count Basie. Chubby Checker was the opening attraction. By 1964, radio jingles promoted Freedomland not as a site for children to learn history while having fun but as a place for teenagers to take dates. Paul Anka sang:

Take a tip from Anka man
Take a date to Freedomland!

75 “Accent Is On Non-Stop Fun This Year At Freedomland This Summer” Leader-Observer, May 3 1962, 5.
76 “Freedomland's Budget Big One,” New Journal and Guide Apr 20, 1963, 14
The Moon Bowl’s free and swinging wild,
Performing night and day,
Great shows night and date,
There’s me and Bobby Ridell for you,
Bobby Vinton rocking too and then their Lesley Gore,
Four Seasons coming to town!
Gloria Lynn!
James brown!
All summer starts galore
It’s just one dollar at the gate
There’s rides at Freedomland!
Great rides at Freedomland!
New rides at Freedomland! 77

But all these attempts to save Freedomland were doomed by changes happening in the area. Eventually crime affected even the very performers who were hired to attract teenagers. In 1964, Ronald Wakefield, a famed saxophone player, and his band were scheduled to perform with the Marvin Gaye Revue but they had trouble getting to Freedomland. They were “having more than their share of problems during the rioting at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem where they are quartering.” 78 As a result, the performers staying at the famous hotel were late to perform for their show at Freedomland, “because of the barricades around the Theresa Hotel, where they are quartered.” They were “fined (for being late to the engagements), shot at, and are having problems getting through the barricades in the Harlem area going to and from their engagements.” 79 The city’s racial turmoil was coming to a head and filtering into the miniature “United States in the Bronx.” 80

78 Article 3 -- No Title. Los Angeles Sentinel, Jul 30, 1964, B8.
Freedomland’s re-orientation towards teenagers and its impending failure prompted some to cut their ties with the park. In 1962, Benjamin Moore Paint Company, whose success depended on selling its products to the growing suburban population of homeowners, sued Freedomland to be released from its contract with the park. The company argued that the park had become a site of “common place and vulgar mass unrestrained teen-age entertainment”\textsuperscript{81} and that crime and disorder threatened to undermine the “family” theme that attracted the company in the first place. There certainly were reports of crime. In 1960 three men “used a stolen motorboat to rob the Freedomland amusement park of $28,827.”\textsuperscript{82} They all lived in the Bronx and each received between 5 and 8 years in prison despite pleas for leniency. Elsewhere it was reported that displays of Indian mannequins were vandalized by young visitors, “the Pawnees – great and fearless fighters of the plains – are not a match for Bronx kids who invade the project at night and scalp the braces and run off with their loin cloths.”\textsuperscript{83} Other arrests of teenagers evading entrance fees and swimming across the bay to sneak in did not add to the park’s allure.\textsuperscript{84}

By 1964 Zeckendorf’s company, Webb & Knapp,\textsuperscript{85} faced an increasingly burdensome amount of debt and was eager to be rid of Freedomland. “Zeckendorf lined

\begin{footnotes}
\item[81] “Freedomland Is Sued For 'Changing Character',” \textit{New York Times}, Sep 5, 1962, 43
\item[84] Find this reference. Comment by Rob Snyder.
\end{footnotes}
up a $25 million first mortgage loan from a Teamsters Union pension fund and pledged the 407 acres of Bronx land as collateral, The Wall Street Journal reported, relieving “the financially troubled company, controlled by William Zeckendorf, Sr., of various obligations.” Receiving its payout from the Teamsters, Zeckendorf and Webb & Knapp “wrote off completely its $17.9 million of investment from Freedomland, Inc.” at the end of 1963.

The next year “a number of employees’ paychecks bounced.” The Times reported that “Freedomland, the amusement enclave in the northeast Bronx, recently paid some of its employees [sic] with bad checks totaling between $2,000 and $3,000.” While “Freedomland officials said ‘a mixup in deposits’ had caused some checks to be returned for insufficient funds,” few believed them. “Numerous employees turned up yesterday. Some said they had been told they would be paid last Friday, then yesterday, then tomorrow.” By then it was impossible “to convince the public that Freedomland was financially viable.”

Webb and Knapp tried to control the rumors that the park had gone bankrupt by suggesting that the World’s Fair would bring visitors to the park. In 1964 the Washington Post reported that Hyman Green, Freedomland’s new owner said, “Freedomland seems well on the way to making money this year because of the visitors who are coming to New York primarily for the World’s Fair.” He hoped they would also want to visit

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87 “Webb & Knapp, Inc., Sells Its Interests In Amusement Park,” 11;


Freedomland. But Freedomland did not survive the season. The company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1964, citing competition from the World’s Fair.

**Competition with the World’s Fair**

There were discussions in the press about whether Freedomland’s financial difficulties were due in part to competition from the World’s Fair. It is hard not to conclude that the World’s Fair presented a more modern, exciting experience than Freedomland. The *New York Daily News* reported that, while the evidence was mixed, “The [World’s] fair is having some adverse effect on Westchester area amusement centers, but not enough to spoil what should turn out to be good season. Playland in Rye reported that “attendance was down about 8 per cent from last year, and officials assumed it was the fair that was doing the damage. One official said that the weather has been nearly perfect, so it must be the World's Fair that was diverting persons who would normally come to Playland.”

Conversely, another article stated that the World’s Fair was aiding all the metropolitan area amusement parks since “people use the Fair as an excuse for visiting New York, but they also visit the other places they've heard about.” The article stated that Freedomland “reported attendance off somewhat, but not seriously,” and quoted one official who said that, “Freedomland was benefitting from its attractions designed for family fun, which, he said, were lacking at the fair.” But as we have seen, there was desperation in the manic production of new fun activities.

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92 “World’s Fair Attendance Shows Monday Tops Crowds On Weekend.”
The World’s Fair, which opened in 1964, faced a number of challenges similar to Freedomland, but it was a very different undertaking. The Fair was international in scope. As Joseph Lelyveld put it in the New York Times in 1964, “At the pavilion, the United Nations, the United States and Disneyland flags fly side by side.”93 Focused on the future, and designed to last little more than a year, the World’s Fair was hardly the long-term threat to Freedomland that its promoters maintained. The audiences for the World’s Fair and Freedomland were also very different. Freedomland courted white families who lived in the vicinity of the park while the Fair aimed at an international clientele. And while Freedomland was surrounded by highways leading to Westchester and Connecticut, the Fair was located near LaGuardia and Kennedy airports so it was easy for foreign visitors to get to there. While Freedomland exhibited covered wagons, the Fair touted space travel and modern technologies.

One very successful part of the World’s Fair was the story telling hour at the United States Pavilion. “Repeatedly, during the day, for about half an hour at a time, children sit on low stools and watch slides while a librarian narrates the story. In addition, the children see short movies adapted from children’s books…. The attractive library may be the only place at the fair where parents have to plead with their children to leave to visit such favorite exhibits as General Motors, Ford or Johnson’s Wax.”94 Highlighting just how conservative the American audience was anticipated to be, George Lewicky, the assistant director of the [American pavilion’s] library, said there had been no complaints


about the books in the library even though “the list of subjects includes such controversial topics as equal rights and the conflict of ideologies.”

Freedomland did not offer quiet learning experiences but went for drama. The Continental Insurance Company showed a film depicting “the exploits of seven heroes of the Revolutionary war” including “dramatized scenes from the revolution [and] animated battle scenes.” In addition, the company announced, “Each boy or girl visiting the Continental [sic] pavilion between April 22 and Flag day, June 14, will receive a plastic tricorn hat as a memento. A battlefield map of the war also is available” along with “a replica of the flagship of Christopher Columbus, the Santa Maria.”

The World’s Fair also had a very different mission from Freedomland. It was not particularly interested in keeping fees low in order to attract NYC visitors, even children; it had plenty of visitors from elsewhere. Soon after the opening of the Fair a very heated public debate erupted between local politicians and Robert Moses, the former parks commissioner and president of the World’s Fair, about reducing the price of admission to make the Fair affordable for New York City school groups. In September 1963 the Board of Education asked for a flat admission rate of 25 cents for each pupil visiting with a class. Moses fought these price reductions at every point. The New York Times reported that, “Robert Moses has rebuffed, with characteristic gruffness, the suggestion that school children should be admitted to the World’s Fair at reduced rates.”

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Moses, is ‘a business enterprise that must meet its obligations,’” a point the *Times* took issue with. What followed was a debate about whether the Fair was a private or public institution, with the *Times* asking, “If it is a business enterprise, why are New York City, New York State and the United States all subsidizing it with many millions of dollars?” The *Times* cited the Fair’s certificate of incorporation which “empowers it to organize and operate a fair ‘for the exclusively educational purpose of educating the peoples of the world as to the interdependence of nations and the need for international peace.’”

In October of 1963, the City Council demanded reduced rates for children, arguing that the city, in addition to providing the site, “was spending about $120,000,000 to build and improve ‘a network of express highways and scenic parkways leading to the site from all parts of the city.’” Moses still would not reduce rates, arguing “that the loss of revenue, based on several visits by schoolchildren, would be $9,000,000…” The president of the Co-Ordinated Community Service announced that they would provide tickets to school children for 25 cents but let people know that the Fair was not cooperating in this undertaking, explaining, “We may have to purchase blocks of tickets outright from the World’s Fair, and then discount them as the school children apply.” Or, he suggested, “we will turn over the 25 cents in cash to each person: whichever plan is more feasible. Then we will have to work out a system to avoid duplication, while trying

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100 “The Fair And The Children,” 19.

101 Charles G. Bennett, “Council To Press Fair On Pupil Fee: Resolution To Seek Reduced Rate…” *New York Times*, October 4, 1963, 1. Over the years Freedomland would change their pricing (it became one flat rate to enter rather than paying for individual ride), to try to appeal to teens rather than children, and add more and more rides and performances to draw crowds.
to anticipate most of the little problems which are bound to come up in a program of this size.”

Race was clearly at the center of this debate. When Moses offered to reduce the fee on Mondays during the summer, the city saw a ray of hope and continued to lobby for the city’s children. Hulan E. Jack, the African American Borough President of Manhattan and the highest ranking African American politician in the city at the time, critiqued “the World’s Fair Executive Committee and President Robert Moses for their arbitrary stand against reduced rate tickets, which could deny indigent Negro and Puerto Rican children an opportunity to visit the Fair.”

When public shaming failed to bring Moses around, the city announced that it was “revoking the World’s Fair’s exemption from the 5 per cent admissions tax in order to subsidize the children’s admission fees. Again the argument was that the Fair was educational in its mission. ‘The children from our city’s lower income families are the ones who most need the intellectual stimulation and motivation which the World’s Fair could provide,’ he said. ‘Yet these are the very children who can least [sic] afford the fair’s heavy admission charge.’

After months of back and forth, Mayor Wagner (playing a very different role than he had for Freedomland’s opening) and Robert Moses met in person at the Mayor’s summer home in Islip, Long Island and agreed to allow children in school groups from

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103 “Ccs Offers Plan To Help Poor Kids Attend Fair.”

NY and surrounding areas to attend for 25 cents.\textsuperscript{105} fifteen thousand students flooded the Fair on the first day it was available, May 1, 1964.\textsuperscript{106} Moses’ indifference to attracting children from the city underscores that the Fair did not need them to survive in the way Freedomland did. Moses saw the world –and more specifically, the business world -- as his audience and wanted to introduce the world to America’s and New York’s preeminent place in it.

Compared to the World’s Fair exhibits Freedomland’s must have seemed simplistic and corny. Both fairs claimed their objectives were educational. However, exhibits at the World’s Fair were much more intricate. According to the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, “Highlighting the emphasis on education at the fair is the [American] Hall of Education…” Of particular interest is a school of the future, showing the scientific equipment being developed to speed and ease teaching.” The paper noted that “Included are electronic teaching machines, programmed instructions, and a variety of audio-visual devices designed to untangle educational knots.”\textsuperscript{107} Central to this and other exhibits was the role of science, technology and the atom in space exploration and America’s military might. The Atomic Energy Commission announced they were building an exhibit called “Atomsville, U.S.A.” to help youngsters along the paths of atomic science. \textsuperscript{108} At the World’s Fair, the future of schooling involved machines that could teach kids about a

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vast array of scientific equipment, and even the harnessing of thermonuclear power. The ride to the moon in the main hall was especially popular for school aged children.

Unlike Freedomland, where kids had to either accompany their parents by car, navigate the subway and bus system, or swim across the Bay, young people found their way to the World’s Fair by the BMT and IRT subway. A twelve year old boy named Dominic Tucci snuck onto the Long Island Rail Road at 34th Street’s Penn Station, and found that it took no time to find himself at the Fair’s gates: “the next thing I knew the man was announcing World’s Fair and Shea Stadium.” In a story that closely reflects the 1967 fictional book *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, he managed to live in the park for nine days unsupervised. “Wearing a dirty shirt, dirty pants and dusty shoes, Dominic, a green-eyed youngster with blond hair, sat in the Security Building at the fair later and told how he had slept in various pavilions, lied to inquisitive cops and obtained money to buy food by picking coins out of fountains.”

The parents, notably, did not immediately search for their son, nor did they initially seem particularly concerned that he was in danger.

In the end Zeckendorf understood why the World’s Fair was a success and Freedomland was failing. American society itself was rapidly changing and one made some sort of sense while the other didn’t. Zeckendorf went so far as to compare Webb &

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110 Interestingly, the book *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, which came out in 1967, traced themes of ennui in the suburbs and the opportunities the city could provide young children. The book in some ways mirrors the mission of the World’s Fair, in that it helped promote the city as a place for tourism and cultural fulfillment. However, at the World’s Fairs the suburbs were touted as the most promising place for future generations of (white) Americans to live.

111 “Where's Dominic Been 9 Days? 12-Year-Old Lived At The Fair.”
Knapp’s involvement in Freedomland with America’s involvement in Vietnam – the conflict that brought about the end to America’s World War II “victory culture.” He writes, “We got into Freedomland the way the United States got into Vietnam, back-sideways, without really intending to, and only to clean up the mess somebody else had left behind.” Looking back from the point when Freedomland had failed, Zeckendorf acknowledged that even early on investors weren’t totally behind Freedomland.

By the time Freedomland closed it had become a bit of a joke. One reporter summed it up as such: “They took the Chicago fire and the San Francisco earthquake, the Wild West and the Civil War. They rolled them into the shape of the U.S. and plunked them on a swamp in the Bronx. And they called it Freedomland, so nobody would dare laugh.”

Zeckendorf later claimed that he won in the end. He maintained in his autobiography that his interest all along was to increase the value of the land Freedomland stood on. He said that at the outset “we didn’t have a penny in the project. All the publicity and traffic Freedomland generated was bound to increase the value of our real estate. How could we lose? We leased them the land.” But when Freedomland began to falter the company “took forty percent of the company’s stock and advanced them money to pay off a few million in due bills. This process continued: we ended up owning Freedomland… Freedomland, with its enormous fixed costs, never got near the break-even point.”


113 Zeckendorf, 291-2.
For Zeckendorf there was no love lost with the demise of Freedomland and he could even see the advantages. Freedomland “attracted attention to our acreage, and we did, after closing Freedomland, sell the lease to the land to Abraham Kazan’s United Housing Foundation. Co-op City, [where by 1968] seventy-five thousand inhabitants" would reside.\footnote{For Zeckendorf, what had been empty swampland could now be converted into thousands of middle-income apartments.\footnote{Zeckendorf, 291-2. See: Nina Wohl, “Co-Op City: The Dream and the Reality,” MA Thesis, Columbia University, Department of History, May, 2016 for a history of the housing development built on land upon which Freedomland sat following its closure. Available at: https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/catalog/ac:199354, Accessed: June 23, 2017.} Some of the same politicians who spoke at the opening of Freedomland were on hand to announce its demise. “Plans to develop 300-acres of Bronx, N.Y., land with a gigantic middle-income housing project that will receive financial help from New York City and New York State were disclosed \footnote{Freedomland was not the only property or investment that Zeckendorf lost money on by the 1960s. The New York Times reported that, his hotels lost $6 million in 1962 and 1963.” On December 17, 2016, the Facebook page for fans of the amusement park posted the following explanation for Freedomland’s failure. It is a shockingly different narrative that smells a bit like a conspiracy theory: “The public only learned much later (with no internet and social media at the time) that the investors had used the park as a placeholder to speed up the approval process to place high-rise apartment buildings on the land. The property was marshland and the Army Corps of Engineers would not provide immediate approval to build 23 and 30 story apartment buildings that NYC desperately needed to stem the white flight out of the city as the South Bronx was becoming an inner city disaster. The Army Corps stipulated that pilings had to be driven into the ground and monitored every five years for shifting with the currents from Eastchester Bay. Finally, through political pressure from city/state governments, the Teamsters Union and others, the Army Corps indicated that if buildings three to five stories tall were built on the property and lasted without collapse, foundation issues and wall cracks for five years, then it would grant a variance to begin immediate construction of the apartments. Well, Freedomland as with any theme park had buildings three to five stories and the park lasted exactly five years. When Freedomland filed for bankruptcy, ownership presented the court with the plans for the housing project -- Co-op City -- that had been developed in the late 1950s. Freedomland, as we learned later, was a "placeholder" for development of the land.” December 17, 2016 at 1:11pm https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1314789965239709&id=246939775358072&comment_id=1316153705103335&reply_comment_id=1317698444948861&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R1%22%7D}
at a press conference by Mayor Wagner and Governor Rockefeller.”

Co-Op City would rise from the marshes to dramatically alter a small part of the Bronx skyline.

As we have seen, the story Freedomland offered began to unravel in the 1960s as the Bronx changed and the world changed. New York City Mayor John Lindsay ran in 1965 on the platform of halting the decline that had already begun. But as one biography points out, “student radicalism, the counterculture, racial tensions and riots, growing conservatism, and antiwar protests made Lindsay’s brand of earnest, idealistic, good-government liberalism seem quaint and ineffective and helped create an aura of chaos and dissension beyond his control.”

Similarly, Freedomland no longer made sense to Native and African Americans who had been misrepresented, to women who had been underrepresented, to the people who had been badly treated in our society, or even to the people in the Bronx whose lives were being reshaped by urban decay. The Civil Rights, Women’s and Anti-War Movements all brought this home. Just as Freedomland shut down, “Areas of the South Bronx and Bushwick, Brooklyn, were leveled by fires and to this day have not fully recovered. Something obviously went awry deep inside the social fabric of the city between 1965 and 1977.”

To tell the story of America simply as that of a conflict free country would no longer do.

Despite its popularity, massive scale and big dreams Freedomland told an outdated story of America and did not survive beyond four years. When people are asked

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118 Cannato, Ungovernable City, xii.
about what seemed most remarkable about Freedomland they say with shrugged shoulders, “it was fun, I didn’t go back.” Or “I don’t really remember,” and most often, “it was far away.” One person noted that, “there was no place to make out.” Decidedly indifferent were the comments about its history. When asked specifically if they were interested in Freedomland because of the historical narratives or thought it seemed realistic the response is a resounding “no.”

Ironically, the World’s Fair, always meant to be temporary, has left its mark on the landscape. The unisphere still stands on its original site in Queens. But no significant reminder of Freedomland exists on what was arguably the largest single piece of private open land in the city of New York at the time of its development. Instead, Co-Op City, the Mitchell Lama housing project the State built on the site looms large on the horizon. Within this complex is a small plaque dedicated to Freedomland, an extravagant and ill-conceived homage to American history. Freedomland lives on primarily in the memories of those who visited during the four brief years of its existence.

[119] This impression comes from informal conversations with Peter Ashkenasy, and people who went on to become historians themselves, including Joshua B. Freeman, Richard Lieberman, Stephen Weinstein, Lisa Keller, Kenneth Jackson and others.
Chapter 5

Selling Multicultural Girlhood: The American Girl Brand, 1980 – Present

Freedomland’s collapse signaled a shift in the historical narratives that appealed to the public and to children. The events of the late fifties, sixties and early seventies made clear that the stories of cowboys and Indians, the westward expansion of white, mostly male pioneers, and of wars fought for noble reasons could not longer be the sole set of stories about a country with serious racial divisions and involvement in questionable wars. Richard Slotkin points out in *Gunfighter Nation* that America’s defeat in Vietnam and stagnant economy had undermined the myth of American exceptionalism, citing the demise of the classic Western genre in which good American cowboys triumph over sinister savages.¹ Postwar youth counterculture, from hippies to punk rockers, reflected and encouraged cultural associations with people previously excluded from stories of national pride. There was a distinct need for a more complex narratives that would reflect the country’s racial and ethnic diversity. In some ways, the American Girl dolls and accompanying books responded to this need and offered a new image of America and of American identity for girls; the American girl was no longer solely white but black, brown and Asian. She represented girls from different eras of different classes and ethnicities - a colonial American girl, an orphaned Victorian girl, an African American girl who escaped slavery, an immigrant pioneer girl. The series both reflected the fact that America, particularly after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965,

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was a diverse, multiethnic, multicultural country while simultaneously suggesting that over time there has come to be something distinctly American about diversity.

This chapter will first examine the sentimental historical lessons the American Girl dolls and books sold and offered to girls. Second, it will analyze how the plots, merchandise, and characters in the books tended to undermine the sense of diversity among the dolls by painting all girls as essentially the same even while touting diversity. Third, it will demonstrate how the clever use of nostalgia in the company’s advertising, catalogue and store, and the incorporation of products into their history books taught American girls a modern identity – that of the American consumer. Finally, it will demonstrate how, in the face of contested notions of American identity and the pressures of a global marketplace, the company largely shifted its focus from the historical dolls to dolls that looked like the contemporary girl owner of the doll and returned to offering predominantly white characters. Once again, the use of history to sell a children’s consumer product became a clever marketing ploy that led to the company’s success.

The American Girl dolls and books mimic many of the trends and tensions examined in the previous case studies. Like the toy industry early in the century, the American Girl Company (originally known as the Pleasant Company), leveraged an association with American patriotism to sell its product. It also used history, nostalgia, and a late twentieth century version of idealized femininity (of the “girl power” variety) to prescribe particular behavior for girls, much like the doll collectors of the early part of the century had. As with Landmark books, the label of “educational” helped make the

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dolls and books popular with parents and children. And finally, like Freedomland, the company earned its reputation through its attempt to create an immersive experience with American history and then - after an initial success – retreated from that mission in the hopes of earning greater profits. While offering a multicultural, multiethnic view of American history, it introduced the young girl to a particularly expensive and exclusive form of consumerism.

In presenting American history the American Girl Company had to contend with distinctly new tensions – the global market place and more shifting notions of American identity and modern girlhood. With the company’s move away from historical lessons, we can see the shift to neoliberal values and identity politics; where the notion of girl power is transformed into a focus on individual achievement and self-aggrandizement.

The Civil Rights, Women’s, Anti-war and Student Movements of the late 50s and early 60s had all drawn attention to marginalized groups in America and provided the impetus for historians to study the ugly “underside of American history.” They documented stories of exploitation, racism and sexism rarely acknowledged by earlier generations of scholars. ³ The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a vast outpouring of serious scholarship on people and groups previously underrepresented in history and popular culture. ⁴ Historians detailed the exploitation of labor by a growing capitalist class of industrialists, the suppression of women’s rights and the history of immigrant and working class groups. As American life underwent profound revolutions and

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reinterpretation, the cohesive narrative so long proffered by “consensus” historians, 
schools and the media came to seem outdated and inaccurate.⁵

In its early years, the American Girl Company, a homebred enterprise, offered 
pieces of this new history, introducing stories of varying American experiences. 
Although the first three dolls were each white, they took part in discussions of labor 
practices, Native American displacement, and political revolution. As the company grew, 
it added more stories that dealt with slavery, immigration, and World War. In the 1990s, 
leading up to and after Mattel purchased the company, the brand began to abandon its 
historical focus and become an omnivorous conglomerate that merchandised dolls, 
clothes, even miniature computers through catalogues, online sites, and giant stores in 
Chicago and Manhattan and other major cities. Despite its appeal to a broad audience, 
the American Girl doll has always been accessible only to those who could afford to 
spend a significant amount of money on a single doll.

*Precursors to the American Girl Doll*

American Girl was not the first company to use dolls and books to demonstrate 
characteristics considered American and to model American girl behavior.⁶ It is useful to

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⁶ Attempts to model behavior for girls extended beyond dolls to include other toys. In the 1960s, 
toy appliances like Easy Bake Ovens reinforced domestic expectations for girls. In the 1990s 
games like Mall Madness, Dream Phone and Mystery Date prepared girls to shop and find a date with the cutest boy.
look at these earlier examples of American Girl dolls to see how powerfully they influenced and reflected notions of American identity at particular historical moments. In 1906 Moffat, Yard and Co. published *The American Girl Seen and Portrayed*, a highly embellished, beautifully illustrated book by Howard Chandler Christy, detailing the qualities that the American Girl inherited and improved upon from her European “cousins.” The book predicted that the twentieth century “will see the evolution of the highest type of woman-kind the world has ever produced.” The American girl would be a combination of the best qualities of her more sophisticated and cultured Old World relatives. From the German, it stated, this American girl “retained the Teuton sobriety of character and power of reasoning analytically.” From the British she, “derived that love of her home which remains a distinguished characteristic...” and from the French she “derived, either by inheritance or by sympathetic imitation, that grace and lightness that has made the American woman the only competitor of the Parisienne.” Even some of the better qualities of the oft-demonized Irish were absorbed by the new American girl, “from the Celtic have been derived two characteristics not obtainable else-where, the

![Significantly, these board games from the 1980s and 90s feature almost no persons of color in their design or advertising.](image)


8 Christy, 25.

9 Christy, 26.
romanticism that gives love of poetry, art, and music, that confers the power of
appreciating them.” In addition, the American Girl has “the saving grace of humor…
with which comes the wit of tongue and of mind that sweetens the acerbities of life and is
to clever women both sword and shield in social life.”

Christy’s description of the American girl, written when the United States was
moving from an agricultural economy to an urban, industrializing nation and was
receiving waves of immigrants from many different countries in Europe, located this new
young woman as a descendent of older countries whose heritage lent her distinction.

This American girl, according to Christy, incorporated the best qualities from her
European peers, notably England, France and Ireland. Christy contrasted those with the
less desirable qualities of newly arriving immigrants, probably from Southern and
Eastern Europe.

Let us, for instance, compare the American girl who has made her own all the
cultivation and advantages brought to her by our civilization with the young
peasant woman, who, bundle in hand and kerchief on head, makes her awkward,
blundering way amid the throng of emigrants that has been landed in one of our
great cities, and gazes stupidly upon the wonders of the New World to which she
has come.

Christy’s American girl is northern European white and he attributed the
American girl’s superiority to “advantages of race, of climate, of institutions, and of
freedom to profit by them.” He asked, “What is it that makes the difference” and
answered “Race, education, and surroundings.” For him the white American girl is first

10 Christy, 27.
11 Christy, p.20.
12 Christy, p. 21.
13 Christy, p. 21.
and foremost superior because of her natural racial heritage, secondarily she is socially more adept due to her education, and constitutionally better due to her surroundings, or, the land.

Another book, called The American Girl: Her Education, Her Responsibility, Her Recreation, Her Future written by Anne Morgan and published about a decade later, in 1915, offers a different view of the American girl as a symbol of American independence and isolationism. With the conflict of World War I on the horizon, this American girl, according to Morgan, needed to leave behind her longing for a past European world and look to the work of creating a new American identity. “The American girl who seeks to avoid the inevitable conflict by looking to European sanctuary is indeed deceived.” Morgan writes, “She longs for the finish and beauty of the old order, and, in looking far afield to what past generations have accomplished, she fails to realize that it lies in her own hands to bring that same beauty into her own surroundings.” The American girl needed to look to working with the land and discard the petticoats and formalities of the past.

Creating a new American character was essential for the country’s emergence as a united society and even as a global power. The American girl had to be different from her more obedient, supposedly subservient and invisible European counterpart. She needed to reflect her new, young country, which was increasingly visible on the world stage as it sought its own more visible identity. She had to move forward in this modern, industrial world with the qualities of endurance and perseverance that had made the pioneers


15 Morgan, p. 6.
successful, to overcome obstacles in search for a better life. Morgan states, “From the
days of the pioneers our heroes have been those who were most ready to turn their backs
on the limitations of their present existence and seek a wider and freer development in
some better environment.” Morgan’s encouraged the American girl to look not to the past
but to the future and face the challenge of the new industrial world, “Now all physical
and industrial developments are rapidly changing these conditions.”

She emphasizes that it is not surroundings that shape the young American, it is
internal character and a sense of independence and freedom that must guide them, “The
boy and girl who feel the hampering of a country town and strive to lose themselves in a
great metropolis fail to see that, unless they develop within themselves those
characteristics that alone can create the very freedom which they seek, their search will
be an idle search.”16 Continuing to reflect on the nature of American identity, Morgan
goes on, “Freedom of choice is indeed one of the greatest gifts possessed by mankind, but
it must come to a well-trained and spiritually developed character, not to an ignorant and
unformed child.”17

As noted earlier, in the late 1930s the National Doll Collectors’ Club President,
Mary E. Lewis was part of this tradition of trying to define the identity of the American
girl. Like Christy she saw the ideal American girl as a copy of her European counterpart,
not something different, and found little to emulate in her pioneer ancestors.

16 Morgan, 12.
17 Morgan, 9.
A few decades later, in 1955, the U.S. Government asked America’s most popular doll company, Madame Alexander Dolls, to make a Liberty doll and a Statue of Freedom doll to be given to “a little Latvian girl, Dace Epermanis, who was the 150,000th displaced person to enter the United States after World War II.” This little Latvian girl would learn that freedom was what defined America. Dolls of historical characters continued to be popular throughout the 20th century, including this Davy Crockett Doll also produced by Madame Alexander. Notably, the gender bending quality of this doll goes unnoted, despite the doll’s name “Wendy” suggesting a cross-dressing quality to the character.


19 Madame Alexander, p.126.

20 Just as the notion of citizenship and American identity are complicated in an ever globalizing world, so are notions of gender identity and what it means to be a girl. Even as a strict gender binary becomes less accepted in popular culture, American Girl has conformed to uncomplicated notions of gender, of “tomboy-ness” and femininity. In February 2017, American Girl released its first ever boy doll – named Logan Everett. The company and consumers hailed this addition as a move towards “diversity.” In reality, however, the introduction of a boy doll replays a conservative approach to gender. Logan is not a transgender doll, nor is he complicating or diversifying the American Girl brand. He is simply a cis white male infiltrating a previously all female world.
In 1959 the *New York Times* advertised an American Girl doll also produced by Madame Alexander Dolls, which looked remarkably similar to the contemporary American Girl doll.\(^{21}\)

**Display Ad 100 -- No Title**

*New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 15, 1959; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) pg. 102*

This doll, “Janie,” was white and dressed in a pretty pinafore with her hair neatly ribboned. Although there is little about this doll that suggests particular “American”

qualities, it is clear that she was not a peasant or an immigrant, but dressed in a way that reflected the fashion of the white middle class of the 1950s.

Each decade produced a different variation on the American girl – in dolls and other media – and each modeled the characteristics considered desirable during the particular decade in which they were produced. Early on, the central question seems to have been whether the American girl should be like or different from her European counterparts – well-mannered and subservient or be more independent and adventurous. The contemporary American Girl doll still reflects some of these tensions – the stories show struggles about whether to be a tomboy or go to etiquette lessons, whether to listen to adults or take on secret missions. The early books also dealt with language and cultural assimilation for new immigrants and European relatives who disapproved of ostensibly American characteristics. But these tensions have largely given way to a new kind of debate over American identity – today’s American Girl must represent the diversity of race and culture that had come to signify America after the 1960s, but more and more of her actions are driven largely by consumerism.

As the American Girl doll collection grew in size and diversity, the Pleasant Company won the hearts of white, middle class parents and children across the country. Pleasant T. Rowland founded the Pleasant Company in 1986 and sold the dolls exclusively through the mail. The dolls were meant to look like pre-adolescent girls, not women, and they were more age appropriate than Barbie. Although named after its founder, the designation “pleasant” is still quite telling – ultimately, all the dolls seem to exhibit pleasantness. The dolls came with books that told the stories of the historical characters and the challenges they faced in different eras. Originally, there were no
stores (and no website) where the dolls could be purchased. Even this method for
distribution harkened back to another era, when women ordered luxury items from

Pleasant T. Rowland’s interest in history extended beyond the Pleasant Company. An alumna of Wells College in Aurora, New York, Rowland, after finding such huge financial success through her vision, spent $40 million to restore the small college town. Though some residents criticized the renovations, filing lawsuits, spitting and cursing at Rowland, the refurbished historic town drew tourists and faculty and contributed to an increase in the college’s enrollment.\footnote{Lisa Foderaro, “Doll’s Village: Some See Restoration as Too Cutesy,” \textit{New York Times}, Dec. 7, 2007, B1, Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/07/nyregion/07doll.html, Accessed: February 4, 2017.} This is notable because it speaks to Rowland’s instinct, beyond dolls, to bring about her own vision of history, even if it is different than her surrounding reality.

million, (down 7% from the previous year). The dolls tap into the continuously powerful instinct to define American character once and for all.

Dolls

Each American Girl doll represents a different era in American history. The first three dolls, Kirsten, Samantha, and Molly, represent pioneer days (1854), the Victorian era (1904), and World War II (1944), respectively. Soon after the appearance of this trio, two more dolls were introduced: Felicity (the Colonial era, 1774) and the first African American doll, Addy (Civil War, 1864). The company has continued to add dolls to the collection over time, including Josephine, a doll living in New Mexico in 1824, Rebecca a Jewish doll on the Lower East Side (1914), and Julie, a doll living in San Francisco in 1974, among others. The dolls are 18 inches tall and have cloth bodies with movable plastic limbs. Their eyes open when the dolls are upright and close when they are reclining. Their torsos have pre-pubescent, square shapes. Their slightly rounded limbs create a child-like silhouette and their baby-cheeked faces have delicate features.

American Girl dolls are often compared to the popular Barbie doll, which was introduced by Mattel in the 1950s. There are, however, many differences. Barbie exists in a contemporary, ahistorical space whereas American Girl dolls exist in particular historical periods. Barbie is an 11½-inch doll hard plastic woman with the infamous and unrealistic bust and waist measurements of an adult. Barbie also has had over 100

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careers and a muscular paramour named Ken. The American Girl dolls appear innocent by comparison. They are unambiguously child-like and romantic relationships do not factor in to their stories. Instead, they go to school and make friends. As the American Girl website explains, “These nine-year-old fictional heroines live during important times in America’s past, providing ‘girl-sized’ views of significant events that helped shape our country, and they bring history alive for millions of children.”

Although American Girl dolls represent girls from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, each doll and book costs $115 or significantly more when clothing, carriages, wheelchairs, and doll’s ear-piercings and earrings are added on. Originally, the dolls - intricately crafted and fairly large - arrived wrapped in tissue paper inside an elegant red box. The care given to the packaging of these dolls suggested that they were precious and durable and thus worth their hefty price tags.


30 See, “American Girl,” which provides prices of the basic Girl ($115) along with added accessories from cloths through ear-piercing services. Available at: http://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/dolls#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView: grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:& Accessed: August 28, 2017. A link on this homepage offers “journeys to America’s past, stories featuring girls today, an expression of one’s unique spirit, the joy of first friendships, the chance to nurture a newborn – American Girl dolls offer it all!” One affecting story by Toni Cade Bambara from 1972 called, “The Lesson” shows how exclusionary the abundant toy culture is to a poor child. In it, a group of poor children from Harlem are taken on a trip to a large toy store (FAO Schwarz) and find that the toys costs more than they could ever afford. The toy store is a world they never would have entered.

How has such an expensive doll become so overwhelming popular throughout the United States? Central to the company’s success has been the use of history to market the dolls. The company has been acutely attuned to the contemporary market of parents and children who appreciate the educational lessons, the nods to multiculturalism, and the presumed innocence of the young characters. Having grounded the company in an educational mission, the brand successfully became a popular household name.

The Historical Books

Reading the books that accompanied the dolls was not an afterthought. In fact, the original Pleasant Company logo featured a girl, next to her doll, reading together. A large part of the appeal for parents, at least in the 1980s, was the tie of the dolls to the books, which related the history of the eras that each doll inhabited. The books are informative and readable for a seven to twelve year old; they each have an afterword containing more historical detail that children may or may not attend to. Each of the dolls is accompanied by six historical books, which in total serve to illuminate one year of each doll’s life narrative. Each of these works of historical fiction have the same titles, with only the character’s name changing. For instance, each character is introduced with an initial book called Meet Kirsten or Meet Molly. The second book’s plot is always about schooling and is called Kirsten [or Addy or Samantha] Learns a Lesson. The third book, Kirsten’s Surprise, for example, takes place during the winter holidays. Then follows Happy Birthday Kirsten, Kirsten Saves the Day, and finally, Changes For Kirsten, which

32 The company recently introduced the historical doll books in packs with different titles but this was the six-book trajectory for the first decades of the brand.
ends the series. This last book always involves the resolution of the main problem the particular girl has faced in the other books. Often it takes the form of a reunion with family members.

The books are made to appeal to their young readers by offering stories with situations girls that age can relate to. In many of the books the plot revolves around social circles in school and the formation and trials of friendships. For example, the Victorian girl, Samantha, befriends a girl who is made fun of by wealthier girls because she missed school to work in a factory. Often in the books there are snobby girls who act cruelly. The protagonists in the stories must decide whether to join them or befriend the underdog. In this sense the stories could be the story of any contemporary girl, complete with mean girls and cliques. In most of the books there is little in the situation that would distinguish it from situations girls of another era might experience.

Reading the fictionalized stories, however, the reader does learn some of the harsher historical facts about what life was like in different eras. This is a dramatic departure from the oversimplified stories in the Landmark series. The former slave is not a stereotypical character in the background of the story but is actually the protagonist who has complicated feelings of her own. There is an acknowledgement of the real horrors of slavery. Reading the story of Addy, for instance, the reader learns that on a plantation the master might sell slaves to another plantation with no concern about separating family members. In one scene Addy is forced to eat worms that she had failed to pick off of a cotton plant.\(^3\) She learns about how churches and former slaves who made it to the North often welcomed newly arrived, escaped slaves and helped find

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them work and a place to stay. At the end of the series, the reader learns about the Emancipation Proclamation, which is embedded into the plot.

The fictional story in each book is followed by a section called “Peek into the Past,” replete with primary documents that describe in greater detail some aspect of the historical era referenced in the story. These sections can be as long as six pages and contain a good deal of material. For example, the historical section at the end of this second book about Addy’s experience in school explains how difficult it was for African Americans to get an education. The reader learns that by the 1830s it was illegal in most states for blacks to read and write and that whites feared their slaves would run away if they did learn.

There is no question that these books, particularly the historical sections, are a serious attempt to present history accurately and reflect an ethnically diverse America where various problems had to be addressed. Nonetheless, there are problems with the books. First, the history is ultimately homogenized by the books’ uniformity and the social and political tensions are relegated to a resolved and ambiguous “past.” Second, girl readers are actually being taught to be consumers as much as they are learning “history.”

A large part of the distortion results from reliance on stereotypes of past eras as expressed in the descriptors and styles that have come to represent different eras. Nostalgia theory is useful here. The term nostalgia was coined in 1688 to describe an ailment, treatable by prescription, a kind of acute homesickness.34 Over time, “nostalgia” has entered the vernacular and been understood to mean “a wistful or excessively

sentimental yearning for or return to some real or romanticized period or irrecoverable condition.” This sense of a romanticized past era is created by the use of certain styles and settings that have come to evoke a particular era. As Arjun Appadurai points out, throughout the twentieth century nostalgia has been an important tool for corporate advertising. Appadurai’s argument applies to the dolls, which are designed and styled in ways that link them to an imagined past. Fredric Jameson argues that period pieces, which he calls nostalgia films, “falsely reproduce the past, reducing it to recognizable aesthetic styles and settings.” Agreeing that the decades of the twentieth century have been simplified to stylistic and material stereotypes, Appadurai argues that the problem with these stereotypes is that they have replaced deeper historical knowledge, just as Jameson warned nostalgia films might.

In the American Girl books descriptrors of the dolls correspond to the era of American history that they represent. For example, Felicity, the doll associated with the Revolutionary War, is described as “independent;” Molly, the doll associated with World


38 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Culture of Late Capitalism, (Durham: Duke University Press), 1991, 25.

39 Today, Appadurai claims, “Americans themselves are hardly in the present anymore as they stumble into the mega-technologies of the twenty-first century garbed in the film-noir scenarios of the sixties’ chills, fifties’ diners, forties’ clothing, thirties’ houses, twenties’ dances, and so on ad infinitum.” Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 30.
War II, is “patriotic;” and Kit, who grew up during the Great Depression, is
“resourceful.” These personality traits are then represented by the objects associated
with each doll – and the young child can purchase these objects and thus identify herself
within the story of U.S. history.

Svetlana Boym points out in *The Future of Nostalgia* that such descriptors pose a
problem for representing history. She notes that “the sense of historicity and discreteness
of the past” came about in the nineteenth-century and that as the nation began to
industrialize certain descriptors came to represent certain eras – the “gay [eighteen]
nineties,” the roaring twenties, the radical sixties. Jameson points out that the problem
with these designations is that they “obliterate difference, and… project an idea of the
historical period as massive homogeneity.” Nonetheless, advertisers came to depend on
nostalgia to connect consumers to those eras.

The American Girl Company pays very close attention to the aesthetic styles and
settings of the different eras they depict. For example, the dolls are styled with various
“time-specific” hairdos. Kit, the doll from the Depression, wears a “smart chin length
bob,” while Julie, the doll from the seventies, has long straight hair with a single braid
hanging down in the front in a stereotypical style associated with hippies. Julie also wears
bell-bottom pants while Molly arrives in an “authentic 1940s outfit.” Ultimately, the

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42 Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks. eds. *The Jameson Reader*. (Malden, Massachusetts:

consumer comes to identify historical periods not with real events but with hairstyles and other signifiers like clothing and accessories.  

Touting certain experiences as universal for an entire race is also problematic. The first African American doll’s story is defined by her escape from slavery. In an episode of the TV show Blackish, entitled “ToysRN’tUs,” a young girl is given a white doll as a gift. When her mother tries to exchange it for a black doll, the only black doll available is the one related to slavery. The very thing often praised about the book – the acknowledgement of slavery – is a problem when it becomes associated with black girls to the exclusion of other experiences.

The placement of the American Girl dolls in overtly separate time periods has an interesting effect. Although the dolls may only be ten years apart in age (Kit is nine years old in 1934 and Molly is that age in 1944), their stories never overlap. No connections are drawn between the time of the Great Depression and World War II. The dolls born ten years apart may as well be separated by the one hundred years that separate other doll characters. This means that history is broken into discrete segments that suggest that these historical eras and their accompanying issues are resolved, over, and quite literally things of the past.

Because the same formula shapes each of the stories, the historical distance between Addy (1864) and the present feels the same as the distance between Julie, a

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character from 1974, and the present. Both Addy and Julie lived in the “past,” one vast category that no longer exists and does not impact the present. The dolls (even the ones who could still be alive today if they were nine in 1944, or especially in 1974) are creations of a past that is seen as distinct and disconnected from the present. Christopher Lasch argues in his essay *The Politics of Nostalgia* that nostalgia functions as a way to exaggerate both the simplicity of earlier times and the maturation of contemporary society. He convincingly argues that, “If Americans really cared about the past, they would try to understand how it still shapes their ideas and actions. Instead they lock it up in museums or reduce it to another object of commercialized consumption.”

In addition, the format of the American Girl books homogenizes not only the eras but also the characters. While representing very different eras in American history, the dolls end up being more the same as each other than different. The books give each girl the same six touchstones: they all go to school and learn a lesson, have a surprise, have a birthday, save the day, and go through changes. This format serves to erase the differences among them. The story about Addy in school in 1864 reads much like the story about Samantha in school in 1904. A new girl faces her first day of class, makes a friend who helps her, meets a challenge and solidifies her relationship with her friend. The homogeneity of experience across the stories causes the historical details to recede.

The uniform nature of the American Girl merchandise also undermines the historical variation between eras. Each doll comes with a similar set of accessories, including a hat, purse, handkerchief, necklace and coin, though they take on different specific qualities. Lisa Mae Schlosser explains that while the details of the dolls’

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accessories may be historically specific, the variations are minor and “the conformity of the merchandise suggests that all girls like, need, and own the same things.” She notes that gender roles and the rights of women are not seen to fluctuate over the almost 200 years of history covered in the books. The difference in merchandise between 1934 and 1944 is as slight as it is between 1774 and 1864. For example, all of the dolls have a bed: Samantha’s (in the Victorian era) is brass with a fluffy lace quilt, while Molly’s (during World War II) is stark and simple with a thin red cover. These beds show no progression in technology or craftsmanship, only in taste. One notable result of this is that in a child’s room Addy, the character from the Civil War era, could “sleep” in Samantha’s (the Victorian era doll) bed despite her characters’ different backstory. By creating uniform needs through homogenous merchandising American Girl accomplishes what John Berger argues capitalism in general accomplishes through advertising, “all hopes are gathered together, made homogeneous, simplified, that they become the intense yet vague, magical yet repeatable promise offered in every purchase.”

The books also distort history in that modern notions of girlhood permeate each historical book. Although the stories appear to offer girls a realistic firsthand portrait of the past, many modern ideas in the books do not fit the historical period being

47 Schlosser, 4.


49 For years, Samantha was the most popular doll (this doll has now been discontinued. This is not surprising since her Victorian era accessories are the closest to frilly ‘princess gear’ as the AG collection sells. The popularity of Princess culture in the US crosses over into this historically oriented collection. Samantha's popularity likely doesn’t arise from the fact that girls love the year 1904.

described.\textsuperscript{51} Overall, Pleasant Rowland’s ideal girl is very modern – clever, educated, and self-reliant, and has “few limitations on her future,”\textsuperscript{52} a fact that would not be true in some earlier eras. While it is praiseworthy that girls are not depicted as passive and subservient as they often are in the Landmark books, the clever and assertive American Girl is really a modern girl, not a colonial or Victorian girl. As Fred Neilsen points out, Felicity, the colonial girl, “is altogether too feisty for a girl of the eighteenth century.”\textsuperscript{53} Kit, who lived in the 1930s, aspires to be a reporter, there is no mention that her career choice might be difficult for a woman to obtain at that time. She would likely have encountered considerable gender discrimination – or been limited to reporting in the society pages – and in that atmosphere Kit might never have imagined being a reporter. The young American Girl protagonists are able to dream about possibilities in a distinctly modern way, whereas an adult fictionalized story would have to address the real situation of workplace discrimination for women in journalism. While these fictional stories do acknowledge the disenfranchisement of women, they also contain it, putting boundaries around it in order to put it in the past, or label it “solved.”\textsuperscript{54}

Keeping in mind that stories written for seven to twelve year olds must simplify things, there are still many instances when the American Girl books unnecessarily

\textsuperscript{51} Jameson, 21.


\textsuperscript{53} “Felicity, for example, is altogether too feisty for a girl of the eighteenth century,” Fred Nielsen explains in his insightful review. Nielsen, “American History through the Eyes of the American Girls,” 87.

sanitize aspects of America’s tragic history. In the case of the Addy books the distortion results from misplaced emphasis. While the first book of the Addy series presents a powerfully vivid and emotional picture of the horrors of slavery – beatings, the breakup of families, the terror of escaping -- the later books suggest that the suffering is past and the story will end as happily as Addy imagined it: through a reunion with the father, brother and sister left behind. Throughout most of the books, despite references to financial struggles and her separation from family members, Addy seems like a middle class girl who interacts with friends, plays with dolls and celebrates birthdays and Christmas.

The books tend to relegate social problems to the past. With Addy, slavery is over and there is no question that the future is full of promise. The structure of the books contributes to the sense that problems are resolved. Addy escapes from slavery in the first book and then lives in Philadelphia for the rest of the books. Although the Civil War rages on and her family is separated for most of the stories, Addy lives as if slavery is over. She learns to read and recite the Emancipation Declaration aloud to her newly freed family members at a church service. While the story introduces young readers to the Emancipation Proclamation, it also fictively ends the tragedy of slavery. It leaves the reader with little sense of the enduring racism – and the legacy of slavery – that still haunts America today. This happy ending functions to build a more pleasurable and nostalgic, but distorted, memory of the past to connect its readers with merchandise.

In other instances the distortion of history results from omissions. In her story, Felicity, the character from 1774, visits her grandfather’s plantation. Despite being the

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55 Nielsen, 88.
granddaughter of a slave owner Felicity never sees the cruelty that is at the heart of her family’s prosperity. Nor does the reader. As Fred Nielsen points out, the slaves are “all but invisible, unidentified, and unnamed.” However, the rest of the scene - the weather, flowers, fruit, and natural setting - are described in great detail.

All of these ways of simplifying or warping the past leave the reader with the feeling that these dolls are just like them – picking out clothes, receiving presents, talking with friends. The girl reading the book can identify with the characters’ in an emotional way without being excessively aware of the differences between them. Because the dolls seem modern, it is easy for the reader to connect with the doll’s feelings and become emotionally attached to her. In the process, however, the historical and cultural differences between the doll and the girl owner recede.

**Teaching Consumerism**

While the success of the American Girl doll has been largely attributed to its historical orientation, it is important to acknowledge how much of the company’s success was due to the marketing of the doll and the consumer products associated with it. Clever promotional strategies were aimed at enticing girls to desire more and more American Girl items. Consumerism is both the subject of the American Girl books and the object of it. It is the subject in that the girl characters in the books often long for or acquire “things.” Addy, for example, having just escaped slavery, imagines freedom as having fancy dresses. Consumerism is the object of the books in that they are designed to encourage the buying of products. Each book has an illustration of the objects (which are available for purchase through the catalogue) that are described in the text and that are

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56 Nielsen, 88.
available for purchase. This kind of product placement is one way that consumerism is the object of the books. In *Samantha Saves the Day*, Samantha and her friends receive authentic gifts the girls feel proud of. The text explains that an Admiral “gave Samantha a genuine bo’s’n’s [sic] whistle made of shiny brass and taught her how to blow signals like the sailors did. And he gave all three girls sailor hats, which they proudly wore…” The hat and whistle are shown in the illustration. Because the books themselves and the objects in the books are genuinely connected to a moving, emotional part of the story, the reader develops an affective attachment to these objects. The company then successfully translates the nostalgic impulse of the reader into a consumer impulse.  

The American Girl Company understands how important details are in getting girls to attach to the dolls. They also look to develop dolls that can be universally loved but maintain specific ethnic characteristics. For example, much effort went into choosing a hair color for Rebecca Rubin, the first Jewish doll, which was released after extensive debates about “typical” Jewish traits. *The New York Times* covered Rebecca’s release. “Hair color was a big issue, debated for years. At first it was a dark auburn, but it was

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58 I use the term consumer to include both the child and the targeted adult purchaser, usually the mother.
thought that might be too untypical… Then dark brown, the most common hair color for Russian-Jewish immigrants.” The designers then worried, “that would be too typical, too predictable, failing to show girls there is not one color that represents all Jewish immigrants. In the end…we created what we felt was an optimum combination…” The goal was to find a hair color that most girls, perhaps more specifically Jewish girls, could identify with. Ultimately, the goal was not to offend anyone: “Historical matters were of less concern than ones which would trigger a reaction in modern Jews.” The company settled on “hazel eyes…and honey-brown curls.”

Each of the American Girl dolls has her own set of accessories, all of which can become objects for consumption for the young reader: a birthday outfit, winter outfit, sleeping outfit, as well as toys, jewelry, and keepsakes. Jameson labels objects which appear to embody the culture of a specific era ‘cultural artifacts.” These objects allow a person to ‘own’ and consume both culture and history. American Girl not only creates a past the reader longs for but it actually produces “cultural artifacts” available for purchase.

The stories that accompany the American Girl dolls are filled with references to costumes and material goods. Nielsen argues that the books downplay consumerism, citing examples in which the Addy character is contrasted with a richer girl named


60 Salkin, “American Girls Journey to the Lower East Side.”


62 Jameson, 55.
Harriet. Next to Harriet, “Addy seems simple, poor, and backward. Harriet has several nice dresses, while Addy wears the same homemade garments day after day.” I would argue instead that the books do the opposite of downplaying consumerism. While Addy wears the same homemade dress, she does so not by choice but by economic circumstance, and it’s clear that Addy desires fancy dresses. “Back on the plantation Addy had dreamed about being in the North. She’d wear fancy dresses.” Fancy dresses were central to her idea of freedom. She repeatedly gazes with envy on Harriet’s clothes and at one point looks longingly at Harriet’s dress, “light yellow and trimmed with lace.” When Addy’s mother gives Addy the dress she made for her to wear to the spelling bee she exclaims, “Look at you! You look like a fancy city girl.” How could the young girl reading this not come to feel how precious fancy dresses are and how important to own them?

Similarly, Samantha desires an expensive doll she saw in a local shop. In one scene she is upset to find out that her grandmother’s seamstress, Jennie, a kind parental figure to Samantha, has left. Her grandmother softens the blow by praising Samantha’s impressive progress in sewing and sends Samantha upstairs for a surprise gift. On her bed Samantha finds the doll she has coveted. For the reader, the doll has become

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63 Nielsen, 88-89.
65 Porter, 55.
connected to the feeling of consolation after the loss of Jennie as well as to the feeling of being rewarded for a job well done.

Samantha sneaks out to look for Jennie, only to find that Jennie left because she was having a baby. There is an emotional reunion with Jennie after which Samantha returns happily to her room. We learn that “Her nightgown had never felt so soft and warm. Her bed had never smelled so sweet or been so welcome. She held [her doll] Lydia very close and fell asleep.”67 Again, the emotion of the scene – relief that she found Jennie, wonder at Jennie’s baby, confidence that Jennie will still be in her life – becomes connected to objects – her nightgown, the closet and bed in her room, the doll – all of which the reader can purchase.

Another device used by the company is to link objects, particularly those illustrated in the margins of the books, to particular emotional familial experiences. In one of the Addy books Addy’s mother gives her the shell her grandmother brought from Africa. This object then takes on the emotional weight of a connection to her grandmother who was a slave and links Addy’s escape with her lineage. And finally, when reunited with her baby sister, Addy sees again the rag doll she had left with her sister when she and her mother ran away and had to leave the sister behind. The necklace and the doll become attached to the emotions of loss and then joy, separation from and then reunion with family.

This connection of clothing with emotional fulfillment reoccurs often. In 2011, the American Doll Company offered a new historical doll called Marie-Grace who lived in 1853 New Orleans. Marie-Grace must learn about New Orleans and its Mardi Gras and

67 Susan Adler, Meet Samantha, (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company), 1988, 35.
costume balls. She doesn’t believe she’ll be invited to a ball and doesn’t own any costumes were she to be invited. When her teacher arranges an invitation for her, she also provides a trunk full of costumes. “Marie-Grace searched through the cedar-scented costume trunk until she found several sparkling gowns with masks and delicate matching fairy wings…” The dresses brought her a feeling of happiness. “When she saw her reflection, she breathed a sigh of happiness. The silver shone in the light, and when she spun around, the delicate fairy wings fluttered on her back.” The costume reminded her of the past and her mother who had died. “As Marie-Grace looked into the mirror, she remembered the fairy tales her mother used to read to her. For a moment, she could almost imagine her mother standing behind her smiling.”

In another scene Marie-Grace’s friend Cécile and her teacher Mademoiselle Océane help dress her for the Mardi-Gras ball. The experience of women dressing and connecting to each other in the process has its own emotional resonance. It parallels what some consumers do in real life – spend time together selecting clothes. Furthermore, the American Girl Company offers the possibility of reenacting this ritual of intergenerational gift-giving – mothers can buy doll clothes for their daughters and little girls and their friends can dress their dolls together.

The objects that become desirable to the young reader – a necklace, an abacus, a lunch pail, even the kerchief that Addy wears as a disguise while trying to escape slavery with her mother – are made desirable by their role in the story but also by virtue of the tantalizing details associated with them. The detailed descriptions add to their alluring power. John Berger points out in Ways of Seeing that, “the visual desirability of what can

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be bought lies in its tangibility, in how it will reward the touch, the hand, of the owner.”

The scene in which Addy receives her grandmother’s shell necklace demonstrates this kind of attention to detail. “Addy rubbed the shell between her fingers. Its rounded top was smooth as soap. The flat underside was also smooth, except for the middle where the shell closed in on itself. There it felt like the teeth of a fine comb.” Addy and her mother “sat in silence a long time, looking at the cowrie shell and thinking about someone they had never met.” With this description the fact of slavery recedes and the object becomes valued as a thing in itself. The young girl reader can participate in this scene (receiving a necklace associated with someone she has never met) by buying her own shell necklace from the catalogue. Rather than allowing the reader to imagine the object, the book describes the physical sensation of handling this shell necklace, further enhancing the value – or cost – of the shell to be bought.

Molly, the doll from World War II, cannot buy many material goods because of rationing and shortages, so her stories appear to focus on “friendship, family, and simple pleasures.” But the books consistently highlight presents and thereby conveys a different message – one that revolves around gift-giving and commodity fetishism.

Molly’s conflict with her English houseguest over what to do for her birthday party is resolved by a gift of pet dogs and matching outfits. Throughout the entire book about Christmas Molly waits for presents from her father. At the story’s happy conclusion she

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71 Nielsen, “American History through the Eyes of the American Girls,” 90.

receives a doll that she has wanted throughout the book. The description of this doll is lengthy and almost erotic in its detail, and notably, not so different from an American Girl doll that comes wrapped in tissue. “Everyone knelt around her as she lifted her gift out of its rustling tissue paper. Molly’s gift was a doll—a beautiful doll with dark shiny hair and smiling blue eyes.” Molly cherishes its details. “Molly touched the doll’s hair with one finger and traced the curve of her pink cheek.” The doll is exactly what Molly longed for. “She was dressed in a nurse’s uniform and hat like the one Molly had dreamed about. A smart red cape covered her starched dress and tied under her chin. Molly hugged her.”

The book and the character model for the reader how to appreciate her doll.

A young girl reading this description learns that a doll is exceedingly valuable and special. She can purchase an exact replica of Molly’s doll, fulfilling the instinct to memorialize the sentimental story of a time gone by. Longing for the doll is a theme of the book. Molly had dreamt about the doll and along with Molly the reader worries about Molly’s gifts. Thus, the characters’ sentimental connections with the objects are transferred to the reader. These objects, these cultural artifacts, enable the American Girl Company to do the extraordinary and sell young girls a doll for their doll. It seems that all girls, from all eras, (and all dolls too) need dolls to be happy.

The Catalogue

The American Girl catalogue is particularly successful in using nostalgia disguised as history to advertise products and originally accomplished this through its catalogue. Arjun Appadurai notes that, “the effort to inculcate nostalgia is a central

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feature of modern merchandising and is best seen in the graphics and texts of gift-order catalogs in the United States.” The catalogue is the largest consumer toy catalogue in the country and one of the top 30 consumer catalogues and played a huge role in the company’s initial success. Appadurai continues, “These catalogs use a variety of rhetorical devices, but especially when it comes to clothing, furniture, and design, they play with many kinds of nostalgia for bygone lifestyles, material assemblages, life stages (such as childhood), landscapes (of the Currier and Ives variety), scenes (of the Norman Rockwell small-town variety), and so on.”

The original American Girl catalogue offered scenes that created the feeling of some past era – with oversized, thick pages, brown backgrounds and quiet scenes, much like Instagram photos where sepia toned filters create an image that appears taken by an old-fashioned low-fi film camera. This process makes a contemporary image appear colored by age (and infused with sentimentality). Mothers and other adults are encouraged to feel nostalgia for the slower rhythms they may remember from childhood. The catalogue suggests that adults can purchase this idealized childhood for their own children.

By pointing out that these items are “exquisitely made and designed to last,” the catalogue alerts the adult shopper to the archival quality of the merchandise. It suggests

75 Appadurai, 76-7.
76 Appadurai argues that people today view their own present from a distance, as if it is already in the past, 30.
77 Boym notes that the “paradox of institutionalized nostalgia: the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations, the starker the distance from the past, and the more it is prone to idealizations.” 17.
that these items themselves are of historical value. It holds out the promise that these
items will become part of the child’s history and be of value long beyond the seven to
twelve year old age period. It is the girl’s personal history that is being preserved. In the
catalogue there is only one image of each item, giving the consumer a sense that it is
unique and special. Additionally, the objects are each a part of a larger scene in which
each doll interacts with the story and the other objects. There is a sense of completeness
in the displays, which contributes to the creation of a magical and nostalgic aura. As
Berger observes, publicity is “in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future.”
78 The catalogue comes addressed to the child, not the parent, and suggests to the young girl
ways to play with her doll, “Tuck her embroidered hankie in her apron pocket and tie her
spoon bag around her waist,” 79 giving the consumer an active way to participate in the
fantasy world of American Girl.

The Abandonment of American History: “Truly Me” Dolls

In the 1990s, the American Girl Company moved beyond merchandizing history
into merchandizing the present. In 1995, the company released a line of contemporary
dolls first called “American Girl of Today,” then re-named “My American Girl,” and
finally “Truly Me” dolls. 80 The consequent renaming of the “American Girl of Today”
collection reflects an important transition. The first, “American Girl Today” reflected the
idea that the dolls, like the original historical characters, belong to a specific era; they are
“of today.” The renaming of this collection as “My American Doll” emphasized personal

78 Berger, 139.


80 In 2006 the product line was renamed “Just Like You”; in 2010 it became “My American Girl.”
This line has featured over fifty different dolls since its inception. (Wikipedia)
ownership over historical specificity but still suggested the dolls were American. Finally, the further renaming of the collection “Truly Me” suggested that the dolls were simply a replica of the girl herself with no mention of her heritage. Unlike the original collection where the historical dolls were featured and were essentially what made the dolls popular, the “Truly Me” American Girl doll makes no claim to a connection to history.

This shift in the focus of the company reflects both the significant growth of America as a consumer culture as well as a backlash against the liberal ideology of the sixties. Whereas the original dolls became popular because of the multicultural, multiethnic history within which they were presented, the more recent dolls do not exist in a historical context but merely look like a contemporary doll. The American Girl Company flipped what seemed to be progressive multiculturalism into a neoliberal performance of identity politics and made a profit from it. And, despite some recent attempts to offer a broader array of racially diverse characters, in the end the company exhibits a new kind of investment in whiteness.\(^{81}\)

Most historians agree that consumerism had its roots in the industrial revolution. As William Leach states in his book *The Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of New American Culture*, during the period between 1890 and 1930 “American corporate business… began the transformation of American society into a society preoccupied with consumption… with more goods this year than last, more next year than this.”\(^{82}\) Leach maintains that, in fact, this new definition of American society as a


\(^{82}\) Leach, *Land of Desire*, xiii.
consumerist society replaced the earlier narrative, which defined America as a democracy, concerned with the good of all.

As we have seen, since the development of the toy industry early in the century, patriotism has been enlisted to encourage people to buy products. Recall that immigrants were similarly encouraged to participate in Christmas shopping as if it were part of being an American. The advertising industry was critical in communicating that consumerism was part of being American. Lizabeth Cohen argues that the linking of consumerism to “more social egalitarianism, more democratic participation, and more political freedom,” has been a successful marketing strategy. Shopping is presented as a patriotic act. This was true early in the century and true after September 11th, 2001, when President Bush encouraged Americans to spend money to support the “American way of life.”

If one accepts that by the late twentieth century America had become, by definition, a consumer society, then it’s not surprising that the American Girl Company introduced the American girl to her identity as a consumer. Whereas being an American once meant believing in freedom, the spread of democracy, and participation in a growing industrial economy, by the waning years of the twentieth century it also meant being a consumer. Freedom had come to mean freedom to purchase and the freedom of choice. Children had always been a target for mass manufacturers but by the 1980s, there were even more ways to directly reach children and encourage them to become

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83 Cohen, Consumers’ Republic, 403.

consumers, either through, or independent of, their parents. The sale of a $115 American Girl signaled an identity to be strived for and reserved for a select group.

Neoliberalism as an economic theory gained traction in the 1980s just as the American Girl company was founded. Neoliberal economists rejected the idea that government programs and social welfare programs played an important role in the economy and suggested instead that the individual was responsible for all economic failures and successes. Like their classical liberal nineteenth century counterparts, neoliberals glorified the marketplace and rejected government regulation of that marketplace. Their ideas filtered into the social world as well. Qualities like rugged individualism came to be valued over social commitments. Words like “job creator,” “innovator,” and “entrepreneur” became descriptions of desirable American character traits.

While the shift in focus away from the historical to the contemporary dolls began in 1995, Mattel’s purchase of the company in 1998 really accelerated that change. Whereas initially the historical books placed the American girl in the context of large social issues like World War II, slavery, and industrialization, the more recently released books do not place the girl in any particular context but merely reflect the idealized owner of the doll herself. In addition, this neoliberal shift away from broad, social issues came at a time when the company was extending its global reach. Envisioning itself as a major corporation rather than a homegrown business, it took on the values of the corporate world with its focus on consumption and profit. It emphasized the individualistic, entrepreneurial or “innovative” character of America and self-improvement came to replace social involvement.
In his book *The Culture of Narcissism* Christopher Lasch describes this shift in American culture from engagement in the world to a focus on the self as a reaction to the earlier decade of political and social turmoil. In many ways the contemporary American dolls reflect and encourage this culture of narcissism. They have no pre-written history, family backgrounds, or books that tell the reader about their lives. Instead, this “product line lets every girl create a truly special doll that’s just right for her…” A girl can choose from among between twenty different combinations of skin color, eye color, hair color, and texture. It is assumed that most girls will choose physical traits that match their own. Although it’s true that the Pleasant Company – and then the American Girl Company – always relied on emotional attachment to objects in the stories, this now comes without a serious attention paid to history. With the contemporary dolls the attachment is to the girl herself, contemporary objects, and present experiences.

While the older catalogue opened with the historical dolls, today’s usually opens with the contemporary line of “Truly Me” dolls or the featured “Doll of the Year” (a limited addition doll). The “Truly Me” pages provide instructions for choosing hair, eye and skin color, giving the doll a style by buying it clothes, and playing with it online. The doll is a reflection of the girl herself, not someone different from her. The original catalogue introduced each doll with a life-sized photo taking up two pages. Now, only a sample of the historical dolls are displayed within a few cramped pages. On every page the reader is referred to the website where products are available for purchase.


Today’s catalogue, smaller than the early catalogues in both size and number of pages, illustrates the shift of focus to the girl herself. The first catalogue arrives with a plastic cover sheet and a note to the reader which reads, “Like you, we believe in the wonder of youth and letting girls be girls a little longer. That’s why we’ve developed products that are exquisitely made and designed to last.” The girl is invited into a world of play, particularly play with the doll’s appearance, not of learning and she is told that this will be an experience about her, not about history. “When you open the pages of this catalogue, you’ll open a world of imaginative play through dolls, books, clothing, and more. …We encourage you to save this catalogue and return to it often as a reminder that being a girl is something to celebrate and share every day.” It is also a reminder of all the products available to buy.87

Often the catalogue appeals to something personal in the girl’s own life. The March 2015 catalogue offered a set of arm and leg casts and braces (stickers for the doll’s two exposed front teeth). Recently, the New York Times applauded the addition of a miniature diabetes testing kit as a sign of the inclusivity of the brand.88 By giving the dolls braces and illnesses American Girl has found yet another way to encourage young girls to connect personally with consumable artifacts of their own lives – they can make the dolls into miniature memorials to themselves.89 Yet, this illusion of diversity actually

87 American Girl Catalogue, November 2012, 1.


89 Susan Stewart distills the connection between nostalgia and miniature size in On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
draws attention to the holes, to what is missing from the collection of objects and might leave a girl feeling more excluded than included.

The question arises as to whether girls are drawn to – and can show empathy or love to – dolls who are not like them. The shopping section of the website is, notably, aimed at adults (you must click a box that says you are older than 18 to enter the site), displaying pages of small thumbnail images of products and their prices. All items – historical or contemporary – are displayed apart from their dolls on a white background not as part of the intricate scenes characteristic of earlier catalogues.

Much like Freedomland twenty years earlier, this company eventually shifted its emphasis away from history and focused more on entertainment. Between 1998 and the present (an age of selfies) the company developed dolls who “live” in the contemporary world and can be tailored to look like the child consumer. Having used American history to attract consumers initially and having become widely successful, the company has chosen recently to de-emphasize its historical approach. The American Girl Company has been able to both contemporize the past – by making historical narratives feel modern – and historicize the present – by giving modern girls the chance to create a history of herself and her doll. In this way the American girl has done two things: sold dolls under the umbrella of history; and trained girls as young consumer citizens who can purchase what they have been led to desire.

**Creating and Documenting Experience**

Sometimes the company encourages attachment to its brand by suggesting situations in which the girl can have an experience with the dolls and then document it. For example, in the photo studio a girl “can pose with her doll for a special portrait to
highlight their day together. We even offer framed group photos to commemorate ‘Deluxe Birthday Celebrations.’\textsuperscript{90} Another option is to have the photo printed onto the cover of a souvenir “American Girl Magazine.” Although the activity itself is about documentation and preserving a moment, the experience of feeling like a celebrity on a magazine cover becomes part of her own personal history. Jameson calls this creating “nostalgia for the present.”\textsuperscript{91} American Girl has found a way to encourage customers to purchase and document something that will help them hold on to that present, which is quickly becoming the past.

Andreas Huyssen suggests that since the 1970’s there has been a widespread and persistent preoccupation with documenting, remembering, and memorializing the entire world. The increasingly rapid pace with which we recycle and consume memories may have the effect of making these memories less permanent.\textsuperscript{92} These concepts help explain the success of the American Girl Company, as it shifts from memorializing history to replicating and memorializing contemporary (middle-class) girlhood.\textsuperscript{93}


\textsuperscript{91} Jameson, p. 279.


\textsuperscript{93} Other scholarship on the dolls has not traced its transformation in both content and form but has contributed useful frames of analysis. Jan Susina argues that the dolls actually share much in common with Barbies, despite including a backstory and a historical context that are absent in Barbie’s world. (Jan Susina, “American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History,” Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, 24(1999), pp.130-135. Nana Osei-Kofi uses photography to recontextualize and complicate the American Girl doll characters in history by showing the dolls reading about America’s contentious past. (Nana Osei-Kofi, "American Girls: Breaking Free," Feminist Formations 25 (2013), pp.1-7. http://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed April 21, 2014). Other scholars have looked at the specific ways American Girl constructs girlhood and American history, suggesting that the books and dolls tell a story reinforcing female compliance, dependence and materialism. (Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Roushanzamir, Elizabeth P. Lester...
The American Girl Store

In order to gain the full American Girl experience and to understand the company’s move away from teaching history, it is necessary to visit the store, in itself a monument to consumerism. In 1998 the first American Girl store opened near the “Magnificent Mile” in Chicago.94 The store itself is called American Girl Place, as nondescript nation or world, rather than a commercial space. The flagship store is 35,000 square feet spread over three stories.95 Today, there are more than 14 stores across the United States.96

When you enter the store you enter an entirely preserved, organized, and frozen world.97 There are shelves and shelves of dolls to choose from in the girl’s search for one who looks like her. It quickly becomes apparent that the historical dolls are no longer the focus.

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97 Andreas Huyssen notes that since the 1970’s there has been a widespread and persistent preoccupation with documenting, remembering and memorializing the entire world: “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia” Public Culture, 12 (2000), 24-25.
In the New York City store the historical dolls are relegated to one portion of the second floor. The store’s atmosphere and activities generate nostalgia for what Svetlana Boym calls “the magical time of childhood.” By constructing a perfect world within the store, American Girl puts the idealized image of a childhood within purchasable reach. This creation of an impossible past and impossible future is the mystery and intrigue of consumerism.

While the catalogue encouraged the creation of imagined memories, the store encourages the creation of what Huyssen calls “lived memories” which are “active, alive” and “embodied in the social.” Once the young visitor to the store checks her coat, she can dine with her doll, take it to the hair salon, attend a cooking class, learn a craft like embroidery, or walk through the museum-like displays with her doll. She can purchase “souvenirs” of her time in the store that are only available on site. This includes American Girl Place t-shirts and photos taken in the photo booth.

The dolls are posed like museum exhibits. They sit in clean, glass-enclosed cases like those you might find in a museum or in Mrs. Lewis’ displays of her dolls. One article from the Journal of Retailing notes that presenting products as though they are artifacts in a museum like case, intrigues costumers who feel they are viewing something that has “a

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98 Svetlana Boym points out that, “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood…” (Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, xv).

99 As Berger explains, “Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development… Everything publicity shows is there awaiting acquisition.” John Berger, Ways of Seeing, 153.

100 Huyssen, 38.
historical, traditional set of values.” Moreover, this marketing technique leads people from intrigue, through fantasy, and finally to yearning for possession. Looking at these dolls frozen in an idealized childhood scene (the immediate past), the imagined lives of these dolls become something to aspire to and to purchase. American Girl highlights what a perfect childhood looks like – one of leisure and uncomplicated friendships – thereby emphasizing the imperfections of real childhood. At the same time, adults experience a strong sense of loss for this imagined past, which they can assuage by purchasing the items giving them such a feeling.

The displays show dolls sitting together in scenes like taxidermied animals do in the American Museum of Natural History – for instance, they may sit in a bedroom setting playing cards or games like *Apples to Apples* (also made by Mattel), suggesting that these dolls are special, almost like antiques – and valuable, worth purchasing. The store contains hundreds of miniaturized objects, contemporary artifacts of everyday contemporary girlhood, suggesting that these are museum-like and therefore historical when in fact they are not. (Ironically, many museums today try to earn revenue by incorporating consumer activities into their spaces, that is, by selling merchandise that reflects the exhibitions.)

The creation of “lived memories” occurs outside the store as well. In 2006 a *New York Times* article described an odd scene in Mount Kisco, New York: “More than 100

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103 Boym notes that the “paradox of institutionalized nostalgia: the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations, the starker the distance from the past, and the more it is prone to idealizations.” (Boym, 17).
little girls were standing up very, very straight, breathing deeply from their rib cages, placing their feet just so, and dropping into a delicate curtsy while saying, ‘Good afternoon.’”\(^{104}\) While American women might see this spectacle as regressive and oppressive, it was “a re-enactment of sorts. The girls were trying to imagine themselves as Felicity, the colonial era doll who would have been wearing stays and been mindful of the proper way a girl should” behave.\(^{105}\) Here again, it is not Felicity’s history that was being remembered so much as the memory of curtseying in Mt. Kisco.

**American Girl in Schools**

American Girl has recently introduced its historical fiction into elementary school history classrooms via lesson plans. Each historical doll has corresponding learning guides based on a working knowledge of the novels. Discussion questions encourage students to relate to the characters by detailing plot points from the book and then asking questions about modern day. For example, “Molly discovers that part of life during wartime is learning to adapt to change and to live with less…Describe a difficult situation in your own life that you have had to adapt to. How did you adapt?”\(^{106}\) Here again, the focus is not on understanding the historical past but on reflecting on the girl’s present experience. The company has made the decision to encourage personal reflection rather than consider the different experience of someone else. Perhaps the belief is that girls will


\(^{105}\) Lombardi, “Each Girl A Felicity And Traveling Through Time”, O1.

learn better when they can relate to an experience. But perhaps, the company is consciously or unconsciously reflecting the more narcissistic tendencies of contemporary American culture.

The incorporation of American Girl books into the formal authoritative setting of school is problematic on many levels. The fictional plots become part of history lessons and historical dilemmas are considered not in their historical but in their present day context. The lessons suggest that the characters in the books are as real as any figures in American history. Also, as children use these guides they are building an allegiance to the American Girl brand. In addition, parents who want their child to experience the full benefit of her history class might feel pressed to buy the dolls and books. Accessing America’s past becomes, in this scenario, a consumer activity. While theoretically available to all children, in fact it offers special access to the past to those who can afford it.

**Playing Nicely: A Contrasting Approach to Historical Fiction**

The American Girl Company in some ways seeks to broaden what it means to be an American girl. Yet, much like the early American Girl doll books, Mrs. Lewis’ dolls and the Orange and Landmark Books, it has offered as an ideal for girls a well-mannered, gentle, and well-behaved girl. Over the course of the twentieth century the dolls and books have suggested that being an American girl means being respectable. She can be spunky, independent and even outspoken but always within bounds. For this reason it is instructive to compare the most recent history based American Girl doll book, *No Ordinary Sound*, to the Newberry Prize winning children’s novel, *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia. The different treatment of girl behavior in *One Crazy Summer*
might in part be due to the fact that it was written for slightly older children aged nine to twelve. Nonetheless, the comparison is still useful for the light it sheds on what kind of behavior is seen as acceptable in the American Girl books and their vastly different descriptions of historical tensions. Both books are about the Civil Rights Movement. In the American Girl Company book *No Ordinary Sound* Melody, a young African American girl, learns to sing what is considered the Negro national anthem, *Lift Every Voice*, to perform in front of her community. Melody is also part of an extended family and the youngest of her siblings. She takes her lead from both her more politically radical sister, Yvonne, and her career oriented musical brother, Dwayne. The book focuses on her friendships with other girls and on her gaining self-confidence.

*One Crazy Summer* offers a starkly different, less benign narrative about life for a young black girl in 1960s America and a less conservative view of girl behavior. The book lays bare a much more tension-filled history and depicts a world that would not be familiar to the mostly white middle class girls who can afford and are fans of American Girl dolls. The book is narrated in the first person by Delphine, an 11-year old black girl living in the 1960s who has a much harder life than Melody. Delphine and her sisters visit their mother in Oakland and spend each day at a Black Panthers summer camp. There are moments that the books seems to directly point out, and then complicate, the well-worn narrative of the Civil Rights Movement like the one featured in *No Ordinary Sound*. Delphine “expected to find Dr. Martin Luther’s King’s photograph hanging on the wall but…Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali were the only faces” she saw. Although the sisters make clear that they “didn’t come for the revolution. We came for Breakfast,”107

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107 *One Crazy Summer*, 173.
by the end Delphine realizes, “I had that Black Panther stuff in me, and it was pouring out at every turn.”

Delphine is far less naïve than Melody and far more aware of what is happening around her. She handles much more difficult experiences. While Melody’s role models are male (her father and brother) One Crazy Summer has few male characters. In fact, the protagonist must leave her father behind and go live with her politically active mother who neglects her maternal duties. The book offers an alternative to traditional models of the family unit and traditional gender roles.

In scene after scene of No Ordinary Summer the intensity of the Civil Rights Movement is played down. Contemplating the words to Lift Every Voice, Melody asks her college-aged sister, “‘what does it mean to ring with the harmonies of liberty [ital. theirs]?’” Her sister’s reply hardly captures the hard won liberty of African Americans. “Harmony is everybody joining together.”’ The author depoliticizes this further by reducing the issue of racial conflict to child’s play. Melody asks, “You mean, playing nicely, like Mommy used to tell us?” When Melody’s older brother Dwayne declines to participate in a protest march, he explains that his talent is music. Melody asks him, “But what about everybody else? Shouldn’t we try to change things for people who aren’t ever going to be famous: People who are just ordinary, like me?” Dwayne replies, “Everybody has to work to make things different. But we don’t have to do it the same

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108 One Crazy Summer, 164.

109 No Ordinary Sound, 116.
way. Everybody’s got the power for change inside themselves. Music is mine.”\textsuperscript{10} Self-
improvement is as admirable a goal as political activism.

Later in \textit{No Ordinary Sound}, Melody hears (first from her mother, and then on the radio) about the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed four young girls. Feeling overwhelmed she asks, “Do we have to listen?” and her grandmother replies comfortingly, “No, child, we don’t” and they begin to sing.\textsuperscript{11} While the grandmother acknowledges that, “Those police in Birmingham were wrong,” Melody’s mother bemoans the violence. “I don’t see why we have to fight fire with fire.” She goes on, “‘Dr. King speaks against hatred and fear. He believes we can change hearts and laws without violence.’”\textsuperscript{12}

In \textit{One Crazy Summer}, on the other hand, Delphine reacts to a news report about the Black Panthers and is knowledgeable about the good work they did in their communities. She doesn’t ask for an adult to explain to her what the news is saying, she observes and critiques the media on her own. “It wasn’t at all the way the television showed militants—that’s what they called the Black Panthers. Militants, who from the newspapers were angry fist wavers with their mouths wide-open and their rifles ready for shooting. They never showed anyone like Sister Mukumbu or Sister Pat, passing out toast and teaching in classrooms.”\textsuperscript{13} While Melody makes protest signs that say “\textit{Freedom Forever},” “Justice for All!” and “Fair Housing Now!” before she goes to hear Dr. Martin

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{No Ordinary Sound}, 105-106.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{No Ordinary Sound}, 179.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{No Ordinary Sound}, 72-73.

Luther King Jr. speak, Delphine in One Crazy Summer colors “Free Huey” and “Remember Li’l Bobby,” (referring to the shooting of fifteen year old Bobby Hutton) at the summer camp.114

Where to spend one’s money is seen as an important way to exercise one’s rights in each of the books. Melody takes her money out of a bank after her sister is refused a job there because she is black. “Her mother smiled and took her hand. ‘Good job,’ she said. ‘You know, your daddy says voting is a way to speak up for what we believe. Money has a voice, too. What we do with it says a lot about what we believe.’”115 In One Crazy Summer Delphine chooses to boycott stores that do not support the rally she is involved in. She expresses her views loudly and publically by protesting and boycotting. And she makes these decisions with no adult support.

Both books have a scene that takes place in a local store. When a store manager accuses Delphine of intending to shoplift, she says, “We are citizens, and we demand respect.” She thinks about how her father would have supported her speaking up. “Papa wouldn’t have wanted me to spend our money where we weren’t treated with respect.” But she also knows she should think about her behavior when confronting a racist person. She’s sure her grandmother would want her to say ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘Please, sir’ to show him we were just as civilized as everyone else.”116 Delphine considers the politics of respectability and goes through all the different reaction people of different ages would

114 No Ordinary Sound, 84.
115 No Ordinary Sound, 54.
116 One Crazy Summer, 164-165.
want her have in this scenario. A similar incident occurs No Ordinary Sound, but when confronted with racism Melody flees the store and asks her brother what happened.

In both books there is a discussion about racist terminology. Melody’s involvement with the issue is purely theoretical. She recalls that her grandparents said “colored.”

They were older and from the South, and Big Momma said that’s what was proper when they were growing up. Mommy and Daddy mostly said “Negroes.” But ever since her sister, Yvonne, went to college, she says ‘black people.’ Melody noticed that Mommy and Daddy were saying it sometimes, too. She liked the way it went with “white people,” like a matched set. But sometimes she wished they didn’t need all these color words at all. Melody spoke up. ‘What about ‘Americans’?’” she said.117

In One Crazy Summer Delphine and her sisters directly encounter the debate over the use of the term “colored.” When one sister uses the word, they all join her in a show of support. ‘If one of us said ‘colored,’ we all said ‘colored,’ unless we were fighting among ourselves.”118 They are mocked by a man who says, “All right, then. ‘Cullid’ girls…” and then asks about the white doll the youngest girl carries in her arms. ‘Why are you carrying that self-hatred around in your arms?’” Delphine speaks up for her sister and the others follow her lead. ‘That’s not self-hatred. That’s her doll.’” But the man continues with his taunt. “‘Are your eyes blue like hers? Is your hair blond like hers? Is your skin white like hers?’”119 In the following chapter one of the sisters colors the doll’s face black with a marker, devastating the younger sibling. There is a reality to this depiction of the difficult struggles about race that is missing from the book about

117 No Ordinary Sound, 17-18.

118 One Crazy Summer, 65.

119 One Crazy Summer, 66.
Melody. White dolls as a vehicle for self-hatred would never enter the world of American Girl.

While Melody’s triumph is about gaining self-confidence. Delphine is not celebrated and actually feels bad about herself. She says, “I sing in the children’s choir because Big Ma makes sure we motherless girls enjoy all the pitying looks the church can spare, whether we want them or not.” Later she says, “I don’t have anything to be vain about. I have no talent to show. Even if I did, I have no desire to throw myself before people for their applause.”

Melody repeatedly receives care and comfort from her adult relatives but Delphine doesn’t. Delphine notes that her mother “had just told me I was smart and a disappointment, reminding me she hadn’t said one nice thing to me. Not one.” She is independent and stubborn, taking care of her sisters and standing up to adults when she believes they are wrong. In the final pages she confronts her mother. “I’m only eleven years old, and I do everything. I have to because you’re not there to do it.” Only at the very end of the book do the children receive a hug from their mother.

The concerns of Melody and her friends usually revolve around girlish activities. In preparation for performing a song for the family, the girls dress together. “Once the older girls finished pinning and piling hair and buttoning and zipping dresses, Melody, Val, and Lila each twirled in front of the full-length mirror. Melody couldn’t help

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120 _One Crazy Summer_, 130.

121 _One Crazy Summer_, 130.

122 _One Crazy Summer_, 206.

123 _One Crazy Summer_, 206.
grinning at what she saw. They weren’t wearing matching dresses, but they still looked like Motown stars!” Another time they visit the beauty salon where Melody has her hair straightened and she feels “like a more grown-up Melody.”

Delphine’s relationships with her friends are more complicated and Delphine isn’t always nice (or pleasant). In one scene Delphine loses patience and gets angry at her sister Vonetta who “is all ham and show. Any occasion, even a riot in the making, would have been good enough to perform at. Fern is no better. She sings like a bird, is cute, and, like Vonetta, cannot resist the lure of applause and attention…” In another scene she loses patience with Vonetta who is upset that their mother didn’t praise her. “Usually I’d pick up Vonetta’s broken spirits until she was once again crowy and showy, but now I let her sulk… Serves you right, I thought. Just to be evil, I rubbed it in with an insult… I said that to make her feel mad on top of being hurt. Just like I know how to lift my sisters up, I also know how to needle them just right.”

Robert Sutherland’s notion of the politics of assent, mentioned in the analysis of the Orange and Landmark books, is useful here as well. Aa Sutherland explains, “assent” is “an author’s passive, unquestioning acceptance and internalization of an established ideology, which is then transmitted in the author’s writing in an unconscious manner.”

The author of *No Ordinary Sound* the American Girl book, whether knowingly or not, is

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124 *No Ordinary Sound*, 138.

125 *No Ordinary Sound*, 201.

126 *One Crazy Summer*, 130.

127 *One Crazy Summer*, 143.

offering a very conservative message – that girls should be polite and so should political protest. While the American Girl book teaches about the Civil Rights Movement, it plays down the intensity of the violence and conflict and teaches that anger is acceptable in the face of overt racism but only to a point and never irrationally.

Sherri Inness who was cited in Chapter 3 for her discussion of the politics of assent, has written about the American Girl books. She notes in the books a “repeated emphasis on a conservative ideology about what it means to be a girl or a woman.”\footnote{Inness, 177.} At the time of her writing, all of the dolls, for instance, had long hair – as if this were a precondition for being a girl. Inness, looking at the 1996 American Girl catalogue, imagined that the diverse collection foretold a more “empowered image of girldom.”\footnote{Sherrie A. Inness, \textit{The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life}, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 180.} Unfortunately, Inness’ hope did not come true. As the range of dolls expanded, the definition of the American Girl narrowed. While the company individualizes the dolls to represent girls with different backgrounds and needs, the message offered the young reader is that empowerment comes through seeing and celebrating yourself. Girls come to care most about the doll that is most like them, not about dolls representing girls who are different from them. Building empathy, an important goal of childhood literature, seems lost in these contemporary books about the dolls.

While the plots in these two books have many similar elements, the behavior and level of sophistication of the protagonists is very different. In a sense, the American Girl historical books provide a safe space to deliver politically oriented stories to a largely white audience. Through the medium of a historical story the books model traditional
female behavior – naïve, passive, and nice. *One Crazy Summer*, on the other hand, demonstrates that it’s possible to convey the complexity of an era through the experiences of a young girl protagonist and to suggest that less socially sanctioned thoughts and behaviors are normal.

According to the editor in charge of the Melody project about the Civil Rights Era, and as reported in Publishers Weekly, “Everyone we asked [to be on the advisory board] said yes…They were not just willing, but enthusiastic about talking to us. They all want kids to know about this element of history.” 131 Famous activists and academics – including Julian Bond and Thomas Sugrue worked with the company to write this story. For the American Girl Company the enthusiasm and praise of the academics on the board confirmed again that they were doing something good by offering a doll representing a historical period. But it is important to look deeper to understand exactly what they are teaching. When compared to a book like *One Crazy Summer*, the publication of *No Ordinary Sound* hardly seems like a radical act. 132 Telling stories of non-white characters is fine, but it is not in itself and end. Inclusivity cannot only be about the content of the doll’s backstory — it has to reach a diverse audience as well, something the American Girl Company has not made an effort to do. American Girl mobilizes affective attachment with the past for the purpose of marketing and sales, not necessarily civic


132 I am quoted saying this to a reporter in 2016 as well as stating, “History, “…in this case, is accessible only to those who can pay for it.” http://mashable.com/2016/02/27/american-girl-dolls-high-cost/#qPyNle9iMkqX , Accessed: July 20, 2017.
enlightenment or social engagement. Once again, the author’s “assent” to the mores of middle class, respectable behavior results in a story that downplays the tension that characterized the Civil Rights Movement. the racist politics of the nation.

**Conclusion**

Trying to represent the past truthfully, without distortion or sentimentalizing, is a complicated task. As Linda Hutcheon points out, any film (or book, in this case), about history represents a modern idea of the past, rather than the past itself. As she suggests, Jameson’s description of “real” history may, in itself, be nostalgic. If we know that there is no purely objective history – all narratives are laden in some way with the significance assigned to them by the historian – what is the purpose of turning a critical eye to historical fiction? Is there more room for nostalgia in historical literature written for youth? Do the benefits of prompting curiosity about the past outweigh the problems of a sentimentalizing and sanitized version of history?

The American Girl Company is another example of the way private corporations can use nostalgia for an imagined past in place of history. While it has always been true that American Girl is a toy company and not an educational institution, it made a serious attempt early to teach history. But the late 1990s, the historical dolls have been systematically usurped by dolls that reflect contemporary girls and culture. The

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imaginative play these contemporary dolls encourage teaches girls that clothes and
accessories reflect personality more than history, family background, and social status.

As the first generations of American Girl doll owners reach adulthood, the
success of the use of nostalgia in American Girl’s advertising becomes increasinly
apparent. Recent articles on popular websites like the Atlantic and The Washington Post
lament the changes in the American Girl collections.\(^\text{136}\) In 2013, The Atlantic published
an article in which fans criticized the contemporary dolls for not being radical. A few
months later another The Washington Post blog published a piece called, “Even Worse
Things are Happening to American Girl than you Thought.” These articles are written
mainly by young women who grew up with the American Girl dolls and who now mourn
the shift away from the historical dolls and the diminishment of the educational and
“radical” lessons of the historical dolls. These articles draw dozens, even hundreds, of
comments from readers who relate stories about their own sentimental memories of
playing with their dolls.\(^\text{137}\) Even though this may seem detrimental to the company, it
more clearly points out that the company has successfully inculcated an affinity for the

\(^{136}\) Amy Schiller, “American Girls Aren’t Radical Anymore”. The Atlantic.
Alexandra Petri, “Even more terrible things are happening to the American Girl doll brand than
you thought.” April 23, 2013. Available at:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/wp/2013/05/01/even-more-terrible-things-are-
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2014.

\(^{137}\) Comments on the article range widely: “You’re right-- I didn’t realize it at the time, but when I
read those books as a kid, I was grappling with the same issues of class privilege that, as someone
who’s gone from lower class to upper middle class, still affect my thinking today.” “Yi Li, 3
years ago. “For parents, I feel like the rationale for buying a (then-$82... I told you I memorized
the catalogue) American Girl doll was that maybe by osmosis your child will learn about history
through the doll. I certainly learned what the term "loyalist" meant via Felicity, and about Ellis
Island via Kirsten, and so on. The educational value of doll + book set made the price worth it.”
Username: Kkjx1, 3 years ago.
brand that lasts for years.

When I wrote suggesting that the American Girl dolls were not particularly radical, that while they were well researched, and did teach some history that involved instances of injustice and strife in American history, ultimately they taught middle class, respectable behavior to primarily middle and upper class white girls. The response to this article was swift and critical. While willing to critique the downplaying of history and take aim at Mattel, fans were unwilling to consider that the company goal has always been to make money more than to educate. American Girl has a powerful hold on its customers well into adulthood. As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, children’s toys, books and amusements generally go unscrutinized particularly when they are deemed historical or patriotic. This leaves the task of educating children about their history to the whims of manufacturers.

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CONCLUSION

This thesis has looked at the stories about American history that have been told to children through select toys, books and amusements over the twentieth century. Looking back we can see themes that connect each of the case studies: nostalgia for a pre-industrial past conceived of as free of conflicts and corruption, the assumption of American innocence even in the face of contradictory evidence, and the primacy of whiteness, and the influence of consumerism.¹

The amusements studied here generate distilled version of American myths, hopes, fears and dreams. From the inception of the American Toy industry, through it’s powerful influence today, the pastimes of childhood have been inextricably linked with American identity and history. Consumerism has become an increasingly prevalent way for children to access American culture and the stories of American history. It has also come to be a replacement for other forms of community and civic engagement. Consumerism has also allowed for broader or more accessible and imaginative approaches to American identity and has the potential to forge global identities.

The first chapter lays out how the toy industry established itself in the early twentieth century by linking to the country’s industrial revolution and nationalizing, patriotic consumerist identity of the emerging American nation. Chapter 2 looks at how three different groups used dolls in the 1930s, the Depression era, to react to the industrialized consumer economy

¹ The recent protests and debates over monuments to the confederacy, beginning in Charlottesville, VA, have proved to be a powerful example of the way narratives of our history often obfuscate the history itself.
Chapter 3 explores this consensus story and the subtle and overt Cold War pressures that influenced what story was being told to children through fictional history books. The stories they told of a triumphant America are still prevalent today.

_Freedomland U.S.A._, a theme park planned in the 1950s but opened in 1960, created an entire world based on the same consensus version of American history but failed to capture the imaginations of a changing youth. Both the form and content of this nostalgic representation of American history felt corny and trite rather than authentic in a world that was increasingly confronting war, poverty, inequality and social change.

Chapter 5 describes how the American Girl Company in the 1980s has gone through a number of iterations in telling the story of American history and identity. In what was hailed as unusual and progressive, the company offered dolls that reflected the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural world that has increasingly recognized as contemporary America. But over time the company’s focus shifted from historical dolls to those whose major characteristics were their physical resemblance to the girl consumer.

Although disparate in form and time period, the lessons of exceptionalism, white supremacy, individuality, innovation, and American innocence can be traced through all the case studies. Consumerism both excludes and allows for broader inclusion of marginalized groups at different moments in time. It also allows for the false promise of equal access to the things that make Americans feel like Americans.

**Further Research**

There are a tremendous number of examples that would add to the depictions of American identity discussed in this thesis. I chose cases that were popular yet unscrutinized, often East Coast oriented, and which explicitly used history and American
identity as a marketing tool. Other media, like television, provide great examples of how history is used to sell both products and ideologies. There are other series of history books that would be interesting to compare. It would also be interesting to look further into museums and public sites where history is used to draw visitors.

These case studies can lead to speculation in a number of directions. What happens when we account for the agency of children themselves? What can we glean about the reception of these didactic amusements over time? Where and when do we see industry reacting to children’s wants, needs, and changing demands? A rich area of exploration would be to look at children’s agency and their reception of these items, something that was difficult to discern in my research. There are many examples today of consumers using American Girl dolls in funny, often brilliant, and subversive ways - creating home movies with their dolls or offering tutorials on YouTube for cutting their dolls’ hair and making boy dolls. These activities point to the recurring disjuncture that exists between what producers believe the public wants, needs, or can handle and what the consuming public demands.

Another avenue to explore is how the globalized 21st century calls in to question nationalism itself. What happens to stories of particular nations? What political pressures exert themselves on children’s consumer culture outside of the United States? Is consumption as prominent a force in teaching children to be citizens? How does national identity abroad change in the face of a different relationship to capitalism?

The American story is still being written, and today there are endless numbers of people telling the story through different media – books, films, twitter, podcasts. The telling of the American story has been democratized. Each of the cases in this thesis
allows for exploration of how companies profit from telling the stories of American history. They show us who history is marketed towards and who is ignored or even vilified. The stories they tell are a piece of this study but the way the stories are sold, or failed to sell, is equally as revealing.

The fact that there are so many American stories came up in relation to the 2017 Oscars. One reviewer, discussing the many movies which focused on the struggle for “individual and cultural self-definition” pointed out the challenge this poses for the entertainment industry to allow “for all those competing self-definitions to flourish and coexist within some larger American community.” This poses a challenge for moviegoers as well. “There is no one American story, but a variety of specific and unique American stories… If you really want to find out what America looks like, you have to watch all of [the movies].”

Competing definitions of American identity play out in our national monuments, school curricula, and popular culture. The cases cited in this thesis attempt to illustrate who is a consumer, a child, and an American in the eyes of manufacturers, authors, and cultural elites. Even as the messages and media shift over time, the white middle class male child remains primary in the white American imagination. Objects focused on the girl still largely play up individual empowerment and play down community engagement. With consumerism as a primary form of civic engagement, who is and is not an American

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becomes as problematic and contentious as the messages and lessons embedded in objects and spaces themselves.
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