HISTORY GIRLS: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN HISTORICAL FICTION SERIES FOR GIRLS

By

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To my family

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AG	American Girl Company
NAWSA	National American Woman Suffrage Association

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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For over a century, American historical fiction series for girls have depicted young heroines learning a foundational lesson of political consciousness: namely, that their individual lives are connected to and even determined by larger political events and ideologies. My dissertation investigates how the content and form of girls' historical fiction series teaches readers to think about their lives in relation to social issues of the past and present, and to negotiate the tension between their personal lives and their political responsibilities. I argue that, while these series often confine girls' activism within the bounds of polite feminine behavior, they also use the perspective of the American girl to foreground the complex relationship between the personal and the political. Girl heroines of historical fiction series work through questions such as: Once I know how others are socially disadvantaged, can I still be content with my own privileges? How are my privileges connected to the political oppression of others? What is my responsibility regarding the systematic oppression of others and what if enacting this responsibility contradicts my familial duties or individual desires?

By bringing up such questions in relation to various issues in American history—war, labor reform, and racial violence, for instance—girls' historical fiction series teach

not only about American history, but about how girls should engage politically in their own historical context. I examine the rise of the girls' historical fiction series genre in the Progressive era, and track its development throughout the century and into our present moment by examining various influential series: Alice Turner Curtis' Little Maid series (1913-1937), Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series (1932-1943), Lois Lenski's Regional America series (1943-1968), the American Girl Company's American Girl series (1985-present), and Scholastic's Dear America series (1996-present).

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: “GIRL-SIZED VIEWS” OF HISTORY

In 2012, the American Girl Company’s popular line of historical dolls, books, and merchandise introduced a new character: 9-year-old Caroline Abbott, who lives out her girlhood amid the War of 1812 in Sackets Harbor, New York. Like all of the heroines in the American Girl product line, Caroline’s life is chronicled in a six-book historical fiction series, throughout which she uses the sentimental and material features of her girlhood to perform daring, politically significant feats. In the second book in her series, for instance, Caroline gains permission to visit her father in the British fort where he is being held prisoner by asking the British Major, “‘Do you have any daughters?’” while a tear slides down her cheek, which “she didn’t wipe…away” (Ernst 50). Once inside, she shows her father an escape route that she has marked into her embroidery sampler. The accompanying illustration shows a delicately featured blonde girl in a pink dress sitting across from her imprisoned father. She leans forward, her head turned away from the British guard who stands in the background while her eyes lock meaningfully with her father’s as she points to the embroidery sampler, which she also angles away from the officer. Perhaps Caroline needn’t have been so careful, however, as the British guard standing watch is looking out of the window, unsuspicious of the political trouble a girl in a pink dress with an embroidery sampler could cause. True to its mission to present “girl-sized views of significant events that helped shape our country,” the

American Girl Company's line of historical characters is filled with girls performing similarly brave feats of personal and political importance ("Our Company" n.p.).[1]

While the American Girls books are currently the most visible and commercially successful examples of the girls' historical fiction series genre, the idea of a "girl-sized view" of American history has been the basis of various historical fiction series throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first century. For instance, nearly 100 years before the American Girl Company's Caroline Abbott uses the emotional and material aspects of girlhood to rescue her father from political imprisonment, 8-year-old Anne Elliot, heroine of the first installment of Alice Turner Curtis's Little Maid historical fiction series (1913-1937), delivers a secret message to an army captain that leads to the mobilization of Newburyport during the American Revolution. Like Caroline's tears and embroidery sampler, Anne's bearing as an innocent girl in a "pretty hat and cape" allows her to avoid suspicion while carrying out a political action (Curtis, *Province* 164). The illustration depicts Anne on the captain's porch, leaning surreptitiously toward him and meeting eyes conspiratorially. Her large hat and cape hide the message she holds up to him from those who might pass by behind her on the street. For Caroline and Anne, it is the cultural status and material trappings of white, middle-class girlhood that enable and simultaneously encode their political actions. These two scenes of American girls playing pivotal but hidden roles in history, written nearly a century apart, generate questions about the popular but under-studied girls' historical fiction series genre: What

[1] Pleasant Company (now known as American Girl) launched the American Girl line of historical merchandise in 1986 with three historical characters (Kirsten from 1854, Samantha from 1904, and Molly from 1944). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the historical line grew to include several new characters, all 9-year-old girls, each sold as an 18-inch doll accompanied by a plethora of other products available for purchase: outfits, accessories, and six volume book sets that tell of their lives and adventures.

can girls' historical fiction series tell us about the relationship between girlhood and history? How are girls supposed to understand and engage with the political influences that shape their lives in both overt and covert ways? How are girls taught to imagine themselves in history, and how does this affect their agency in the present day?

"History Girls: The Personal and the Political in Historical Fiction Series for Girls" takes up these questions by examining several girls' perspectives in historical fiction series throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first century. Unpacking how American history is imagined through the eyes of pre-adolescent girls over the past 100 years reveals how girlhood, because of its traditional place on the fringes of historical events, becomes a site of meditation on understanding the self as a political subject when gendered cultural, familial, and personal expectations and assumptions often contradict political rights and responsibilities. Historical fiction featuring boy heroes frequently links the cultural expectations of boyhood to the developing political participation of boys—often chronicling their roles as soldiers, speakers, or burgeoning leaders of political organizations. Girls' transition to political activity is not nearly as seamless, and the struggle is presented thoughtfully in many historical fiction series. In between the production of the Little Maid and American Girls series, Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series (1932-1943) depicts the history of the 19th century western frontier through the eyes of the now beloved girl heroine and fictionalized version of the author herself, Laura Ingalls. Generations of children have learned frontier history through this particular girl-sized view. Similarly, Lois Lenski's Regional America series (1943-1968) often featured girl characters living on frontiers, farms, or bayous in an attempt to get suburban, middle-class American children, particularly girls, to "know their country

better" by expanding their visions of what it is like to live in America (Lenski, "Seeing" 280). Currently, Scholastic's multi-authored Dear America series (1996-present) portrays momentous events in American history through the intensely personalized form of the fictional girls' diary. When examined in relation to each other, series that present girls' perspectives of American history can enrich our understandings of how the national figure of the American girl is supposed to understand the past and act within the present. Understanding the predominant prescription for girls' historical and social awareness is as crucial as it is complex in part because, as Lauren Berlant, Robin Bernstein, and others note, the national figure of the American girl is imagined to possess a consciousness that exists "beyond social categories" such as race, gender, and class (Bernstein 6). Thus, the American girl is imagined to be innocent of the systematic inequities wrought by such categories as well as innocent of any "agency" or "accountability" in relation to these inequities (Berlant 6). Materials that imagine how the American girl interacts with historical evidence of the political systems she is in essence supposed to be unconscious of, then, present compelling ways to think about what it means to become politically conscious, and what kind of political consciousness the nation envisions for its girls.

Each series mentioned above raises questions about how the American girl should think about and act in response to matters of war, labor disputes, racial prejudice, and other systematic forms of political injustice throughout American history. These thought processes are often sparked by and resolved within the girl heroine's personal sphere, such as when a friend or family member is hurt by systematic injustices and the girl must help that individual character in some way. Thus, the

insights she gains are often akin to the lessons in selflessness and generosity typically found in narratives for girls. However, because the insights also occur in response to historical events or political circumstances, they speak to issues of both personal conscience and political consciousness. Girl heroines realize that their individual lives, behaviors, desires, and actions are connected to and even determined by larger institutions, ideologies, and political events. As a result of this realization, girl heroines of historical fiction series pose complex questions about the relationship between their personal lives and their political responsibilities. For instance: once I know how others suffer due to social injustice or political oppression, can I still be happy in my own, personal life? How is my personal happiness connected to others' suffering? As an American girl, what is my social responsibility regarding others' suffering, and what if these social responsibilities run contrary to my familial ones or to my individual desires? In this way, the question of how girls are supposed to see themselves as girls *and* political actors lies at the heart of series that present girl-sized views of American history. My project examines the scope of the girl-sized views of history presented in various historical fiction series for girls produced in the past 100 years in order to think about how girls are supposed to understand their subject position as American girls, the workings of the social and political nation that they occupy, and, crucially, the connection between the two.

Considering the "Girl-Sized View" of American History

In a project that examines serialized "girl-sized views" of history, it is important to consider how the very concept of a "girl-sized view" contains within it the familiar tension between political empowerment and disempowerment that fuels many debates about educational as well as popular materials for young people. This tension takes on

particularly high stakes in debates surrounding books that prescribe models for girls' behavior, given the historical tendency of these materials to impart conservative lessons that socialize girls into passive positions in the family, society, and history.[2] In one way, then, books devoted to teaching American history through girls' perspectives can be empowering to girl readers. As Suzanne Rahn writes in her history of historical fiction for children, when girls first started "playing lead roles in stories based on American history" in books like Curtis's Little Maid series, they "established a claim through fiction to a place in history which textbooks were not to recognize for another forty or fifty years" (11). By telling stories about girls' lives as they are shaped by and help to shape historical events, girl-sized views of history depict the daily realities of girls' lives as significant to rather than remote from history. Reading stories about how past girls lived their lives in relation to historical events and circumstances could cultivate in girl readers a richer sense of how their own lives relate to their current historical moment.

However, depending on what is contained within and what remains beyond the scope of books presenting history through girls' perspectives, as well as how exactly the personal lives of girls are shown to be connected to historical events and conditions, a girl-sized view of history could also present limited, disempowering visions of girls' roles, responsibilities, and significance in history. In other words, presenting history through a

[2] Even narratives and character types that appear to offer expanded visions of female roles and behavior often support conventional, limiting prescriptions. For instance, Michelle Ann Abate's examination of the figure of the 'tomboy' in American literature and culture argues that while the tomboy trope seems to subvert domestic models of young womanhood, it often works to support conservative gender and racial ideologies. Kenneth Kidd's reminder that "we should not confuse the trope with its ideological effect" when examining texts that seem to challenge conventional modes of behavior for boys or girls is useful here (61). See Abate, Michelle Ann. *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2008. And Kidd, Kenneth B. *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale*. Minneapolis:U of Minnesota P, 2004.

girl's perspective could support rather than challenge cultural assumptions about girlhood that have contributed to girls' exclusion from history and politics. For instance, in many texts that render history through a girl's perspective, material objects traditionally associated with girls' domestic lives—dresses, dolls, embroidery samplers—are points of intense focus and fetishization. The American Girls series, with its plethora of associated dolls and accessories, is perhaps the most blatantly "object-obsessed" historical fiction series (Miskec 158). But lovingly described objects traditionally associated with girlhood are apparent in most historical fiction series for girls. According to historical fiction series, even the most historically oppressed girls—from fugitive slaves to factory laborers to migrant workers—dream about pretty dresses and dolls, just like girls of today. Girls' close association with material objects like dresses or dolls is a historical reality, and as several scholars have demonstrated, this relationship can be a useful historical lens through which to understand the intimate, daily workings of all manner of political relationships fueled by race, gender, and class.[3] Still, girl-sized views of history that focus so intensely on material objects can also work in the opposite way: obscuring rather than clarifying the political meanings of girls' desire for the objects most closely associated with them by presenting this desire as a timeless and essential one that all American girls share, regardless of historical era or social circumstances. In this way, girl-sized views of history can be profoundly

[3] See Robin Bernstein's Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights. New York: NYU Press, 2011, and Miriam Formanek-Brunell's Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.

ahistorical, and therefore could discourage girls from recognizing the ways that their lives are connected to specific historical and political circumstances.

The question of whether or not the girl-sized views of history presented in popular historical fiction texts are empowering or limiting influences on girls' historical knowledge and consciousness is an important one to consider, especially in a project that focuses on how American girls are taught to see themselves in relation to the political world they inhabit. However, closely examining girls' historical fiction texts for evidence of female empowerment or disempowerment quickly proves that such clear-cut classifications are impossible. First, the reading process itself is notoriously hard to pin down. Angela Hubler and others have compellingly argued that girl readers do not passively consume but actively cobble together meanings in the texts they read, a process deemed "liberatory" because the meanings they make are often contrary to the narrative's intended prescriptions for female behavior (270). And as Shirley Foster and Judy Simons note, even conservative narratives that appear "definitive and ideologically orthodox" in their portrayal of female behavior, often contain textual moments that complicate and potentially subvert traditional notions about girlhood and femininity (108). For instance, the historical fiction series for girls mentioned above, despite their often homogenized visions of girlhood behavior, desires, and actions, all pose complex moral and social questions that hinge on the tension that arises between personal contentment and political responsibility.

For one brief example, we can turn again to the American Girls series—the historical fiction series most accused of presenting girl-sized views of commodities instead of history. The American Girl books featuring Felicity, set during the

Revolutionary War, tell the story of Felicity Merriman and her Patriot family, living in Williamsburg, Virginia under the leadership of a Tory Governor. In the third book of the series, *Felicity's Surprise*, Felicity feels conflicted between her political support of the Patriot cause and her desire to wear her coveted new dress and attend the dance the Tory governor throws for the town's children. Her father's teenaged apprentice, Ben, is ashamed of her for wanting to go: "'How can you even *consider* it?'" He asks Felicity. "'How could you possibly go to the Governor's Palace? How could you smile at the governor and drink his punch as if you're the best of friends? . . . You know Governor Dunmore represents the king. . . . You know the king and the governor have treated us colonists badly!" (Tripp, *Felicity's* 8). After Ben's remonstrance, Felicity poses the deceptively simple question: "'*Is* it wrong for me to go to the Palace?'" (10). Felicity's question hinges on the moral conflict between her personal desire for pleasure and her commitment to her political beliefs. Of course, Felicity's personal responses to her political atmosphere are not as strident as Ben's, and they certainly don't adopt rhetorically stirring Revolutionary ultimatums such as "give me liberty or give me death." Still, Felicity's query about whether or not it is wrong for her to go to the Tory Governor's palace evokes its own set of important questions about liberty, agency, ethics, and personal responsibility. For instance: Is opposing a political belief different than opposing the individuals who adhere to it? Can I speak out against Loyalism but be friends with Loyalists? Am I at liberty to pursue pleasure when I know that it's sponsored by people whose politics disadvantage my community? In this way, Felicity's perspective can evoke thoughtful considerations on the complexities involved in

engaging politically, even if those considerations are spurred by wondering whether or not she should go to a party.

As the examples of historical fiction series books I've mentioned so far suggest, however, the imagined 'American girl' who gets the opportunity to consider the relationship between her personal decisions and larger political events is usually white and materially privileged. This isn't just the case in girls' series, of course, but in the larger cultural imagination. The 'American girl' is white, middle-class, and politically and socially innocent, or as Berlant puts it, she is "not yet bruised by history. . . . still innocent of knowledge, agency, and accountability" (6). Series books like *Felicity's Surprise* adhere to this myth. Further, the myth is what allows so many historical fiction series books to portray the productive development of knowledge, agency, and accountability as girls thoughtfully ask questions in relatively low stakes situations. But of course, the myth also ignores the experiences of girls who are undeniably "bruised by history," girls whose first lessons about the effects of larger political forces on their everyday lives are not learned through negotiating conflicts between material pleasure and political responsibility. As Berlant and Bernstein note, although the national figure of the American girl has been imagined to exist beyond social categories such as race and class, she has historically been envisioned as white and middle-class. According to Bernstein, since the nineteenth-century, the idea of innocence in America was not just intimately associated with white girlhood, but embodied by it: white girlhood was seen "not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment" (6). Thus, the privilege of being innocent of social categories, political realities, and the inequities they foster is historically limited to the bodies of white,

middle-class girls. Another crucial question to ask in a project about girls' historical fiction series, then, is how do series attempt to reconstruct history through the perspective of girls who experience the burdens of their political positions in their lives every day?

Early series like the Little Maid books do not attempt this at all. The Little Maids are all white, and the series' portrayal of American Indians (often as kidnappers) and African Americans (mostly as servants) are unambiguous caricatures. In the Little Maid series, the white girl's perspective of history and developing political consciousness have nothing to do with her nation's racial history. Later series feature fraught, fractured, and multifaceted attempts to present girls learning about or living out this history. Wilder's Little House series depicts the Ingalls' family's intense encounters with American Indians in the western U.S., but Laura's white, girl-sized perspective necessarily limits the series' insight into American Indian experiences of westward expansion. Lenski's regional series and the American Girls series shift some of their girl-sized perspectives of history to the lives of laboring girls and girls of color. While these attempts succeed in broadening the histories presented in girls' historical fiction series, they also reinforce the myth that white, middle class girls have the privileged ability to rise beyond their historical limitations while working class girls or girls of color are more or less victims of their histories. Despite the value of attempting to portray the often devastating individual effects of oppressive historical circumstances, then, presenting stories in which whiteness and economic privilege allow girls to have power over history while non-whiteness and poverty allow history to have power over girls ultimately offers girls of different social and racial backgrounds different relationships to

history. These relationships to history in turn could influence girls' perception of their own agency in their current historical moment. In this way, it is important to study representations in historical fiction series of girls who exist outside of the myth of girlhood innocence, *and* to clarify as best we can how the highly pervasive and politicized myth of white girls' political innocence prescribes ways for all girls to act (or not act) within their daily, political worlds.

Texts and Contexts: Considering Historical Fiction Series

Just as the girl-sized view of history is an idea that can complicate rather than reduce historical thinking, the historical fiction genre and the series form also render history in unique ways. The archive of books featuring girls' perspectives of the world around them is voluminous, and one might wonder why my project focuses on historical fiction series rather than stand-alone historical fiction novels starring girl heroines, or girls' series fiction written and set in contemporary periods. Both kinds of texts certainly speak very strongly to the issue of girl-sized views of history and their political implications. Anne Scott MacLeod, for example, uses the girl-sized view of the nineteenth-century mid-western frontier in Carol Ryrie Brink's *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) as a way to recognize distinctions between the experience and consciousness of American girlhood, a period often marked by "physical and psychic freedom," and the experience and consciousness of adolescence and womanhood, periods in which social prescriptions for femininity become much more constricted (202). Also, the plethora of popular twentieth-century girls' series books such as the Stratemeyer Syndicate's Nancy Drew Mysteries (1930-2003), Motor Girls (1910-1917), and Outdoor Girls series (1913-1933) feature girls acting within the specific confines and prospects of their own historical moment, navigating the cultural and technological changes of the day. These

series also speak to questions of how American girls should regard the world around them and their place within it.[4] I make the case, however, that while all texts depicting girls' perspectives of their worlds are useful tools for examining prescriptions for girls' political consciousness, historical fiction series for girls provide unique ways to think about my project's primary questions regarding the tension between girls' personal and political lives, and the development of girls' political consciousness.

Bernstein points out that the culture of childhood often "retains and repurposes" past cultural practices that have faded, even become "abject," in other spheres. For instance, she notes that while the literary and cultural practices of sentimentalism and minstrelsy "peaked in the lives of adults in the nineteenth century . . . the popular cultures of childhood . . . delivered, in fragmented and distorted forms, the images, practices, and ideologies of sentimentalism and minstrelsy well into the twentieth century" (Bernstein 7). In this way, "the study of childhood radically challenges many established historical periodizations," and in doing so, allows us to think about how and why certain cultural practices and ideologies persist and function beyond the historical moment that provided the conditions for them to flourish out in the open (Bernstein 7). As part of the culture of childhood, series books for children similarly challenge "established historical periodizations," as many series remained popular throughout decades of cultural shifts without any attending alteration in the characters' "values, ideals, and attitudes" (Deane 13). Paul Deane also argues that while many series may on the surface reflect preoccupations of their specific historical moment, the worlds

[4] See Kathleen Chamberlain's entry on girls' series fiction in: *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*. Eds. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh. Westport: Greenwood, 2007. 522-526.

depicted in the series are ultimately “abstract” rather than concrete. In other words, while there is certainly some connection between early twentieth-century technological progress in automobiles and the publication of series like the Motor Girls, Deane notes that these series could have been written without any “knowledge at all of [the] specific locales” in which they take place. He concludes, then, that series books “do indeed reveal a great deal about the American mind, but not…in the superficial sense that they reflect current events” (13).

I would indeed argue that studying series books, echoing Bernstein’s thoughts about the study of the culture of childhood in general, reveals “values, ideals, and attitudes” that endure, though perhaps in varied forms, beyond the historical periods which gave rise to or openly sustained them. Examining multiple series aimed at girls in relation to each other provides a new historical lens through which to view girls’ shifting as well as enduring cultural and political meanings and roles. Many previous studies of girls’ series, such as the essays in Sherrie Inness’s edited collection, *Nancy Drew and Company: Culture, Gender, and Girls’ Series* (1997), examine how girls’ series interact with a specific historical moment—the time period in which they were produced, or particularly fraught historical environments in which they were or are widely read—in order to confirm as well as complicate historical uses and meanings of American girlhood. However, studying different girls’ series in relation to each other, rather than just in relation to their historical moments of production or popularity, captures the cultural and political meanings of girlhood that persist, though perhaps in different guises, throughout various historical moments.

Historical fiction series for girls are also distinct from other girls' series in that their educational mission necessitates the inclusion of concrete details of the time and place in which they are set. Further, because the "expanding horizons" curriculum model for elementary social studies education that is used in many states holds that "children should learn about what is nearest to them first, and then, as they grow older, about people and places progressively more remote," students begin in kindergarten with lessons about the self and family, and then progress through history lessons about their community, state, and finally, in the fifth grade, their nation (Zarrillo 15-16). It is at the ages of nine to ten that many students get their first formal lessons in U.S. history. This is the age group featured in and targeted by many historical fiction series for girls, and so not only do these texts often accompany girls' first formal national history lessons, they are often charged with the task of 'bringing history alive' for children in ways that textbooks cannot.[5] The question of *whose* history these texts bring alive reveals the problems behind this impulse, of course, and there is no shortage of criticism that expertly explores how texts like Wilder's Little House series or the American Girl books present anti-historical perspectives by obscuring the historical experiences of certain groups of people, or dismissing systematic political problems by offering personal solutions.[6] These insights are undoubtedly crucial to my project's

[5] See Sara Schwebel's *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in the U.S. Classroom*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2011. Schwebel charts how educational trends like the "authentic literature movement" and multiculturalism greatly increased the use of historical fiction in American history and social studies classrooms (2).

[6] For just a few examples of this astute criticism, see: Hade, Daniel. "Lies My Children's Books Taught Me: History Meets Popular Culture in 'The American Girls' Books." *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Ed. Roderick McGillis. New York: Garland, 1999. 153-164. Susina, Jan. "American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24.3 (Fall 1999): 128–35. Smulders, Sharon. "'The Only Good Indian': History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*." *Children's Literature*

questions of how historical fiction series for girls have imagined girls' political consciousness throughout the past 100 years. But since I am also using these series to think about how the concept of a girl-sized view of history interacts with and complicates questions of political consciousness and historical thinking, I will focus on the ways in which series books that render American history through imagined girls' perspectives can work to both obscure and expand girls' understandings of American history and of themselves as historical actors.

One way that historical fiction series for girls expand historical perspectives even while harboring seemingly anti-historical tendencies is by complicating the relationship between the personal and the political. The "expanding horizons" curriculum model implies that learning about the self is simpler than learning about the more "remote" processes, people, and places that make up the nation. However, as I have mentioned above, accounting for the connection between the self and the nation leads to complicated and useful questions. Further, the series form exhibits the complex process of thinking through these questions. Series books often present, obscure, ignore, and re-present certain characters, ideas, and issues at different moments in a girl heroine's life. Sometimes series books forget previously gained knowledge of injustice, but they also produce evocative reminders here and there, in unexpected places. In this way, the series form exhibits how knowledge, especially complicated knowledge about political injustice, can be learned, forgotten, remembered, conciliated, negotiated, or confronted within the scope of girls' everyday lives. Many historical fiction series for girls present

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Association Quarterly 27.4 (2002): 191-202. Kaye, Frances W. "Little Squatter: On the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians." *Great Plains Quarterly* 20.2 (2000): 123-140.

this complex process of thinking about the relationship between self and nation, and in doing so, address fundamental issues of political consciousness that can continue to inform adults' scholarly pursuits in various fields. The enormous influence that stories read in childhood have on adult scholars' research interests is often mentioned in criticism on historical fiction for young people and children's literature in general. American Studies scholar Maureen E. Reed notes, speaking about Maud Hart Lovelace's Betsy-Tacy series (set at the turn of the 20th century, published 1940-1955), that her later historical understandings of immigration and WWI was "undoubtedly shaped" by her imaginative exposure to the affects these political events had on the series characters' personal lives (124). But Reed also notes, significantly, that these stories not only shape what scholarly interests one gravitates towards, but also how one thinks about these interests. Reed describes how her reading of the Betsy-Tacy series as a girl and as an adult forged connections between personal and political understandings of history that ultimately enriched her way of thinking about the American past:

> I could match [narrative moments in the Betsy-Tacy series] with distinct memories of my own family's past: my paternal great-grandparents' immigration from Hungary and their desire to raise their ten children as patriotic 'Americans,' the day my great-aunt taught my grandmother to drive in their parents' first car. . . . Eventually, my history lessons were irrevocably linked to both Betsy's past and my family's own . . . my penchant for re-reading girls' books like the Betsy-Tacy series enables me to maintain these bonds, re-shaping and strengthening them according to what I continue to learn about the past. (Reed 124)

What is so significant about Reed's argument is the importance it places on the concept of a girl-sized view of history, not only in its capacity to pave the way for future historical

learning but to expand our ways of thinking about history, the personal, and the political.

My project also approaches the girl-sized view of history as a concept of great significance. Each chapter examines a historical fiction series featuring girl characters and aimed at girl readers to consider what it means to present American history through imagined girls' perspectives. While unique aspects of each series will dictate variations in focus, each chapter will perform three main tasks: 1) historicize each series by taking into account its cultural and political moment of production, 2) use close readings of particularly rich moments in the text to demonstrate how each series employs particular historical issues to envision girls' complex political roles, and 3) examine how visions of girls' developing political consciousness expand and complicate rather than reduce and simplify historical thinking. This last task in particular will put the various series I study in dialogue with each other, so that visions of girls' political consciousness can be considered both as they arise out of specific historical moments, and also as they persist, in various forms, across them.

Chapter 2, "'This is a message for you': The Progressive Era Emergence of Historical Fiction Series for Girls," situates the rise of the girls' historical fiction series amidst the confluent and sometimes conflicting political projects of the Progressive era. Focusing my examination on Alice Turner Curtis's Little Maid series, I argue that what distinguishes the girls' historical fiction series from other popular girls' literature of the first few decades of the twentieth-century is its use of the girl's perspective to work through the tension between cultural associations of girlhood as a politically innocent state and Progressive era opportunities for girls to participate in public, political

discourses and activities. Progressive era visions of girls' political participation, as seen in organizations such as the Girl Scouts or in national women's suffrage demonstrations, illustrate Catherine Driscoll's claim that the "history of modern girlhood" is "entwined with anxieties about cultural norms and cultural change" (14). The Little Maid series uses the Revolutionary era to depict pre-adolescent girl heroines negotiating the traditional cultural expectations of girlhood—characterized by Romantic innocence and civility—with emerging calls for girls' political action in the twentieth-century. For this reason, Curtis's heroines perform their political actions on the threshold of history: secretly delivering messages to army generals or overhearing key military information at rehearsals for elaborate political celebrations. In this way, the Little Maid series envisions the imminence of girls' public, political participation, but also gives girls the space to rehearse, practice, and prepare for engagement with questions of how their personal decisions will be influenced by political events.

Chapter 3, "She could not say what she meant": Seeing, Speaking, Writing, and Reading History in the Little House Series," examines one of the most famous girl-sized views of history: Laura Ingalls in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series. While the Little Maid series sends Progressive era girls to the Revolutionary era to think about the personal and cultural implications of their political actions, the Little House series uses the girl's perspective to re-imagine another violent benchmark of American identity: the 'settling' of the western frontier. As several critics have noted, Wilder and daughter/collaborator Rose Wilder Lane's Depression era context and anti-New Deal political stances influence Laura's vision of the frontier, as do celebratory narratives that support white, expansionist ideology. While Laura's gaze is inextricably tied to the

political ideologies of both nineteenth-century expansionism and 1930s proto-libertarianism, I argue that it also powerfully dramatizes the complex ways in which Laura—who from birth is drafted into the ideology of expansionist projects by her parents and white settler community—comes to recognize and question her own role in the violent history of the frontier. Still, Laura's very ability to express these questions about her individual relationship to history in a hugely influential series that still serves as many people's most memorable depiction of the American west indicates her privileged historical position.

In Chapter 4, "The View from Other Little Houses: Constructing Girls' Relationships to History in Lois Lenski's Regional America Series," I continue to examine the question of who is granted the privilege of being able to work through and transcend the messy relationship between individual and history, and who is not, by studying Lois Lenski's Regional America series. In a departure from previous series' girl-sized views history, which captured well-known eras such as the American Revolution and the western frontier, Lenski's regional series delves into girls' lives in far-flung and lesser-known time periods, places, and historical realities, such as farming on the early twentieth-century Florida frontier in *Strawberry Girl* (1945) and negotiating various forms of racial prejudice in southern and northern American regions in *Mama Hattie's Girl* (1953). Lenski's series features both girls and boys as main characters, but she saw the regional series as a way to combat the specific tendency of girls' fiction to disengage girls with the complex social and economic realities of their nation's past and present. For this reason, Lenski performed extensive research on the regions and eras she wrote about, including travelling to the places she featured in her series, talking to

local people about their regional culture and history, taking notes and photographs, and participating in daily work routines and activities. Lenski saw these materials as valuable ways of understanding the process behind constructing historical fiction series, and so preserved her research materials and editorial correspondence pertaining to the series in several university special collections. Examining these materials alongside two key installments of the regional series—*Strawberry Girl* and *Mama Hattie's Girl*—reveals that while the regional series attempts to portray how all girls are shaped by their historical environments, it ultimately envisions white girls as able to employ the domestic and civilizing powers of middle-class girlhood to escape the damaging aspects of their history and culture, while black girls must accept the injustices of their history and remain contained within discriminatory systems in their present day.

In Chapter 5, "Making History Matter: The American Girls Series and Political Accessories," I continue to examine the tendency of girls' historical fiction series to pose insightful questions about the relationship between girls' individual lives and their political responsibilities, but to only allow certain girls the privilege to determine how much their lives will be affected by historical and political circumstances. Specifically, I examine how this discrepancy extends to readers living in the specific historical context of global children's consumer culture. The American Girl Company's American Girls series is a major player in global children's consumer culture—its associated dolls and accessories expanding girls' interaction with their brand of history from reading series books to engaging with all manner commodities manufactured predominantly by young women in factories overseas. As they consume American Girl products, then, girls become enmeshed in their own historical issues of personal privilege and political

responsibility. To think about how the American Girls series speaks to the contemporary context of American Girl consumers, I examine the series books of two characters: 1904's Samantha, who learns of the injustices of America's early twentieth-century factory labor system by befriending a child laborer, and 1864's Addy, a fugitive slave who the American Girl company attempts to incorporate into its materially privileged world of American girlhood. I argue that while the Samantha series offers simplified personal solutions to industrial problems and thus encourages girl readers to accept their own privileged positions in consumer culture, it also offers readers the chance to critique unjust labor practices through its nuanced descriptions of accessories. In other words, the Samantha series offers girls the choice to engage or disengage from the historical contexts that affect their lives. In contrast, the Addy series attempts to extend the privilege of historical and political transcendence to girls, but similar to Lenski's 1953 *Mama Hattie's Girl*, envisions contemporary black girls as constrained in the violent history of America's racially fraught past.

Given the ways that girls' historical fiction series have provoked productive questions and perpetuated paralyzing inequalities over the past 100 years, Chapter 6, "Conclusion: The Present and Future of History Girls," considers questions of value and approach. The girls' historical fiction series genre remains popular in the twenty-first century. The American Girls series continues to expand its world of historical characters and merchandise, and series such as Scholastic's multi-authored Dear America books (1996-present) imagine a plethora of momentous and often tragic events in American history through the intensely personalized form of the fictional girls' diary. As we move into the twenty-first century, how can girls' historical fiction series prompt readers to

think about the connection between their own lives and the larger world without reinforcing typical boundaries between privilege and disadvantage? And what can girls' historical fiction series offer to American girls living in a historical moment in which the routine infliction of violence upon women and girls is "one of the paramount human rights problems of this century"? (Kristof and WuDunn xiii).

CHAPTER 2
"THIS IS A MESSAGE FOR YOU": THE PROGRESSIVE ERA EMERGENCE OF HISTORICAL FICTION SERIES FOR GIRLS

When faced with an act of injustice, nineteenth-century heroines of girls' series fiction often direct their tear-drenched eyes to the Bible. From its pages, they receive their central source of guidance on how to respond. The Bible in many nineteenth-century girls' series is not only the basis of the girl heroine's moral conscience but also of her political consciousness. It is through the Bible that she understands her world and its power structures, as well as her responsibilities regarding that world, and her position within those structures. While this makes the girl heroine of nineteenth-century series fiction a powerful spiritual authority, when it comes to political matters in the earthly realm, her role is much less clear. A brief example from Martha Finley's ultra-popular girls' series charting the life of the famously devout Elsie Dinsmore (1867-1905) illustrates how religion often informs the nineteenth-century American girl heroine of her social and political responsibility. Eight years old in the first volume of her series, Elsie Dinsmore lives within a complex system of familial and political power dynamics on her wealthy family's Civil War era plantation. Elsie has "very clear and correct views on almost every subject connected with her duty to God and her neighbor," and her use of this view to spiritually reform her tyrannical father and other family members is the chief action of her girlhood (Finley 28). However, Elsie's duty is not as clear regarding the politics of her historical context. For instance, when Elsie's young Uncle Arthur accidentally breaks his father's watch, he blames it on Jim, one of the family's slaves. Arthur's choice of scapegoat reveals his knowledge of and complicity in the ideologies of slavery: he is the most openly dishonest of the children, but he knows that even the

word of a lying, white child carries more weight than that of a slave. Elsie knows the truth, and is highly "agitated" at the injustice of it all, and at Jim's proposed punishment—being flogged and sent to work on the plantation (129). However, she believes that it would be equally wrong for her to "tell tales" against Arthur (130). In this situation, Elsie's usually "clear and correct view" of her responsibilities is hopelessly muddled.

According to Elsie, the wrongness of telling tales is akin to the wrongness of systematic slave punishments, revealing that while her keen spiritual sense gives her firm courses of action regarding certain behaviors (refusing to play the piano on the Sabbath, for instance), it does not extend to thinking about her own responsibilities within the power structures that define her daily life. Elsie only overcomes her moral paralysis because her father demands that she speak up and tell everyone the truth of the matter, and not "allow an innocent person to suffer when [she] can prevent it" (131). Elsie's close connection to God allows her to develop an individual sense of conscience that famously will not bend to the wills of her father or other relatives when they contradict the Bible, and thus is a source of empowerment. But her confusion over her duty regarding Jim reveals that her piety does not equip her, at least in girlhood, to engage with matters of social or political injustice. This is not surprising. Elsie—like countless other white girl heroines of nineteenth-century series fiction—acts as the "embodiment" of innocence, exhibiting what Robin Bernstein calls the "holy ignorance" that allows for "the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and…race," and thus the transcendence of any consciousness or responsibility regarding those categories (6).

At the turn-of-the-century, however, amidst the multitude of cultural, economic, and political shifts now associated with the Progressive era in America (1890-1920), religion faded away from girls' series fiction, disappearing from their pages approximately between the years 1895-1915 (Hamilton-Honey 2). In other words, during an era marked by the "recession of traditional political loyalties" that once defined the American people's understanding of the nation and its power structures, religion ceased to determine the American girl heroine's understandings and responses to her world, its workings, and her place within it (Rodgers 114). Indeed, religion's withdrawal from girls' series fiction reflects several cultural and political shifts of the Progressive era. The view of girls and women primarily as religious and moral influences on their families and communities widened in the early twentieth-century, when the range of women's responsibilities grew to include participation in the growing consumer marketplace. With advertisements and advice literature proclaiming thoughtful consumption as the avenue to individual growth and expression, personal happiness, and social duty, series books shifted focus accordingly from young heroines engaged in religiously inspired acts of charity and social benevolence to smart consumption and future careers (Hamilton-Honey 5). Along with the ever-strengthening link between women and girls to consumption, feminine moral influence also took on political dimensions, as women and girls participated in various Progressive reform efforts regarding public health, child welfare, temperance, and suffrage on the local, state, and national levels.

Progressive era women and girls' unprecedented public political activities considerably widened the scope of girls' adventures and accomplishments in series books, which now routinely featured girls organizing collective social efforts, going to

college, or setting off on unchaperoned journeys through the national landscape. Since, too, the rapidly growing children's book publishing industry was "unflagging" in its production of gender-segmented series in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, there existed a wide variety of stories centering specifically on girls' and young women's experiences for girl readers to choose from (Wadsworth 18). The Progressive era cultural, economic, and political shifts that made religion less lucrative as the central feature of girls' moral and social development in girls' series fiction provoke a crucial question about the presentation of girls' political responsibilities in girls' series fiction. Without the Bible to explicitly instruct girl heroines in times of moral and social conflict and inform their understanding of their responsibility regarding matters of injustice, how should girls learn to connect their individual lives, thoughts, and actions to the political events and structures that define their world?

In this chapter, I examine the Progressive era rise of the girls' historical fiction series—a genre that continuously addresses the above question. The girls' historical fiction series genre emerges as part of the flowering of girls' series fiction in the Progressive era, but I argue that its blending of past and present enables it to project a unique perspective on the personal and political complexities of girls' political participation. First, I examine Progressive era cultural, political, and literary influences that helped shape what it meant to be an 'American girl' growing up amidst the social shifts of the early twentieth-century. Specifically, I examine how Progressive era organizations such as the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the Girl Scouts, and popular fiction for girls such as the Outdoor Girls series position the American girl in relation to her nation's politics and history, and envision her

role within those discourses. I argue that Progressive era discourses about girls' political participation exhibit tensions between enduring cultural assumptions about the white, American girl as the "embodiment" of political innocence and changing opportunities for girls to take active roles in the political sphere. Second, this chapter examines how a popular girls' historical fiction series uses the past to work through the cultural tensions between political innocence and political activity apparent in Progressive era discourses about girls. Alice Turner Curtis's Little Maid series, published from 1913-1937 and set during the American Revolutionary War, imagines the American girl's perspective of specific moments in the nation's Revolutionary beginnings, such as mounting tensions between the British and the American coastal settlements before the war, the pleasure-seeking entertainments of British-occupied Philadelphia, and the diplomatic negotiations of the British evacuation of New York after the signing of the Treaty of Paris. While ostensibly distanced from the immediate political concerns of the Progressive era, the Little Maid series uses these historical situations to explore the tensions contained within representations of Progressive era American girlhood: political innocence vs. political action, personal entertainment vs. political responsibility, and social manners vs. social militancy. Thus, as the Little Maid series presents girls navigating political agency as it relates to the enduring moral and social expectations of girlhood that inform their personal lives, it dramatizes a key issue of Progressive era girlhood: the development of girls' political consciousness.

"Children of Hope": American Girlhood and the Progressive Era

The historical period now known as the Progressive era in America is customarily placed between the years 1890-1920, encapsulating the post-Civil War growth of industrial capitalism, the questioning of traditional political structures and notions of

progress, and, perhaps most famously, the subsequent “explosion of scores of aggressive, politically active pressure groups,” all fighting over how to reform and redefine institutions, public policies, and individual political consciousness (Rodgers 114). Indeed, by 1912, the term “progressivism” was widely used by politicians, journalists, and spokespersons for various reform movements to describe the “dramatic outpouring of reform energy” taking place in this period (Diner 202). Despite its widespread usage, however, the “essence of progressivism” has proven difficult to pin down for both Progressive era thinkers and later historians, in large part because Progressive reform groups were fundamentally divided over issues such as woman’s suffrage, racial equality, democratic participation, and the expansion of federal power (Rodgers 114).

Because of these discrepancies, Daniel T. Rodgers notes that the most insightful examinations of Progressivism ask “less about the internal coherence of the progressive ‘movement’ than about the structures of politics, power, and ideas within which the era’s welter of tongues and efforts and ‘reforms’ took place” (114). According to Rodgers and others, then, it is not the achievements or even the aims of Progressive reform groups that unite them within a historical context, but their simultaneous engagement with political questions about the structures of national progress and their effects on individual American lives, as well as their use of particular languages and ideas to convey “their discontents and their social visions” in response to these questions (123). Questions such as: How are workers treated within the growing industrial system? How can consumers purchase goods in socially responsible ways? How can people living in overcrowded urban areas as well as sparse rural ones access education and

sanitation? How do mass marketed books, movies, and advertisements influence people's behavior? While reform efforts provoked by these questions ranged from the development of trade unions and settlement houses to the championing of eugenics and censorship, the questions themselves provoke an intense engagement with the complex tensions that exist between individual lives and larger national systems, or in other words, with the negotiation of the personal and the political. As historian Jackson Lears argues, while the "political has always been personal," there are certain historical moments, such as the years that encapsulate the Progressive era in America, when "personal longings become peculiarly influential in political life; private emotions and public policies resonate with special force, creating seismic change" (1). While studying the formation of political pressure groups and collective reform efforts are crucial for understanding the Progressive era, then, studies of Progressive era culture and politics also calls for attention to how the individual becomes conscious of, relates to, and engages in the political systems affecting her daily life.

American women form one group whose collective efforts reveal intense negotiations of the personal and the political. Extending the scope of women's work from the private to the public sphere, women's clubs and all-female political organizations became "a fixture in Progressive-era cultural life," working collectively on a plethora of issues that varied in both scope and focus (Tarbox 13). Women lobbied Congress for the establishment of the first all-female agency of the federal government, the Children's Bureau, and worked locally on anti-hookworm campaigns in the rural South. They advocated urban beautification, braved thugs on factory picket lines, exposed corrupt business practices in newspaper articles, and established America's

first juvenile court. They also, of course, worked to gain national suffrage. The Woman's Suffrage Procession on March 3, 1913 marked the first time that thousands of women gathered together to march on the streets of the nation's capital. The procession included a parade of women in various professions presenting, for the first time, a "vision of woman suffrage as a united, national movement" (Southard 69, 55). Despite this public demonstration of unity, women's reform efforts often contradicted each other. While some women worked to widen access to birth control, others supported sexual purity campaigns. Advocates of 'clean living' spoke against cigarettes, while some suffragists smoked in public as a sign of their equality with men. African American women worked to end lynching and Jim Crow laws, while many of the women's clubs and organizations denied them membership based on their race. Indeed, in the suffrage parade, prominent African American activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett had to sneak in to march with the Illinois delegation after the procession had already begun (Southard 84, 85). Like the larger idea of Progressivism itself, women's Progressive reform efforts are not defined by a unified political aim or a consistent understanding of progress, but rather by intense, imaginative, subversive, and personal engagement with political and moral questions regarding the individual's relationship to society and the processes of national progress.

Women's political organizations and clubs often focused these questions on American girls—particularly the "daughters" (literally or figuratively), of clubwomen and activists, who would inherit both the privileges these women strived for as well as the responsibility to use their privileges to engage in political and social activities. Indeed, despite the discrepancies and divisions amongst Progressive era women's reform

groups, Gwen Athene Tarbox argues that “if there were any one sentiment that united all clubwomen during the Progressive era, it was the desire to pass on their legacy of achievement to the next generation of young women” (27). The ways in which organizations projected their visions of girls’ political activities demonstrates the unresolved tensions between cultural expectations of girlhood innocence of and separation from the political sphere, and visions of girls as active participants on the national stage. For instance, Juliette Gordon Low’s Girl Scout organization, begun in America in 1912, taught girls how to grapple intelligently and resourcefully with the technological, domestic, professional, and natural aspects of their present world, offering merit badges for a range of traditional and unconventional girl activities: housekeeping, heroism, cooking, civics, music, marksmanship, athletics, aviation, electricity, and public health. The Girl Scouts seemed to challenge the spate of early twentieth-century primers and popular books for boys (certainly also read by girls) that envisaged the home as the natural place of girls. Girls, born with innate social graces, were naturally disposed to follow the dictates and customs of polite society, prefiguring their residency in the domestic instead of the public sphere. Boys, on the other hand, with their loud, physical, and sometimes destructive ways could disrupt the status quo of polite society, prefiguring their ability to “make waves” in American society as future inventors, entrepreneurs, army officers, and politicians (Kidd 61, 63). The June 1915 issue of the *Rally*, the official Girl Scout magazine, announces the Girl Scouts’ emergence as a national organization proclaims girls’ ability to “make waves” on the national stage:

> Hurrah! Hurrah! The Girl Scouts have become a national organization! They have emerged from their crysalis [sic] of helpless dependence,

> thrown aside their swaddling clothes of infancy, and now, behold, they stand forth in all of the glory and pride of their emancipation, for they are now a real organization—an organization with a charter, a constitution, elected national officers, a standing and a brilliant future. . . . the Girl Scouts found themselves launched forth upon the world with all of the fundamental equipment essential for their development into a movement that shall stand shoulder to shoulder in scope and importance with the Boy Scouts. (1)

The Girl Scouts shirk the idea that girls should stay innocent of or separate from the political sphere, linking growing out of the sheltering "chrysalis" and "swaddling clothes" to the political imperatives of "emancipation," collective organization, democratic elections, and gender equality.

Alongside this kind of language, however, issues of the *Rally* also contain articles and stories that perpetuate the persistent ideas about girls' inherent social graces and domesticity that had historically limited their movement into the public, political sphere. Josephine Daskam Bacon's story in the August 1918 issue, "Sister's Vocation—The Story of a Girl Who Liked to Keep House," tells the story of "Sister," who would rather keep the house and watch the children of her neglectful neighbor than participate in other "occupations of a young lady…walks, music, shopping…dancing class and the fencing club" (8). Bacon uses political language to describe the girl's genuine delight in domestic housekeeping and her "reign" in the house: "All the housekeeper in Sister reveled in such an opportunity for *activity*. . . . her *ambition* soared higher as the grateful house repaid the toil of its busy little mistress. . . . In two days the lower story was reflecting from window to polished floor . . . and Sister *pined for new worlds to conquer*" (10; my emphasis). In addition to celebrating girls "launch[ing] forth upon the world," *Rally* also presents the domestic sphere as an exciting place for the fulfillment of girls' ambition, activity, and leadership. Even though organizations such as the Girl Scouts

had the “fundamental equipment” to structure and run a national organization for girls, social expectations of domesticity complicate girls’ mission to “stand shoulder to shoulder with boys” on the national stage.

Indeed, even when girls did stand on the national stage, they often appeared as both political actors and innocent beings with natural social graces. For instance, the NAWSA’s 1913 Suffrage Parade included a grand tableau on the steps of the US Treasury Building, which featured actresses and dancers performing in elaborate, classical costumes the roles of Columbia, Liberty, Charity, Justice, Peace, and Hope. The tableau ended with a performance by the “Children of Hope”—fifty young girls wearing white dresses and holding balloons, who danced with Hope to the blithe melody of Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song” (Madsen 169). The fifty girls performing as the “Children of Hope” visually represent the interplay of the old and new roles of American girlhood. Outfitted in white dresses, carrying balloons, dancing, and evoking spring, the girls resembled Romantic-style images of girlhood first popularized by British portraitists such as John Hoppner and Joshua Reynolds, and kept in vogue throughout the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth by illustrators such as Kate Greenaway. Greenaway’s images of children frolicking in “paradisiacal” gardens, timeless and detached from political realities, “emblematizes the… view of childhood as a special time of life during which children should be isolated from the adult world of work and trouble” (Silver 40). Yet, instead of dancing in an enclosed garden, the girls danced as part of a highly public, militant demonstration—the first time a large group of women marched on Washington, demanding a political voice. Girls’ performances at events such as the Woman’s Suffrage Procession demonstrate the complexity of Progressive

era attempts to visualize the American girl as a political actor. Girlhoods in Progressive era America were envisioned and lived out amidst tensions between private and public, personal and political, persistent assumptions and provocative opportunities. Now that American girls are gaining entrance to the national stage, how should they perform?

"'Do we look so militant?'": Outdoor Girls, Public Life, and Political Consciousness

Circulating within the Progressive era's cultural interplay of old and new, popular girls' series books provided ways for girls to continuously interact with representations of girls' behavior, actions, and consciousness within their changing world. The girls' series genre that most explicitly arises out of the context of Progressive era women's clubs and political organizations is the outdoor girls genre, which included plentiful tales of female adolescent scouts, campers, aviators, and motorists, normally between the ages of 15 and 18, traveling about the country and showing off their physical skills for the first time in the public sphere, outside the bounds of the home or women's college (Tarbox 102). Some scholars argue that Progressive outdoor series penned by clubwomen and female activists help girls envision and even recruit them to participate in collective political activity. Others point out that the series books' descriptions of gender, race, class, and consumerism, recruits girl readers into more conventional ideological systems that celebrate capitalism and white femininity.[1] A critical discrepancy contained in Progressive outdoor series, then, is the construction of the

[1] For more on competing perspectives regarding the ideological work of popular girls' series fiction, see Sherrie A. Inness's edited collection, *Nancy Drew and Company: Culture, Gender, and Girls' Series*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State UP, 1997, and Carolyn Stewart Dyer and Nancy Tillman Romalov's edited collection, *Rediscovering Nancy Drew*. Iowa City: U. of Iowa P, 1995.

girl's sense of self, nation, and agency within that nation. Emily Hamilton-Honey articulates the discrepancy contained in these series texts as one between a celebration of the moral, social, and political status quo, and one that offers at least a "glimpse" of "a means for personal agency" and empowerment, beyond the realities of one's daily, social surroundings ("Guardians" 766). Tarbox argues that the "glimpses" of agency provided by these series books are specific strategies for attaining such agency, as despite the limitations in the series' portrayal of gender, class, and race, they provide girl readers with "simple, easy-to-understand blueprints for entry into public life" (46). In this way, the simple, formulaic structure of outdoor girls' series works to promote and normalize girls' engagement in the public sphere, and proliferate the "heroic female image that replicated [girls'] desire for adventure and empowerment" (Tarbox 102). However, while imagining girls' public participation in physical endeavors is itself a political vision, it is a vision that brings up questions about girls' political consciousness. How do outdoor girls think about what they see on their public jaunts through the country? How does it change their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world they live in, and to the political structures that determine their desires and activities?

The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale: Or, Camping and Tramping for Fun and Health (1913) was among the first and most popular "camping adventure tales" for girls. Written by Laura Lee Hope (the pen name of Lilian Garis), it was the first volume in what became "a million-selling series" with installments published from 1913-1933 (Tarbox 105). The first installment reveals how the outdoor girls' series genre envisions girls' political engagement. It tells the story of Betty, Grace, Mollie, and Amy—four adolescent

girlfriends who form a “camping and tramping club” and embark upon a two week summer hiking trip that they meticulously plan out regarding route, lodgings, equipment, and food (Hope 5). The girls have many adventures and meet a lot of new people over the course of their 200 mile hike. Tarbox argues that the “strategies that enable [the girls] to move about freely in the public realm,” and navigate their adventures and meetings “form a radicalized vision of how American girls should behave in public” (106). One of these strategies is purchasing items like walking clothes and outdoor caps which, although consumption is accepted as a conventional feminine activity, do offer a striking contrast to “the idealized imagine of the pale, fragile ‘angel of the house,’” and even further, allow the girls to successfully navigate rough spots on the road, including bad weather, an errant dog, and a loose circus bear (107). Tarbox also notes that the girls display a strategy for dealing with people who are confused by or disapproving of their challenging of the feminine ideal—in other words, those “elements of the public that call into question their right to walk along the byways, unescorted and unapologetic,” staring at them in “wonder” or asking them if they are suffragists (109). Tarbox argues that the girls “ignore” these questions and walk bravely on, thus modeling an attitude of perseverance and even physical defiance for young readers who might face “ridicule from the general public” for their public displays of independence (109).

However, the girls’ “ignoring” of questions about the purpose of their public activity reveals a complex set of assumptions about how girls should understand themselves in relation to their political actions. It is other women who ask the girls whether or not they are suffragists, and the girls do not ignore but rather deny

engagement with the issue of woman's suffrage. As Nancy Tillman Romalov notes in her study of early outdoor and automobile girls series, while the Outdoor Girls are independent and outspoken, attempts to politicize these traits are met with denial, as the girls refuse to affiliate themselves with specific political movements directly related to their lives (81). One scene of this denial is worth quoting at length, as it reveals how the girls understand and position themselves and their actions in relation to politics. After the girls are chased by a farmer's dog, they stop at the house and talk to the farmer's wife:

> "Won't you come in the house," invited the woman. "We're jest goin' t' set down t' supper, and I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea."
>
> "I should love it!" murmured Grace.
>
> "What be you—suffragists?" went on the woman, with a smile.
>
> "That's the second time we've been taken for them to-day," murmured Betty, "Do we look so militant?"
>
> "You look right peart!" complimented the woman. "Do come in?" (Hope 116-117)

The woman's question about the potential political purpose of the girls' walking trip ("What be you—suffragists?") is gently patronizing, but her assessment of their "peartness" is billed as a compliment. Betty's reaction to being associated with suffragists, however, hints at slight exasperation: she "murmurs" about being mistaken for them more than once, denies affiliation with them, and even lightly ridicules suffragists with her question, "'Do we look so militant?'" Betty assumes that the way they look—not militant—proves that they are not affiliated with the suffrage movement. This is telling, as it links the girls' public activity to conventional notions of femininity, while simultaneously displaying a blatant disinterest in the suffrage movement.

For instance, the book details the new clothing the girls purchased expressly for their trip: “Clad in their new suits of olive drab, purposely designed for walking, with sensible blouses, containing pockets, with skirts sufficiently short, stout boots and natty little caps, the outdoor girls looked their name” (90). In other words, they look like outdoor girls who journey forth “for fun and health,” not suffragists, who are identified with a specific political mission. In this way, Betty’s question supports Shealeen Meaney’s point that while the “new identities and activities that modern women engaged in were potentially transgressive . . . most could also be domesticated to serve the needs of the new consumer economy,” and that “freedom from domesticity certainly shouldn't mean freedom from beauty culture and its rituals of femininity” (268). So while the girls’ clothes do allow them the physical freedom to move about in the public sphere, Betty also uses them to adhere to certain conventions of femininity, and, crucially, to distance herself and her friends from political affiliation. Indeed, Betty’s “do we look so militant?” question also speaks to how the girls understand the political issues that directly affect them. Betty equates the whole suffrage movement with the militant strategies of such activists as Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and other like-minded members of the NAWSA—whose national suffrage procession in D.C. was just one example of the group “militantly entering reserved political spaces” (Southard 2). She does not consider, for example, the strategies of the more moderate strategies of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, of which Garis herself was a member. The girls’ disregard for the complexity and importance of political movements is even more explicit in another exchange with a woman the girls meet on the road, who asks: “‘Are you a Votes for Women crowd?’” When Betty responds that they are a “walking club,”

the woman asks "'No politics?'" Betty affirms: "'None whatever'" (169). This exchange reiterates that while the girls make a powerful political statement by their unapologetic public display of female collectivity and physical boldness, they deny engagement with the significant political questions raised by their actions—for instance, how the girls identify themselves in relation to specific, publically debated political issues of the day (Tarbox 111).

While publicly stating one's disconnection with specific political movements does not necessarily signify political disengagement in a larger sense, *The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale* undoubtedly lacks moments in which the girls engage in personal contemplation about how their actions might carry specific political meaning. Beyond the woman's gentle teasing and Betty's slight exasperation, we get little sense of what the woman and the girls think about the political debates of their historical moment. In other words, *Outdoor Girls* uses American girlhood to envision its own subtitle: public, physical, and collective activity "for fun and health." This is not to say that the series and others like it did not offer political empowerment to its readers. Rather, while outdoor girls' series may have provided girls with "blueprints" for engaging in public and political life, they sidestep crucial questions about how girls should understand the personal and political meaning of this engagement. In other words, the Outdoor Girls series does not examine how girls should think critically about their own lives and actions in relation to the political structures and events that define their world. Girls' historical fiction series, on the other hand, continuously depict girls thinking through how their various actions and behaviors should relate to their growing political awareness and engagement. Girls' historical fiction series imagine the development of girls' political consciousness

alongside the personal and cultural implications of this consciousness—an issue of great import in the Progressive era.

"'What's a Citizen?'": Little Maids, Historical Fiction Series, and Political Consciousness

Progressive era promotions of girls' public activity found in outdoor girls' series are given thoughtful personal and political consideration in Alice Turner Curtis's Little Maid series. Curtis's series is an early example of what became a popular structure for the girls' historical fiction series genre: each installment features a different girl heroine in a different place or time. In the context of the American Revolution, the Little Maid series uses the girl's perspective of political events to examine questions about how girls should balance personal desires and social expectations with political responsibilities toward the nation. By combining an awareness of girls' expanding political roles and social responsibilities in the Progressive era with the cultural tendency to preserve for them a separate space of political innocence defined by domesticity and social manners, historical fiction series push to the forefront questions of how girls should think about, act, and understand themselves in relation to the political events that determine their lives.[2] The Little Maids range in age from 8-12 years-old, and live in

[2] Several historical fiction series for girls emerged in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century, each projecting different ideas about girls' political engagement. For instance, Amanda Minnie Douglas's romance-laden Little Girl series (15 volumes published from 1896-1909) features amply detailed scenes of girls' daily lives, activities, and relationships as they grow from girlhood to adolescence in various time periods and places. But the ever-flirtatious heroine's political engagement is usually confined to dialogues with family members or romantic interests, and deemed more saucy than serious. Lucy Foster Madison's Peggy Owen series (1908-1912), set during the American Revolution, details a Quaker girl thoughtfully trying to reconcile the violence of her patriotic feelings with the peaceful tenets of her Quaker religion. But the conflict is presented in the terms of two specific doctrines—the pacifism of the Quakers and the militarism of the Patriots—and thus does not thoroughly showcase the young heroine examining how the cultural dictates of her own girlhood conflict with participation in Revolutionary political concerns. Although all of these early historical fiction series contain insight into girls' political engagement, Curtis's Revolutionary war Little Maid series is the focus of this section because its pre-adolescent heroines, structure, and language most closely resemble the form and content of the girls' historical fiction series popular in the twentieth-century and today, and therefore stands as a point of origin for the girls' serial

different parts of the country during the American Revolution. Like the Outdoor Girls, they are adventurous—encountering wolves, overturned boats, British Generals, and delivering important messages (stashed inside sunbonnets, bandboxes, and capes) that shift the tide of the war. Unlike the Outdoor Girls, however, Little Maids do not deny the political meaning of their actions, but consciously connect their behavior, actions, and relationships to political ideals. Further, their actions earn them the praise of such illustrious national heroes as George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Ethan Allen, but also transcend the political by gaining the regard and protection of adults with varying political ties, including staunch British Generals. Thus, the Little Maid series uses the historical setting of the Revolution to depict American girls engaging with the personal, cultural, and political tensions that so informed the experience of girlhood in the Progressive era. Out of the Little Maid's historical adventures, then, emerge plentiful questions of personal and political import that are generated, crucially, by the tension between accepted constructions of American girlhood and the dictates of burgeoning political consciousness.

This section examines three Little Maid installments. The questions that come through in each volume vary according to where and when during the Revolution the story takes place, but are always generated by examining an enduring value of American girlhood in light of a specific political mission or aspect of the American Revolution. *A Little Maid of Province Town* (1913), which takes place just before the war

historical fiction genre. Curtis's series also enjoyed a longer period of circulation than other Progressive historical series, as volumes were reprinted in mid-century by Knopf and again in the 1990s by Applewood—further attesting to the enduring appeal of the questions it raises regarding girls' participation in historical events.

begins, explores the girl's supposed political innocence against the call for political participation, ultimately posing the question: how closely should girls' lives and identities be affected by America's political struggles? *A Little Maid of Old Philadelphia* (1919) uses the British occupation of Philadelphia in the winter of 1778 to examine how the girl's fondness for material pleasures interacts with her growing awareness of political responsibility. In this volume, the American girl asks herself questions such as: Is it right to take pleasure in goods or entertainments produced by my political opponents? *A Little Maid of Old New York* (1921) is set near the end of the war, as British soldiers remained in American cities awaiting the negotiation of a peace treaty and official departure orders. This volume depicts the girl using her social graces to navigate the political dimensions of personal relationships, wondering: Is my neighbor my friend or a Tory? Should I behave politely or politically toward my political enemies? Common expectations of girlhood experience that often keep them out of political engagement—innocence, material pleasure, and polite social behavior, for instance—thus take on political dimension in the Little Maid series, and inform the imagined development of girls' political consciousness.

"A brave girl might be of great service": Political Uses of Girlhood in *A Little Maid of Province Town*

A Little Maid of Province Town tells the story of 8-year-old Anne Nelson's life in the small, coastal settlement of Province Town in Cape Cod "just before the war of the American Revolution" (Curtis, *Province* 10). Removed from the heart of the Revolutionary conflict by both time and geography, Anne's story is an apt one to begin a series that poses questions of how closely girls should personally identify with and be involved in political struggles that define the nation. Anne, a "dark-eyed, elfish-looking

child," is motherless, and lived on the beach with her father until one day he goes out on his fishing boat and does not return. After his disappearance (he is captured by British soldiers but later reunites with Anne), she shows up on the doorstep of the childless Captain and Mrs. Stoddard. At first, political affiliation prevents Captain Stoddard's sympathetic feelings toward Anne. Her father had been accused of being a spy for the British, and Stoddard announces that "'no man shall say that I took in a British spy's child and cared for it'" (18). However, Stoddard has a change of heart when two children harass Anne and call her names, and she responds by flinging a bucket of water into the boy's face "with such energy that he had toppled over backward, soused and whimpering," and then throwing "handful after handful of sand into the face" of the boy's sister, who "wail[s] for mercy," but who Anne nevertheless chases after "relentlessly" (29-30). Captain Stoddard, a staunch patriot who chafes at the impositions the British have placed on Province Town fishing boats, is drawn into a sympathetic relationship with Anne by her physical display of revolutionary vehemence, much impressed when he sees the "boy prostrate and humble, while his sister . . . prayed for Anne to stop the deluge of sand that seemed to fill the air about her" (30). Stoddard declares: "'I like her spirit. I do not believe in being put upon,'" and from then on refers to Anne as "'my little girl'" (31-32). By demonstrating her compatibility with the American revolutionary spirit, Anne transforms from an "it" to a "girl," and wins a place in the heart and home of the patriotic Captain Stoddard. Whereas the Outdoor Girls deny any connection between their physical activity and their political affiliations, Anne's violent, physical attack is celebrated as an encapsulation of American political ideals as well as what makes her worthy of American adults' sympathy and adoption.

Of course, Anne's political actions are not all pugnacious displays of revolutionary fervor. After she moves into the Stoddards' cozy home, she takes part in regular life in Province Town and indulges in the tasks and pleasures of girlhood as imagined in countless girls' series: friendships, food, chores, day trips, and outdoor walks. As is the case in many girls' series, the details of Anne's daily life particularly emphasize the procuring and loving of objects, and often associate girlhood happiness with these objects. Anne imagines what her father will say when he sees how she is flourishing in Province Town: "'When [my father] knows about my scarlet stockings and leather shoes, and the white kitten, and that I go to school and have coral beads, he will think I am the luckiest girl in the world'" (129). Anne's possessions, which she catalogues in this way several times throughout the book, receive equal credit with going to school for her happy girlhood. When she receives new items, like a "blue cape and a blue hat with a broad ribbon bow" given to her by friends in Boston, it is a major event in her life (154). Her new possessions receive mention, for instance, in the important scene in which Anne finally reunites with her father: "Father! Father!" Anne cries when she sees him in Boston, "and in a moment the little girl in scarlet stockings and blue cape and hat was gathered into the close clasp of the dark, slender man" (156). That Anne is identified by her prized articles of clothing in the awaited reunion with her father reveals how inextricable the girl's clothing is to her identity.

While the close connection of the American girl to her feminine clothing is typical across different kinds of girls' series—and indeed is used in the Outdoor Girls series as a way to distance girlhood from political affiliation—in *Province Town* Anne's clothes enable her to carry out a political mission of military import. The climax of the story

takes place in Boston, where Anne travels with Captain Stoddard to see her father, John Nelson. Nelson has a message for the men in Newburyport to be ready to join the Boston troops if war should break out, but because of his political affiliation with the cause of the American colonies, he is watched too closely to leave Boston and deliver it. When Stoddard agrees to take the message to Newburyport on his ship, they decide the safest way to get it onto the ship is to pass it to Anne. Nelson reasons: "'It will not do for me to meet you again. There are too many eyes about. Let Anne walk along…about sunset toward the South Meeting House, and I'll give it to her'" (159). Here, Anne's father is very conscious of the political power of the idea of girlhood political innocence. As Bernstein argues, the figure of the white girl in literature and culture, as well as girlhood materials, have historically acted as "safe houses" for political ideologies, hiding them "under a cloak of innocence," which is to say, within girl bodies imagined to exist beyond all social and political categories (18). Anne's "cloak of innocence" is quite literal: "Anne wore the pretty cape . . . and her father slipped the packet into her hand. . . . She grasped it tightly and held it under her cape," and she carries the message safely onto Stoddard's vessel bound for Boston, where Stoddard confirms to her that the message is "'safer with you, Anne'" (Curtis 162). Later Anne carries the message to its intended receiver in Boston. Stoddard tells her, "'put on your pretty hat and cape, and follow that lane up to the main road. Then ask for Squire Coffin's house of the first person you meet.'" Stoddard is at first anxious about Anne's mission, but then admits, "'I can see no danger in it for the child'" (164). That Captain Stoddard "can see no danger" for Anne, even though there are so many "eyes" about, reveals a conscious confidence in the ability of girlhood to act as a cloak of political innocence. And indeed,

the message is safe with Anne. She shows up on the threshold of the Squire's home and delivers the message to him without drawing undue attention, even making sure to curtsey to the Squire once the deed is done.

The central event in many volumes of the Little Maid series is a variation on Anne's delivery of the message to mobilize the men in Newburyport, performed under cover of her "cloak of innocence." In other installments, Little Maids deliver written military messages in sunbonnets and bandboxes. The trope of girls as message deliverers, often aided by the concealing power of girlhood objects or clothing, demonstrates the complexity of Progressive era attempts to clearly envision roles for girls in politics and history. Little Maids play a role in provoking military action, but do so swaddled in the trappings and expectations of polite, conventional girlhood (pretty capes and curtseys, for instance). It is telling that Anne delivers her political message on the threshold of the Squire's home, again indicating Progressive era excitement about impending opportunities for girls' political activity but also resistance to fully disassociating girlhood with the innocence, domesticity, and social graces that have historical kept them out of full participation in public, political matters. The message that Anne conveys on the threshold of political activity, then, is conflicted regarding visions for girls' future political participation. After she delivers the message, the town attempts to resolve the conflicted meanings of Anne's political act.

After Anne's courageous delivery of the message, she is praised and celebrated by Province Town, and a local clergyman argues for her place in history: "'It should be put on record that a maid of Province Town helped the Americans to win their just cause against King George'" (211). In this way, Curtis's series envisions a place for girls in

national political battles of historical significance. However, just as the Little Maids perform a political role under the cover of their girlhood innocence, Anne's adherence to the typical image of girlhood also re-establishes her symbolic space outside of the political realm, in which she serves a different purpose. Soon after Anne arrives back in Province Town, the town has a "May party" for the children—an English custom in which "children gather and put flowers on their heads, and have a May-pole wreathed with flowers, and dance around it. And they choose a little girl for Queen of May'" (185). The patriotic adults of Province Town recognize but soon overcome the political discrepancy of practicing such a custom: "'To be sure it is an old English custom, and just now England does not seem our friend, but 'tis a pleasant custom that we do well to follow'" (190). Even Captain Stoddard, who was urged to sympathy by Anne's earlier display of revolutionary fervor, is taken by the pleasantness of the May Day scene, and specifically with the image of Anne as Queen of May. When he sees Anne, dressed in a white pinafore and sitting on a "pine-covered sandheap" that represents a throne, with a "wreath of fragrant arbutus on her head" as a crown, Captain [Stoddard] "thought it the prettiest sight he had ever seen. The tall pole, covered with green vines and bright blossoms, the children forming in a circle round Anne, and the pleasant May skies over all, seemed to the sailor to make a picture worth remembering" (193). This picture is memorable indeed, as it encapsulates the Romantic image of childhood—an image that worked to "deny, or enable us to forget, many aspects of adult society," including political conflict (Higonnet 23).

While Anne's performance of girlhood innocence helps her carry out a political mission, it ultimately shifts her back outside of the political realm. In fact, she sits above

it on a sand-heap throne, projecting a pretty pleasantness that enables adults to forget political discrepancies against England: “Then came the dance round the Maypole and the song. . . . It was a circle of happy faces, and when the time came for them all to start for their homes, each one said that Province Town had never seen so pretty a sight,” and that it would be something they will always “‘like to think about’” (Curtis, *Province* 193). The whole town uses children, in particular Anne, to construct a space of pleasantness apart from political battles, where they can participate in the agreeableness of England’s cultural customs while ideologically opposing England’s politics. In this way, Anne’s political power lies not only in her ability to cover up political action, but to recover what is lost during fraught political battles. As Higonnet argues, the “image of the Romantic child replaces what we have lost, or what we fear to lose”—in this case, pleasantness, prettiness, and innocent pleasure, which is threatened by the political partisanship already occurring in the colonies, and the violent conflict on the horizon (28). In the beginning of her story, Anne’s violent actions symbolize the revolutionary spirit of America and provoke sympathetic bonds with politically-minded adults. Anne’s later projection of political innocence, helped by her use of clothing, enables her to play a political role in the coming war. In the end, however, she invokes the power of the Romantic image of girlhood to recover for her community a pleasant, happy space that exists above politics, and is to be preserved even amidst heated political battles. Adults’ various political uses of Anne in *A Little Maid of Province Town* speak to the tensions contained within visions of Progressive era girlhood. The Progressive era—fraught with competing visions for the nation—delivered many representations of girls taking part in constructing these national visions. At the same

time, representations of girls' political involvement often perpetuated cultural assumptions about girls' innocence and innate connection to the sentimental or domestic realm—expectations that loosened their foothold in the political sphere. By imagining the American girl mobilizing an army and then re-establishing her ability to project an aura of peaceful and rejuvenating political innocence that eases the difficult experience of national conflict within her community, *Province Town* invests the American girl with the power to be both political agitator and political peacemaker.

While *Province Town* demonstrates the expanding political meanings of American girlhood, it brings up another question that it does not explore in great depth due to Anne's geographical distance from major events of the early Revolution. Namely: how is the American girl herself supposed to think about her political actions and the political events that affect her daily life? Apart from delivering the mobilization message in Boston as she is told to do, and having a few encounters with kind British soldiers in Province Town, Anne is distant from the events of the Revolution. On the day of the battle of Lexington, for instance, Anne has a pleasant picnic, and we are told that "If Anne had known on the day when she was so happy," that American soldiers were fighting, and that the people of Boston were evacuating their homes, "she would not have cared so much about the May Day plans" (187-188). As it happens, however, "the world seemed a very cheerful and happy place" to Anne, and she "could not know how anxious the older people were that the trouble with England might soon come to an end" (188). The passage absolves Anne of any accountability regarding her unconsciousness of the political anxieties that would undermine her experience of the world as a "cheerful and happy place"—after all, she "could not know" of these

anxieties. But it is unclear if the statement that Anne "could not know" carries with it the air of a moral imperative (girls should exist in a preserved space of uncorrupted happiness), a practical assessment (girls cannot productively understand or deal with the political realities of the adult world), or a lament (girls are not exposed to knowledge of the political complexities of their historical moment, but should be so as to become informed citizens). Installments of the Little Maid series that depict American girls living in closer proximity to the war imagine the American girl consciously balancing the personal or social maintenance of a "cheerful and happy" world with political awareness and responsibility.

"she ought not to wish to be entertained by the amusements of America's enemies": Material Pleasures vs. Political Ideals in *A Little Maid of Old Philadelphia*

The issue of personal happiness versus political responsibility is often posed in the Little Maid series through the tension the American girl feels between the pleasures of consumption and her growing political awareness. Thus, objects not only aid in the American girl's performance of political innocence, as they do in Anne's delivery of the mobilization message. They also produce moments of thoughtful consideration of the value of politically innocent pleasure versus politically mindful responsibility, particularly in *A Little Maid of Old Philadelphia* (1919). This volume takes place in 1778 in British-occupied Philadelphia, and details the life of 11-year-old Ruth Pennell, who lives with her Quaker Aunt Deborah while her father fights in the war, and her mother cares for a sick relative. Like her young friends, Ruth identifies as a rebel. She particularly idolizes the "gallant young Frenchman, the Marquis de Lafayette," who gave up "all the comforts of his Paris home to share the danger and privations of the American soldiers" (Curtis, *Philadelphia* 26). Likewise, she vilifies the British soldiers who reside in Philadelphia

under the command of General William Howe, who was widely criticized in England and America for what many called “the reckless pursuit of luxurious entertainment and diversion during the occupation” (O’Quinn 146). British and American newspaper and magazine pieces about the occupation centered on the parties, plays, and other social and material indulgences of British officers and American loyalists in Philadelphia. *A Little Maid of Old Philadelphia*, while it follows the tropes of other volumes in the series, uses the American girl’s perspective of British indulgences to speak particularly to the tension between material pleasure and political responsibility.

Ruth’s first encounter with the luxurious lifestyle of the British officers occurs when her dog goes missing, and she assumes the British soldiers took him. Ruth decides to inquire at the mansion General Howe and his officers use as their headquarters, disguising herself in her mother’s dress and bonnet so she will appear to be a woman and thus taken more seriously. The soldiers, of course, know that Ruth is a little girl dressed up, and think she has been sent as part of a comedic play, in keeping with the tendency of British officers to produce plays in the cities they occupied, including Philadelphia, where they organized their own theatrical company (Miller 21). Because they think of it as an entertainment, the officers enthusiastically invite Ruth into their dining room, where she takes in the grand surroundings: “Ruth found herself on the threshold of the beautiful room whose paneled walls were brilliantly lighted by many wax candles in silver sconces. The table was handsomely spread with fine china, glass and silver” (Curtis, *Philadelphia* 35). In the midst of her splendid surroundings, Ruth performs well—receiving a “murmur of applause” when she manages to curtsy despite “the bonnet which kept nodding over her face, and the long sleeves that had slipped

down over her hands," and the "queer little figure" she makes causes General Howe to be "quite sure that his young officer Major André had planned the whole affair for his amusement" (36).

Ruth provokes adult amusement and applause for her performance at Howe's mansion, which, like Anne's May Day enactment of the innocent Romantic child's ability to provoke forgetting but also recovery, also evokes an image of Romantic childhood—namely, the child "unconsciously prefiguring adult gender roles," usually depicted by the child wearing adult clothes that are comically too big for them (Higonnet 33-35). Although it was Ruth herself who deliberately chose to wear her mother's clothing, she is innocent of the fact that it makes her girlhood even more apparent. According to Higonnet, painting children in oversized clothes emphasizes their endearing smallness in order to provoke adults' enjoyment and amusement: "The child…is presented for us to look at, and to enjoy looking at, but not for us to make any psychological connection with" (Higonnet 28). It is this sense of enjoyment without psychological connection that Ruth enables at Howe's mansion with her comically oversized clothing. The soldiers are cordial to her, and listen to the tale of her lost dog, but no earnest connections or personal recognitions occur. At first, Ruth is afraid that the officer who overheard her earlier expressing her Revolutionary sentiments would ask her about them: "Ruth instantly recognized [the officer] as the same who had called her a 'rebel' that very afternoon on Second Street. She became really frightened. Suppose he should remember her, and tell General Howe what she had said about Washington driving the English from the city?" (Curtis, *Philadelphia* 34). The officer does not appear to remember her, however, at least he never mentions the encounter, not even in jest.

Ruth's primary function at the mansion is amusement, not conversation about the Revolution, and indeed, once the soldiers realize that Ruth is not part of "the first act of some amusing play of André's contriving," but "only a runaway little girl looking for a lost dog," they think it "amusing that the young officer should have the trouble of taking her home" (39). However, Ruth not only entertains, but is entertained herself. The night makes a lasting impression on Ruth: "Years after, when Ruth was really 'grown up,' she often recalled the wonderful night when she sat at General Howe's dinner-table. For Major Andre had lifted her to a seat beside the General…and Ruth began to think that it was all a dream from which she would soon awaken to find herself safely at home" (37). The British soldiers and Ruth understand each other as part of an amusing make-believe scene—a play or a dream—with no acknowledgment of the political context they occupy.

Later, however, Ruth begins to think more about her performance when she talks to her friend Winifred's older brother, Gilbert. 14-year-old Gilbert is one of many boy activists in the Little Maid series. The boy activist—an older brother, cousin, or friend of the main character—is unwavering in his political ideals, and vociferous in his patriotic actions and aspirations. Gilbert, for instance, writes a play called "America Defeats the Foe" and performs it in a stable with Ruth and the other children. Because the only plays in Philadelphia during the British occupation were put on by the British, and indeed "the theatre in America, for all practical purposes, was a British institution during the Revolutionary war," Gilbert's production is politically subversive (Miller 21). The boy activist's demonstrative patriotism also leads him to disapprove of the girl heroine's behaviors for their perceived lack of political principle. For instance, when Ruth tells her

friends about her night in General Howe's mansion, Gilbert replies, "'*I* wouldn't have sat down at General Howe's table.'" Gilbert's judgment prompts Ruth to re-think her own actions on that "wonderful night": "'But Major Andre lifted me up. I didn't do it myself,' replied Ruth, suddenly ashamed that she had entirely forgotten that the English officers were her enemies, and had even been rather pleased that no other little girl in Philadelphia could say that she had sat at the dinner table of the great English General" (Curtis 64). Ruth questions the value of her amusing night with the English officers, specifically her own participation and pleasure in it, for political reasons. She realizes her lack of agency in the performance ("I didn't do it myself") and feels guilty about forgetting what political knowledge she had in favor of pleasure. Ruth not only becomes conscious of her previous unconsciousness, but critical of it as well, realizing that she regrets her own performance of the role of innocent child who produced and received pleasure at the expense of political consciousness.

Ruth's negotiation of the uncomfortable tension between pleasure and political awareness is heightened when she attends a rehearsal for the Mischianza—a sumptuous celebration organized by Andre to mark General Howe's departure from Philadelphia, and the arrival of General Henry Clinton in his succession. The Mischianza, held on May 18, 1778, featured a regatta, an extravagant medieval-style tournament in which British officers played knights competing for the hands of rich, Philadelphia women, a lavish feast, an opulently decorated ball, and fireworks (O'Quinn 150). The Mischianza's air of ostentation has been understood as both "a window on the minds and manners of an elite under stress," desperately attempting to recapture lost military glory, and a self-aware display of "patrician subjectivity" (Colley 147,

O'Quinn 153). *Philadelphia* uses the Mischianza rehearsal to dramatize the American girl's subjectivity, as it provides the setting for Ruth's continued enactment of the tension between material pleasure and political responsibility. Ruth is invited to attend the preparations by an English officer, along with her friends Betty and Winifred. Ruth goes, "but with a vague feeling that she ought not to wish to be entertained by the amusements of America's enemies"—a feeling no doubt generated by her previous regrets over her evening at Howe's mansion (Curtis, *Philadelphia* 176). At the Mischianza rehearsal, the girls learn about the medieval tournament and its representations of chivalry, as well as encounter the lavish ballroom decorations, which, as Andre has described in his detailed account of the event, included flowers, ribbons, and 85 mirrors, meant to "heighten" the effect of the decorations (qtd. in O'Quinn 160). The girls are indeed awed by the decorations, particularly the mirrors: "they ascended a short flight of steps, and entered a spacious hall, lined with mirrors. Never had the little girls seen anything so wonderful. Wherever they looked they saw Betty, Ruth, and Winifred all smiling with delight." The girls are delighted by their own multiplied, delighted reflections being served "plates of candied fruits, cakes, and glasses of lemonade" on a silver tray (Curtis, *Philadelphia* 180). It is important that in Curtis's description of the Mischianza, the mirrors do not "heighten" the decorations, but rather the girls' delighted responses to them. The girls see their own pleasure reflected back at them "wherever they look," and the scene thus emphasizes, in contrast to Ruth's earlier experience at Howe's mansion, Ruth's heightened consciousness of her own pleasure.

Immediately after Ruth sees this intensified image of her delighted self, she overhears two officers discussing a plan to capture Lafayette, and as she "whispered

the dreadful words over to herself . . . all her delight and pleasure vanished." She realizes that the British soldiers, even the ones who treated her kindly at the Mischianza, "would try their best to capture the young French Republican, America's best friend, and take him to England a prisoner. Ruth could think of nothing else" (181). At the unsubtle reminder that the Mischianza is a political event staged by the opposition, Ruth's consciousness empties of delight, and fills with thoughts of the planned ambush and what she can do to prevent it. In other words, her feelings about being entertained by the amusements of America's enemies turn from vague to precise. She cannot think of anything except the knowledge she has gained from the political enemy, and she responds by forming a plan of action: "Ruth had made a great resolve: she would try to let Lafayette know that the English General meant to do his best to take him prisoner to England. Once at Barren Hill," where Ruth would visit her Aunt, she "was sure that she could find some way to reach Washington's camp and warn the young Frenchman" (181). Further, Ruth regards this mission as her responsibility and hers alone. She does not tell anyone else about what she overhead: "…it was a secret which she could confide only to one person: to Lafayette himself" (182). Unlike her lack of agency in Howe's mansion, when she was unaware that she was performing for the soldiers, Ruth understands it as her own especial duty to reach Washington's camp in Valley Forge to tell Lafayette of her knowledge. Through her experiences with the material pleasures and entertainments of the British, Ruth's sense of political responsibility transitions from unconsciousness, to vague feelings of guilt, to a powerful sense of personal duty and agency.

And indeed, Ruth's sense of agency becomes action. On her visit to Barren Hill, she meets Lafayette, who has taken a party of men from Valley Forge to scout out a camp ground for the troops he plans to lead to Philadelphia. He is appreciative and kind when Ruth tells him of the plan she overheard, and thanks her but also assures her that British officers talk of these plans all the time. When Ruth is walking a few days later, however, she remains vigilante and "crouche[s] low behind a small tree" to listen while British soldiers talk of a plan for thousands of British troops to come up behind Lafayette and his men while they march toward Ridge road. At this news, Ruth "turned and ran toward the American encampment where she could see troops of soldiers already moving forward toward the Ridge road" (203). Finally, Ruth gains her audience and performs her political duty: "at last breathless and tired she found herself facing a number of American soldiers…'Lafayette! Lafayette!' she called wildly. 'Tell him there are thousands of English soldiers coming up the road behind his army. The road from Swedes Ford'" (204). Ruth arrives at the performance of this political action only after taking part in two other events that shaped how she views her actions in relation to the Revolutionary cause—the play-acting dinner at General Howe's mansion and the Mischianza preparations. Although Ruth is a message carrier like many Little Maids, then, her primary political activity concerns how she consciously negotiates the tensions between innocence, entertainment, and political responsibility.

Philadelphia's vision of girls' political engagement focuses on the issue of girls' political consciousness. Significantly, Ruth does not end up adopting Gilbert's model of political engagement, which advocates the rejection of all material and symbolic contact with the political opposition. After she attends the Mischianza rehearsal and realizes

that the British officers' political allegiances trump their hospitality and kindness, she admits that while it "seemed disloyal even to have accepted" the invitation, she also recognizes that her acceptance is the reason she gained information, and was the catalyst for her vigilant deliverance of that information (182). Anticipating Gilbert's disapproval but affirming her own actions, she muses "'I am glad I went, and I always shall be glad'" (187). While Ruth did not attend the celebrations with the conscious purpose of gaining intelligence from the enemy but rather from the temptation of material pleasure, she was nevertheless able to negotiate pleasure and political awareness expertly while there. Ruth's model of political consciousness, then, allows for ambiguous personal actions that seem politically "disloyal" by the standards of more demonstrative models of patriotism, as well as displays confidence in the girl's ability to value political responsibility over personal pleasure when she sees for herself how they conflict. Given the success of her political action, Ruth was right to accept a pleasurable entertainment instead of rejecting it, even though she felt vaguely conflicted about doing so, because it allowed her to resolve upon and enact her own political responsibilities. In the Revolutionary context of British-occupied Philadelphia, the Little Maid series uses entertainment and material pleasure to explore how the American girl becomes conscious of and questions the validity of her own personal pleasures by becoming aware of their political dimensions. Just as Anne's delivery of a political message on the threshold in *A Little Maid of Province Town* is an apt representation of the impending though precarious entrance of the Progressive era American girl into the political realm, it is important that Ruth becomes conscious of her political duties during the rehearsal or preparations for a political event. *A Little Maid of Philadelphia* suggests that the

development of girls' political consciousness—or how they think about their individual lives and responsibilities in relation to larger political events—takes practice and deliberation, and can therefore occur at a remove from the public, political stage.

"be sure and make your best curtsey to the British General, that he may know little American girls can be well-mannered": Personal Relationships versus Political Affiliation in *A Little Maid of Old New York*

In the Little Maid series, the American girl's model of political consciousness not only develops through her negotiation of material delights and entertainments, but through her navigation of personal relationships. Many volumes feature Little Maids who struggle to reconcile their friends' and acquaintances' personal and political identities. The tension is usually dramatized through the girl heroine's decisions over how to behave toward others: politely or politically. As evidenced by the bold but decidedly not "militant" Outdoor Girls, Progressive era girls were still negotiating their actions to adhere to cultural expectations of polite, feminine behavior even within an expanding public sphere that offered them new opportunities for political participation and agency. The Little Maids also feel the need to maintain a level of decorum as befit their natural social graces, preventing them from displaying their political ideals in ways deemed too defiant, disruptive, or impolite. This stipulation, of course, contrasts with the behavior of the series' boy activist characters, who are defined by their defiant speeches and actions regarding the British cause. And both the Little Maid's social and political obligations are complicated further by personal feelings of friendship and loyalty.

The personal and political complexities of girls' behavior is taken up in *A Little Maid of Old New York*, which is set in 1783, the year the Treaty of Paris was signed and British soldiers finally received orders to evacuate New York City. Against the backdrop of American diplomacy, 10-year-old Annette negotiates relations with her best friend

Kathy Down, the daughter of prominent Loyalists, her patriotic but polite mother, who "would not be rude to anyone; not even to the King of England," and her 16-year-old cousin John, who, with "revengeful glance[s]" at the British flag flying over the Battery, dreams of pulling it down (Curtis, *New York* 88, 22). John is vocal about his frustrations that New York is still a "Tory City": "'tis nearly two years since the Americans drove Cornwallis from Yorktown, and everyone said that ended the war and made America a free nation. But these English stay on here until the United States and England can agree on a Treaty of Peace" (28). Annette is more conflicted, because while she wants the British to leave, Kathy's family will also leave when New York is no longer under British command, and further, Kathy is on friendly terms with many British officers, including Sir Guy Carleton, commander-in-chief of British forces. Annette knows that Americans colonists in New York were treated unfairly by Carleton and other officers treated, but she also feels strongly that her patriot family and friends do not treat Kathy fairly. The Treaty of Paris, widely understood as a highly successful American diplomatic effort, was negotiated by such historically prominent men as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson—whose biographies made up the bulk of the recommended Revolutionary era history education of American children in the Progressive era. *A Little Maid of Old New York* imagines the American girl negotiating diplomatic relationships within the scope of her daily life, in which she must reconcile polite behavior, personal relationships, and political expression.

The first dramatization of this conflict occurs when Annette is playing at Kathy's house, and Carleton arrives to visit Kathy's parents. Because Kathy's parents are not at home, Kathy receives him in their stead. As a girl, Annette knows how she is supposed

to behave in this situation: with pleasant courtesy. But as a political subject, she is conflicted because she also knows that Carleton is in charge of the British troops still occupying her city. Unable to reconcile her behavioral duties as a girl with her political duties as a patriot, Annette "made no response but turned and ran from the room" (72). Annette very soon regrets her behavior, and her mother confirms that she behaved wrongly: "'how is it that my own little daughter could forget that she was a guest, and that the first duty of a guest is to think of her hostess's feelings, and to treat other visitors with courtesy?'" (89). Although Annette's mother is as anxious as anyone for the British to leave New York, she is certain about what duties, and therefore identities, trump others for little girls: Annette is not a political subject but a guest, Kathy is not a tory but a hostess, Carleton is not a British General but a visitor, and therefore Annette's actions should not exhibit political defiance but polite courtesy. After thinking it through, Annette makes a "firm resolve" to "ask pardon" of Sir Guy. It is not easy for her mother to permit Annette to apologize the British Commander, as "Americans living in New York during the British occupation had been badly treated," but in the end she realizes the experience "would be a lesson Annette would never forget," and tells Annette that "Sir Guy was sure to think more highly of all little American girls if Annette owned her fault" (90). Annette's visit to Carleton is framed as both a personal lesson in politeness, and a carefully constructed diplomatic mission on behalf of American girls. Her mother continues to lay out the procedures for such a mission: "'you shall wear your checked silk dress, and your blue hat, and carry the fine white parasol that Grandmother Vincent gave you…and be sure and make your best curtsey to the British General, that he may know little American girls can be well-mannered'" (90). Because Annette's fulfillment of

culturally sanctioned expressions of girls' social propriety is understood here as part of a political process of diplomacy, in which goodwill must be fostered between former political enemies and favorable images upheld, her well-mannered behavior is both polite and politic.

Annette's restoration of her own polite behavior, and simultaneous building of the General's "good opinion of the manners of American children," is successful (96). When Carleton receives her and she curtseys twice, he smiles "approvingly at the brown-eyed little girl in her dainty summer dress," not recognizing "this attractive little lady as the rude girl who had fled yesterday at his entrance to the Downs' dining-room" (95). Annette explains the reason for her visit and asks Carleton's pardon for her rudeness, who responds that perhaps she is "'not a rebel after all,'" and kindly accepts her apology. Annette is appreciative at Carleton's acceptance but also makes sure to politely let him know where her political loyalties lie: "Thank you, sir. . . . But, if you please, I am a little American girl." Annette's polite avoidance of the term "rebel" is a successful diplomatic maneuver, as Carleton agrees to part on friendly terms with both Annette and her country: "Well, we will shake hands. Miss America, for after this, you know, England and America are to be friends." Annette replies that she will shake hands if he promises not to fight against "America's rights" again. When he agrees, "the great British commander and the little American girl clasped hands as if they were forever settling the friendship between England and America" (96-97). Juvenile (and certainly unbinding!) as this 'treaty' is, it re-imagines the idea of diplomacy to include the girl's negotiation of cultural codes of polite behavior and growing awareness of herself as a political subject.

As in other Little Maid volumes, the girl's successful negotiation of girlhood expectations within a political context results in the discovery and development of personal and political consciousness. Her diplomatic encounter with Carleton prompts her to want to learn more about America's political situation, as well as think about how it pertains to the dictates that govern her own life. She asks her mother: "'…what are America's 'rights'? I know that is what the war was about, but when I asked Sir Guy to promise not to fight against our 'rights' again, why, all at once I realized I did not know what America's rights are. I thought about it all the way home.'" Her mother tells her about unfair taxes and the "hardships such taxation inflicted on Americans; without permitting us even to help make the laws under which we must live.'" Annette puts it all together like so: "'They wanted to tell us what we must do, whether it was right or not'" (99). Although it is a rudimentary understanding of the Revolutionary war (of the kind girls might encounter in their history readers), the Little Maid series begins to link girls' developing understanding of national politics and power with daily experiences of power in their own lives, such as being told to follow rules governing their behavior and relationships that they did not make and do not think are not right. For instance, Annette's understanding of the causes of the Revolutionary war recalls her frequent disagreements with her patriotic family and friends over her friendship with Kathy. While her mother, John, and other girlfriends are usually courteous to Kathy, they have reservations about her Loyalist connections and therefore do not accept her wholeheartedly. This often prompts Annette to defend her loyalty to her friend: "'Nobody is fair to Kathy'. . . . None of the girls go to see her . . . all the grown-ups think she is a Tory. And, Mother, when you seemed pleased that she could not go with me to

Greenwich Village, it did seem as if I must see Kathy'" (87-88). Annette remains true in her friendship with Kathy despite proprietary and political objections because she feels it is fair and right—an experience that affects how she understands her burgeoning political knowledge.

In the end, Annette's maintenance of relationships based on personal feelings as well as politeness are recognized by others as politically valuable. At first, John disapproves of Annette's visit to Carleton, as well as her friendship with Kathy, and questions Annette's loyalty to the patriot cause. Indeed, girls' appropriate social behavior is antithetical to John's idea of patriotism, which includes the desire for public acts of political expression, such as taking down the British flag in the harbor. John's model of patriotism not only speaks to the trope of the boy activist characters in the Little Maid series, but to a "defining theme of books written for and about boys": the desire to "escape from the feminine and civilization" so as to stride forward and carry out the deeds that change the world and make history (Kidd 61). When John is tasked with taking his small boat and delivering a message to a British officer that gives orders for British ships to leave the harbor, he believes he is embarking on this kind of history-making task, and is sure to tell Annette that, unlike her call to Carleton, he is "'not going as a visitor'" (Curtis, *New York* 200). Annette and her friend Nancy, an orphan girl whom Annette has taken under her wing, accompany him on his mission. On the way, however, a wind hits and John cannot maneuver correctly: "John moved quickly forward to reef the big sail. As he started up his foot caught in a coil of rope and before he could save himself he had pitched forward, the letter flying from his pocket as he fell." It is Annette who saves the day: "Annette sprang after [the letter] as it fluttered toward her

and grasped it just before it went over the boat's side." When the boat rocks dangerously forward, Nancy grabs her skirts to keep her from falling out of the boat, but indeed, "even in her perilous tumble overboard, Annette had managed to keep the letter out of the water" (202). In John's rocking boat, Annette manages to save the letter in pristine shape, after which John is "ashamed of his own clumsiness," both physically and socially. He realizes his "unfairness toward his little cousin because of her friendship for Tory Down's daughter, and her call to apologize to Sir Guy Carleton," now that Annette "had saved him from he knew not what punishment and disgrace by rescuing" the letter (204). John finally recognizes that Annette's patriotism can be both polite and political. As Annette puts it: "'John said that by saving the Governor's letter I had served the American government…and now John believes me to be a loyal little maid, even if I am Kathy Down's true friend, and if I was polite to Sir Guy Carleton'" (207). Annette's reconciliation of political action, personal feeling, and politeness speaks back to her preliminary knowledge about rights in that she affirms her own sense of how to act in the world, all while negotiating cultural, familial, and political expectations.

Conclusion: Progressive Era History Girls

What political message did Curtis' Little Maids ultimately deliver to Progressive era girl readers? After all, the political actions of the Little Maids are circumscribed within approved modes of girlhood behavior. Also, given the Revolutionary setting of the series, the girls' political actions are performed individually instead of collectively, and thus the series seems even more distant from the Progressive era political participation of women and girls, which depended so much on collective organization. Indeed, collectivity is the model by which women in the first wave of the women's movement expressed the need for the integration of women into the political sphere, and was

certainly a fundamental strategy for Progressive women's organizations. However, the Little Maid series' display of the American girl's individual political acts, even though it does not make the case that girls should be fully integrated members of the political sphere, presents and works through the anxieties surrounding girls' political participation in the Progressive era. In this way, the series' presentation of girls figuring out how they should navigate the interconnecting personal, cultural, and political tensions within their lives could have helped girl readers think about their own lives in relation to the plentiful and often confusing messages they received from Progressive era organizations or series fiction. Recalling Lears' view that during the Progressive era the "inner lives" of Americans uniquely affected the construction of the outside world, the examination of an individual's responses to political events, even if those responses adhere to cultural expectations, are as important to understanding political consciousness as are examinations of collective activity or more demonstrative rebellion (4). The Little Maid series gives girls a space to think about the "interplay between private desires and public policies" by presenting stories of girls navigating the values that determine their individual lives against historical issues of political participation, responsibility, and diplomacy (Lears 4).

In other words, while the Little Maid series does not make revolutionary claims for how girls should participate politically, by using conventional girlhood values such as innocence, delight in material pleasures, and social graces to think through questions about how girls should connect their individual lives to political events, the series demonstrates how girls' historical fiction series can use the past to provide valuable ways for girls to work through the complexities of their own historical moment. In this

way, the series does not use the past in the reactionary sense of projecting girls back into a time period that did not allow them the political opportunities of their present day. Rather, the Little Maid series—and the girls' historical fiction series that followed throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries—show that historical stories that center on girls can be an important way to recognize that "a citizen's political socialization takes place at an early age," and to think about how this political socialization is inextricably connected to personal, familial, and cultural forms of socialization (Kerber 283). It is this interplay of personal, cultural, social, and political values and responsibilities that continue to generate questions in girls' historical fiction series throughout the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first.

My next chapter examines Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series, in which the interplay between personal, cultural, and political poses sharp questions about the role individual girls play in national narratives of power and dispossession. While Alice Turner Curtis's Little Maids stand on the threshold of history, delivering political messages to powerful men under the sheltering guise of girlhood, Laura Ingalls of the Little House books crosses through the American frontier, throwing off her sunbonnet to see and be seen. She is the ultimate "outdoor girl," although what makes her story so enduring are her interior responses to the vast landscape she inhabits. Like the Little Maid series, the Little House books use the figure of the white, American girl to think through questions about how girls should understand their personal lives in relation to larger political events and movements. However, while the Little Maids perform their political feats on the periphery of history, Laura's disruption of the boundaries between

house and frontier, Euro-American and American Indian, self and other, both interrupts and helps sustain dominant historical discourses about the nation.

CHAPTER 3
"SHE COULD NOT SAY WHAT SHE MEANT": SEEING, SPEAKING, WRITING, AND READING HISTORY IN THE LITTLE HOUSE SERIES

Despite the sequence of cozy little houses that enclose Laura and her family in the famous Little House series (1932-1943), author Laura Ingalls Wilder believed that her books exposed something quite vast. Speaking in 1937 to an audience in Detroit, Michigan, Wilder explains the inspiration behind her series:

> I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of rail-roads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession….I had seen and lived it all….in my own life I represented a whole period of American History….I wanted the children now to understand more about the beginnings of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it. (qtd. in Anderson 217)

There is power and privilege in Wilder's tidy vision of the frontier, which tucks out of sight the environmental and human violence wrought by homesteading, farming, and possessing an "unsettled country" that was already inhabited by millions of American Indians. However, by linking the possession of the "wild" frontier to America as we know it, Wilder perpetuates a powerful American myth that had been influential in popular, academic, and political discourse ever since historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the Chicago World Columbian Exposition in 1893. Turner claimed that American national identity had been shaped by the generations-long experience of expanding further and further into the western wilderness, braving natural and human forces of savagery to civilize the nation and fulfill Manifest Destiny: "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things . . . that dominant individualism . . .

these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier" (41). By presenting her series as a projection of the frontier, Wilder not only claims that her Little House series portrays a "whole period of American History," but the whole of America itself.

Wilder's celebration of the mythic American frontier, with its implicit privileging of whiteness and self-sufficiency, would have had particular resonance in the 1930s, as the Great Depression confronted Americans' optimistic faith in their frontier-based abilities to find expedients and survive on their own, and brought up questions about the relationship between individual lives and political structures. In his 1932 campaign speeches, Franklin D. Roosevelt, a former student of Turner's, attempted to shift America's ingenuity and determination from the open frontier to the "enlightened" system of government reforms and programs that would become the New Deal: "Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land. Our task now…is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources," Roosevelt claimed, but the "less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand…of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come" (qtd. in Rives 12). Wilder and her daughter/collaborator Rose Wilder Lane, however, opposed the government's New Deal programs and their interference with the individualistic, self-reliant character of American society (Fellman, "Don't Expect" 107). As Anita Clair Fellman and others have noted, the Little House books can thus be read not only as celebratory narratives of nineteenth-century white settler culture, but as specific arguments against twentieth-century government interference in individual lives.

Sometimes they can even read like directives for how Americans could draw on frontier survival skills to subsist when resources are scarce. A chapter such as “Two Stout Doors” in *Little House on the Prairie*, for instance, meticulously details Pa’s method of building house and stable doors without nails. Thus, when Wilder re-opens the frontier through the eyes of her fictional girlhood self, Laura Ingalls, she seems desirous to re-establish the mythical power of the figure of the white, self-reliant, American frontier individual at a time when it was ostensibly under attack.

As Richard Slotkin reminds us, however, the myth of the frontier not only to “symbolized” American ideology, but “dramatiz[ed] its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain” (6). In other words, even though the Little House series reproduces myths about the nineteenth-century frontier as well as proto-libertarian sentiments of the 1930s, the series is not a simple perpetuation of white expansionist ideology, nor merely a reactionary, anti-New Deal vision of American bootstrapism. Rather, the series dramatizes, in intricate and intimate detail, the complexities and contradictions of frontier ideologies, and the ways in which individuals become conscious and unconscious of them. As Laura begins to recognize the complex connections between herself, her settler family, the people who her family unsettles, her government, and her nation, the tidy vision of the frontier presented in Turner’s frontier thesis and Wilder’s description of her series is destabilized. Instead of the neat progression of the frontier from wilderness to Indian country to white settlers, in Laura’s first encounter with Indian men she is held in place by their eyes, which stare “straight at her” (Wilder, *Prairie* 140). When the Indians move further west, on government orders, Laura locks eyes with an Indian baby whose “black eyes looked

deep into Laura' eyes," provoking an outburst of emotion and disordered speech (308). As Laura looks into these eyes and they look back into hers, Laura's vision dramatizes American frontier history in ways that illuminate various historical issues. For instance: how young, individual white settlers are "implicate[d]…within the structure of frontier racism" in the nineteenth-century, how girls are used to think through the complex relationship between the individual and larger political structures, and how the legacy of Laura's complex gaze continues to influence the way we think about girlhood, history, privilege, and responsibility (Smulders 192).

Examining the Little House series in the context of the development of girls' historical fiction series, then, calls for close attention to the racial and political ideologies of the series, and to how the imagined (and in this case iconic) American girl learns, understands, challenges, and acquiesces to these ideologies. This chapter begins by tracking Laura's developing political consciousness as a white, American girl settler in the multiracial and multicultural frontier space that the Ingalls family drive their covered wagon into in *Little House on the Prairie*. Here, the origins of Laura's conscious relationship to American Indians and the ethical questions that arise from this discovery begin the complex process of forming. Then, I will explore how these connections play out in further installments of the series as well as in critical and creative responses to the series that use, re-work, or expand Laura's vision to understand personal and political contexts well beyond nineteenth-century white settler culture.[1]

[1] By examining how American Indians influence Laura's development and our understanding of it, I recognize that I am participating in the project of Wilder's series, other popular children's books about the frontier, and American history textbooks that privilege the story of the white pioneer girl instead of the people she displaces. Despite this, I think that examining the development and character of Laura's privileged consciousness in the Little House books is a valuable line of inquiry to pursue, especially as

Girl, Interrupting: Questions, Quiet, and Outcries

Little House on the Prairie, the third and most famous installment of the Little House series, was originally titled “Indian Country” (Romines 60). The titular displacement of “Indian country” by the Ingalls’ “Little House” is one of many instances in which the novel’s alluring fantasy of domestic coziness is quietly complicit in the violent history of Indian removal. Indeed, responses to the perceived wildness of Indians and their country are built into the very structure of the Ingalls’ house. Its walls have no cracks. Its door has a latch-string that could “keep anyone out” (Wilder, *Prairie* 105). The Little House is a physical representation of the Ingalls’ family’s reaction to their political and cultural situation as white settlers in territory that does not belong to them, but that they nevertheless feel entitled to claim. How does Laura exist within this complex structure? Laura sometimes helps to build the house, following her father’s instructions, but mostly she watches its careful construction, and feels safe and happy living inside of its secure walls. In this way, Laura is an integral if not completely agential part of the Little House and all that it represents. However, Laura’s attitudes about Indians and what it means to move into their territory begin to form well before the little house is built. Laura’s first ideas about Indians are shaped by conversations with her parents as they leave the little house in the big woods of Wisconsin and travel into Indian territory. The scene in which the Ingalls’ drive away from their home is one of regretful but resigned nostalgia, punctuated by the impending West:

> So they all went away from the little log house. The shutters were over the windows, so the little house could not see them go. It stayed there inside

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part of an examination that investigates the shifting ways that American girlhood is used to envision American history, and particularly historical American injustices.

> the log fence, behind the two big oak trees that in the summertime had made green roofs for Mary and Laura to play under. And that was the last of the little house. Pa promised that when they came to the West, Laura should see a papoose. 'What is a papoose?" she asked him, and he said, 'A papoose is a little, brown, Indian baby.' (5-6)

By "promising" Laura that she will see a "papoose" in the West, Pa objectifies the Indian baby by giving it a de-humanizing name, and defining it as something Laura is entitled to see as compensation for leaving home and moving further into Indian Territory. Despite the objectifying nature of Pa's speech, the West, and specifically Indian Territory, is characterized as a space of seeing, in contrast to the shuttered windows and "green roofs" of the oak trees under which Mary and Laura played in the big woods. The move from the woods to the prairie, then, is linked to Laura's emerging awareness of the larger world.

Susan Naramore Maher interprets Laura's physical and psychological move as a border crossing that both "silences and opens one up to new expression": "Young protagonists negotiating the increasing complexities of life face uncertain thresholds….Add to this inevitable maturation a move, a displacement, from the known to the unknown; then, children, while gaining through parents the traditions of other places, must still respond to the imperatives of new ground" (131). Of course, that Laura's awareness of the larger world and the people who occupy it begins with her father's naming of the "papoose," and the idea that she should "see" rather than meet or speak to one, reveals the ethnocentricity that will inevitably inform Laura's responses to "new ground." Indeed, the family's drive through the snow-covered woods and the "enormous lake stretched flat and smooth and white all the way to the edge of the gray sky" eloquently illustrates that the enormity of Laura's flat, white world makes it impossible for her to understand what exists beyond it, even if she tries (Wilder, *Prairie*

6). Laura sees wagon tracks going across the frozen lake, but they stretch beyond her comprehension, “so far that [she] could not see where they went; they ended in nothing at all” (7). The first chapter of *Little House on the Prairie* depicts both the Ingalls family leaving their sheltered house in the big woods and travelling further West, and the beginnings of Laura’s consciousness of others, shaped by her father’s language, and the particularities of her environment.

In addition to Pa’s promises, Ma’s interruptions also powerfully shape Laura’s way of thinking about Indians. While camping on the prairie later in their journey, Laura asks: “‘Where is a papoose, Ma?’” Ma interrupts Laura’s line of questioning with a silencing domestic order: “‘Don’t speak with your mouth full, Laura.’” Undeterred, Laura “chewed and swallowed, and she said ‘I want to see a papoose’” (46). Laura’s question and follow-up statement indicate that she has adopted Pa’s way of understanding Indians, both in her use of the term “papoose” and in her desire to “see” one. Still, in her ensuing conversation with Ma, Laura reveals the development of her own critical consciousness regarding the motivations of the family’s journey west, and her desire to see beyond the flat, white boundaries that previously surrounded her. After ascertaining that her mother “just [doesn’t] like” Indians, Laura asks: “‘This is Indian country, isn’t it?’…‘What did we come to their country for, if you don’t like them?’” (46). As Smulders and others argue, Wilder uses Laura’s “curiosity to initiate and sustain the novel’s critique of frontier values” (Smulders 194). Laura’s girlhood perspective, in other words, is both innocently curious *and* ideologically critical. In dialogue with Ma, Laura’s questions “reveal and challenge key assumptions governing the westering movement,” such as fear and dislike of Indians, disregard of American Indian claim to the land, and

white settler's entitlement to that land (194). Smulders argues, however, that the power of Laura's curiosity and the critiques it offers are ultimately limited because they "do not drive the novel past its ethnocentricity" (193). In other words, while Laura implicitly criticizes Ma's dislike of the Indians, Ma's response reiterates the novel's fundamental assumption that the West belongs to white settlers and not to the Indians: "Ma said she didn't know whether this was Indian country or not. . . . But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement" (Wilder, *Prairie* 47). As if to emphasize the virtues of white settlement and to end Laura's troubling questions, Ma performs an especially expressive domestic task: "Ma took the sadiron out of the wagon and heated it by the fire. . . . [she] hummed softly to herself while the iron smoothed all the wrinkles out of the little dresses" (47). Once again, domesticity enacts the violence of white settlement culture: 'civilization' flattens what it comes into contact with. Ma also irons out the troubling ethical wrinkles Laura stirred up regarding the family's move west, and closes off any chance for more questions by humming to herself. Here, Laura's questions do not drive Ma past her ethnocentricity and, since Laura must obey her parents' rules regarding silence and speech, the impact of her questions are indeed limited. However, Laura's questions also indicate the formation of her own consciousness that is different—if not altogether independent—from her parents' attitudes regarding Indians.

However, even though Laura's perspective cannot always be spoken due to the restrictions of age and culture (she knows well that "children must be seen and not heard"), the inner, unspoken shifts of her consciousness still offer rich criticism of the

historical experience of white settlement and Indian removal (51). As many scholars note, Laura often experiences intense conflicts between outer behavior and inner feelings of fear, grief, and rebelliousness. She can typically quell these disruptive emotions outwardly, but knows that she can still be “naughty, inside” (15). As Louise Mowder writes, the Little House books’ portrayal of the “movement of women into the Western landscape” can also be read as “the movement of the female into silence, the very silence that surrounds the story of the female in the Golden West” (15). Further, Wilder’s novels of progressive female silence in turn silence the history of American Indian life in the west (Stewart 221). However, while forced silences often signal disempowerment, Laura’s silences often indicate incredibly complex encounters between herself and what surrounds her. In Laura and Ma’s dispute over Laura’s tendency to doff her sunbonnet, for instance, Laura’s response to the silencing, restrictive influences of white femininity is both compliant and contrary. After Ma exclaims that Laura and Mary must wear their sunbonnets because their increasingly suntanned skin makes them “‘look like Indians,’” Laura again asks Pa when she will see a papoose. It is Ma who reacts: “‘What do you want to see an Indian baby for? Put on your sunbonnet, now, and forget such nonsense.’” Laura complies outwardly but resists inwardly: “When her sunbonnet was on she could see only what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat. She put her sunbonnet on when Ma told her to, but she did not forget the papoose” (Wilder, *Prairie* 123). This scene once again demonstrates Ma’s use of the tools of white femininity to stifle Laura’s questions about and interest in the presence of American Indians on the prairie, and to “recreate order and boundaries between ‘us’

and ‘them’" (Blackford, “Civilization” 180). While Laura’s outer compliance but inner resistance to Ma’s orders on the one hand shows how difficult it is for Ma to uphold racial and cultural boundaries on the frontier, it simultaneously shows how difficult it is to truly resist them. When Laura disobeys her mother’s orders by taking her sunbonnet off and seeing all around her, the bonnet strings—suggestively evoking the power of Ma’s controlling influence—tie around her throat. Thus, even when Laura resists Ma’s narrow perspective and tries to sees things for herself, the bonnet strings prevent full articulation of a point of view separate from Ma’s. Laura is not only limited in her ability to voice resistance but in her ability to think in ways that resist her parent’s boundaries. While Laura quietly challenges Ma by not forgetting about the existence of the papoose, the fact that she remembers it as a “papoose” reveals that the boundary between herself and ‘them’ still very much informs her thinking. The sunbonnet scene, then, is an example of how Laura’s responses to Ma’s restrictive orders about preserving the whiteness of her skin and not thinking about Indian babies do not present any simple indication of acceptance of or resistance to the larger ideologies about gender and race they represent. Rather, her responses show the complex ways that Laura’s resistance is inevitably still informed by them.

While the sunbonnet scene demonstrates how Laura’s way of thinking about Indians is both different than and influenced by Pa and Ma’s ways of speaking about them, the chapter “Indians in the House” illustrates how her parents’ speech informs the way that Laura actually *sees* Indians for the first time. As the chapter title indicates, Laura’s first encounter with Indians takes place inside the house, where it is immediately apparent that the boundary between wildness and domesticity has been

breached: “The naked wild men stood by the fireplace” (Wilder, *Prairie* 137). But even more fraught than the image of wild, naked male bodies beside a contained, domesticated fire is the perspective of Laura herself, who hides behind a “long, narrow slab” of wood that leans against the wall: “The slab was just wide enough to cover both her eyes. If she held her head perfectly still and pressed her nose against the slab, she couldn’t see the Indians. And she felt safer. But she couldn’t help moving her head just a little, so that one eye peeped out and she could see the wild men” (137-138). Wilder’s situating of Laura behind the slab illustrates two ways that Laura could choose to ‘see’ the Indian men in her house. By keeping both eyes behind the “long, narrow slab,” Laura could avoid seeing the Indians at all, and thus feel a combination of fear at their presence and comfort in the ability to ignore the fact of their existence. Staying behind the slab would uphold a number of personal and political conditions: Ma’s instruction to forget about the Indian baby, the family’s decision to build their house in Indian territory, and the “long” history of “narrow” perspectives about who is entitled to occupy American land that informs Ma’s attitude and the Ingalls family’s actions. Crucially, however, while one of Laura’s eyes remains behind the material used to construct the little house built in violation of Indian territory, one eye tentatively but purposefully “peeps” out from behind it. Even though the Indians she sees are men and not a baby, this scene dramatizes Pa’s promise that “Laura should see” Indians in the west. Indeed, this promise perhaps even informs Laura’s decision to peep one eye out: she knows that she *should* see them.

Further, the slab not only splits Laura’s sight, but interrupts it as well: “Laura peeked, and hid, and peeked again, while the Indians ate the cornbread that Ma had

baked" (140). Laura's peeking and hiding reproduces the pattern of earlier scenes in which Laura asks questions about Indians and Ma interrupts them with domestic orders. It makes sense, then, that what Laura sees when she sees Indians for the first time reproduces negative stereotypes about Indians that inform Ma's attitudes. With her peeping eye, Laura looks the Indian men up and down, from their "leather moccasins" and "stringy, bare, red-brown legs" to their "glitter[ing]" black eyes and the "feathers" in their hair (139-140). More potent than these stereotypical physical and material features of American Indians are the skunk skins that the men wear around their waists. As Debbie Reese points out, while the Ingalls family is "repulsed by the smell of skunk musk," the "Indian men are not," implying that the Indians are not only different from Laura and her family but primitive: "The image of Indian men wearing fresh skunk pelts is plausible only if the men aren't really human; only if the reader thinks them to be ignorant or animalistic, and only if we believe that they do not know how to skin a skunk without puncturing the glands that hold the musk" (65-66). The divisive stereotypes captured by Laura's abridged gaze indicate how Ma's interruptions in turn impact how Laura sees Indians.

But as much as Laura's perspective is interrupted by cultural and familial attitudes regarding Indians, it also interrupts the easy perpetuation of those very attitudes. Although Laura's gaze at first reproduces the image of the Indian as wild, savage, and animalistic, Romines argues that the scene shifts when the Indian men look back at Laura: "When Laura peeked out from behind the slab again, both Indians were looking straight at her. Her heart jumped into her throat and choked her with its pounding. Two black eyes glittered down into her eyes. The Indian did not move, not

one muscle of his face moved. Only his eyes shone and sparkled at her. Laura didn't move, either. She didn't even breathe" (Wilder, *Prairie* 140). This moment of dual stillness interrupts the complex power dynamics of the scene. Laura, a white settler who imposed her reductive gaze up and down the bodies of the Indian men, is unable to continue objectifying the men. In response to the man's active, shining gaze that is focused on her before she is even aware of it, Laura's heart jumps to her throat, choking off her ability to see and reproduce stereotypes that divide her from the men in her home. Romines observes that the reoccurring images of "'shining' eyes and eye contact" are often used to indicate Laura's connection with her father, but shining eyes are also used to communicate deep emotion between people in a variety of charged or rather ordinary situations (66). Ma's eyes shine at Pa's thoughtfulness when he remembers how much she wanted pickles and brings them home from town (Wilder, *Prairie* 269). Mr. Edwards' eyes shine when he is about to leave his home and Laura thanks him for crossing the creek and bringing the girls Christmas gifts several months before (319). The Indian man's shining eyes not only arrest Laura's reductive gaze, but arouse familiar connections: "In the intense eye contact is Laura's most difficult lesson: the 'wild men' whom she longs and fears to see are subjects, not objects, and they share her space and her humanity" (Romines 66). Difficult as this lesson is to learn within the close-fitting walls of the little house, Laura seems desirous to extend her experience of it: it is not that she can't move, but that she "didn't."

Like Romines, I understand the above scene as an "extremely complex…attempt to convey, from a white girl's viewpoint to a readership of children, the extraordinary stresses and tensions that burdened even the simplest contact between Euro-American

females and Indian men" (66-67). I would emphasize, however, that in addition to being the medium of expressing cultural tensions, the "white girl's viewpoint" itself contains particular stresses and tensions, as well as the elasticity necessary to accommodate adaptations borne from these stresses and tensions. This is evidenced by the way that Laura's perspective in "Indians in the House" reproduces her parents' way of speaking about Indians and broader cultural stereotypes about the savage Indian, but also attempts to suspend these assumptions by holding on to a moment of eye contact that blurs her previous boundaries and sparks incipient connections, however tenuous. Indeed, after Laura's charged encounter with the two Indian men, her responses to unseen Indians take on a sharper critical intensity as she attempts to understand and articulate how her own existence connects to theirs. When Laura, Mary, and Pa go to see an abandoned Indian camp, for instance, Laura revels in the array of colors she sees there, and then recognizes a critical truth about the prairie and her position in it:

> Low bushes grew on the sides of the hollow—buck-brush with sprays of berries faintly pink, and sumac holding up green cones but showing here and there a bright red leaf. The goldenrod's plumes were turning gray, and the ox-eyed daisies' yellow petals hung down from the crown centers. All this was hidden in the secret little hollow. From the house Laura had seen nothing but grasses, and now from this hollow she could not see the house. The prairie seemed to be level, but it was not level. (Wilder, *Prairie* 175)

As Romines explains, Laura learns a lesson of "cultural relativism" here, as she realizes that "instead of a blank, flat page, the prairie is folded, full of small, complete cultural domains that cannot fully see each other" (62). The scene also echoes, in quieter but clearer tones, the shifts in Laura's consciousness that occur as she looks first *at* and then *into* the eyes of the Indian man in her house. In both scenes, Laura moves from a very constricted vantage point to a different position where she is able to see in a way

that upends her previous perspective. The idea that “the prairie seemed to be level, but it was not level”—suggesting that Laura’s particular position on the prairie complicates her ability to “fully see” others who live there, and hinting at the inequality bound up in this “not level” prairie—is a more fully articulated critical claim than anything that appears in “Indians in the House.” This makes sense, as the pounding heart in Laura’s throat (like the choking bonnet strings) symbolizes the difficulty of expressing with any precision the personal or political meanings at work within racial and cultural encounters. In the quieter space of the abandoned Indian camp, informed by her earlier encounter with the Indian men, Laura’s recognition of the uneven prairie and the meanings contained within it takes a more definite shape.

Of course, it is important to note that Laura is able to appreciate the beauty of the Indian camp, and realize the spatial and social conditions that had previously obscured it only in the absence of actual Indians. This perpetuates the myth of the “vanishing Indian,” a romanticized defense of Indian removal policies in which Indians were considered part of “a noble race…destined to disappear from the earth” (Coward 35). In the very inevitability of this disappearance, white settlers are absolved of their role in the removal of Indians from their land. At the camp, Laura discovers that the prairie is “not level,” but she does not yet know why this is the case, why it matters, or whether or not she has anything to do with it. Indeed, she “forg[ets] everything” when she sees beautiful beads scattered around the camp, and proceeds to take them (Wilder, *Prairie* 177). Later, though, Laura’s questions to her parents about how and why Indians move west take on a new persistence that is fueled by her experiences in “Indians in the House” and “Indian Camp.” One night when Pa plays his fiddle and Ma sings a song

about an “Indian maid” named Alfarata, they use the gentle, nostalgic tale of a vanishing Indian as a lullaby: “Fleeting years have borne away / The voice of Alfarata / Still flow the waters / Of the blue Juniata.” Ma’s voice is supposed to put Laura to sleep, but Alfarata’s voice rouses her: “Ma’s voice and the fiddle’s music softly died away. And Laura asked, ‘Where did the voice of Alfarata go, Ma?’” (235). Significantly, Laura does not ask about Alfarata, but about her voice. She is not curious about the romanticized image of “Bright Alfarata,” the “Indian maid” on the banks of the Juniata, but about what Alfarata might communicate to her in the present moment on the Kansas prairie. In short, Laura does not accept the idea—supported by the song lyrics, Ma’s voice and Pa’s fiddle, and widespread cultural beliefs in the “vanishing Indian”—that Alfarata and her voice “softly died away.”

Although Laura’s question challenges the myth of the vanishing Indian, Ma ignores or misunderstands it, answering: “‘Oh I suppose she went west’…‘That’s what the Indians do.’” When Laura again asks why, Pa names the force compelling the Indians’ movement: “‘The government makes them, Laura….Now go to sleep.’” But Laura is still not satisfied with this answer because it fails to distinguish between the imagined Indians that Ma and Pa speak of, and the specific Indians who live on this prairie, and who Laura herself has encountered: “‘Will the government make *these* Indians go west?’” (236; my emphasis). At this, Pa makes explicit the connections between national myth, Indian removal, and the Ingalls family that were previously only implied:

> “When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. *That’s why we’re here, Laura.* White people are going to settle this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our

> pick. Now do you understand?" "Yes, Pa," Laura said. "But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—" "No more questions, Laura," Pa said firmly. "Go to sleep." (236-237; my emphasis)

Laura's persistent, critical questions unearth direct connections between national myths of white superiority, governmental policy, the movement of white settlers and subsequent removal of Indians from their land, and crucially, Laura herself. The government is moving the Indians farther west to make room for white people, and Pa states "'that's why we're here, Laura,'" not only complicating the idea that Indians are "destined" to vanish by explicitly naming the government as the force that compels them to go, but implicating Laura in the process of removal by naming her. Perhaps driven by the fact of her personal involvement in the movement of Indians off their land, or perhaps because Pa's response answers her question empirically but skirts the ideological issues about power, entitlement, and inequality implied within it, Laura tries one more time to express herself: "'But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—'" Pa interrupts Laura before she can finish her question, leaving readers to wonder what she would have said. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to go west? To leave their territory? To move away from their homes? Each possible conclusion would scrutinize a different aspect of the injustice of Indian removal: the mythological rhetoric of 'going west,' the political deceitfulness of government-granted territory, or the emotional consequences of displacement. Although it remains unspoken, the myriad injustices of a prairie that is "not level," and the human feelings of those who suffer due to that imbalance linger in the air even as Laura is told once again to go to sleep.

The complexities of the connections between Laura, her family, Indians' voices and anger continue to linger unresolved, because Laura does not ask any more questions in the novel about the implications of her family's move into Indian territory. Even as the presence of Indians near the Ingalls' little house visually and vocally intensifies as they gather together to discuss what to do about the white settlers who have moved into their territory, Laura "knew it was no use to ask questions" (289). However, she still searches for an answer to her question about the Indians' anger by straining to understand the mediated language she hears from both the Indians and the proponents of white settlement culture. When she hears the voices of many Indians at once, the sound "was something like the sound of an ax chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song that Laura had ever heard. It was a wild, fierce sound, but it didn't seem angry" (265). The Ingalls' previous tendencies to animalize and aestheticize Indians are apparent in Laura's description, but Laura also recognizes agency in the Indians' voices. The Indians are chopping with their voices, just as Pa and Mr. Edwards chop trees to build their houses. However, Laura interprets the chop of their voices as "wild" and "fierce" rather than angry, indicating how the dominance of violent stereotypes has once again interrupted, much like Pa's order to go to bed, Laura's earlier imagining of Indians as people reacting to a specific injustice. Laura also listens carefully to white responses to the sounds coming from the Indian camps. Pa tells Ma that he heard talk from "folks in Independence" that "the government was going to put the white settlers out of the Indian Territory. He said the Indians had been complaining and they had got that answer from Washington" (272). Second-hand talk from "folks in Independence" further obscures the meaning of

the Indians' voices from legitimate anger to fierceness to "complaining." Even the efficacy of their complaints are challenged when Pa reads a newspaper article to Ma that "proved that he was right, the government would not do anything to the white settlers" (273). In addition to hearing the talk from the town and the newspaper that devalues the power of the Indians' voices, Laura hears nearby white settlers interpret the Indians' voices as evidence of their depravity: "Mr. Scott said he didn't know why so many of those savages were coming together, if they didn't mean devilment. 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian,' Mr. Scott said'" (284).

However, Laura listens to both "the talk and to the Indians," and despite what the townsfolk, newspapers, and neighbors say, she develops her own connection to the Indians' voices, even though she cannot understand what these voices mean: "Faster, faster, faster [the yells] made her heart beat. 'Hi! Hi! Hi-yi! Hah! Hi! Hah!'" (273). Even though their voices are not fully understandable to her, they affect the very beating of her heart, much like the Indian man's gaze does in "Indians in the House." We could interpret the connection between Laura's beating heart and the Indians' voices as prompted by fear, as later Laura reveals that she does feel "afraid" of the Indians: "she had a queer feeling about the prairie. It didn't feel safe. It seemed to be hiding something. Sometimes Laura had a feeling that something was watching her, something was creeping up behind her. She turned around quickly, and nothing was there" (288-289). Given the growing tension between the Indians and the white settlers, and the resulting talk she hears from neighbors such as Mr. Scott, it would not be surprising if Laura adopted a fear of the Indians based on stereotypes—wild, fierce, devilish—that solidify divisions between "us" and "them." However, Laura's "queer

feeling about the prairie" could also be prompted by her knowledge of the connection between her own presence on the prairie and the Indians' impending removal. Pa told her that the family came there to settle the land, which is why Indians have to "move on." Laura knows that she is part of the reason the Indians gather together to make the sounds that she hears. But she cannot fully grasp what this will mean for her or for the Indians because what she hears, from both sides, is either untranslatable, interrupted, or mediated. The unlevel prairie is certainly hiding something, and Laura's creeping awareness of the part she plays in the enactment of Indian removal is indeed cause for disturbance and fear.

The climax of Laura's encounters with Indians occurs as the Ingalls' watch the Indians ride away into the western horizon. It is a remarkable scene that deflates the Ingalls' fear of the threatening presence of the Indians and depicts an emotional response that is harder to define. The Ingalls family stands in front of their house to witness the manifestation of Pa's explanation that "'when white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on.'" Led by Soldat Du Chene, the Osage who convinced the other tribes not to commit violence against the white settlers, the procession evokes the romanticized idea that it is the Indians' destiny to ride willingly into the western horizon. Du Chene himself is the very image of the noble, vanishing Indian who forms "a mythic image" of American spaces such as the frontier at the same time as he "confirms his inevitable exclusion from the nation he has helped to imagine" (Wonham 799). "It was a proud, still face. No matter what happened, it would always be like that. Nothing would change it. Only the eyes were alive in that face, and they gazed steadily far away to the west" (Wilder, *Prairie* 305). As in "Indians in the House,"

however, an intense mutual gaze interrupts the recitation of stereotypes projected through Laura's vision. In one of the most passionate and perplexing scenes in the novel, Laura locks eyes with an Indian baby in a basket on one of the westward moving horses:

> Those black eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby. "Pa," she said, "get me that little Indian baby!" "Hush, Laura!" Pa told her sternly. The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes. "Oh, I want it! I want it!" Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. "It wants to stay with me," Laura begged. "Please, Pa, please!"…it was shameful to cry, but she couldn't help it. The little Indian baby was gone. She knew she would never see it any more…."Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things!" Ma asked her. "Its eyes are so black," Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant. (308-309).

Instead of being unable to speak or make a sound, which is Laura's usual response to intense encounters with Indians, she releases a baffling outburst of emotion and inarticulate speech—about which critics, like Laura herself, have struggled to explain. Romines argues that "Laura's assertive, imperative, desirous demand for the baby taps an impulse that her Euro-American upbringing has offered no way for a girl to express….Her outburst is a female child's explosive critique of the languages offered her by her culture; it *voices* her yearning for a life of expansion and inclusion" (78). According to Romines, the explosiveness and imperialism of Laura's demands to "'get [her] that little Indian baby!'" express both an intense desire to live a life of expansion and inclusion, and a critique of the culture that provides her with no coherent form through which to express this desire. However, Smulders questions the validity of Laura's desire for inclusion and the power of her critique of Euro-American frontier values by arguing that Laura's personal desire for the Indian baby "to stay with [her]" is

disconnected from an awareness of the political dimensions of the Indian baby's departure: "Despite her emotional involvement…Laura lacks both the intellectual maturity and the historical awareness necessary to comprehend…the removal as tragedy." Thus, Smulders argues that Laura "cries not for the Osage but for herself. Having been indoctrinated into the expansionist ideology of the frontier, she fails to comprehend the Osage child as a person with innate human rights" (198-199). In other words, Laura's emotional response to the cultural upheaval she witnesses—informed by the "expansionist ideology of the frontier"—overtakes and therefore limits her understanding of the situation to a strictly personal one. According to Smulders, Laura not only fails to understand what she witnesses as a human tragedy, but also fails to connect her own presence on the prairie to the enactment of this tragedy.

I agree that Laura's emotions are expressed in personal terms, and that these terms are cringe-worthy expressions of power and objectification. However, in the context of a novel that presents the messy complexities of Laura's developing "intellectual maturity and historical awareness," I see her personal response as intensely informed by an emerging although not fully formed understanding of both the tragedy of what she witnesses and her own connection to it. Laura's desire has shifted from wishing to "see" an Indian baby to "wanting" one—a seeming heightening of her objectification of Indians and her imperialistic assumptions about white entitlement. But as an outgrowth of Laura's previous conversation with Pa about how the Ingalls family is directly connected to the removal of Indians from their land, "wanting" the baby, and even ordering Pa to "get [her] that little Indian baby" expresses, however rudimentarily, an awareness of her responsibility for the baby's departure and a desire to redress that

fact. Further, Laura's declaration that "'it wants to stay with me'" again objectifies the baby, but also imagines an affirmative response to her unanswered question about Indians' anger at having to leave their land to make room for white settlers. Despite the scene's plentiful earlier descriptions of Indians as stoically willing participants in their own disappearance, Laura's encounter with the baby causes her to recognize in the Indians an unwillingness to go.

In this way, Laura's outburst is less an unbridled expression of her "indoctrination" into "expansionist ideology," but a manifestation of the messy process of both learning and resisting her position within that ideology. Indeed, Laura's explanation for why she wants the baby—"'Its eyes are so black'"—is indicative of this messy process. The blackness of the baby's eyes, "black as a night when no stars shine," recalls an earlier scene of a starless night: "It was black dark. Not one star was shining. Laura had never seen such solid darkness." Laura asks Ma "'what makes it so dark?'" and Ma replies that "'It's going to storm'" (Wilder, *Prairie* 308, 256). The baby's black eyes look like the world does before a storm, once again indicating that Laura understands the Indians' departure as anything but calm, peaceful, and unrelated to herself. It is true that Laura cannot say what she means, both in terms of explaining her desire for the Indian baby, and defining her presence as a white girl settler on the Kansas prairie. What does she, a white girl settler taken into Indian territory by her homesteading parents, mean to the historical tragedy that she witnesses? She cannot say, but she presents the question in all of its messy, tempestuous, and uncomfortable complexity.

As important as this question is and as richly as *Little House on the Prairie* poses it, the responses it generates, in the series and outside of it, matter a great deal. The ending of *Little House on the Prairie* leaves the question to hang in the air, unresolved. After receiving word from other settlers that the government is sending in soldiers to remove white settlers from Indian territory, Pa angrily packs up the wagon and moves the family on so as not to be "'taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw!'" (316). Laura notices that Pa's eyes look "like blue fire," and she is "frightened" by this, as she "had never seen Pa look like that." She remains very "still, looking at Pa" (317). In a novel filled with multilayered and meaningful moments of eye contact, Laura's vision of Pa's eyes as "blue fire" perhaps denotes her subtle recognition of the violence of Pa's movements through the west, and in a larger sense, of the Euro-American project of settling the frontier. But what happens after the Ingalls leave Indian territory? After Laura and Mary look out of the back of the wagon at the Little House they're leaving behind as the family moves further west and further into history, captured so memorably in Garth Williams' 1953 illustration that continues to grace the covers of multiple editions of the novel? In this image, Laura's right eye is in the center of the wagon, framed between the forward-facing bodies of her parents, looking back at the Little House, Indian territory, and us. As Katharine Slater writes, Williams' image conveys the novel's "simultaneous, paradoxical movement forward and backward across physical, temporal, and discursive borders" (55). Further, the centrality and clarity of Laura's singular eye in this image of paradoxical movement (Mary's hazier, less direct gaze looks somewhere off to the side) promises the continual return of questions about power, responsibility, connections, and divisions brought up by Laura's gaze. As Laura continues to grow up,

does she learn to say what she means? Can she translate intense emotions into articulations of historical injustices? How do readers, critics, and writers address questions of Laura's flawed but fascinating gaze? In the following section, I will examine how other installments in the series as well as later critical and creative responses to the series use Laura's gaze to obscure, address, adapt, or shift the questions it poses.

In later installments of Wilder's series, Laura's gaze becomes disconnected from political questions about the family's westward movement specifically, and from the complexities of cultural exchange in general. As Romines writes, the rich questions posed through Laura's perspective in *Little House on the Prairie* "fade" as the series continues, "through contacts with immigrant neighbors and Laura Ingalls's infatuation with a 'half-breed' man until, at the end of the series, the adolescent Laura's access to interracial, multicultural experience has dwindled to an amateur minstrel show at which, as a pubescent white girl, she can only take the role of acquiescent spectator" (8). In other words, while Laura's perspective previously brought out the complexities of cultural encounters in ways that intervened against easy acceptance of white expansionist ideology, it loses its political potency and agency as Laura grows up and moves out of Kansas Indian territory, eventually adhering to conventional gender and racial divisions. This shift occurs because Laura's perspective, while always intensely personal, becomes de-politicized in later installments. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, for instance, which immediately follows *Little House on the Prairie* and details the Ingalls' life in Minnesota after they leave Kansas Indian territory, contains a scene of looking between Laura and a badger that reads like a parody of the scene between Laura and the Indian baby. In the chapter "Strange Animal," Laura disobeys Pa's orders to stay

away from the deep pool shaded by willow trees. Blocking her path to the pool is an unfamiliar animal with a flat head and gray fur: “while they stood still and staring, that animal widened and shortened and spread flat on the ground. It grew flatter and flatter, till it was a gray fur laid there. It was not like a whole animal at all. Only it had eyes staring up” (Wilder, *Banks* 30). By turning the subject of Laura’s intense gaze into an animal that flattens out in front of her until it becomes fully objectified (“not like a whole animal at all”), the scene reverses the power of Laura’s gaze. In *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura’s gaze is productive, generating charged silences and awkwardly posed, unanswered questions that nevertheless battle against the tendency to flatten and objectify. Here, Laura’s gaze is suppressive. Under it, an animal becomes identifiable only by its hide.

The lesson Laura herself learns from her encounter with the badger is also about the restrictive rather than the expansive power of sight. Laura’s punishment for failing to obey Pa and attempting to go down the path to the deep pool is that she “‘must be watched’”: “‘tomorrow you stay where Ma can watch you. You are not to go out of her sight all day’” (34). After a day of Ma’s watching, Laura “was sure that being good could never be as hard as being watched” (36). Ma’s watchful gaze re-captures Laura within the bounds of her own constricted cultural position as a white, Euro-American girl on the frontier who must adhere to the rules of ‘good’ girlhood, including obedience and domestic containment. These scenes in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, in contrast to *Little House on the Prairie*, present the act of seeing as a way to define and constrict both Laura and her frontier environment. Rather than a mode of expansion and incipient understanding, seeing becomes a way to reinforce conventional boundaries. Laura’s

perspective thus loses what made it politically powerful in the previous installment: its ability to interrupt the ideologies of Euro-American settler culture.

In the next installment of the series, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, the meaning of Laura's seeing is once again divested of its ability to destabilize political ideologies as she grows up and the purpose of her sight is contained within a familial context. The beginning of the novel details changes that propel the 13-year-old Laura into coming of age and leaving her girlhood behind. Her sister Mary has suffered from an illness that has left her blind. The family's beloved dog and protector of the family, Jack, dies. Pa leaves in the wagon for the Dakota Territory while Laura, Ma, and Mary will wait until Mary fully recovers and then travel there by train. In the second chapter, entitled "Grown Up," Laura recognizes through these changes that she is "not a little girl any more." Without Pa and Jack, "she must take care of herself. When you must do that, then you do it and you are grown up. . . . Pa and Jack had gone, and Ma needed help to take care of Mary and the little girls, and somehow to get them all safely to the west on a train" (Wilder, *Shores* 14). No longer a little girl, Laura is now responsible for the family's movement in a way that she was not before. Laura's own progression coincides with history's, as westward moving families shift from covered wagon to train travel. In this context, Laura's seeing becomes directly tied to her family's advancement through and acclimation to the west. Because of Mary's blindness, Laura "must be eyes for Mary": "[Pa] had said, 'Your two eyes are quick enough, and your tongue, if you will use them for Mary'" (2, 22). On the train, Laura "'see[s] out loud'" for Mary, describing the wondrous amenities of the train's interior, as well as their fellow homesteaders: "'Now I will see the people. . . . Farther ahead are two young men with their hats on. They are

holding a big white map and looking at it and talking about it. I guess they're going to look for a homestead too. Their hands are rough and callused so they're good workers" (23-24). Laura's seeing is active and definitive. Indeed, her seeing is conflated with knowing. She says "now I will see the people" instead of "now I will describe them," and in response to her representation of the train and its travelers, Mary says, "'Yes, I see'" (23). Once again marking the shift from *Little House on the Prairie*'s presentation of Laura's gaze as a destabilizing influence on white settler perspectives of the west and its inhabitants, in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* Laura's vision is contained within the advancing structures of white settler culture, and focuses on rendering the wider world understandable to the white settler family.

The containment of Laura's vision within the mission of white settler culture speaks to popular understandings of the Little House books, which often conflate Laura's seeing, Wilder's writing, and American frontier history. Recall that Wilder bases her whole series on what she has seen: "I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of rail-roads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession." Generations of readers, like the blind Mary, see this version of frontier history through Laura's vision, without questioning the factors that inform that vision or what is impossible for it to fully see. Evidence for this can be found in the way that the creation of the Little House series was for years understood. As Fellman writes of the myth of the series' production: "The story used to be a simple one. An attractive white-haired farm woman in her midsixties sits at a desk in a Missouri farmhouse in the Ozarks around 1930 and, using a lined school tablet and a pencil, writes the story of her early

childhood in the Big Woods of Wisconsin sixty years before" (*Long Shadow* 11). The trajectory of the series as well as the narrative surrounding its production perpetuate the idea that the movement from seeing to knowing to writing is "simple," and that Wilder's "naïve artistry" directly captures the story of her childhood self (Moore 7). Of course, we know from the work of Fellman, Rosa Anne Moore, and most recently *The Selected Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (2016), edited by William Anderson, that the Little House series was a collaborative effort between Wilder and her daughter—the best-selling writer and proto-libertarian thinker, Rose Wilder Lane. Lane acted as Wilder's "editor" and "agent," and thus had a hand in both the production and circulation of the Little House stories (Moore 10). As I mention earlier in this chapter, Laura's vision can be understood to celebrate the myth of the self-sufficient, white American pioneer through its expression of both nineteenth-century expansionist ideology and Depression era "political individualism" (Fellman, "Don't Expect" 107). As Fellman argues, Wilder and Lane's Depression era context and anti-New Deal political stances powerfully inform their portrayal of the nineteenth-century west in ways that bolster ideologies of self-sufficiency and laissez-faire government. For instance, Wilder and Lane exaggerate the Ingalls family's isolation from the nearest town in *Little House on the Prairie* from thirteen to forty miles, and shrink the distance the Ingalls family had crossed over the border to Indian territory from over twenty to just three miles (Smulders 192).

The legacy of Laura's politically charged sight, according to Fellman, can be seen in the "particular form that contemporary conservatism in the United States has taken, with its volatile fusion of disparate, even contradictory, elements—commitment both to a reduction in the role of government and to the use of government to enforce

particular personal values." Fellman posits that "the comfort that many Americans [have] with" condemning government intervention when it comes to programs such as federal welfare for poor families, but supporting government intervention when it enforces "family values" legislation that reinforces the lifestyle of white, middle-class families could possibly owe "something to . . . their reading and understanding of the Little House books" (*Long Shadow* 9). To support this argument, Fellman examines "compliant readings" of the series, which imbibe the political ideologies embedded in the content and production of the series. Compliant readings of *Little House on the Prairie* would, alongside Pa, rail against the "'blasted politicians in Washington'" for issuing government orders to protect Indian territory and thus take away opportunities for self-sufficient white settlers to build homes and cultivate land (Wilder, *Prairie* 316). At the same time, compliant readings would, alongside Pa, support government intervention when it came to Indian removal legislation, because it enforces values and ideologies that benefit white families: "'The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now….White people are going to settle this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick'" (236-237).

Whereas Fellman's study focuses on "compliant readings" of the series, she recognizes that many recent studies of popular texts including the Little House series push back "against the notion that readers are passive before the ideological messages implicit in any text," and examine "ways in which readers resist hegemonic meanings in texts and refuse to draw from the conventional messages" (*Long Shadow* 8). Engaging in this process of "unearthing resistant readings," I believe, is especially necessary when examining the Little House series, because the defining factor of Laura's

perspective in the most famous installment *Little House on the Prairie* is the struggle to resist compliance to familial and cultural orders, however difficult this resistance may ultimately be (Fellman, *Long Shadow* 9). It is my contention that Laura's gaze in *Little House on the Prairie*— constructed as it is by the racial and political ideologies of nineteenth-century white settler culture and Depression-era individualist thought—provides the tools with which to challenge those very ways of thinking. And indeed, it has generated a variety of challenges to the easy conflation of Laura's perspective, Wilder's writing, and history. Examining various critical and creative responses to the series shows how Laura's complex gaze can not only inspire but give form to productive meditations on the series' personal and political meanings that are relevant in contexts far removed from the white settler experience of the nineteenth-century frontier. Laura's way of connecting herself to others in *Little House on the Prairie*—marked by charged silences or an inability to say what she means—fuels some of the most thoughtful critical and creative projects surrounding the Little House series.

In the introduction to her influential monograph on the Little House series, *Constructing The Little House: Gender, Culture, And Laura Ingalls Wilder* (1997), Romines explains how her own girlhood connection to Laura, "a girl as ambivalent and headstrong as I was, as a reading child," speaks to the complex interactions between girl heroine, girl reader, and adult author. Romines writes about meeting Laura Ingalls Wilder at a book signing event when she was 10-years-old—an encounter in which she "finds herself speechless," just like Laura does "at moments charged with emotion and import" (3-4):

> Had Laura and I met and recognized each other at Brown Bookstore, we could have spoken to each other. But Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author in

> the regal wine-colored dress, seemed to me a silencing figure. Calm, controlling, and assured, she handed me a commodity about which she appeared to have no doubts. A book, a name, a myth. She looked like a powerful woman—powerful because she had learned to speak, to write, and to sell her writing. What she sold was the Little House story, the series that held me quivering in its thrall. In the warm car with my sympathetic grandmother, hurtling toward the End of the Little House Books, I could find no words to tell her how this story seduced and frightened me. (5)

Romines' girlhood self felt a connection to the fictional girl Laura—particularly to her inability to voice the intense emotions she feels in the presence of powerful representations of ideologies in which she is intimately involved but also beginning to challenge. "Why can't she speak?" Romines wonders, regarding Laura's silence, when, for instance, she is faced with the direct human gaze of the "wild" Indian men in the chapter "Indians in the House." "And why did I, at ten, share her silence?" Romines wonders about her own response to Wilder, who, unlike Laura, appears to have no doubts at all about her perspective of frontier history (4). Through her encounter with Wilder, Romines recognizes that speaking, writing, and selling that writing in a popular series for children has the power to control the way readers understand history, and to silence the questions, doubts, and ambivalence that readers might feel while reading that seductive series.

At the same time, Romines also recognizes that silence can be productive. Romines uses this moment of triangulation between girl reader, girl heroine, and adult author—which results in her girlhood self's inability to speak—to introduce her voluble literary and cultural study on Wilder and the Little House books. By doing so, she signals that charged silences, such as Laura's in the Little House series and her own in the bookstore with Wilder, have the potential to spark important recognitions and sustained critical thinking. Further, Romines states that in her study she wanted to

include alongside the voice of the "feminist scholar" she had become the voice of the "raptly reading girl" she once was, again recognizing the critical value of her girlhood perspective, even if it is characterized by actions and attitudes usually deemed non-critical, such as silence or raptness (10). In other words, Romines' introductory anecdote and the book that follows provide compelling evidence that moments of speechlessness in girlhood brought about by encounters with powerful representations of dominant ideologies—whether they come from your family, community, or a beloved book series that for a time seduces and holds you in its thrall—can ultimately result in powerful challenges to those ideologies. It demonstrates Svetlana Boym's claim that "longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection" (50). In fact, I would argue that, in the case of the Little House series, "affective memories" of reading the series can fuel and enhance critical reflection by, for instance, bringing out the critical power of moments that might otherwise be deemed non-critical or acquiescent, such as Romines' girlhood speechlessness at the book signing, or Laura's silences at charged moments throughout the series.

"She could not say what she meant": The Birchbark Series

Fiction writers such as Louise Erdrich have also used Laura's gaze as a jumping off point to explore complex questions about silence and speech, power and privilege, and girlhood and American history. Erdrich's four volume Birchbark House series—*The Birchbark House* (1999), *The Game of Silence* (2005), *The Porcupine Year* (2008), and *Chickadee* (2013)—details a century of life in an Ojibwe community, mostly told through the eyes of the girl heroine Omakayas, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century Midwest. Because the series features a young Ojibwe girl's perspective of daily life in

the western part of America, including her community's displacement by white settlers ("chimookomanag"), it has often been understood by scholars as a "response to and revision of" Wilder's Little House series (Kurup n.p.). Erdrich herself has named the Little House books as a "formative" influence on the series. However, scholars such as Michelle Pagni Stewart and Seema Kurup as well as Erdrich herself are quick to note that the Birchbark House series is not simply a revision of Wilder's famous take on the nineteenth-century Midwestern frontier. Erdrich's series does not merely counter the view presented in the Little House books, but rather expands questions about the complex cultural life of the nineteenth-century American west (qtd. in Stewart).[2] Stewart argues that Erdrich's series engages in the "literary application" of the practice of "counting coup"—"the means by which some American Indian warriors would measure their success in war" by getting close enough to their enemy to "seize [their] belongings." Conceptualized by Catherine Rainwater, to count coup in a literary sense is to create stories in which American Indians "articulate [their] subject position" instead of "being objectified or viewed from a Western perspective." This serves the critical purpose of "transforming" and repurposing the way "seminal works" belonging to Western culture are understood and used (Stewart 216). Kurup suggests that Erdrich's series can be understood as a "prequel" to Wilder's that gives voice to "the lived history of an indigenous people," and thus presents a "sense of what has been lost, as

[2] Kurup suggests that while examining the Birchbark House series as a revision of the Little House series has "merit," it also positions "the series in the context of the western frontier narrative," and thus "is itself a form of literary colonization" (n.p.). I argue that Erdrich's series not only questions the very context, terms, and structure of the western frontier narrative, but replaces them with different histories, ways of communication, and organization. In this way, I believe that examining how Erdrich's series challenges western expansionist ideology does not necessarily constrain the series within the context of that history or ideology.

opposed to what has been ‘discovered’ by westerners” (n.p.). Both Stewart and Kurup conceive of the Birchbark series’ relationship to the Little House series as one that transforms, layers, and expands understandings not just of Wilder’s series and its portrayal of frontier history, but of the complex, emotionally charged, and often uncomfortable process of reading frontier history through an imagined white girl’s perspective so many years later. Erdrich explains that she hoped her series could “annotate” some of the troubling dialogue and ideas contained in the book, and in doing so present “an enlargement of the view encompassed in Laura's world” (qtd. in Stewart 216). And indeed, expressions and exchanges such as “‘get me that little Indian baby!’” and “‘Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things!’ Ma asked her. “Its eyes are so black,” Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant,” cannot be simply answered, but do require annotation: the act of making sense of difficult language in a way that expands understandings of the language in its own as well as in new contexts.

Erdrich begins expanding frontier histories and annotating Laura’s perspective before the first installment of her series begins. In the Thanks and Acknowledgements section of *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich lets readers know that the name of the book’s heroine, Omakayas, was one she found on a Turtle Mountain census record. She says that it is pronounced “Oh-MAH-kay-ahs” and urges readers to “speak this name out loud,” because in doing so they will be “honoring the life of an Ojibwa girl who lived long ago” (n.p.). *The Birchbark House* then begins with two Ojibwe men finding Omakayas as a baby girl, the only survivor of a small pox epidemic that wiped out her Anishinabe village: “The only person left alive on the island was a baby girl” (Erdrich, *Birchbark* 1). Instead of a mysterious, unknowable baby, however, readers already know her name,

and perhaps have already spoken it while imagining the real girl whose name appears on the census record. In other words, readers are encouraged to see in their first encounter with this “baby girl” a life and a story, both within and outside of the book. By beginning the book in this way, Erdrich expands the potential of charged scenes in the Little House books such as Laura’s encounter with the Indian baby. She does so not merely by countering the objectifying language of that scene, but by giving readers the power to imagine and to speak what Laura, from her familial and historical vantage point, could not. Like Romines realizes at the book signing and then begins the long critical process of unravelling, a complex relationship exists between reader, girl heroine, adult author, and history. Erdrich attempts to establish a relationship amongst them that empowers instead of enthralls. Erdrich tells readers why she chose the name Omakayas, gives them information on how to say it, and explains why she urges them to do so. Readers, in turn, are given the opportunity to continue learning and speaking about the particular history detailed in the books (Erdrich includes glossaries of Ojibwe words and pronunciations throughout the series). Omakayas, the girl heroine, is separated from a real person named Omakayas who lived on Turtle Mountain, and whose only perceivable trace left in the world is her name on a census record. The recognition of the two Omakayases enlarges the conception of history to include what will always remain unknowable alongside the processes of imagining and attempting to bring the past to life in a new context. In this way, Erdrich makes it clear that readers occupy different positions than the characters in the books, and that readers’ way of understanding history also can and should differ from the characters’. This is a useful idea when applied to the Little House books as well, especially moments when Laura

cannot say what she means, either because she is interrupted by her parents or she cannot find the language to express her complex emotions. By urging readers to learn and to speak unfamiliar words as well as to recognize the difference between author, character, and historical person, Erdrich gives readers the tools to overcome Laura's inability to say what she means.

If the problems of language in the Little House series form the basis of Erdrich's series— that which she wishes to "annotate"—she also uses her Birchbark series to emphasize how language itself is both problematic and powerful. In this way, Erdrich urges readers to be aware of how language works, and to recognize what it does and does not capture. The second installment of the Birchbark series, *The Game of Silence*, depicts the U.S. government's Indian removal policies and thus directly recalls *Little House on the Prairie*. Like Laura, Omakayas is removed from full participation in political discussions because of her age. The children play "the game of silence" while the adults "council, think, absorb the facts," and discuss the removal order that "said that the government now owned the ground they lived on. It was needed for white settlers," and so the Ojibwe "must leave their homes" and take "land payments…in a new place in the west" (Erdrich, *Game* 17, 21). Apart from the pain of the prospect of leaving their homes, the Ojibwe know that the western land belongs to Bwaanag, "or Dakota Sioux, who were facing the loss of their own land and had nowhere else to go" (Kurup n.p.). Erdrich's portrayal of the Ojibwe's discussion of the government order, the presence of white settlers, and how they should respond is an obvious contrast to the wild noises that Laura and her family hear in "Indian Jamboree" and "Indian War-Cry." But also like Laura, Omakayas tries to understand both the talk of her own people and

the baffling language of the other side, communicated in a strange and confusing form. Laura describes the Indians' voices in terms of sounds she is already familiar with (dogs barking, axes chopping, and singing) and this leads her to interpret the voices as wild and fierce—reproducing already familiar descriptions of Indians. Omakayas also tries to make sense of the form and meaning of the chimookomanag's (white people's) language through sights and sounds she is familiar with: "Black marks that captured sounds. Tracks across paper or slate boards or birchbark that stood for words spoken. How did the odd scratching connect to the sounds?" (Erdrich, *Game* 20). Rather than reinforcing stereotypical ways of understanding others, however, Omakayas's perspective challenges the dominant form of Euro-American communication—writing—and its ability to capture meaning. Omakayas realizes that the treaty the Ojibwe signed with the U.S. government was being disregarded: "something about the black marks had gone wrong….The black marks promised one thing, but the chimookomanag wanted to break that promise" (20). Here Omakayas reveals the deceitfulness bound up in the U.S. government's relations with Indians, as well as in the very act of writing itself. She finds that the black marks and the odd scratching on paper do not always connect to the meanings they convey. In other words, writing does not necessarily capture truth, in treaties or in texts. Omakayas breaks apart the link between writing, truth, and history that fuels the myth surrounding the Little House books and their authorship. Through Omakayas's perspective, readers can be prompted to reconsider the black marks contained in Wilder's famed series. Can the scratching of Wilder's (and Lane's) pen on paper capture the voices of the Indians ("'Hi! Hi! Hi-yi! Hah! Hi! Hah!'") or their faces as they move west ("brown face after brown face went by") (Wilder, *Prairie* 306)? Readers

who are familiar with the Little House books can thus be empowered by *The Game of Silence* to reflect upon the forms of communication through which they learn history, and to formulate questions that Laura—herself contained within the black marks—cannot ask.

Even though Erdrich, through Omakayas's perspective, reveals the problematic and privileged aspects of writing, the ending of *The Game of Silence* also reveals that writing is a vital way to give voice to histories previously silenced by other written texts, ranging from broken government treaties and beloved historical fiction series. As the Ojibwe are forced to leave their homes and travel into Bwaanag territory, Omakayas twice wants to express her feelings but twice she cannot, first for emotional and then for practical reasons. First, as Omakayas prepares to leave her home, "she wanted to sob with fury. She tried a few deep sighs, even tried to make crying sounds, but her sadness and anger was too big. It was a stone" (Erdrich, *Game* 240). Then, as Omakayas floats with her family down the narrow river "through the tree-confined woods of the country of the dangerous Bwaanag," she once again cannot speak: "Along the shore there were ears, and eyes, and enemies who resented the Ojibwe entering their territory and would gladly attack….The children bit their lips and held their tongues, for they all understood…that the game of silence was now a game of life and death" (247-248). In both instances, Omakayas, like Laura during the scene when the Indians ride into the western horizon, cannot say what she means. The reason for the girls' uncommunicativeness are also tied to their specific cultural and historical circumstances. However, the difference is that the emotional turmoil and physical danger of Omakayas's historical situation render her unable to say *anything* let alone

articulate the subtleties of what she means. Laura's language is messy and complicated, but it is given a voice and captured in writing. In other words, Laura's historical position as a white, girl settler allows her to look and shout and sob at the movement of American Indians into the west, while Omakayas's historical position as an Ojibwa girl does not allow her to speak at all. This key difference reflects the silencing of Omakayas's history, and the amplification of Laura's. But just as the difference between silence and speech is a matter of life and death to the Ojibwe crossing the river into Bwaanag territory, it also determines the life or death of their history. The Birchbark series brings a once silent history into writing, which in turn offers new ways to understand the many histories of the American west.

Attempts to give voice to silent American histories in series books, including frontier histories, were already beginning to form in the mid-twentieth century. As Wilder's Little House series came to an end in 1943, Lois Lenski's influential but less enduring series featuring girls' perspectives of American regional history began. Lenski's Regional America series (1943-1968) comprises 17 novels that tell the stories of children living in various regions of America that were often absent in books for children—from Florida frontier communities of the early twentieth-century, to Cajun fishing villages in the Louisiana bayou, to San Francisco's Chinatown. In addition to the diversity of perspectives presented in the regional series, the overt political attitude that infuses the production of Lenski's series stands in opposition to the Little House books' individualistic, anti-New Deal libertarianism. In fact, much of the secondary source material Lenski used to construct her regional series was funded by New Deal projects. For instance, Lenski consulted the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) *Guide to*

Florida (1939) as well as Stetson Kennedy's WPA funded *Palmetto Country* (1942) to reconstruct the early twentieth-century Florida frontier setting of the Newbery Award-winning and most well-known installment of her regional series, *Strawberry Girl* (1945) (Lenski, *Strawberry* xii). The difference in the political foundation of the series' production also comes through in the text. While Laura's family carries out a vision of national progress by domesticating the land upon which they have displaced others, Lenski's girl heroines are often part of families and communities that struggle to benefit from systems of national progress. Sometimes they are successful, and sometimes they are not. In this way, Lenski's regional series shifts questions about girls' relationship to history. The Little Maid series and the Little House books explore how the American girl negotiates the personal, cultural, and political meanings of girlhood in order to understand herself and her relationship to the larger historical events that affect her life. Lenski's series brings up the question of whether or not all girls have the privilege and power to act in productive ways within historical situations in which they are intensely disadvantaged by their social, racial, and economic circumstances.

CHAPTER 4
THE VIEW FROM OTHER LITTLE HOUSES: CONSTRUCTING GIRLS' RELATIONSHIPS TO HISTORY IN LOIS LENSKI'S REGIONAL AMERICA SERIES

Lois Lenski was a prolific and popular mid-twentieth century children's author and illustrator who created many influential works for children in various forms: picture books, poems, songs, short stories, and historical fiction. Her Regional America series is generally considered to be her "most distinguished contribution to the field of children's literature" (Jacobs 261). The 17 novels that make up the series are quite a contribution indeed, depicting American places and periods that were often overlooked in children's books. The idea for the regional series came to Lenski when she travelled to Louisiana and became fascinated with the small, bayou village of Lafitte. It "opened [her] eyes to the great diversity of pattern in the ways of life of America," and formed the basis of the first installment of the regional series, *Bayou Suzette* (1943) (Lenski, *Journey* 187). From there, Lenski attempted to capture the diversity of America's past and present ways of life with installments such as *Judy's Journey* (1947), about a family of migrant workers, *Boom Town Boy* (1948), about an Oklahoma family during the 1920s oil boom, and *Coal Camp Girl* (1959), about a West Virginia mining community. Lenski herself wrote numerous essays, articles, and speeches describing the ambitious purpose behind her regional series: to get middle-class, suburban children to "know [their] country better" (Lenski, "Seeing" 280). More specifically, Lenski wanted children to know how individual lives, including their own, are shaped by the larger social and economic structures of their nation. Lenski lamented the tendency of children's fiction to portray "the average, innocuous middle-class American family," with "a good home and large yard," and "a good income from some imaginary, unmentioned source." She noted

that some stories go even further in their fantastical portrayal of the economic factors of American family life, citing a book in which “a baby pays off the mortgage” (“Are Your Books” 2). Lenski felt that these social and economic fantasies disempowered child readers by disengaging them from national realities. Lenski wanted her books to expose children to the diverse ways in which American children and families lived and made their livings across the country, and to use this knowledge to build an awareness of their own privileges and political responsibilities.

Lenski believed the mission of her series was especially necessary for middle-class girls, who she felt were too often given “anemic Pollyanna stories” that not only failed to tell them anything about the economic, social, and racial realities of their nation, but also presented an unrealistic picture of the roles children play regarding the social and economic circumstances of their families and communities (“Seeing” 284):

> I need not mention the stereotyped, glamorized heroes and heroines—those insufferable prigs, those models of perfection, those wonderful miracle-workers, those solvers of all mysteries whose like never existed except in books. In real life, a child can *never* change the economic situation of the family, or take them from poverty to sudden riches. . . . But in real life, a child’s character can grow and develop, it can be shaped and changed by circumstances and by human relations. (“Are Your Books” 2)

Lenski thought it important that books for young people present children not as transcendent “miracle-workers” but as complex human beings, grounded in and shaped by their personal relationships as well as their social and historical circumstances. By naming girls as the particular targets of narratives that gloss over social realities in favor of “glamorized” narratives in which children magically solve all manner of problems, Lenski recognizes the cultural impulse to keep girls innocent of political realities and responsibilities, and seeks to confront it in her series. As such, she often centered her regional books on girl heroines, whose stories contradict the idea that girls’ lives are

untouched by the sometimes harsh social and economic systems of the nation, and who Lenski used to cultivate her young readers' political consciousness. Lenski explains the political purpose of engagement with such stories is to prepare her child readers (and especially girl readers) for future participation in the political processes that determine these conditions: "in ten years," Lenski writes, "they will be voters….Why shouldn't they begin now to think a little?" ("Seeing" 285).

Lenski's contemporaries applauded this project. Writing in the education journal *Elementary English* in 1953, Leland B. Jacobs praises Lenski for "valu[ing] children as a great national resource," and for creating books based on the idea that "children must come to grips with philosophical and sociological matters that touch the hearts and minds of boys and girls intimately" (263). Current scholars also find much to admire about Lenski's regional series. Julia Mickenberg, for example, positions the series as part of the growing body of "problem books" in the 1930s-1940s—stories that depicted daily lived experiences of disadvantaged groups, and raised awareness about relevant social and political issues "heretofore regarded as taboo for young people" (Josette Frank, qtd. in Mickenberg 100). Mickenberg and Philip Nel even include Lenski's series in their *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* for its depiction of labor issues (59-61). Gary D. Schmidt notes that Lenski's goal was "not unlike that of John Steinbeck: to suggest that the American scene was more complicated than it might appear" by writing books "based on real-life events that she herself had witnessed or that she had researched" (88-89). Indeed, the exhaustive research methods Lenski used to create the Regional series play a major role in its critical acclaim. In addition to researching histories of the area, Lenski traveled to each

region she wrote about—sketching and photographing natural and man-made landmarks, talking to locals and participating in their work and daily routines, and taking copious notes on dialects, conversations, local history, folklore, and the joys and hardships of everyday life.

As other scholars have pointed out, however, Lenski's project is riddled with pointed ideological questions, particularly regarding Lenski's authorial position. How can an outsider—especially one who occupies the dominant culture and its economic and educational privileges—understand and portray the "real-life" of other regions, cultures, and communities? Julia Pond suggests that Lenski remained inattentive to how her own social, economic, racial, and artistic positions infused her depiction of life in various American regions (53). Indeed, the mid-century American white, middle-class values of domesticity, consumerism, femininity, the nuclear family, and formal education are often celebrated in the series, despite the series' ostensible aim to broaden young people's horizons beyond the worldviews of the "average, innocuous middle-class American family." Lois R. Kuznets similarly addresses the superficiality of Lenski's series, arguing that Lenski fails to adequately reflect upon or explain the ideological choices she made in the "process of transforming…raw material into a novel" (101). Choices such as: "*plot*, where to begin or end and which incidents to emphasize; *character*, which family or child to use as main characters or protagonists; and *point of view*, how much emphasis to put on inner consciousness and how much on outer action" are never addressed. (Kuznets 102; original emphasis). "Have all these choices…been made effortlessly?" Kuznets asks, acknowledging Lenski's commitment to gathering first-hand stories about

various regions but calling into question her attention to the complexities of shaping these “real life stories into art” for children (102).

While Lenski does not offer any written examination of how her ideological and aesthetic choices shape the regions she portrays, there are eleven substantial Lois Lenski Collections housed in university libraries all over the country containing a massive body of materials that document Lenski’s creation of the regional series. These collections include editorial correspondence, photographs, notes, newspaper articles, and sketches that all provide insight into the complex process of shaping regional history into stories for children.[1] Examining Lenski’s archival materials alongside her regional series provides evocative evidence of how historical novels for children reflect the worldview of their author, and also of the empowering and disempowering ways that these reflections situate girls in relation to history and politics. This chapter examines two key installments of the regional series—*Strawberry Girl* (1945) and *Mama Hattie’s Girl* (1953)—in light of archival materials that illustrate how they were constructed, specifically Lenski’s editorial correspondence. *Strawberry Girl*, set in early-twentieth century backwoods Florida, envisions the American girl as a powerful agent of individual and familial progress even in the midst of difficult historical circumstances. I argue that

[1] In addition to the insight the archival materials provide into the construction of Lenski’s regional series, it is important to note that Lenski herself understood these materials as central to the meaning of her series, and was unusually “proactive” in assuring their preservation by sending them to university archives (Murphy 555). This suggests that Lenski was aware that the process of creating historical fiction for children necessitates the recording and preserving of the many voices her series contains, even if she was unaware of the extent to which her own voice shaped the series’ portrayal of regional history. Major Lois Lenski Collections can be found at the University of Mississippi’s de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection and the University of Oklahoma’s Western History Collections, both of which I draw upon in this chapter. Other Lois Lenski collections can be found at: University of Minnesota’s Kerlan Collection, Syracuse University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Florida State University, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Illinois State University, University of California, Berkeley, Buffalo State College, and Arkansas State University.

Lenski thus positions the white, American girl in a privileged relationship with history. She is affected but not contained by the disadvantages of her historical circumstances, and while she cannot enact structural change, she is ultimately able to lift herself and her family out of the way of harmful social and political forces. *Mama Hattie's Girl*, the only regional installment to feature an African American protagonist, demonstrates that presenting girls as social and historical agents is more difficult when Lenski attempts to work through the burdens of past and present racial ideologies. The novel, meant to offer a slice of contemporary history concerning African American communities in the north and south, follows a black girl as she ponders various ways of understanding herself in relation to her social world, and is ultimately unable to enact personal, social, or economic progress. Lenski's imagining of two different American girlhoods in the same series reveals the privileges and burdens of history on girls' lives.

Strawberry Girl and Historical Privilege

Strawberry Girl, the Newbery Award-winning second installment of Lenski's regional series, follows 10-year-old Birdie Boyer and her "Florida Cracker" family as they farm, make a home, and engage in a culture war with their cattle-driving neighbors in turn-of-the-century Polk County.[2] Amongst the events that occur in this backwoods Florida story are the obligatory alligator run-in, snake trouble, and cane grinding frolic, complete with some mean fiddling. There is also a male schoolteacher who two students "beat up to a jelly" (Lenski, *Strawberry* 38), a traveling dentist who pulls a

[2] According to the Work Projects Administration's *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, the term "cracker" as it was used to refer to settlers in Florida specifically derives from the skillful cracking of bullwhips, which early Florida settlers used to signal the progress of oxen hauling timber or turpentine through the woods. It later took on the negative connotations of "a gaunt, shiftless person" (128).

rotten tooth from Birdie's little brother and then from the Boyers' mule, and the neighbor, Mr. Slater, who shoots the heads off all his wife's chickens in a drunken binge. In the novel's foreword, Lenski describes the story's historical setting: "In the early 1900's, the date of my story, Florida was still frontier country, with vast stretches of unexplored wilderness…and her towns were frontier towns thirty and forty years later than the same frontier period in the Middle West" (*Strawberry x*). Lenski's desire to explore a particular and often overlooked history through the eyes of an American girl was met with both approval and resistance from Lenski's editor, Helen Dean Fish, who loved the book but objected to some episodes of "cruelty and unhappiness," which she felt might "bother a sensitive child" (25 Aug. 1944). Fish especially took issue with "the ugly incident of beating up the schoolteacher" (22 Aug. 1944). Lenski stood firmly behind her decisions, however, writing that *Strawberry Girl* was decidedly not a story about "some pretty-pretty fairy land of the imagination," but rather was meant to describe the real "frontier community" in early-twentieth century central Florida, including its "crudities, brutalities and cruelties" (26 Aug. 1944). Indeed, Birdie and her family are intricately involved in an often brutal debate of the Florida frontier period concerning the dispute between cattle-drivers who adhered to the "open-range system of grazing livestock," which allowed cattle and hogs to roam free and feed on whatever they could find, and farmers who raised cash crops and penned and fed their livestock (McWhiney 51). In keeping with Lenski's goal to write stories that capture how children's lives are affected by the economic, environmental, and social factors of where they live, much of the novel's dramatic action comes from the Slaters' open-range hogs damaging the Boyers' carefully plowed strawberry fields, and Birdie's attempts to protect her family's

livelihood. By defending her portrayal of the girl's presence amidst difficult historical realities in the foreword and in her editorial correspondence, Lenski envisions girls as having agency in real historical settings, instead of in "fairy lands of the imagination."

However, Lenski's depictions of the Boyers and the Slaters encapsulate much more than a historical dramatization of the early-twentieth century open-range debate. Although both the Slaters and the Boyers identify as "Florida Cracker" families, it is clear that the Slaters are meant to represent the "traditional Cracker way of life" in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Central Florida, while Birdie and the Boyers espouse popular mid-twentieth century values of domesticity, consumerism, and entrepreneurship, which took on particular value near the end of WWII, the time in which Lenski produced the novel (Arsenault 130). The novel's prologue, which focuses on the Slaters, and the first chapter, which focuses on the Boyers, make this juxtaposition clear. The prologue opens with 7-year-old Essie Slater's efforts to restrain her family's cow from traipsing into the Boyer's grove and ruining their orange trees. Her concern is met with her father's staunch decision to "'Let that cow go where she's a mind to'"—the first indication of how the Slater's open-range practices threaten the Boyers' property (Lenski, *Strawberry* 4). In addition to Mr. Slater's adherence to open-range, Lenski's depiction of the Slaters reaffirms what Julia Pond argues is the reductive view of Cracker culture found in the Florida history books that Lenski cites as research sources (53). For instance, the Work Projects Administration's Florida Guide describes the slow and "simple" lifestyle traditionally associated with Florida Crackers, as well their tendency to "resent intrusion and be suspicious of unfamiliar things and persons" (*Florida* 129). In the prologue, Mr. Slater leans backward in his chair with his

eyes closed, speaking slowly. When he learns that he has new neighbors: “The legs of the man’s chair came down on the porch floor with a thump. He opened his eyes. ‘What new folks?’” (Lenski, *Strawberry* 3). Mrs. Slater, whose voice is heard twice from within the house accompanied by a “clatter of dishes” and “the crying of the baby” similarly suggests the domestic disorder often coupled with descriptions of the Cracker lifestyle in the Florida regional history books (1, 3). Essie is the only one who is interested in engaging positively with the Boyers. She knows that the Boyers have a daughter around her age, and “in her mind she carried a bright picture of the new Boyer girl” (4). But Essie’s desire to forge positive relations with this bright, new presence is impeded by Mr. Slater’s resentfulness at the Boyers’ intrusion. He lets the cow roam on, and expresses pride in the fact that the animal is going to “‘make trouble’” for the Boyers. As the prologue makes clear, in Cracker culture men are dangerously backward, women are drowning in domestic disarray, and girls cannot change their circumstances, even if they have “bright” ideas about “new” people and things.

While the prologue foreshadows the central plot conflict of the novel—the Slater’s open-range practices threatening the Boyers’ commercial endeavors to grow and sell oranges and strawberries—the cultural stakes of this conflict become clear in the first chapter, as the Slaters’ historical “Cracker” culture conflicts with the Boyers’ modern confidence in middle-class domesticity and commercial ventures. The chapter begins with Birdie happily picking dead leaves off of the pink geraniums she has planted in lard buckets, exclaiming: “‘The pink geranium’s a-bloomin…Hit shore is purty!’” (5). In addition to making things grow, Birdie has a clever idea to make the flowers even more attractive by purchasing blue paint for the lard buckets: “‘Did I get some blue paint and

paint the lard buckets, Ma, they'd look a sight purtier, wouldn't they?'" (6). The word "purty" is repeated nine times over the course of the nine-page chapter to describe Birdie's actions or the Boyers' home and possessions. Lenski indicates the economic and personal impact of the Boyers' pretty ways by contrasting it to the Slaters' uncouth ones. In a loaded description, Birdie and her mother watch as Mrs. Slater and her children approach the Boyers' house to borrow a cup of sugar: "[t]he woman and children plowed the loose, dry sand with their bare feet. With each step forward, they seemed to slip a trifle backward, so their progress was slow" (6-7). As much as Mrs. Slater and the children attempt to move forward, their environment keeps them "backward," and their progress is ultimately slow (7). Once inside the Boyers' home, the Slaters remain backward in their attitude toward the Boyers' fine domestic fixtures, and slow to accept the Boyers' modern farming practices. Mrs. Boyer tells a flabbergasted Mrs. Slater about their plans to sell oranges and strawberries: "'Sell things? Messin' with things to sell? . . . Then you'll purely starve to death. . . nothin' won't grow here in Floridy." Mrs. Slater is also befuddled at Mrs. Boyers' suggestion that feeding and penning cows instead of letting them roam free allows the cows to provide the family with good milk and butter (8-9). Mrs. Slater is both suspicious of the Boyers' modern ideas and offended at the material evidence of their success: the Boyers' home is filled with "wonders" such as combs, mirrors, and table-clothes. When Mrs. Boyer takes down a "pretty flowered plate from the shelf," a bristling Mrs. Slater responds: "'Don't bother to show me no more of your fine fixin's. Guess we know now how biggity you folks is, without seein' nothin' more'" (13). Mrs. Slater's rejection of the Boyers' success as

“biggity” suggests both jealousy and an obdurate refusal to recognize the benefits of modern farming practices such as selling products and penning livestock.

Birdie has better luck in her encounter with the Slater girls, and her domesticating actions regarding them are imbued with political and economic significance. Birdie leads the girls, Essie and Zephy, to the back porch, where she “comb[s] out their short, straggly hair” and washes their “thin, pale faces.” She finds that once they are washed and combed, the girls’ “features were fine,” and their hair “looked soft and pretty….In the bright sunshine, it shone like warm, glistening silver” (10). In many ways, this civilizing, feminizing, and relational action is typical of girls’ social responses to daily life amidst harsh environments in historical fiction series. However, Lenski’s editorial correspondence reveals a crucial economic motivation to Birdie’s actions. Lenski avidly objected to the proposed dust jacket note for the novel, which characterized Birdie as a “‘friendly little girl.’” Lenski explains that “Birdie is never trying, consciously, to ‘get along’ with her neighbors. She is trying to help her family make a living” amidst the often unyielding culture and landscape of central Florida. Part of the unyielding Floridian forces are the Slaters themselves, who Lenski explains exist in the story as “obstacles” to the Boyers’ quest for education and economic success, in addition to other factors such as “drouth [sic], fire, roving hogs and cows, etc.” (17 Mar. 1945). Because the Slaters are an “obstacle” to the Boyers’ social and economic success, Birdie’s discovery of the Slater girls’ “fine” features underneath all the dirt, and spinning of their straggly hair into “glistening silver” reveals the political significance of Birdie’s girlish actions.

It also signals the complex meanings of Birdie’s agency regarding her historical situation. Birdie’s economically motivated civilizing actions at once forge personal bonds

with Essie and Zephy, better her own family's chance for economic success, and reinforce a political narrative of progress that equates other cultures with natural disasters and wild animals. In this way, Birdie not only acts as "a literary device to explore the conflicts that arose as commercial agriculture and the values of the marketplace superseded the traditional self-sufficient farmer and Cracker culture," but as a primary force through which modern values displace previous ways of living off the land (Davis 11). Birdie thus occupies a privileged position in relation to her own historical circumstances. Because she is aligned with the attitudes and values that characterize the progressive future, she exists outside of the culture that is being "superseded." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Lenski's illustrations of Birdie examined alongside photographs Lenski took in central Florida as she conducted research for the novel. The Lois Lenski Collection at Florida State University includes a photograph of a young girl pushing a plow, described as "the inspiration for the main character, Birdie Boyer" (Lenski, "Photograph"). The girl in the photograph squints from the sun, but still manages to fix the camera with a direct gaze and frank expression. Her chin-length hair is windswept, and her coarse dress is darkened in places from dirt and the shadows cast by the plow. Lenski's illustrations of Birdie make pointed changes to her appearance. In the first illustration of Birdie, appearing before the prologue and titled "Birdie Boyer," Lenski replaces the frank gaze with demure and downcast eyes, the windblown hair with pigtails looped up and tied neatly with ribbon, the plow with a broom, and the coarse dress with a lighter one that creates an hourglass shape. In Lenski's illustrations, Birdie is the ideal image of mid-century domestic femininity, perfectly exhibiting Sara Schwebel's notion that a historical fiction text tells dual stories

about the time period in which it is set *and* the time period in which it is written: "historical novels are always products of a particular historical context. As a result, their characters and historical arguments reflect the knowledge, politics, and worldview of authors at a particular moment in time" (3).

The historical argument that Birdie makes as she tends to her lard bucket flowers and spins the Slater children's tangled hair into silver—standing confidently over both the garden and the children brandishing not farming tools but a ladle and comb—is that the present values of American mid-century domesticity wield productive power over the wild, uncultivated, and violent environments of the past. Birdie's desire to combat wild and dangerous threats to her family's way of life via resourceful homemaking and productive consumption aligns with the increasing national importance of domesticity and consumption during Lenski's own historical moment: WWII and the early postwar years. In this way, Birdie's recycling of lard buckets for use as flower pots in a makeshift garden as well as her idea to make the buckets "purtier" by painting them blue reflects cultural confidence in domesticity as an empowering response to the disturbances of war. As *Strawberry Girl* was published in 1945, domestic magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* featured stories of women restoring health, happiness, and harmony to homes torn apart by the war via resourceful housekeeping and interior decoration. One article about a war widow and mother struggling to recover emotionally and economically from the loss of her husband suggests that she create a special mother-daughter room, and "harmonize" the space by painting all of the furniture and accessories in it to match. This domestic, feminine space, harmonized via matching paint, is supposed to serve as a powerful curative for the losses of war (Janeway n.p.).

Another article about a woman whose husband suffers from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder suggests that she tame this now "wild" presence in the house with delicious meals served on attractive dinnerware (Furnas n.p.). According to the domestic ideology of Lenski's historical context, then, Birdie's idea to paint the lard buckets blue, and her family's possession of pretty plates and tablecloths are not merely resourceful, but work to maintain peace and prosperity in an otherwise disturbed environment.

Historical fiction that uses the past to celebrate the present is of course nothing new. As Elizabeth Long writes, popular historical fiction of the postwar era was especially prone to use the past to "provide an exotic shell in which one can see the operation of contemporary values in exaggerated form" (64). Indeed, sometimes Lenski's focus on the eccentric or even grotesque aspects of early twentieth-century backwoods Florida (a traveling dentist that pulls teeth from animals and humans alike, Mr. Slater's drunken execution of his wife's chickens) turns Birdie's world into an "exotic" set piece that evokes the Southern Gothic as well as popular literary representations of the south in general. Margie Burns writes that stereotypical literary representations of impoverished southern cultures depict a "rebellious" and "primitive" class, "*stuck*—in the boonies, in ignorance, in prejudice…with degenerate histories miring them down" (106). This certainly describes Lenski's depiction of the Slaters, and thus Birdie's conflict with them is not only a validation of present cultures and values over past ones, but revelatory of Lenski's belief about who is trapped by "degenerate histories" and who is not. Crucially, despite all of the "obstacles" Birdie faces to education and advancement, she progresses beyond the violence and paralysis that characterizes representations of her history and culture. For instance, Birdie works to

help her family to make a living on their farm, but she also has a personal desire for education and art, through which she glimpses a life different from the one she currently lives, full of the stresses of having to protect her family's plowed fields from the Slaters' open-range hogs. When Birdie attends church, she is taken with the organ music as well as with the young woman who plays it: "A pretty young woman with curly hair played the organ. As Birdie watched her fingers move over the keys, she forgot all about the hog chase of the night before. The organ music was rich and melodious. It was the nicest music she had ever heard" (Lenski, *Strawberry* 41). When Birdie learns that the woman's name is Miss Annie Laurie Dunnaway, she decides the name is "almost as pretty as the organ music," thus associating Miss Dunnaway herself with the power to transcend the hardships of one's life (41-42). Birdie admires Miss Dunnaway greatly, and is dumbstruck when Miss Dunnaway tells her that she might learn to play the organ one day: "'You like it?' asked the organist. 'You play the organ too?' 'No ma'am,' gulped Birdie. 'Only…I'd like to.' 'Maybe you will some day,' said Miss Dunnaway. 'I…' Birdie could not speak" (42). Birdie's halting speech indicates her awe at the prospect of playing the organ as well as the difficulties of expressing a personal aspiration that is so removed from her everyday reality of protecting her family's farm from natural and human threats.

The difficulties of cultivating and achieving such interests and aspirations are reiterated when she encounters Shoestring, a Slater boy around her age, in the churchyard. Shoestring, having caught a live snake, boasts that he would "'whirl it by the tail till its head drops off!'" (46). When he does, the snake accidentally hits Birdie in the head, knocking off her beloved new Sunday hat and provoking her violent rage:

> She was so angry she wanted to kill him. She hated him with a cold hard hate. She hated his overalls and his black felt hat. She hated this thin face, tight mouth and half-shut eyes. She hated every bone in his skinny body. Her anger was black enough to kill him, but he ran so fast she could not catch him. She came back to the church, went in and sat down beside her mother. She took her hat off and dropped it on the floor. She never wanted to see it or wear it again. She was trembling all over. She could not sing any more. (47)

The Slaters do not just threaten the Boyers' livelihood. Birdie's enjoyment of the organ music and her new Sunday hat—both representing aesthetic pleasure as well as social advancement—are blunted by Shoestring and the economic and cultural impoverishment he represents with his "skinny body," his "thin face, tight mouth, and half-shut eyes." Birdie's first impulse is violence, quickly followed by paralysis ("she could not sing anymore"), which is in keeping with stereotypical portrayals of backwoods southern culture. Indeed, in the beginning of the book, Birdie's family is also stuck momentarily in the cycle of violence. Her father cuts the tips of the ears off the Slaters' hogs after they trample the Boyers' crops, and even her mother's idea to sprinkle flour on their crops to trick the Slaters into thinking it is poison backfires when Mr. Slater actually does poison the Boyers' mule. While these moments are indicative of the violence typical in literary portrayals of the south, they also stem from conversations Lenski had during her research in Lakeland, Florida. In a draft of a letter to Fish, Lenski explains that she "heard so many stories in [Florida] of animals being maimed, killed outright, or poisoned during the Open Range controversy." She goes on to explain that "these people became furious with each other and being hot-tempered and always carrying knives and guns, and being more or less drunk, what else could you expect?" (Sept. 8 1944). This explanation reveals how the cycle of violence that characterizes

Birdie's surroundings are a combination of first-hand research and southern stereotypes.

Rather than being bound to this cycle, however, Birdie draws on her powers of civilization and domestication and applies them to both the Slaters' wild animals and the Slaters' wild ways. Birdie and her family tame the Slaters' hogs by feeding and caring for them. The hogs stop trampling on the Boyers' crops and instead "come to the back door sniffing for slops" (Lenski, *Strawberry* 138). Birdie tames the snake-throwing Shoestring Slater in the same way. When Shoestring's mother is too ill to feed him, "hunger drove him as far as the back door….Birdie hid cornbread and biscuit under her apron and took them out to him" (180). Feeding Shoestring provokes his apology to the Boyers for "all the trouble us Slaters has made for you-all," and later, when Birdie proudly "present[s]" Shoestring to the new schoolteacher, she promises that he won't make any trouble there, either (182, 190). Since it was Shoestring's older brothers whose fight with the previous teacher shut down the school, Birdie's taming efforts help protect her family's farm and her education. Thus, Birdie is able to transcend difficult, extreme, and grotesquely imagined historical circumstances in order to advance herself and her family. She is not, in other words, "mired down" by history or by historical stereotypes. Rather, Birdie occupies a privileged relationship to history that is characterized by her ability to engage with but not be completely constrained by the disadvantages and hardships that define her specific historical circumstances as well as representations of them.

Birdie is not only unconstrained by her surroundings, but plays a role in perpetuating the historical representations that she transcends. After all, her 'taming' of

Shoestring by offering him food when he sidles up to the back door directly equates him with his family's wild animals. The connection between the Slater family and their animals is even more pronounced when, on adjacent pages, Birdie has similar unwelcome encounters with the Slater hogs and then the Slater girls. First the Slater hogs come to the Boyers' back door "sniffing for slops and Birdie had to drag them away and put them outside the fence." Then, Birdie hears Essie and Zephy hanging around her house, "scuttling down the steps like scared rabbits," and she similarly drags them off her property (138-139). The illustrations create a clear parallel between the hogs and the girls. In the first image, Birdie's arms stretch out behind her as she walks forward, dragging a hog by its back legs. In the image on the facing page, Birdie holds the wrists of the two Slater girls in each hand and drags them behind her in the same way. In the illustration with the girls, Birdie's brow is furrowed and her mouth tenses up into an expression of disgust. While Birdie often treats the Slater girls with kindness, illustrations such as these reveal how Birdie's own privileged ability to transcend her historical setting prevents her from recognizing connections to others in her community who also suffer from economic and educational disadvantages. Indeed, despite the fact that the book begins with Essie's voice and perspective, she only resurfaces a few times in the novel, usually as a dirty and hungry figure and the "picture of distress" (24). It would be easy enough to forget about her entirely, or lump her in with the rest of the Slaters, except for the fact that the prologue provides us with distinct, engaging details about her personality, grit, and aspirations. Her voice is "slow, soft and sweet," she is "only seven" but is "not afraid of her father" (2-3). Further, the "bright picture" she has of Birdie and of a potential relationship with her mirrors Birdie's hesitant but hopeful

fascination with Miss Dunnaway: "'They got a gal…' began Essie. She looked at her father's frowning face and paused. In her mind she carried a bright picture of the new Boyer girl whom she hoped to have for a friend. She did not want it spoiled" (4). Essie Slater and Birdie Boyer are both girls whose environments make it difficult to obtain what they desire. But instead of recognizing this connection and the larger systematic issues it speaks to, Birdie's historical agency enables her to escape rather than address them.

The ending of *Strawberry Girl* places the resolution of the Boyer/Slater family feud within larger political and environmental shifts occurring in Florida, and further reveals how Birdie's privileged relationship to history affords herself and her family an escape from disadvantageous historical shifts. A string of events occurs that brings the feud between the Boyers and the Slaters to a crisis and resolution. First, Mr. Slater sets a grass fire that destroys the school, almost burns down the Boyer house, and nearly kills Essie and Zephy, who had been playing in the brush on the Boyer's property. Then, while Mr. Slater is off carousing, Mrs. Slater and the children fall seriously ill. Birdie and her mother enter the Slater home and work around the clock to nurse them back to health, cook for them, and get their house in order. Birdie and her mother's domestic actions not only save the lives of Mrs. Slater and her children, but also inspire Mrs. Slater to conform to their domestic values. Instead of letting her cow roam free, Mrs. Slater plans to pen it so that her children will always have fresh milk, and she plans to raise and sell produce. Birdie and Mrs. Boyer's actions also play a role in changing Mr. Slater's violent ways. A preacher named Brother Jackson is given much credit for Mr. Slater's conversion into a "peaceable" man, but he first comes to recognize the error of

his ways through the Boyers' actions toward his sick family: "'Did I not have kind, forgivin' neighbors, they'd a been dead'" (185). Like Mrs. Slater's adaptation to the Boyers' modern, domestic ways, Mr. Slater plans to give up his livelihood as an open-range cattleman for a job as a dynamiter at the newly built phosphate mine, "foreshadowing," as Kathleen Hardee Arsenault argues, "the new Florida to come" (132). The final chapter also suggests a great change for Birdie herself. Not only will she attend the newly re-opened school with Miss Dunnaway as a teacher, but her family has made enough money to buy Birdie an organ and organ lessons. Thus, she will presumably follow in the footsteps of her idol, Miss Dunnaway, and teach school and play the organ in church on Sundays instead of farming and selling strawberries. In this way, Birdie's projected individual progress, as well as her domestication of the Slaters, seems harmoniously linked to the coming of the "new" Florida.

However, Arsenault rightly argues that while *Strawberry Girl* ends on an ostensibly happy note regarding the Boyer/Slater feud, the novel does not view the historical shifts in store for Florida uncritically. Arsenault points out that while Mr. Boyer appreciates the Slaters' newly peaceable ways, he views developments such as the phosphate mines "with trepidation" because of the massive damage they do to farmland: "Lenski implies that Cracker culture's casual interpersonal violence was being superseded by violence to the landscape. Polk County's massive phosphate pits and the air pollution resulting from their processing plants provided ample support for Lenski's concern" (132). Birdie's domestication of the Slaters—while it helps her to achieve personal goals and her family to make an immediate living—is ultimately channeled into the destruction of the region for national commercial interests. But

although the destructive qualities of this historical shift are implied, Birdie herself is developing the means to escape them and thus it is difficult to interpret *Strawberry Girl* as a critique of modernization. After all, Birdie's livelihood as a future schoolteacher and organist does not tie her to the central Florida landscape that will soon be damaged by the phosphate companies. In a letter to Fish, Lenski calls Birdie's organ the "symbol" of her education and advancement (17 Mar. 1945). And indeed, Mrs. Boyer calls it a gift "'for Strawberry Girl and for all of us,'" suggesting the power of the organ to save the Boyers from suffering disadvantages due to the historical shifts occurring in central Florida (Lenski, *Strawberry* 192). By showing how Birdie's personal happiness and advancement occur despite the modernization of Florida, *Strawberry Girl* at once shows how girls are vulnerable to large historical shifts outside of their control, and gives them agency to escape direct harm wrought by these shifts if they adhere to contemporary values of domesticity, femininity, consumption, and formal education. At the novel's conclusion, Mr. Slater will now channel his wildness into a project that won't hurt target the Boyers' farm specifically, but will damage Florida farms in a larger and more systematic way. Birdie cannot herself change this larger structure of power, but through education and cultural advancement can find ways to benefit from or at least not be disadvantaged by it.

Although Lenski claims, then, that "a child can *never* change the economic situation of the family, or take them from poverty to sudden riches," in *Strawberry Girl* she imbues the figure of the white, American girl who adheres to mid-twentieth century, middle-class conventions of girlhood with the power to lift, at least gradually, her family out of disadvantageous economic and social circumstances. By doing so, Lenski

envisions her as unburdened by her historical surroundings—indeed, Birdie is able to combat the violence and impoverishment of her surroundings precisely because she herself has not internalized them. In Birdie's case, history does not weigh her down. As with the Little Maids in Chapter 1 and Little House's Laura in Chapter 2, Birdie is a privileged historical actor: able to see, participate in, and negotiate the impact of historical change within the scope of her own girlhood. It is no surprise, of course, that all of these heroines are white. As I have discussed in the introduction, Robin Bernstein, Lauren Berlant, and others argue that the figure of the white girl is specifically associated with political, social, and historical innocence: she is "not yet bruised by history. . . . still innocent of knowledge, agency, and accountability" (Berlant 6). Curtis, Wilder, and Lenski all use the white girl's initial innocence to effectively portray the development of historical knowledge and pose incipient questions about agency and accountability. In the end, however, these girls remain "unbruised" or unburdened by the violence and injustices of the histories in which they live because of their privileged ability to shift between the roles of historical agent and historical innocent.

Mama Hattie's Girl and the Burdens of History

What about, however, the girls who cannot escape the forces of systematic injustices such as racial prejudice? Girls whose access to education and advancement is not achievable through individual grit and hard work? Girls who are undoubtedly bruised by history? Earlier historical fiction series made no attempt to focus on the experiences of girls of color, and how national events, ideologies, and policies affect their lives, and their ability to gain individual happiness within their social worlds. In addition to the archival presence of the Regional series, then, Lenski's series is notable in the history of girls' historical fiction series for its inclusion of heroines of color. The

ninth installment of the regional series, *Mama Hattie's Girl* (1953), is a contemporary story featuring an African American girl named Lula Bell who moves from the south to the north with her family to make a better living. Like Birdie in *Strawberry Girl*, Lula Bell encounters many obstacles to economic and educational advancement. Unlike Birdie, however, Lula Bell is unable to propel herself out of her disadvantaged social circumstances, which are burdened by the weight of America's racial history. While there is by no means a wealth of scholarship regarding Lenski's series as a whole, the absence of any critical work concerning *Mama Hattie's Girl* seems an especially large missed opportunity, given its status as the only installment starring a black girl in a larger series about raising the social consciousness of white, middle-class girls, written during a time in which "the quantity" of children's books that portrayed black people as "ordinary, recognizable human beings…was relatively small" (Bishop 226). This critical absence is due in part to the fact that *Mama Hattie's Girl* is a series book, and thus is likely to get lost or lumped within the stated goals of the popular and successful larger series. However, while *Mama Hattie's Girl* is part of the Regional series, key differences exist between this novel and other installments such as *Strawberry Girl*. These differences reveal how the racial ideologies of 1950s America, bound together with the nation's fraught racial history, complicate Lenski's construction of the black girl's negotiation of personal and political identity.

Differences are apparent immediately in the book's front matter. The foreword is a mere three paragraphs, which seems truncated when compared to *Strawberry Girl*'s eight paragraphs of explanation about the setting of the story and its cultural mission regarding the social knowledge of American children. Clues about the brevity of

foreword are apparent in Lenski's correspondence with her editors, who expressed concerns about the "note of patronage" in the original foreword, along with the frequent use of the terms "race" and "Negro": "We would prefer to omit it, for we believe it would offend and hurt the very Negroes who will be delighted and helped by the story itself….if you insist on using it, please at least cut the more troublesome sentences." Fish adds: "Please believe we are thinking with you and for you in this, and using our collective experience during recent years with the situation this subject involves" (3 Sept. 1952). The brief foreword, then, is the result of Lenski's omissions and cuts, which Fish called "vastly improved" but when read alongside the foreword to *Strawberry Girl*, seems more likely to be characterized as terse, abrupt, and a clear departure from Lenski's usually verbose descriptions of the purpose of her novels (12 Sept. 1952). Certainly a terse foreword is better than a long and patronizing one, but it is clear from the editorial correspondence that the conversation regarding the foreword was never about challenging Lenski's racial assumptions nor engaging in a dialogue about the complexity of writing stories about African American children, but to disengage with a tense "situation" about a difficult "subject."

A similar disengagement occurs in correspondence over Lenski's dust jacket illustration. In a letter to Lenski, editor Daniel T. Walden calls Lenski's attention to an artistic issue regarding the use of black lettering for the title as well as an ideological one about her representation of Mama Hattie:

> One thing only seemed to bother our promotion people, and that is the very thick lips on the drawings of Mama Hattie. I am sure that that is just the way Mama Hattie should look, but we have had so much trouble over our editions of LITTLE BLACK SAMBO and one or two other negro stories with the Society for the Advancement of Colored People and with special inter-racial groups that we would very much like to have you, if possible,

> alter Mama Hattie on the jacket only, to make her lips a little less conspicuously large….there is a terrific pressure group which is after us and other publishers all the time about such points. (11 Sept. 1952)

As with Fish's letter, Walden positions the critique as the result of "pressure groups" such as the "Society for the Advancement of Colored People" and poses a superficial rather than a substantial solution: Lenski only needs to alter the image on the cover, not within the book itself. After all, the reason for altering the image in the first place is not to address the damaging perpetuation of racial stereotypes but to avoid the kind of "trouble" they've had over their own dissemination this stereotype in re-issues of Helen Bannerman's 1899 *Little Black Sambo*. The mention of Bannerman's text in Lippincott's mid-twentieth century correspondence reminds us how heavily past representations of black children weighed on the contemporary children's literature scene. Caricatured images like Sambo circulated not in the background but at the forefront, in new editions. These images influenced contemporary attempts to represent black characters, such as Lenski's, and figured centrally in protests against the continued use of such dehumanized representations by civil rights organizations. Despite the hefty cultural meanings and political urgency surrounding the act of illustrating black characters in children's books, Lenski's response to Walden's suggestions are, much like the tone of the suggestions themselves, resistant to engaging with larger conversations about racial ideologies. While she goes on at great length about her artistic and technical reasons for using black lettering on the cover (it is central to her "whole conception of the design of the jacket"), Lenski never specifically addresses the critique of her representation of Mama Hattie's lips and its connection to earlier, stereotyped representations of black characters (22 Sept. 1952). The editorial correspondence certainly sets up the context for *Mama Hattie's Girl*—one in which historical stereotypes of black Americans weigh

heavily on contemporary representations, and attempts to combat such stereotypes often result in paralysis rather than progress.

This sense of paralysis is apparent in the novel itself, in the powerlessness, incapacity, and lack of progress experienced by its characters. Like some of Lenski's other Regionals, *Mama Hattie's Girl* takes place in contemporary times instead of the past, although the exact year is never stated. The novel also takes place in two regions instead of one. The first part of the novel details Lula Bell's life in the south with her beloved grandmother, Mama Hattie. The south is fragrant and beautiful, but Lula Bell's mother, Imogene, is frustrated at the lack of opportunities for economic advancement there, and moves with Lula Bell to the north to find more lucrative work. There, they come up against other troubles and prejudices, and ultimately move south again. Although the story takes place in Lenski's present day, the central regional shift as well as the central adult female characters represent the tension between past and present. The first description of Mama Hattie—"a large, heavy woman, wearing a plaid cotton dress, bulging and overflowing her chair. Her face was full, her features strong, and her dark eyes penetrating"—presents her as a Mammy figure. Patricia Morton writes that "the old slave Mammy lives on as a most popular historical image of black womanhood….Simultaneously perceived as both a real, historical person and a legend—as the most devoted and beloved of servants" (xi). Indeed, Mama Hattie, in her existence as a Mammy figure, represents both a "real" person who influences Lula Bell's perception of the world, and symbolizes the historical association of black women with content servility. Lula Bell's mother Imogene recognizes the historical roots of Mama Hattie's willingness to serve white people and criticizes her for it. As the two

characters discuss work, Mama Hattie says: "'I still got my white folks who looks out for me'" by sending her their clothes to launder. Imogene scoffs at this: "'*Your white folks who looks out for you!'* Imogene laughed. 'Mama—you're still living in the days of slavery!' Mama Hattie quickly changed the subject. There were some things that Imogene would never understand at all" (Lenski, *Mama* 41). Imogene connects Mama Hattie's content performance of domestic, menial labor to the Mammy figure's happy servility, and resolutely disapproves of it. So staunch is Imogene's disapproval that Mama Hattie knows she will "never understand" it any other way.

Just as Mama Hattie recalls the Mammy stereotype, Imogene's aggressive judgement of Mama Hattie's choices is reminiscent of a mid-twentieth stereotype of black womanhood: the Sapphire figure. A character on the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, which had its television debut in 1951, Sapphire was "constantly denigrating those around her," and came to represent black women as "argumentative, aggressive, bitchy, stubborn, and quick-tempered" (Smith 124). Imogene is much less volatile than other iterations of the Sapphire figure, but her disapproving condescension is an aggressive presence in the novel, and ultimately is the catalyst for Lula Bell's move to the north. She is dissatisfied with her role as worker and caretaker: "'After working hard all day long, I gotta come home and cook supper, I suppose.' Her voice from the room inside sounded irritable'" (Lenski, *Mama* 4). And while she is described as sophisticated and feminine in appearance, "slim and graceful" in a "flowered blouse and a tight-fitting black skirt," this very femininity is often described in commanding, assertive ways: "Her high heels made a click-click tattoo as she moved rapidly up the paved brick street" (2, 42).

Mama Hattie and Imogene demonstrate how past and present stereotypes of black womanhood populate Lenski's novel about black girlhood.

From these stereotyped perspectives, however, Imogene and Mama Hattie's arguments over how one should make a living bring up complex questions about identity and responsibility—questions that Lula Bell must think through as she grows up inheriting the fraught racial history that her two female role models represent. Imogene connects individual labor to the political progress of the race, which accounts for her criticism of Mama Hattie's decision to earn money by washing or cooking: "'We must stop doing menial work. White people will never respect us if we don't get into more dignified jobs and show we are worthy of them. . . . If you want to get ahead, you have to have education.'" Mama Hattie replies that "'There's nothin' wrong about workin' with your hands….I've washed clothes all my life'" (39). While Imogene speaks in the "we" and sees her labor as connected to the fight for racial equality, Mama Hattie views her work in personal terms. Mama Hattie also brings up the fact that her age and health prevent her from performing the office or factory work that Imogene strives for (cite). Although Mama Hattie and Imogene both represent different historically specific stereotypes of black womanhood, then, their conflict over work also symbolizes a larger tension between the personal and the political. In other words, Lula Bell's two female role models represent different ways of understanding oneself in relation to the world, and these ways of understanding are infused with America's fraught racial history. Lula Bell is caught between these two perspectives: As Mama Hattie and Imogene discuss work and money, Lula Bell "listened to the argument, and she knew her mother was right. But her grandmother was right too. How could they both be right? She could not

side with either one" (40). Lula Bell's conflicted response to her mother and grandmother's differing perspectives thoughtfully acknowledges that their ways of making choices about their lives—basing them on personal comfort or political meaning—are both "right" in some ways. And yet, the fact that Lula Bell "could not side with either one" also indicates how the weight of history represented by Imogene and Mama Hattie constrains Lula Bell from being able to understand her own racial identity and make decisions about how it will influence her decisions. Since Mama Hattie and Imogene both recall stereotypes of black womanhood, they do not offer clear paths for Lula Bell to follow.

As the novel progresses, Lula Bell learns that political definitions of black girlhood, not just black womanhood, limit her pursuit of education and happiness. In the north, Imogene and Lula Bell are reunited with Lula Bell's father, Daddy Joe, but they find that the jobs and education they had hoped to gain in the north are riddled with complexities. Lula Bell attends a challenging school on Long Island, and often feels behind. However, a teacher encourages her to speak to her classmates about her life in the south, and after Lula Bell describes the flora and fauna of her neighborhood, her teacher's praise "inspired [Lula Bell] to try harder" (110). As Lula Bell grows to love going to school, she develops close but complicated relationships with friends and teachers. Her closest friend at school, a white girl named Rose Marie, is a source of both comfort and distress. Rose Marie tells Lula Bell that her mother won't let her invite Lula Bell over to her house, and she also would not let her go to Lula Bell's neighborhood. When Lula Bell demands to know why, the girls have a blunt exchange about whiteness, blackness, and girlhood:

> “My mother wouldn’t let me go in the colored section where you live,” said Rose Marie frankly. “Colored people are bad and tough and always making trouble. They fight with knives…and my mother says it’s dangerous for little girls.” “But *I* go there,” said Lula Bell. “I *live* there.’” “You’re not a little white girl,” said Rose Marie. Lula Bell looked at her hard. “At least,” she said, “for once you’re tellin’ the truth.’ The truth rankled even though Lula Bell tried to forget it. (115-116)

From this conversation, Lula Bell learns that personal friendships do not have the power to change larger racial assumptions and the discriminatory practices they fuel. She also learns that girlhood is not a universal category, but defined by racial ideologies. Rose Marie casually parrots the common sentiment that black neighborhoods are “dangerous for little girls.” Lula Bell counters by using the evidence of her own girlhood to disprove Rose Marie’s statement: Lula Bell, a girl, not only goes to these neighborhoods, she *lives* there. Rose Marie’s blunt response makes it achingly clear that “little girl” really means “little white girl,” and that the privileges of innocence and protection associated with girlhood only extend to them. According to Rose Marie, Lula Bell’s black girlhood does not entitle her to protection from “dangerous” people with knives. The fact that Lula Bell lives out her girlhood in a black neighborhood is also not enough to make Rose Marie question the validity of the violent stereotypes associated with black neighborhoods. In addition to excluding Lula Bell from the privileges of white girlhood, Rose Marie’s reply of “you’re not a little white girl” also implies that white girlhood is the especial target of black violence, and thus is a crucial justification for the continuance of discriminatory practices such as segregation. The “hard” look that Lula Bell gives to her white girlfriend at the end of their racially charged conversation reveals Lula Bell’s grudging appraisal of Rose Marie’s words as the “truth” about common racial attitudes, and Lula Bell’s resistance to but inability to repair this “truth.” Indeed, instead of offering any resolutions, the conversation “rankles” her.

The racial injustices made apparent through her talk with Rose Marie continue to upset Lula Bell until she discusses them with her teacher, Miss Jarvis. Miss Jarvis assures Lula Bell that she is "'equally found of every girl'" in the school "'no matter what color they are. . . . I'm even fond of the bad ones, who make trouble, because I hope to help them'" (116). While meant to reassure Lula Bell of the egalitarian nature of her regard for students, Miss Jarvis's language recalls Rose Marie's description of "colored people" as "'bad and tough and always making trouble.'" Both Rose Marie and Miss Jarvis implicitly associate black girls with trouble, but instead of separating herself from them, Miss Jarvis adopts the position of helper. She tells Lula Bell that while it might be difficult and confusing to go to school with so many different races of people, it will ultimately "'help [her] to learn to live out in the world with all kinds of people,'" and for this lesson Lula Bell should feel both gratefulness and responsibility (116). "'Aren't you glad to get to know Rose Marie and the other white children?'" Miss Jarvis asks. "'[W]e are all trying to be friends. . . . even though we come from different races and backgrounds. We don't always succeed, but we are trying. That's a democracy. You'll help by being kind and friendly to the other children, won't you?'" (116). Miss Jarvis links Lula Bell's personal behavior and relationships with those around her to the progress of American democracy. Like Birdie in *Strawberry Girl*, Lula Bell's kindness and friendliness is imbued with national purpose, and connected to American progress.

However, while Birdie's behavior ultimately saves her from being disadvantaged by the forces of national progress, Lula Bell's decision to be "kind and friendly" in response to casual affirmations of racial prejudice leaves her vulnerable to and accepting of injustice. After Lula Bell's talk with Miss Jarvis, things at school "were

easier" because Lula Bell has learned to accept injustice without making "trouble" (117). When another teacher asks students to write an essay on the prescriptive topic of "Why I Like This School," Lula Bell dutifully responds:

> …she remember[ed] some of the things Miss Jarvis had said. She put them down in her own words, and said that her school was a little democracy and the United States a big one. . . . The next day Miss Jacobson told the class that Lula Bell had won First Prize. All the children clapped, then they sang 'America' and Lula Bell realized for the first time what the song meant. It was easier to be friendly with Rose Marie now that she understood her better. (117-118)

When asked to think about why she likes the school, Lula Bell does not recall how "rankled" she felt by her conversation with Rose Marie, but instead reproduces Miss Jarvis's optimistic sentiments about democracy. Lula Bell receives educational, social, and political rewards for her confidence in the school and the nation—winning first prize for her essay, garnering the applause of her peers, and understanding the patriotic song "America." Samuel F. Smith's famous paean to America contains stanzas that connect school and education to the strength of the nation: "Our glorious Land today / 'Neath Education's sway / Soars upward still / Its hills of learning fair / Whose bounties all may share / Behold them everywhere / On vale and hill!" (107). Lula Bell uses this celebratory but amorphous connection between egalitarian education and national progress to support and validate her own "friendly" behavior toward her classmate Rose Marie. Instead of using the complexities of her own life experiences to question the hopeful ideas espoused by Miss Jarvis or Smith's "America," then, Lula Bell's new confidence in American progress causes her to peacefully accept small injustices in her daily life. In other words, while the situation becomes "easier" for Lula Bell in her northern school, it is not substantively better. This becomes clear when immediately after Lula Bell wins first prize for her essay, she learns that she will no longer be able to

share in the bounties of education. The work Imogene and Daddy Joe have found on Long Island is too difficult and unstable. The family will have to move somewhere else, and the impending upheaval obstructs Lula Bell's learning: "The uncertainty began to tell on [Lula Bell]. Her school work grew worse and worse. She could not write, she could not think….She stayed out of school now and then. Finally she stayed out altogether" (Lenski, *Mama* 120).

Lula Bell's unceremonious removal from school after she wins first prize for an essay about democracy could be read as a subtle critique of the school's (and the nation's) superficial solutions regarding racial inequality. Lula Bell is successful when she says the right things about her school and avoids making trouble, but no help is extended to her when undemocratic realities inhibit her from continuing to attend. In this way, Lula Bell's situation within the novel recalls the editorial correspondence regarding the novel's production, in which the editors at Lippincott advised Lenski to make superficial changes to the text and images of *Mama Hattie's Girl* not in order to substantively address the damaging racial assumptions contained in the manuscript, but to avoid trouble from "pressure groups." Lula Bell's situation within the novel illustrates the damage of this approach. Increasingly unhappy in the north, Lula Bell is sent back south to live with Mama Hattie while Imogene and Daddy Joe continue to look for steady and desirable work. Since Lula Bell's school did not address the racist assumptions about black communities espoused by some of the students, Lula Bell returns to the south with a desire to reject her blackness: "'Rose Marie said I'm almost as light as a white girl. . . . I wish I wasn't colored. . . . I liked those white girls in my school,'" Lula Bell confesses to Mama Hattie. Instead of addressing the damaging racial

ideologies that account for Lula Bell's desire for whiteness, Mama Hattie advises her to be content with what she is: "'You may as well be proud to be a Negro….You can't pretend to be something else when you're not. You have to be what you are, what the good Lord made you, and you might as well be satisfied'" (152). Lula Bell pushes back at Mama Hattie's instructions to be satisfied with "what you are" by again referring to widespread racial assumptions that associate what she is with something "bad": "'Rose Marie said colored people are bad and tough and are always makin' trouble'" (152). Once again, however, Mama Hattie skirts the destructive racial assumptions of these sentiments, noting that there are "'good and bad people, both colored and white,'" and that "'a few bad ones in both races…cause most of the trouble.'" Mama Hattie then tells Lula Bell that there is "'nothin' better in this world than a *good* colored woman, and that's what I want you to be'" (152). Like Miss Jarvis's recommendation to be friendly and kind when navigating complex race relations, Mama Hattie's advice to be "good" and "satisfied" is meant to ease Lula Bell's troubled mindset into a more peaceable one. Neither addresses the larger racial ideologies that Lula Bell recognizes and wants desperately to understand.

The novel concludes with Lula Bell learning how to be a good, satisfied "colored woman," although the change does not come immediately. Lula Bell still feels displaced by her move from south to north and back again, and she ostracizes her old friends with her bitterness. In Lula Bell's resentful, lonely state, we get a final symbolic glimpse at the dangers of harboring dissatisfaction. While sleepy one morning, Lula Bell heats up the kettle on Mama Hattie's new kerosene stove, but forgets to turn the stove down before she falls back to sleep and accidentally sets the house on fire. After the fire is put

out, Lula Bell "stare[s] at the damage": "Walls and ceiling were charred black, and so was the white enamel on the end of the stove….'It's ruined now,' said Lula Bell. 'It'll never be white and purty again'" (158). Beyond the symbolic destruction of what is "white and purty," Lula Bell's mistake has domestic and financial repercussions, as the stove was brand new and Mama Hattie had not finished paying for it. Although it was unconsciously done, Lula Bell becomes the source of domestic, economic, and social trouble by leaving the stove "'turned too high.'" As Lula Bell fretfully explains: "'I was so sleepy, I forgot to turn it down'" (158). The familiar message—pay attention to and turn down heated emotions or risk becoming a source of trouble—is one that Lula Bell finally internalizes. As Mama Hattie grows increasingly fragile and sick, Lula Bell becomes her caretaker and eventually Imogene and Daddy Joe move back south so that they can live as a family and take care of Mama Hattie together. Although they are content to be together again, the family's economic situation is the same, if not worse, than it was at the beginning of the novel. Unlike Birdie Boyer in *Strawberry Girl*, Lula Bell does not have the agency to lift her family out of social and economic circumstances that disadvantage them. Rather, she learns to accept these disadvantages without making trouble.

Conclusion: Troubled Girls

Both *Strawberry Girl* and *Mama Hattie's Girl* present nuanced stories of girls in "troubled" social environments, working to understand themselves and to act in relation to complex regional and national ideologies. As becomes clear from this chapter's examination of the novels, however, Lenski imagines the white American girl and the black American girl to have drastically different abilities to cultivate personal and political progress within the nation. In *Strawberry Girl*, trouble is represented by the destructive

ways of the neighbors, and Birdie's domestic efforts are powerfully reconstructive. She helps her family's farm become economically successful, and in the face of larger systematic shifts that Birdie cannot redress, she is able to save her family from being economically disadvantaged by pursuing a formal, feminine education. In *Mama Hattie's Girl*, trouble does not come from the neighbors but from within Lula Bell's own community, and even within herself. Rather than taming others, Lula Bell must learn to tame herself in order to ensure peace and contentment for herself and her family. Lula Bell's education does not lift her family out of their economic struggles, but rather teaches her to accept the injustices of historical and cultural prejudices and their effects on her present day life. Although they are both American girls, Birdie repels her troubled historical circumstances while Lula Bell absorbs and is anchored by the weight of her history. In Lenski's regional series, then, the white American girl and the black American girl have vastly different personal relationships to and agency within the past and present political realities of their nation.

The following chapter addresses how representations of America's fraught racial history and its effect on American girls' consciousness and agency continue to play out in girls' historical fiction series as the genre merges in the late twentieth-century with the global children's product industry. The popular American Girl Company (1986-present) sells historical fiction series detailing the lives of different girls who living through some of the most atrocious events and issues of American history, including slavery, child labor, and war. Like Lenski's regional series, the American Girls historical fiction series exposes its audience of primarily middle- and upper-middle class girls to various social, economic, and racial issues in their nation's history that are of particular significance to

the lives of young people. However, American Girl famously links their book series to dolls, clothing, and an abundance of accessories all laid out in glossy mail-order catalogues and online. American Girl products expand consumers' engagement with history to include reading alongside physical interaction with materials from the series books, such as the Revolutionary era Felicity's invitation to a party at the Tory governor's house, frontier era Kirsten's red-checkered sunbonnet, and eighteenth-century Nez Perce Kaya's trade beads. These products not only connect girls to the history portrayed in the books, but to their present day world of production and labor, characterized in the late twentieth-century by an increasing divide between authors and designers of children's products in the U.S. and manufacturers of these products in notoriously difficult to regulate factories overseas. In other words, as girls read about and play with the American histories they read in the American Girls series, they also engage with the system of global industrial labor that characterizes their own historical moment, as well as with their privileged positions within it. The following chapter examines how the American Girls historical fiction series books present and implicate readers in the genre's major questions about girls' privilege, responsibility, and relationship to history.

CHAPTER 5
MAKING HISTORY MATTER: THE AMERICAN GIRLS SERIES AND POLITICAL ACCESSORIES

In 1986, Pleasant Company (now the American Girl Company) sent its first mail-order catalogs to pre-adolescent girls. The glossy pages introduced the American Girls Collection and its first three historical characters: Kirsten, a Swedish immigrant in 1854 Minnesota, Samantha, a wealthy orphan in 1904 New York, and Molly, a patriotic girl on the home-front in 1944 Illinois. The mission of the Collection was to present "'girl-sized' views" of American history, making the past matter to present-day girls through engagement with compelling stories about girls' lives ("Our Company" n.p.). Girls were invited to read about the lives of each character in their accompanying historical fiction series—six volumes that tell of her friendships, adventures, trials, and triumphs, amidst the larger historical issues that shape her daily life. The series books were far from the American Girls Collection's only way to engage with history, however, as the catalogs made abundantly clear. 18-inch doll versions of the American Girl heroines looked out at readers from double-page spreads, wearing meticulously detailed dresses and surrounded by compelling accessories. For instance: Kirsten's plaid shawl ("tie around her so she won't get cold on her long walk to school across the prairie"), Molly's radio ("press the red button to hear snippets from actual World War Two era shows"), and Samantha's black valise ("with its fine brass fittings" it "came in handy when she helped Nellie sneak out of the orphanage") (*Playthings* n.p.). Contemporary American girls are encouraged to connect their own girlhoods to historical girlhoods not just through reading, but through wrapping shawls, pressing radio buttons, and opening valises—in

other words, through interacting with the material objects that defined the daily lives of American girls in the past.

The American Girl Company's (AG) mission to make history "matter" to girls takes on a multiplicity of meanings. Many critics have questioned the value of the series books' historical lessons precisely because the narratives abound with accessories. Elizabeth Marshall argues that the AG books and products "ultimately reflect a gendered pedagogy of consumption rather than any lessons about empowerment or U.S. history" (95). Daniel Hade notes that according to AG, what defines a "'girl-sized' view" of American history is not a growing understanding of social and political issues of national import, but rather, an intense focus on "consuming stuff" (163).[1] The idea that "consuming stuff" is *the* essential activity of American girlhood—spanning time and place as well as social and historical circumstance—is indeed a potent political lesson. It is also one that grows more complex during the late twentieth-century rise of global children's consumer culture, when the creation of children's products "move[d] into a new phase of accelerated hyperconsumption" marked by "the pervasiveness of the product universe into which children were drawn" (Langer 254). Children in the late twentieth-century could own alarm clocks, underwear, toothbrushes, dinner plates, and bedsheets emblazoned with their favorite characters from movies, television, or books. At the same time as children's commodities were inserted into the most mundane activities of daily life, however, the production of these commodities moved further

[1] Many scholars agree with Hade's assessment. Sherrie A. Inness, for instance, describes the AG catalogues as "a world of conspicuous consumption that would make Thorstein Veblen roll over in his grave." See: Sherrie Inness, "'Anti-Barbies': The American Girls Collection and Political Ideologies," in *Delinquent and Debutantes*, ed. Sherrie Inness (New York: NYU P, 1998), 165.

away—to overseas factories where workers, mostly young women in Southern China, manufactured them under notoriously difficult to regulate conditions.[2] As Beryl Langer notes, while the separation between commodities and the social conditions under which they are produced is nothing new, "the new global division of labour takes it to another level, not merely separating, but severing, manufacture from design and marketing" (264). AG moved its manufacturing operations from Europe to China in the early 1990s, and became a major player in the global children's toy industry in 1998, when founder Pleasant T. Rowland sold the brand to Mattel, the largest toy company in the world (Edwards 53, 46). Thus, as Sally Edwards argues, AG represents the "cruel irony" at the heart of global children's consumer culture: AG products promote girls' health, happiness, and historical knowledge, but are manufactured by young women who often work oppressive hours, in unhealthy or unsafe environments, and under austere disciplinary regulations (56).

The moral "disjuncture" between the happiness and hopefulness symbolically tied to children's products and the realities of global industry is so strong that it leads several critics to argue that the "aura of fun and enchantment" surrounding the children's toy industry "is only sustainable if conditions of production in the toy industry

[2] See Ching Kwan Lee, Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1998). Lee notes several cultural and economic forces that account for the influx of young, unmarried female workers who leave their poor, rural areas to perform factory work in cities in Southern China: "women's marginalized position in their families of origin, women's intent to flee from patriarchal demands on their labor and from arranged marriages, and their subscription to a cultural notion equating factory work with appropriate femininity." Lee also notes that not just supply but demand for female labor is high, as "foreign capitalists" buy into "the gendered notion of women as more docile, more dexterous, and cheaper laborers for labor-intensive work than men" (161). See also Sally Edwards, Beyond Child's Play: Sustainable Product Design in the Global Doll-Making Industry (Amityville: Baywood, 2010). According to Edwards, women between the ages of 18-30 make up 85% of China's over 3 million toy factory workers (14).

remain hidden from consumers" (Langer 262). This implies that AG historical fiction series would avoid issues of labor, or at the very least hide the discrepancy between conditions of consumption and production that could provoke questions about the AG brand. However, as previous chapters have argued, historical fiction series perpetually consider the tensions between contentment and complicity, pleasure and politics in girls' lives. AG series books are no exception, and in fact extend these questions further into the realm of contemporary girls' lives because of the expansive offerings of their product world. For example, the Samantha series, set in 1904 New York, exposes the "cruel irony" of a factory labor system that manufactures products for the privileged Samantha's pleasure at the expense of young workers who suffer emotional and physical hardships due to their work. And while the series sets this "girl-sized" critique of factory labor in the past, its presentation of Samantha grappling with the social and ethical factors of her consumption should complicate understandings of how the series functions in the context of global children's consumer culture within which contemporary American girls live, play, and think. Indeed, because Samantha occupies the privileged social and economic position of the ideal AG consumer, her recognition of and responses to unjust labor practices seem especially relevant to the ideal AG consumers who occupy their own privileged positions within consumer culture.

This chapter examines how two AG series work to construct contemporary girls' responses to the social realities of their nation's past and present, as well as understand their own positions within those realities. This examination expands arguments that "branded fiction" such as the AG series books are "simply one product among many that attract the consumer to the brand" (Sekeres 400). Indisputably the books use plots,

characters, descriptions, and illustrations to direct the reader to more brand consumption, but this is not by any means a simple maneuver. As Naomi Klein writes, brands are “intimately entangled with our culture and our identities,” and so are the social and racial issues that the AG brand reconstructs for contemporary girls (335). First, I will examine how the Samantha series uses accessories to craft not only brand loyalty but a particular consciousness that functions smoothly within the late twentieth-century ‘disjunctive’ context in which the brand is consumed in mass quantities. I argue that the Samantha series enacts Roland Barthes’ idea of “inoculation,” in which an “established value” that is subject to suspicion and cynicism, such as industrial production, first acknowledges “its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise,” and then overcomes these qualms by “exalting” its “transcendent good,” thereby ensuring its continued existence “*in spite of*, or rather *by* the heavy curse of its blemishes” (41-42). By acknowledging the injustices of industrial production but also exalting the “transcendent good” of what it engenders—the happy, healthy, materially privileged American girl—the Samantha series encourages its readers to accept the current workings of the global children’s product industry, as well as affirm their positions as its beneficiaries. However, while the series books encourage this acquiescent response to the system, they also present opportunities to question the system, ultimately putting girls in the privileged position of choosing how much they will be affected by their knowledge of social injustice, and what actions they will take in response. The next section explores the breakdown of this privileged choice in the consumer and educational materials surrounding the Addy series, which features AG’s first non-white heroine, a fugitive slave in antebellum America. Examining how AG

attempts to craft its version of materially privileged American girlhood in various ethically fraught historical situations reveals how AG historical fiction series go beyond encouraging girls to consume, and inform their positions within the complex social realities of their present day.

Samantha Parkington: Thread and Sewing Kits

As Maurya Wickstrom notes, each AG heroine "is equipped with a singular, defining set of values…forged as a result of specifically American historical situations" (99). Thus, Kirsten possesses "strength and spirit" as a result of her historical experience as an immigrant and pioneer ("Kirsten" n.p.). Molly is "resourceful" and "cooperative" due to the daily sacrifices she must make on behalf of the war effort ("Molly" n.p.). Samantha is "compassionate" and "generous"—values forged as a result of her privileged economic status in the Progressive era, a period marked by economic inequality and social reform ("Samantha" n.p.). While AG roots the development of these values in specific historical experiences, they are also meant to apply to the contemporary American girl in her own historical moment. For instance, as a "kind-hearted girl of privilege" living in an age of industrial expansion, early twentieth-century Samantha emulates the economic position of AG's ideal girl consumers in the late twentieth-century ("Farewell" n.p.). *Meet Samantha*, the first book in the Samantha series, introduces Samantha as a familiar, spirited girl heroine who benefits from but also chafes against the materials that make up her "elegant life" *(Summer* 20). Samantha falls out of trees and rips her stockings. She sees ants gathering around a jelly biscuit she dropped on the floor of the sewing room, but decides not to say anything to Jessie, Grandmary's seamstress, because "it would be fun to see how many would come" (Adler, *Meet* 6). (Jessie has to pepper the sewing room later to deal with

the ant infestation.) Despite these gently mischievous moments, however, Samantha strives to be a good girl—diligently applying herself during her daily sewing hour with Grandmary, in which she works on an embroidery sampler that will say “Actions Speak Louder Than Words” in “pink silk thread” (6). In this way, Samantha not only represents the privileged economic position of AG’s ideal late-twentieth century consumer, but her privileged consciousness as well, which is eager and able to engage in fun activities, unmindful of how her fun is connected to others’ labor, but ultimately receptive to traditional girlhood activities and the moral lessons they espouse.

Meet Samantha also exposes the shortcomings of Samantha’s privileged consciousness when it introduces Nellie, a former child laborer in a thread factory who has come to work as a housekeeper for Samantha’s neighbors. Samantha at first assumes that Nellie is there to “visit,” and is surprised to learn that Nellie, “a girl,” would come there “to *work*.” Samantha is also surprised that Nellie has never been to school, and that, although the girls are the same age, Nellie “seemed smaller,” and was “very pale and very thin” (22). Nellie explains that her educational and physical deficiencies are linked to her factory work: “‘in the factory I had to work every day but Sunday, until dark.’” Nellie continues to upset Samantha’s worldview when she explains that her parents sent her away from the city to work because there “‘wasn’t enough food. And there wasn’t enough coal’” to provide for the family. At this initial exposure to the idea of material deprivation, Samantha’s eyes go “wide with disbelief. She was good at imagining castles and jungles and sailing ships, but she had never imagined hunger and cold” (23-24). Nellie’s first scene in *Meet Samantha* highlights the physical, intellectual, and material disadvantages she sustains due to her status as a child laborer. Her

descriptions draw upon Progressive era exposés that shocked the (middle- and upper-class) public with the plight of the child worker—their underdeveloped bodies, their lack of access to beneficial educational and familial structures—in attempts to gain support for child labor reform (Pace 336-337). Throughout the volume, Nellie continues to expose Samantha to experiences outside of her own privileged life, briefly broadening Samantha's awareness of economic disparities to racial ones. When Samantha and Nellie sneak out of the house to find out why Jessie has been missing from work, Samantha is depressed by the "drab houses" of Jessie's neighborhood, where "there wasn't much grass in front, and there was very little room for flowers." She wonders aloud why Jessie lives in a place so lacking in nice things, and Nellie explains that it is the "'colored part of town.'" When a shocked Samantha asks, "'You mean, Jessie *has* to live here?'" Nellie is surprised at Samantha's ignorance: "Nellie looked at her. Samantha was smart about so many things that Nellie was always surprised at what her friend didn't know" (Adler, *Meet* 41). This is a rare moment in which the perspective shifts away from the American Girl heroine, and it is important that it does so in order to express how much Samantha does not know about the social realities of her nation. The first volume of her historical fiction series, then, not only introduces readers to Samantha's life of privilege but also to her resultant consciousness, which lacks knowledge about the lives and experiences of those who are not wealthy and white.

Since Nellie's role in the series is to cultivate this knowledge in Samantha, Samantha's relationship with her represents "the relationship the privileged have with the less fortunate," and thus also teaches a moral lesson about how to provide for the economically disadvantaged (Hade 160). Most of the girls' interactions involve

Samantha providing for Nellie in some way—tutoring her, or giving her food, clothing, and toys. When Nellie learns she is going to be sent back to the city, to perhaps work at the factory again, Samantha makes a material sacrifice: she gives Nellie her prized possession, a beautiful new doll that Grandmary had just bought for her. Not only are dolls the main feature of the AG enterprise, they are also important symbols of girlhood—for centuries "understood as the defining feature of girls' culture and a metonym for girlhood itself" (Bernstein 19). Through this act, Samantha models both compassion and generosity—values "forged as a result" of her historical situation as wealthy, white, Progressive era American girl. Indeed, the book ends with an illustration of the finished "Actions Speak Louder Than Words" sampler, implying that Samantha's generous gifting of her doll is the proverbial "Action" of the sampler. However, despite Samantha's action, Nellie still must leave for the city and the specter of the dark, dusty, and dangerous factory. The conclusion of the book therefore acknowledges the existence of the larger economic forces that Samantha's generous action cannot redress. On the last page of the book, along with the illustration of Samantha's finished sampler, Samantha expresses the desire to commit some other, larger "Action" to help Nellie and her family escape from the injustices of her social situation. The ending illustration of the sampler and its proverb, then, references Samantha's gifting of her doll, but also indicates her desire to perform some as yet unknown future action of larger social significance. At the end of the first volume of the Samantha series, Nellie's story, and the historical issue of child labor that is represents, remains unresolved.

While Samantha's relationship with Nellie plays out against the historical backdrop of early twentieth-century labor reform, its lessons about privilege, political

consciousness, and responsibility translate in complex ways to the AG consumer in the late-twentieth-century context of global children's consumer culture, in which laboring bodies exist even further away. Since dolls are the main commodities of the AG enterprise, Samantha's generous action regarding Nellie encloses girls' social activism snugly within the enchanting aura of children's consumer culture, and specifically within the consumption of AG materials. Samantha's actions do not, in other words, engage with the larger forces that compel Nellie to work. However, Samantha's sampler—an accessory available for purchase through the AG catalogue—does link consumption to the larger world of production. Jan Susina points out that the "numerous accessories that are sold only through the catalogue are the very items that appear highlighted in the illustrations of the books," a technique that directs readers to "constantly refer back to the catalogues" (133). As mentioned above, *Meet Samantha* ends with an illustration of Samantha's finished sampler. Thus, as they close the last page of *Meet Samantha*, readers are encouraged to open a catalogue and purchase an "Actions Speak Louder than Words" embroidery sampler to craft on their own. On the one hand, this could offer a neatly sewn up solution to the issue of unjust labor practices, as it celebrates Samantha's individual act of generosity at the expense of engaging with the workings of the larger industrial system that privileges Samantha and disadvantages Nellie. On the other hand, Samantha does recognize the existence of such a system, since Nellie still must leave to find work and Samantha realizes that to truly help her she must perform an action of larger social significance. For AG readers, the movement from book to catalog that the sampler illustration prompts is likewise tinged with the vague presence

of an industrial system that privileges some at the expense of others, along with the ensuing question of how the privileged girl should act in response to it.

In the second book, *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, Samantha learns more about the early-twentieth century industrial system that advantages her and disadvantages Nellie. In Barthes terms, the "injustices" of consumer culture and the industrial system are "lavishly displayed" (41). Samantha is directly confronted with the knowledge of how the objects that make up her daily life are produced when her school participates in a speaking contest about American progress. Samantha's original speech hails factories as the "'true signs'" of the nation's progress. Because factories use machines to make all kinds of objects quickly and cheaply, Samantha explains, "'more people can buy the things they want and the things they need. That is progress'" (Adler, *Lesson* 43-44). With this speech, Samantha wins the chance to represent her school at the contest. Nellie, however, who has returned from the city to work as a housekeeper at Grandmary's arrangement, challenges Samantha's assessment of the virtues of factory production. Nellie describes the factory's long hours ("'I got so tired, Samantha. My back hurt and my legs hurt and my arms got heavy'"), unhealthy work environment ("'The machines got fuzz and dust all over everything. It was in the air, and it got in my mouth and made it hard to breathe'"), and horrific accidents ("'The machines were so strong they could break your hand or your foot or pull a finger off. . . . If your hair was long the machines could catch it and pull it right out. . . . Once I saw that happen to a girl. . . suddenly she was screaming and half her head was bleeding'") (47-48). Nellie's factory stories draw from Progressive era reports that sought to rally support to end child labor. They are particularly reminiscent of the National Child Labor Committee's (NCLC)

caption cards accompanying Lewis Hines' photographs of child laborers, which often included quotes from the photographed children about their work or work-related injuries, and information about their wages and hours (Natanson n.p.).

Accompanying Nellie's vivid description of work in the thread factory is a grainy illustration of two girls beside a cotton loom, again reminiscent of Hines's photographs of child laborers taken for the NCLC. In its departure from the clear, bright illustrations that make up the rest of the book, the illustration reproduces the disturbing contrast the NCLC sought to convey between child laborers and the "groomed and articulate middle-class child bodies" depicted in most images of children during the period (Pace 332). It is apt that Nellie's stories and image so closely resemble the NCLC's efforts to bolster public support for child labor reform, as her role in *Samantha Learns A Lesson* is to encourage Samantha to engage with the issue of large-scale labor reform. Indeed, Nellie's factory stories conclude with another powerful technique used in the NCLC caption cards: a "sense of irony" that sharpens the organization's moral condemnation of child labor (Natanson n.p.). Directly after Nellie's description of factory horrors, she states: "'They paid us one dollar and eighty cents a week,' [Nellie] looked straight at her friend. 'That's why thread is so cheap.'" Nellie's dry conclusion is followed by an illustration of a pretty display case of neatly arranged spools of thread in various colors with an attractive sign that says "2 cents" (Adler, *Learns* 48). The thread case is tidily ordered except for two spools that have been tossed carelessly aside, suggesting its placement in a busy store where consumers riffle through cheap goods as part of their daily routines, without thinking about why the goods are so inexpensive. Nellie's factory

stories infuse this seemingly innocuous illustration with derisive irony, thus presenting Samantha and the AG reader with a surprisingly biting critique of consumer culture.

Confronted with the "cruel irony" of factory labor, Samantha has a physical reaction: "Samantha stared at Nellie. She couldn't move. She felt numb and cold. Only her scalp was tingling and her arms had a strange ache in them" (48). By feeling in her own body the laborers who produce the objects she consumes, Samantha makes a conscious connection between herself as a child who consumes and the children who produce. Further, this connection causes her to criticize, albeit in grossly simplified terms, an American consumer culture sustained by an unjust industrial system. Samantha's revised speech recognizes the disjuncture between the enchanting rhetoric of industrial progress and the realities of industrial production. She notes that while Americans "are proud of the machines in our factories because they make so many new things for us," these machines also hurt children, and "'[i]f our factories can hurt children, then we have not made good progress in America'" (51). Despite the simplified terms of Samantha's critique, *Samantha Learns a Lesson* exposes Samantha to the dangers and ironies of the Progressive era industrial system in which she participates, and in so doing presents an important moment in the development of Samantha's political consciousness. By the end of the book, Samantha has begun to feel the connections between her own privileged life and the social and economic institutions of her nation.

The development of Samantha's political consciousness could extend in powerful ways to the AG consumer. For instance, the "thread, 2 cents" illustration further complicates Susina's argument that the books' illustrations smoothly direct readers to

AG catalogues and consumption. Instead of directing the reader to consume, this illustration seems more likely to cause the reader to consider how the products in the catalogue are produced—including, for instance, the "Actions Speak Louder Than Words" embroidery sampler that comes complete with hoop, needles, and embroidery thread in multiple colors. Nellie's factory accounts are also suggestive of the voices of laborers in the global toy industry of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a young, female worker in one of Mattel's factories describes: "'you can see paint dust everywhere. . .The major problem is fatigue. My shoulders are stiff and aching after days and nights of work. . .'" (qtd. in Edwards 2). The irony of the fact that Nellie's stories parallel those of the workers who manufacture AG products might not immediately make an impression on girl readers who, like Samantha in the first volume, are as yet unaware of the existence of factory workers let alone reports about their experiences. But the connection is there, waiting to be recalled when AG consumers, like Samantha in the second volume, eventually learn about the operations of the industrial system in which they consume.

However, the third book in the series, a Christmas story called *Samantha's Surprise*, uses commodities to "inoculate" Samantha to the injustices so "lavishly" presented in the previous volume. Nellie does not appear in this volume, but her presence is evoked through the objects that Samantha receives for Christmas—a new doll and a sewing kit filled with spools of thread. Samantha's responses to these objects show how she reconciles comfortable material privilege with disturbing knowledge of the injustices of the industrial system. The book begins by detailing Samantha's desire for a beautiful Christmas doll that she sees in the window of a toy store—the same window

that once displayed her old doll, which she gives to Nellie in book one. While Samantha remembers why she gave Nellie that doll ("'She had never owned a doll in her life. Not ever!'") the aura of the new doll does not prompt any thoughts of where Nellie is or if she is working at the factory again (Schur, *Surprise* 5). In this volume, rather, the doll connects Samantha to a new character: her uncle's girlfriend, Cornelia, who thinks women should fly airplanes and whose "clothes were the latest style" (35, 17). Independent, fun-loving, and fashionable, Cornelia represents the consumer-oriented "modern" woman—a popular heroine of girls' and adolescent series fiction since the early-twentieth-century—who "could pick and choose goods that suited [her] tastes, openly display [her] personality through the clothes [she] wore . . . venture into public places of business and exercise power as [a customer]" (Hamilton-Honey 106). Cornelia is a model of the social position an American girl of privilege like Samantha will grow into, and Samantha's connection with her is forged through mutual admiration of the new doll. When Cornelia sees it and gushes over its "exquisite" qualities, Samantha feels a powerful affinity between them: "*Cornelia understands,"* Samantha thinks. *"She knows what's special*" (Schur, *Surprise* 43). This moment of understanding, inspired by the new doll, suggests that Samantha's consciousness is naturally attuned with that of the privileged adult female consumer who recognizes material quality, and furthermore can purchase it. Samantha does not tell Cornelia how much she covets the doll, but Cornelia buys it for her as a Christmas gift anyway. When a surprised Samantha gasps, "'I've wanted this doll for the longest time. How did you ever know?'" Cornelia explains: "'I didn't know. . . It's only that *I* liked the doll so much, I thought perhaps you might, too'" (57). In this volume, Samantha's doll—the "metonym of girlhood"—shifts her

empathetic connection from Nellie, the poor girl laborer, to Cornelia, the modern woman who has discerning taste as well as the means to partake in all of the best offerings of consumer culture.

Grandmary's gift to Samantha also evokes Nellie, and further demonstrates the position Nellie and the social issues she represents occupy in Samantha's consciousness. Grandmary gives Samantha "a sewing kit, a very grown-up one with forty different colored threads, a thick package of needles, and a cat-shaped pincushion. Samantha loved the way everything in the kit was arranged in its own special compartment" (55). The fact that the "different colored threads" prompt no remembrance of Nellie's account of her experiences in the thread factory suggests that the conscious connection Samantha began to form between her consumption and Nellie's production in the previous volume has simply disappeared. But the specific positioning of the thread, "arranged in its own special compartment" within a "grown-up" sewing kit, reveals something subtler about the workings of Samantha's political consciousness. The compartmentalized thread does not signal a restoration of Samantha's ignorance regarding the social issues involved in the production of thread, but a precise organization of these issues into carefully confined spaces that do not disrupt her engagement with the wonders of consumer culture at large. Through Barthes, we can understand the sewing kit as an indication of how Samantha's exposure to the horrors of the thread factory worked as an "inoculation" to the dangers of the industrial system. In her previous response to Nellie's thread factory stories, Samantha acknowledged a "little 'confessed' evil" of the industrial system. But the compelling arrangement of the thread in separate compartments depicts how accepting

this confessed evil has saved Samantha from “acknowledging a lot of hidden evil”: namely, her own involvement in the system” (Barthes 42). Samantha compartmentalizes the confessed evil of the thread factory (how it hurt her friend and other children) within a wonderful product of the larger industrial system, an enchanting sewing kit that she loves, and that allows her unproblematic entry into the “grown-up” world of consumer culture.

Nellie’s absence continues in the next two installments: *Happy Birthday, Samantha!* and *Samantha Saves the Day*. Detailing events that depend upon leisure and wealth—Samantha’s birthday party and summer vacation—these volumes continue to depict Samantha’s inoculated consciousness and affirm the “transcendent good” of children’s consumer culture. The historical backdrop of *Happy Birthday, Samantha!* is women’s suffrage, which Cornelia vocally supports but Grandmary, at first, opposes. Samantha hears their discussions about it but does not participate in them; her lesson about change versus tradition is played out in the realm of material culture when Cornelia’s younger twin sisters help Samantha plan a spectacular birthday party. The twins are modern and independent-minded, although all of their ideas have one theme: novel ways to heighten material pleasure. For instance, they tell Samantha that instead of one cake with ten candles, she should really have ten miniature cakes with one candle each (Tripp, *Birthday* 7). Samantha praises the twins’ talent for “‘thinking up new ways to do things,’” but Grandmary cautions that they “‘don’t always think very carefully,’” and Samantha soon realizes that their impulsive ideas can cause trouble (27). When the twins try to compare their penchant for trying out new ideas to Cornelia’s involvement in the suffrage movement, Cornelia reminds them that women who

campaign for suffrage “thought long and hard” about it, and that “‘[w]hen you want to change something, you’d better be sure it’s a wise change, a change for the better’”(52). Although Grandmary’s and Cornelia’s advice to think carefully about change recalls Samantha’s determination to change Nellie’s circumstances in the first volume, and her desire to help child laborers in her factory speech in the second, Samantha only applies it to what she consumes. At the end of the story, Samantha, the twins, Cornelia, and Grandmary (who has come around on the issue of suffrage) meet at an ice cream parlor. When Grandmary asks Samantha if she would like to “‘try something new,’” Samantha decides to stick with peppermint, her old favorite, telling Grandmary that “‘some things are too good to change’” (56). This lesson specifically affirms the “intergenerational” appeal that AG markets, in which “grandmothers, mothers and daughters bond over wholesome materials based in America’s past” (Marshall 99). Samantha’s birthday story, like the Christmas story, displays the good that consumer culture generates—not only beloved objects but emotional connections formed through those objects among generations of girls and women.

Samantha Saves the Day, which depicts Samantha’s stay at Grandmary’s summer home in the mountains, also displays the advantages of consumer culture and Samantha’s privileged participation in it. Each AG series book concludes with a brief non-fictional entry called “A Peek into the Past,” which includes more information about the time period. In *Samantha Saves the Day*, this section focuses on vacation and leisure, informing readers that “[f]amilies like Samantha’s” went to remote places such as resort hotels, vacations camps, and summer homes when they “wanted to get away from crowds and noise and air that was gritty with coal soot” (Tripp, *Saves* 60).

Samantha's literal distance from the dirt and noise of industry in this volume allows her the time and space for personal growth and self-discovery. At Grandmary's remote summer home, Samantha visits the beautiful island where her parents drowned years ago, and learns how to engage productively with knowledge that is painful and troubling. Samantha at first avoids the island, but decides to go there after she finds her mother's sketchbook full of watercolors and photographs. She and the twins take their "pack baskets," "jammed with sandwiches and cookies, butterfly nets, bird guides, and magnifying glasses," and marvel at the island's captivating beauty: the waterfall with its "lacy curtain of water," drops of which hung in the girls' hair "like pearls," and the moss that creates an atmosphere "'like the enchanted forest in *Sleeping Beauty*'" (29-36). The "enchanted" quality of the island is defined through commodities—not only through the girls' magnifying glasses and other nature gadgets but in the descriptions of the "lacy" waterfall and its pearl-like droplets. The girls swim, picnic, and play, and the island's "peaceful" atmosphere has a powerful effect on Samantha. She realizes that, even though the island is the site of a tragic occurrence, it is "a beautiful, happy place" that she wants "to try to remember," not avoid (36, 56). Samantha's recognition of the importance of remembering events that are sad or painful rather than taking refuge in avoiding them is a self-affirming lesson about finding ways to cultivate beauty, happiness, and peace in the wake of personal tragedies. It is also telling, however, that Samantha's emotional growth is cultivated on an island that can only be accessed through wealth. Further, the island is healing and enchanting precisely because of its associations with expensive commodities as well as its remoteness from the gritty realities of industrial production. The goodness of consumer culture (its "aura of fun and

enchantment" and Samantha's privileged ability to engage with it) is thus affirmed "*in spite of*, or rather *by*" the fact that it exists far away from the social problems of industry (Barthes 41).

Nellie finally returns in the concluding volume of the series, *Changes for Samantha*. Samantha's interactions with Nellie in this book demonstrate how the drawbacks of the industrial system are "redeemed by the transcendent good" of the consumer culture it engenders. In this volume, Samantha is living with her uncle and Cornelia in New York City when she finds out that Nellie and her younger sisters Bridget and Jenny have been sent to the city after their parents died of the flu. Samantha finds the girls in an orphanage, plans their escape, and hides them in her aunt and uncle's attic. Hiding the girls makes Samantha feel "as if she lived in two different worlds. In one world, she made valentines and cookies with Aunt Cornelia. She went to school, practiced her ice skating, and joked with Uncle Gard, just as usual." This is the world that Samantha occupies as a materially privileged girl. "The other world was smaller and quieter, but just as happy . . . in the room where her secret family lived. Samantha was a very important member of that family. It was up to her to be sure that Nellie, Bridget, and Jenny had food to eat, water for drinking and washing, books to read . . . everything they needed," including cocoa, and Valentine's Day cookies (Tripp, *Changes* 49). In this world, Samantha previews her future, adult participation in consumer culture by deftly creating her own space of domestic comfort and security for her "secret family." Further, she realizes that the wonders of consumer culture are not only essential to providing comfort, but also happiness: "It was easy for Samantha to keep [the girls] happy and amused . . . They asked hundreds of questions. What color dress was Aunt Cornelia

wearing today? . . . Did [she] finish the valentines she was making? What did they look like? . . . The three girls listened to everything Samantha said with glowing eyes." Although Nellie sneaks out of the attic window every morning to look for work and worries she might have to return to the thread factory, upon returning to the attic she is comforted by the "safe and cozy" home that Samantha provides for them, and made happy by tales of the wider world of consumption that exists in the rooms below (50, 53). Samantha, in return, receives their glowing looks of gratitude and admiration.

In the last volume of her series, then, Samantha once again attempts to mediate Nellie's suffering at the hands of the industrial system by giving her a semblance of her own material privileges, as she did in the first volume when she gave Nellie her doll. This time, however, it works. Samantha's contained world of consumption, complete with its "aura of fun and enchantment," is at once a refuge from the larger industrial system that exists just outside of the attic window, and a saving force. After finding out that Samantha has been hiding Nellie and her sisters in the attic, Samantha's aunt and uncle decide to officially adopt the girls. Her uncle jokingly explains the decision in the language of commerce: "'I'd say we need three more girls, in a variety of sizes.'" Despite the sweetly whimsical nature of her uncle's speech, Samantha's response suggests that she does understand the adoption primarily as a purchase her aunt and uncle have made on her behalf, exclaiming that she is "'the luckiest person in the world. At last, at last, I have a real family of my own!'" (60). The goodness of consumer culture is proven to be both economic and emotional. The Samantha series thus ends by displaying the myriad virtues of consumer culture: safety and security, coziness and comfort, happiness and health, family and fortune. It also offers the "moral" of

inoculation: “What does it matter, *after all*,” if consumer culture “is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows” for so much happiness? (Barthes 42).

I am not arguing that the Samantha series was consciously written to justify American girls’ consumption at the expense of toy workers’ rights, health, and happiness. Rather, I argue that the series’ depiction of Samantha’s “inoculation” to the injustices of early-twentieth-century industrial labor and consumer culture suggests to contemporary girls that it is okay to accept rather than critically engage with their privileged positions within a hyper-commercialized children’s consumer culture dominated by a troubled global system of production. This message bolsters the enduring cultural myth noted by Lauren Berlant, Robin Bernstein, and Nathalie op de Beeck, among others, that girls exist outside of the social and political machinations of history, and thus have the right “to stand remote from time-sensitive issues, to indulge in leisure activities, and to refuse participation in any process that stands to change (or fails to change) the course of history” (Op de Beeck 115). However, as mentioned above, even though Samantha becomes “inoculated” to the injustices of industrial labor, there are provocative opportunities throughout the series for readers to view key scenes and accessories with a critical gaze. For instance, the irony of the “thread, 2 cents” illustration in the second volume might spread to the illustration of the neatly ordered thread compartments in the sewing kit that Samantha loves in book three. The specter of the thread factory outside of Samantha’s cozy attic in the final volume might prompt the reader to ask about or seek out information on factories in their present day world. Thus, while encouraging girls to critically challenge the status quo is not an ostensible goal of AG historical fiction series, AG’s commodification of history nevertheless creates

moments of potential subversion. Presenting both options in the series also gives girl consumers the privilege of choice. Girls have the right to engage in political issues when they want to, and ignore them when they want to. They can make speeches about unjust factory labor practices *and* enjoy mass-produced commodities at Christmastime and birthday parties. The Samantha series thus exemplifies how AG grants American girls the ultimate privilege of choosing how much awareness of social and economic injustice will influence their daily lives.

Addy Walker: Wiggling Worms and White Stripes

The addition of Addy Walker to the AG collection in 1993 represents AG's attempt to broaden its "girl-sized" views of history by creating stories and merchandise around the perspective of an American girl whose social, political, and racial status at first denies her access to AG's ideal version of girlhood. A fugitive slave from 1864, Addy escapes with her mother from a North Carolina plantation in the first book in her series, and in the rest of the volumes learns to read and write while establishing a new life in Philadelphia, makes friends while negotiating the subtler forms of racism in the North, and participates in patriotic celebrations while trying to bring her family (still enslaved in the South and fighting for the Union army) back together. Addy was AG's first non-white heroine, and her inclusion in the collection garnered much attention. Many educational institutions saw the Addy series as a valuable way to teach girls about slavery and America's racial history. Public libraries still feature the Addy series in their book clubs and reading programs, and elementary school instructional plans demonstrate how to incorporate the Addy series into units on the Civil War. In 2011, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History partnered with AG to create a self-guided tour using characters, incidents, and materials from the Addy series to direct

young visitors to examine specific documents, artifacts, and models pertaining to slavery and Civil War life across a variety of the museum's collections. Among the objects highlighted are: a model of a slave ship, a copy of Hannah and Mary Townsend's *Antislavery Alphabet*, a Civil War era cotton dress, and the Emancipation Proclamation. The tour, called "Addy's World," is part of the Smithsonian's "Our Story" project, which uses children's literature to "help children and adults enjoy exploring history together through children's literature, everyday objects, and hands-on activities" ("About" n.p.). In this way, the Addy series is perhaps AG's most publically visible and institutionally supported "girl-sized" view of history, and is especially valued for its ability to productively engage contemporary American girls in the difficult historical reality of American slavery.

While some praised the ability of the Addy series to engage contemporary girls with a traumatic period of American history, others questioned the validity of AG's depiction of slavery from within its multi-million dollar enterprise. The *Chicago Tribune* noted the important historical lessons Addy's stories could provide for young readers, but also wondered, "[i]s it appropriate to depict the only African American doll in the group as a slave?" (Mena n.p.). Scholars were similarly skeptical: "it seems far-fetched to suggest that Addy's real milestones are the normal ones," Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace writes. She continues: "In the end the horrors of [Addy's] beginning give way to . . . 'Addy's party treats' (imitation flowers, miniature milk bottle, pie plate, pie server, as well as a 'patriotic *banner of freedom*' for $24). Thus even slavery becomes a marketable condition, when it leads to the accumulation of the appropriate accessories" (156). Critical concerns about the Addy series revolve around what message AG's

depiction of slavery sends to contemporary girls living in a historical moment fraught with its own racial and economic issues. After all, the Addy series is a profitable AG product that, like the Samantha series, attempts to celebrate the "transcendent good" of the consuming girl over the brutality of national systems of production. In addition, as Paula T. Connolly reminds us, debates about slavery and debates about race have been and continue to be "linked symbiotically in the United States" (2). As such, children's fiction about slavery teaches child readers not only about the political workings and personal experiences of slavery, but also about "what their function is in terms of race, citizenship, and personhood" (Connolly 2-3). What kind of lessons about race, citizenship, personhood, privilege and responsibility are presented by a fugitive slave happily existing in AG's "object-obsessed" world of "branded fiction"? This section examines how the first book in the series, *Meet Addy*, attempts to perform the complicated task of reconstructing the experiences of a slave girl (literally an object herself) while supporting the ideologies of global children's consumer culture, and the myth that all AG consumers have the privilege of compartmentalizing and escaping the violence of their histories.

In the first scene of *Meet Addy*, Addy lies awake in her cabin, listening to her parents whisper to each other about the possibility of escape for their family—Addy, her baby sister, Esther, and her older brother, Sam. While Addy's mother thinks it would be safer to wait until the war is over, Addy's father cites Addy's threatened girlhood as the reason that escape must happen as soon as possible:

> "I hurt when I see Addy toting heavy water buckets to the fields, or when I see her working there, bent over like a old woman. Sam already fifteen, but she a little girl, nine years old, and smart as they come. She go out in the morning, her eyes all bright and shining with hope. By night she come

> stumbling in here so tired, she can hardly eat. Esther still a little baby, but Addy getting beat down every day. I can't stand back and watch it no more." (8)

True to their mission, AG presents slavery through the lens of girlhood—not just by featuring a girl main character, but by focusing the book's critique of slavery on the particular damage it does to girlhood. Slavery has already affected the teenaged Sam, as evidenced by his mounting, reckless rebelliousness: "'He get up grumbling about not wanting to work for the master, and he take his grumbling out into the fields,'" his father notes (Porter 5). However, as is common in other girls' historical fiction series as well as in influential antebellum slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), young males' rebellious response to unjust political systems is developmentally par for the course, and accounts for their progression into makers of history. Indeed, in a later volume we learn that Sam fights for the Union as a soldier in the United States Colored Troops—a story detail that the "Addy's World" Smithsonian guide highlights by directing visitors to view a Battle Flag carried by an African American regiment ("Addy's World" n.p.). But AG's version of girlhood is not cultivated through engagement with the injustices of the system. Slavery beats girls down and bends them over like old women. In this way, AG sets up slavery as a system specifically opposed to AG's profitable version of privileged girlhood, and suggests that Addy's escape from slavery will also be her entrance into this version of girlhood.

Indeed, Addy's experiences of slavery as well as her dreams about freedom are marked throughout the book by her "girl-sized" perspective: a combination of historical research into girls' experiences in slavery and AG's vision of their ideal girl consumer. One of Addy's duties is to "worm" the tobacco plants—"mov[ing] from row to row, carefully pulling green, wiggling worms from the leaves"—a common and well-

documented task of slave children (Porter 10, Schwartz 117-118). To distract herself from the unpleasantness of the wiggling worms, Addy "dream[s] about freedom." First, "[s]he saw herself learning to read and write," drawing from the antebellum slave narrative trope of literacy as a way to freedom and a source of power. Immediately after she dreams of literacy, "[s]he saw herself wearing fancy dresses with lace, nothing like the rough cotton shift she always wore now" (Porter 10). Addy's dreams of dresses speak to contemporary assumptions of children's consumer culture about girls' material desires, and the AG enterprise in particular, which sells many fancy dresses for Addy dolls. The prospect of fancy dresses continues to occupy a large portion of Addy's dreams of freedom: "Poppa would get paid for his work and buy so much food they would never be hungry. He would buy cloth for her fancy dresses and Momma would make them for her" (10-11). The juxtaposition of dresses and worms contrasts girls' material privileges with the horrors and deprivations of slavery, which certainly works to expand the perspective of contemporary, privileged American girls into historical experiences of girlhood that differ drastically from their own. It also works to solidify, however, the connection between girlhood and the desire for commodities such as "fancy dresses"—a connection that obviously supports the AG enterprise as well as the idea that Addy's escape from slavery and entrance into 'American Girlhood' means not just freedom and literacy but also consumption.

The tobacco worms continue to be a powerful symbol of Addy's experiences of slavery, and thus AG's portrayal of how it damages girlhood. Soon after Addy's parents whisper about escaping, Addy's father and brother are sold to a neighboring plantation. Distracted by her sorrow, Addy misses a few worms and is punished by the overseer:

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

The punishment is visceral and suggestive. As Connolly notes in her examination of picture books about slavery, while texts for young children do not "illustrate the same level of physical violence or sexual exploitation included in books for older children…images of violence are often conveyed symbolically," for instance, by the presence in escape stories snarling wolves on the peripheries of the pages, or bloodhounds waiting in the shadows (Connolly, "Narrative" 108). Reading Addy's punishment, it is hard to ignore the symbolism of sexual exploitation—the phallic worms, the forcing open and inside, the stuffing, the bursting. Even if the child reader does not have a clear conception of the sexual aspects of this scene nor a historical knowledge of the pervasiveness of sexual violence in slavery, the description of the punishment provides an immediate, sensory depiction through the "still-twisting and wiggling worms" of the perversities of power and the multifaceted realities of girls' suffering within slavery. Indeed, author Brit Bennett, writing of her own complex girlhood experiences with the Addy series, claims that among "all the harrowing scenes [she has] encountered in slave narratives," reading the worm-eating scene in *Meet Addy* as a child is the experience that stands out "most vividly," specifically because the scene both expands a young person's conception of the scope of slavery's violence and zooms in on an individual girl's experience of it. "At eight years old," Bennett writes, "I understood that slavery was cruel—I knew about hard labor and whippings—but the idea of a little girl being forced to eat a worm stunned me. I did not yet understand that violence is an art. There's creativity to cruelty. What did I know of its boundaries and

edges?" ("Addy" n.p.). As Bennett's reading experience demonstrates, Addy's "girl-sized view" can have a revelatory affect on young readers learning about personal suffering wrought by political injustice.

It is important to note that Addy's "worm-eating punishment" was a "carefully researched detail brought to the [AG] company by the [advisory] board"—a group of historians and educators assembled to provide guidance in the development of Addy's stories (Mena n.p.). This reminds us that the punishment and the symbolic power of its description exist within the ideological, educational, and consumerist projects of the AG enterprise. Thus, besides the lessons it might teach readers about slavery's violence, Addy's forced consumption of worms also informs the book's lessons about girlhood values, elementary school instructional plan's lessons about slavery, and children's consumer culture's lessons about girls' consumption and material privilege. In *Meet Addy*, the worm-eating punishment is Addy's formative experience in slavery, and as such, it informs the book's two main lessons: first, for the politically oppressed, self-preservation often requires performing outward passivity or stoicism, and second, even in the face of dehumanizing circumstances, one must choose love rather than hate. Regarding the first lesson, Addy's father tells her that slaves are not always "'free to show our feelings on the outside.'" Fear, sorrow, and anger must be kept in sometimes, for safety's sake. However, he tells her that "on the inside we is free. There's always freedom inside your head…'" (Porter 6). By opening Addy's mouth and "stuff[ing] the still-twisting and wiggling worms inside," where they burst inside her body, the overseer enacts a violation of Addy's supposedly sacred inner self. Indeed, although Addy suffers emotional and physical trauma earlier in the story when her father and brother are sold,

and she is struck by the lash of a whip as she tries to protest, Addy's forced consumption of the "wiggling worms" is the incident that makes her proclaim to her mother that she "hates white people" (24). This admission leads to the book's second lesson: the importance of love in the preservation of self. Addy's mother tells her that hate is what drives people like the overseer, and that she doesn't want Addy "to ever be that kind of person." She reminds Addy that if she "'fill[s] [her] heart with hate, there ain't gonna be no room for love" (25). Over the course of the book, Addy successfully separates her inner feelings of fear from her outer bearing during her dangerous escape from the plantation, and when she arrives at the safe house, feels a great deal of love at the prospect of freedom rather than hate for past injustices. Recalling Wickstrom's idea that each AG heroine depicts "values" generated as a result of their specific historical experiences, Addy's values of learning to love instead of hate, and separating inward emotion from outward performance are generated through her experiences as a slave and fugitive slave in antebellum America—specifically through the worm-eating punishment.

Educational guides that use the Addy books in the classroom also highlight the worm-eating scene. Marguerite A. Murphy's instructional plan for grades 3-5 featured on "ReadWriteThink"—an online, interactive portal partnered with the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association—instructs students to engage in historical research and literary analysis by way of those "wiggling worms." Two important objectives of Murphy's instructional plan are to: "Formulate inferences to explain the author's word choices," and "[i]nterpret the author's craft of visualization through writing and drawing" (n.p.). Specifically, Murphy suggests that teachers "[s]top

at places in the chapter that lend themselves to inferences," and highlights as an example Addy's forced consumption of worms: "Ask students why the overseer is making her do this. Explain how inferencing is like figuring out a mystery. Model specifically how to use background knowledge to answer questions when a book does not directly provide the information" (n.p.). The worm-eating scene is singled out as a place for readers to stop, think, closely consider word choices, investigate, discuss, and draw on knowledge about historical context. The tobacco worms, therefore, are not just used to viscerally depict Addy's fictional traumatic experience, but to engage students in the work of historical research and the development of political consciousness: the worm punishment indicates larger systems of belief, laws, and power relationships at work in slavery, and instigates examination of these forces. Regarding the second objective, Murphy suggests that students "independently retell the events in each chapter in writing" and "draw pictures to enhance their writing"—an exercise that "reinforces their visualization of the author's word choices" (n.p.). Because students are encouraged throughout their reading of *Meet Addy* to visualize specific word choices, the "still-twisting and wiggling worms" both prompt investigation into the historical and political contexts informing the scene, and provide specific terms with which to visualize and recreate a personal experience of those contexts.

The worm-eating scene not only informs the book's depiction of girlhood values, and the classroom's historical investigation of slavery, but also informs the concluding scene of *Meet Addy*, in which Addy receives a highly visible commodity in the Addy

product line: the pink, striped dress that the Addy doll comes wearing.[3] Addy and her mother make it to a safe house where a kind, white woman provides them with beds, sustenance, clothing, and passage to Philadelphia. Addy's bath, warm meal, new clothes, and feeling of being "clean and safe" are a relief after the dirt and deprivations of her escape, in which she passed through rough, leech-filled waters and a Confederate Army camp (Porter 58). At the safe house, Addy receives a dress to wear for the journey to Philadelphia and freedom: "Addy loved her dress with its wiggly white stripes and white buttons running down the front. It was prettier than any she had imagined when she dreamed about freedom" (58-59). Addy is able to "love" the dress, showing that her heart is no longer filled with hate fueled by the injustices she recently suffered. And yet, the description of the dress directly recalls the earlier scene in which Addy pulls "wiggling worms" from the tobacco leaves, and imagines dresses in order to distract herself from the unpleasant task. Further, there is that evocative phrase—the dress's "wiggly white stripes"—that causes the "wiggling worms" the overseer forced inside her body to materialize on the very fabric of the dress that supposedly represents her escape from that system. According to Kowaleski-Wallace, Addy's loving response to the pink, striped dress would be an example of the "horrors" of slavery "giv[ing] way" to commodity-driven happiness. And indeed, the pervasive presence of the dress and images of Addy smiling serenely while wearing it certainly support this notion: Addy wears the dress on the cover of *Meet Addy* as she stands in front of tobacco plants, and

[3] The American Girls Collection was renamed American Girl BeForever in 2014.The BeForever re-release of Addy changes the original pink dress to a blue one, without stripes. Since 2014, the Addy doll comes dressed in this outfit, and the descriptions of her dress are updated in new editions of Meet Addy.

at the top of the Smithsonian's "Addy's World" self-guide. For years, brand new Addy dolls arrived wearing the dress, and the AG catalog sold girl-sized versions. In this way, *Meet Addy* presents the pink dress as a triumph over the traumas of Addy's experiences in slavery.

However, while the dress indicates Addy's ability to love despite personal trauma and political injustice, the dress's "wiggly white stripes" evoke the brutality of her experiences in slavery. While it is impossible to say if and how readers connect the wiggling worms to the striped dress, the process of the "horrors" of slavery "giving way" to consumerism is complicated by the subtle evocation of Addy's past experience as a slave on the dress that marks her status as an AG heroine. Samantha's sewing kit compartmentalizes spools of thread along with the knowledge they should evoke about child labor. Unlike Samantha's sewing kit, Addy's dress does not demonstrate how to compartmentalize disturbing knowledge about social injustice and then shut it away. Addy's dress translates a traumatic episode of historical injustice into a material decoration that stands as an ever-visible indication of the "horrors" of slavery, and yet, one that Addy loves to wear. Thus, in *Meet Addy* slavery does not "give way" to pretty accessories such as Addy's pink dress. Rather, the dress presents the failure of AG's attempt to mitigate historical trauma.This failure affirms other important lessons. For instance, that trying to glean universal girlhood values out of historically specific experiences yields corrupted results. Also, that AG's method of making history "matter" by selling a plethora of attractive accessories entails multiple processes: designing these accessories, describing them in the book series, catalogs, and related educational materials, and manufacturing them in factories overseas. Each of these processes

impresses meanings upon the objects that remain there, ever-ready to be taken up, examined, and used to challenge any simple understandings of a "girl-sized" view of history.

Conclusion: Girls Within and Without History

It is important to remember that Addy was the first African American AG heroine, and as such African American girls in the late-twentieth century were encouraged to identify with Addy, her history, and her fraught historical materials. This identification speaks to how the nation's racial history affects present day girls' commodities, education, and lives. Bennett, who credits Addy's worm eating punishment with giving her a "stunning," initial glimpse into the depths of historical cruelty, writes: "If you were a white girl who wanted a historical doll who looked like you, you could imagine yourself in Samantha's Victorian home or with Kirsten, weathering life on the prairie. If you were a black girl, you could only picture yourself as a runaway slave" ("Addy" n.p.). Black girls not only pictured themselves in history as slaves, but performed this history for others. A Chicago Tribune article features a 10-year-old girl named Mercedes Posey, who "loves Addy so much that she dresses like the doll and sometimes, as if she were Addy, reads her story to children at area bookstores. She often reads for free, sometimes for a stipend of $20 to $30." (Mena n.p.). Bennett herself performed as Addy in a play at her public library, wearing the striped dress from *Meet Addy* and "sign[ing] autographs in character to shy girls clutching Addy dolls" ("Addy" n.p.). Real girls performing the role of Addy— wearing her fraught accessories and reading her stories about slavery for their own gratification as well as to boost the circulation of Addy's books and merchandise— display the inequities in AG's brand of privileged girlhood and how it perpetuates racial divisions between girls. As Bennett writes, Addy is "a toy steeped in

tragedy, and who is offered tragedy during play? Who gets the pink stores and tea parties, and who gets the worms? When I received an Addy doll for Christmas, I was innocent enough to believe that Santa had brought it to me, but mature enough to experience the horrors of slavery" ("Addy" n.p.). As a girl, Bennett was mature enough to learn about slavery, but was innocent of what cultural, ideological, and institutional forces offer her "tragedy" during play as they simultaneously offer other girls "pink stories and tea parties." In other words, the Addy series encouraged her to engage with her "heritage" of racial violence, but not with how her life continued to be affected by it.

This has particularly strong implications for American girls living in a culture in which violence toward black bodies is so prevalent and institutionally supported that the expression "black lives matter" fuels a national movement. Three weeks after writing about her girlhood experiences with America's violent racial history in the Addy series, Brit Bennett wrote about historical and contemporary racial violence in a piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, sparked by the white, 21-year-old Dylann Roof's killing of nine black people at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Ostensibly far removed from AG's world of historical stories and accessories for girls, Bennett's examination of white privilege and the obscured structural roots of present day racial injustice is relevant to the AG series and its presentation of American history. Bennett writes that the media's hesitancy to "classify the Charleston shooting as terrorism" despite the history of "American-bred terrorism" symbolized by the Confederate flag flying over the grounds of the state's Capitol, and plentiful evidence of Roof's "alignment with violent segregationist ideology," demonstrates the "privilege of whiteness" to detach itself from national histories of

violence and injustice. Roof's actions were at first deemed the "inscrutable" work of a deranged "loner," disconnected from larger historical and systematic structures of racial violence. Bennett claims that Roof and other white terrorist's "violence is never based in his whiteness. . . . he is never indicative of anything larger about whiteness. . . . He represents nothing but himself" (Bennett, "White Terrorism" n.p.).

While it would be woefully wrongheaded to suggest that the actions of white AG heroines are akin to terrorism, it is crucial to grapple with the fact that AG offers white girls such as Samantha the ability to detach themselves from larger historical structures of violence and injustice. At the same time, it envisions black girls as inextricably burdened by America's violent racial past—a past that continues to contribute to the inequalities and injustices that limit their present day choices. The same myth that says it is Santa who gives black girls dolls "steeped in tragedy" to play with also fuels the understanding that a tragic shooting in an historic black church was committed "by some disembodied force, not real people motivated by a racist ideology whose roots stretch past the founding of this country" (Bennett, "White Terrorism" n.p.). Once again, the design, development, manufacture, and consumption of AG dolls, accessories, and historical fiction series are a far cry from domestic terrorism. However, series books and accessories from enterprises like AG do teach young people to envision white girls as historical agents whose actions are detached from larger ideological and institutional forces—such as racial violence and labor practices—that continue to limit the agency of so many girls of color as well as work to obscure the structural causes of such limitations. Historical fiction series over the past century have imagined girls as active participants in crucial moments of American history—performing heroic feats as well as

pondering hefty questions about ethics and economics, poverty and privilege, destiny and dispossession. But the very real division that they often perpetuate between white girls and people of color gives rise to crucial questions about the value of the historical fiction series genre, how we should read and approach various series, how current series continue or attempt to redress the more problematic aspects of the genre, and what the future of the girls' historical fiction series should be. I explore these issues in the conclusion.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF HISTORY GIRLS

Girls' Historical Fiction Series in the Twenty-First Century

At the 2015 Children's Literature Association Conference, "'Give me liberty, or give me death!': The High Stakes and Dark Sides of Children's Literature," I presented an overview of this project on a panel entitled "Girlhood and Society." I highlighted what I saw as the two crucial strains of the girls' historical fiction series genre: the productive questions it poses to girls about their personal connection to larger political events, structures, and ideologies, and the perpetuation of white, middle-class girls' privileged ability to escape the most harmful consequences of those events, structures, and ideologies. I cited both the productive and destructive strains of the genre as evidence for the importance of closely examining historical fiction series texts for insight into the complex ways that these popular materials have portrayed the development of American girls' political consciousness over the past century. I received two responses at the end of the panel that encapsulate the high personal and political stakes of girls' historical fiction series in the twenty-first century, as well as indicate how discussions about the value of the genre are concomitant with discussions about the morality of the myth of girl's political innocence in a world in which girls' political uses are often unspeakably brutal.

One audience member told a personal anecdote about her daughter's positive experiences with the American Girls series—not just the books but the expansive material world that the American Girl Company offers to girls through its accessories, activity books, and interactive stores. Like many socially conscious parents, this audience member wondered if series like American Girl could "do more" to expose girls

to the structural injustices of the nation's past and present, but also recognized the value of giving individual girls a positive space in which to imagine, learn, develop their interests, and to feel supported and affirmed in their ability to pursue these interests. This response does not deny the fact that girls inhabit a world filled with often harsh political realities, but nevertheless validates and foregrounds the personal benefits that individual girls can receive from books and materials that promote their development, self-esteem, and self-discovery. I see this response as linked to discourses about girls' education and imaginative engagement with transformative possibilities in an often restrictive world. For instance, in her book *Out of This World: Why Literature Matters to Girls* (2004), Holly Blackford studies how girls make meaning out of the texts that they read, and the personal and political implications of this meaning making. Blackford argues that "girls prefer literature to take them 'off-world' rather than embed them in what they feel to be their real world," full of gender, race, and class based limitations (7). In these 'off-world' spaces, furthermore, Blackford argues that girl readers identify with the formal, aesthetic structure of the fiction that they read rather than with the female protagonists inhabiting them. While these reading practices disengage girls from the political realities and subjectivities of their own world—in which they are indeed embedded—Blackford interprets the practice as productive. Girls might "disconnect literature from social issues" that affect their present day worlds, "but they ultimately do so for a better understanding of how power operates in narrative space and social structures" (61). This understanding in turn helps girls to "transform their perceptions of how the social world could be," thus tapping into the revolutionary potential of childhood

as “the birthplace of new possibilities” and “the hope of an alternative world” (Kapur 2-3).

While the first response suggests that the ability of girls’ historical fiction series to cultivate the personal development of girls, even their relative innocence of real world political issues, is potentially productive to the future social state of the world, the second brought the devastating contemporary political realities of girlhood to the fore. This audience member, drawing on recent uses of girls in terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, offered a thought experiment. What, she asked, would a historical fiction series that featured girl suicide bombers look like? Since 2014, over 100 women and girls, some as young as 8-years-old, have been kidnapped, trained, and then sent “with bombs hidden in baskets or under their clothes” into markets, refugee camps, and schools in West Africa. In a horrific manifestation of the uses of innocent girlhood in historical fiction series, terrorists recognize that girl bombers “are ideal weapons. At security points run by men, they are often searched less thoroughly, if at all. Tucked under the bunched fabric of dresses or religious gowns, explosives are easy to conceal” (Searcey n.p.). Because of their marginalized, often invisible status, girls become both weapons and victims of ideological wars. And as Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn remind us, while “quotidian cruelties” such as kidnapping, trafficking, and abuse are systematically “inflicted on women and girls” every day, only “a tiny portion of U.S. foreign aid is specifically targeted to women and girls” (xiv). The devastating truth of girls’ lives outside the world of girls’ historical fiction series presents a sobering challenge to the girl-sized views of history presented within them—one that needs to be examined if it is to change. In the end, however, I cannot imagine what a series for pre-

adolescent American girls about suicide bombers would look like. But while the thought experiment might not generate a new avenue for girls' historical fiction series content-wise, it does provoke important questions about innocence, awareness, suffering, and responsibility that can be usefully applied in our approach to current series for girls.

Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), her essay collection about representations of war, that "[n]o one after a certain age has the right" to "innocence" regarding "how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others" (114). This is a sentiment that is widely shared by socially conscious Americans. However, thinking about how the idea of innocence is implied in this statement draws out particular questions: What is that certain age? What should those who are young and privileged enough to have not yet reached it learn about the suffering of others within and outside of their own nation? And once we have indeed grown beyond that "certain age" of innocence and reached what Sontag calls the "moral or psychological adulthood" that brings with it not only the knowledge of others' suffering but the knowledge of how we are implicated in the systems that cause such suffering, how are we then to think about privileged young people's innocence of suffering as well as the materials that perpetuate it (114)? These abstract questions take on concrete dimensions depending on the specific historical contexts and issues about which they are raised. Sontag evokes the concept of childhood innocence in relation to twentieth- and twenty-first century technological advancements in media forms that have made "[b]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country" a "quintessentially modern experience" in the Western world (18). In this context, childhood innocence is a state one must leave behind in order to commit oneself to the attention, reflection, and

examination such calamities morally require. In the context of American girlhood, and specifically in the context of this project's focus on a popular genre of girls' series fiction, other questions arise. For instance: Can historical fiction series overcome its dual tendencies to grant privileged, white girls the "right" to disengage from the most violent aspects of history at the same time as they constrain girls of color within that violence (both of which are related to our cultural and political failure to address the daily violence inflicted upon girls around the world)? On the other hand, can historical fiction series' creation of spaces for girls to grow and develop relatively removed from political realities encourage a more reflective and nuanced sense of self that is ultimately politically useful in the twenty-first century?

Diaries, Histories, and Girls' Series

I would like to briefly explore these questions in relation to a current girls' historical fiction series that is both popular and educationally valued: Scholastic's Dear America series (1996-present).[1] With 42 titles so far, Dear America is perhaps the most expansive look into girls' lives in a historical fiction series. The series' title (suggestive of letters) and form (the fictional girls' diary) combine two important forms of girlhood writing that also speak to the conflict between private thoughts and public dialogues that informs all girls' historical fiction series. The series explores the relationship between the personal and the political in other ways, too. To learn about girls' experiences during the Civil War era, for instance, girls can read about multiple girl-sized views of the same historical issues. For instance, in Karen Hesse's *A Light in the Storm: The Diary of Amelia Martin* (1999), Amelia tells of her life in Delaware, "on the border between North

[1] The Dear America series originally ran from 1996-2004, and then re-launched in 2010.

and South, half the state holding slaves, half the state opposed to the practice," as her family suffers the consequences of her father's abolitionist activities (46). Patricia C. McKissack's *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl* (1997), follows Clotee, a slave on a Virginia plantation as she teaches herself how to read and becomes involved in the Underground Railroad. Barry Denenberg's *When Will This Cruel War Be Over: The Diary of Emma Simpson* (1996), records the thoughts of the white daughter of a slave-owning family on a Virginia plantation. Joyce Hansen's *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl* (1997) depicts the life of Patsy, an emancipated slave immediately following the war who struggles under persisting prejudices in South Carolina. Each of the girl-sized views of history in these volumes can complicate understandings of the others, demonstrating how personal experience, family, community, culture, and racial and class status affect girls' understandings of and experiences in the world. With its many titles depicting the same era or events, the Dear America series presents a valuable de-universalization of girls' perspectives and experiences—a lesson that could serve girls well as they learn about the varied experiences of girls within and far outside of their own communities.

While the personal intimacy of the fictional diary form makes it clear that political realities deeply influence individuals, it also demonstrates that oppressive structural injustices do not wholly constrain them, personally or politically. For instance, Karen Michele Chandler writes that in both the slave Clotee's and the recently emancipated Patsy's installments, the girls' diaries serve as "a freeing space, a locus of resistance that equates the protagonist's writing with artistic and epistemological control" (16). Through the diary form, oppressed black characters are shown to be "active, versatile

participants in a culture that often dignifies black individuals and communities even as they are restricted and hurt by racism, economic exploitation, and violence" (Chandler 12). The girls specifically, through their cultivation of an identity within a nation that denies them personhood, demonstrate the power of personal resistance to dominant political and cultural forces in ways that are relevant to contemporary girls. As Chandler puts it: "Encouraging an intimacy between today's readers and nineteenth-century black girls, *A Picture of Freedom* and *I Thought My Soul Would Rise* emphasize how enslaved or only nominally freed girls have the power to shape their experience and to determine which social influences they will accept" (16). This affirmation of the self's power to reject powerful political forces that seek to constrain it is not only an empowering idea for individual girls, but also demonstrates how cultivating an understanding of one's personal identity can lead to political action. At the end of *A Picture of Freedom*, Clotee has the chance to escape her plantation, but decides to stay behind so that she can help others to organize their escapes with the Underground Railroad. In other words, Clotee reaches an "individual, psychological transcendence of oppression," and because of this individual transcendence, recognizes that she wants to work for "collective freedom" (Hubler 102).

In this way, the Dear America installments focusing on the experiences of Clotee and Patsy productively challenge the tendency of series like the American Girl Addy books to constrain contemporary black girls in the horrors of their history. However, Clotee and Patsy's fictional diaries also affirm a major goal of the American Girl Company: to celebrate the value of girls' individual development in spaces that offer a measure of freedom from constraining political realities. Indeed, the diary form expands

the meaning of political literature to include girls' innermost thoughts. Chandler argues that "Patsy's and Clotee's diaries belong to the category of antislavery literature, but they oppose the traditional slave narrative's adherence to a strict abolitionist agenda, foregrounding instead often hidden dimensions of girls' personal and communal lives" (16-17). Furthermore, the diaries show how these personal dimensions of girls' emotions, reflections, relationships, and aspirations are politically important, and should thus be given the room to develop in spaces at least ostensibly separated from the political realities that seek to stifle them (16-17). For the Dear America series, this space is the diary. For the American Girls series, it is the expansive material world of the brand's dolls, books, and accessories. While these spaces encourage very different ways of cultivating the self in a space of relative freedom from the outside world, as well as attach different political outcomes to this personal cultivation, both recognize the value of giving girls room to develop their individual perceptions of the world.

In another example of how the Dear America series offers a more nuanced and politically useful girl-sized view of history than the American Girls books while still affirming the value of girls' personal experiences and development, we can briefly examine Dear America's take on early twentieth-century factory labor disputes. Like American Girl's Samantha series, Deborah Hopkinson's *Hear My Sorrow: The Diary of Angela Denoto, a Shirtwaist Worker* (2004) explores issues of girls and labor in turn-of-the-century New York. American Girl's privileged Samantha becomes aware of unjust labor practices, and through her personal experiences of Christmas, birthdays, and vacation, offers readers the choice of engaging or disengaging with this difficult political reality. Angela of the Dear America series, on the other hand, is a worker herself, and

her personal experiences encourage critical engagement with political rhetoric, organizations, and activism. Angela, from an Italian immigrant family, works at a shirtwaist factory and becomes politicized when she meets Sarah Goldstein, another young female worker and union member who Angela describes as being “on fire inside,” wanting “to fight all the injustices in the world, starting right here” (Hopkinson 43). While attending union meetings, Angela becomes aware of how typical rhetoric surrounding workers devalues, disempowers, and denies their personhood: “‘The bosses only want you for your hands,’ I heard one woman say. ‘Not for you heads or you hearts.’ I found myself nodding as I listened. That was true. I’ve seen signs that say simply, HANDS WANTED” (82). In the American Girls series, Samantha learns about the shocking dehumanization of workers when Nellie speaks about her experiences in the thread factory. While this realization leads to a temporary shift in consciousness, Samantha is ultimately able to compartmentalize this knowledge so that it does not cause her to question the industrial system as a whole, nor her participation in it. Angela, however, recognizes how her personal experiences as a worker connect to the structural ways in which the system of industrial labor disempowers all workers, down to the casual language it uses to hire them. It is a useful lesson in the fact that systematic injustices do indeed produce shocking instances of abuse or mistreatment, but are also sustained by daily, mundane prejudices that perpetuate the divisions between powerful and powerless.

Angela’s political awakening is also usefully complicated by her personal experiences as a member of the Italian immigrant community. For instance, her older sister Luisa does not believe that the union can change anything, and disapproves of

Angela's plans to strike because her loss of income will harm their family, especially Angela's sickly younger sister, Teresa. While Angela still believes in the union's cause, she also realizes that political activism has personal consequences, and that there is no easy answer when choosing between the immediate needs of one's family and the collective needs of workers. Further, however, Angela's experiences as an Italian immigrant also demonstrate how personal allegiances are not just roadblocks to political activism, but can unearth valid critiques of specific political organizations and movements. For instance, Angela and the more radical Sarah have different feelings toward the Italian "scabs" who don't support the strike:

> Sarah is angry when she sees scabs. But my heart isn't bitter. I understand. Also, Italian girls and their families weren't involved in planning the strike at the beginning. Sometimes it makes me angry to hear the union ladies blame the Italian girls for being weak and for not caring about the strike. But things aren't so simple. Sarah has the support of her family because they've been involved in this union, or one like it. But if the families haven't been involved, what can the girls do? (99)

Angela's personal experiences as an Italian girl whose particular community does not have a history of labor activism and was not included in planning the strike allows her to recognize who is left out of political organizing, and at what cost. In American Girl's Samantha series, Samantha's privilege is what keeps her outside of political engagement. In *Hear My Sorrow*, Angela recognizes that privilege also functions within political movements, allowing those with supportive families, knowledge of labor unions, and the financial means to carry on despite a strike to have their voices are heard. She also points out that the girls and women who seem to "not care" about labor issues are not necessarily weak, apathetic, or apolitical, but rather are the consequences of a political organization that has been built without their voices and experiences in mind. Angela still ultimately decides to participate in the strike because she believes in it, but

her recognition of how privilege and exclusion work within organizations fighting for political justice could serve girls well when getting involved in their own political causes, and joining or creating their own political organizations.

In fact, Angela's discovery recalls a point Carol Hanisch makes in her essay regarding the Women's Liberation Movement, "The Personal is Political" (1970). Hanisch's essay famously argues that many problems in women's individual lives speak to larger issues of systematic oppression, and are therefore not only personal problems but political ones requiring collective, political solutions. Nevertheless, Hanisch maintains that recognizing, respecting, and listening to the thought processes of "so-called apolitical women" is of the utmost importance. Hanisch clarifies that this dialogue is important not so that the movement can better organize and politicize these women, but because listening to why they remain outside of political action forces critical reflection on the movement's methods of organization and politicization—an exercise that ultimately enriches political movements and their participants. Hanisch writes that "there are things in the consciousness of 'apolitical' women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have," and that the movement should take their voices seriously to see if there "might be something wrong in our thinking…something wrong with the action or something wrong with why we are doing the action or maybe the analysis of why the action is necessary is not clear enough in our minds" (n.p). In *Hear My Sorrow*, Angela realizes that her labor union would be stronger if it included the voices and consciousness of the so-called apolitical girls and women. Attempting to understand the reasons why certain girls and women resist the union would help the union to clarify its own actions, and to resist the

oversimplified and detrimental impulse to cite weakness or ignorance as the explanations for all political disengagement.

Not all installments of the Dear America series are so thoughtful in their treatment of girls' negotiation of the personal and the political. Hubler, Melissa Kay Thompson, Debbie Reese, and other critics find troubling issues with the series' portrayal of American Indian experiences. For instance, Ann Rinaldi's *My Heart is on the Ground: The Diary of Nannie Little Rose, a Sioux Girl* (1999), follows Nannie's relocation from a South Dakota reservation to Pennsylvania's Carlisle Indian School. Hubler argues that "while the pain of forced assimilation is depicted" in certain scenes, the novel ends with Nannie triumphantly overcoming stage fright to play the role of a white, Pilgrim woman in the school's Thanksgiving play (99). Also, Ann Turner's *The Girl Who Chased Away Sorrow: The Diary of Sarah Nita, A Navajo Girl* (1999), tells about the forced relocation of the Navajo people, but "avoids the central themes in U.S. government / tribal relations: extermination and land theft," and thus uses the girl's perspective to avoid examining political realities (Thompson 363). In other words, while Dear America installments such as *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly, A Picture of Freedom,* and *Hear My Sorrow* use girl-sized views of history in ways that offer productive counters to the American Girls series' depictions of slavery and factory labor, other installments reiterate damaging historical myths found in texts such as the Little House series. This disparity occurs undoubtedly because the series employs so many different authors. Still, I would argue that the expansiveness and the intimacy provided by many of the fictional girls' diaries in the series can still be very useful, as long as they use the girl-sized view to reveal instead of conceal personal and political realities.

It seems apt to mention in closing that the inspiration for the Dear America series was inspired by actual, well-known girls' historical diaries that capture traumatic political realities at the same time as they document individual girls' lives, ideas, beliefs, desires, and philosophies. According to Scholastic, Dear America's fictional diaries present "history in a format that is perennially appealing" to girls "as evidenced by the continuing popularity of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Zlata's Diary*" ("Discussion" 7). The connection between a popular girls' series such as Dear America and *The Diary of Anne Frank* goes further than just the diary form. The well-read Anne Frank loved Cissy van Marxveldt's popular Dutch girls' series of the 1920s, Joop ter Heul, which followed a girl named Joop, her adventures with her friends in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Amsterdam, and her eventual marriage and motherhood. According to Berteke Waaldijk, Anne "used form and content from the Joop ter Heul series," which begins as letters Joop wrotes to her friends and then turns into Joop's diary entries, "in finding a form for her own diary" (115). For instance, from September to December of 1942, nearly all of Anne's diary entries are written "in the form of letters to one of the characters from the Joop ter Heul books" (Waaldijk 115). Also, while Anne wrote letters to Joop's friends Pop, Pien, Conney, and Kit, she never wrote to Joop herself, suggesting that perhaps Anne identified with the series' heroine. Indeed, Waaldijk recognizes similarities between the personal lives of Anne and Joop that would support this identification, citing family connections such as "Joop's strong affection for her father and problematic relationship with her mother," and the fact that both girls "have an older sister, whom they consider a model girl and daughter." There are also similarities in the girls' interests and personalities: "Just like Joop, Anne formed a club

with her friends and tried writing poetry," and both girls "are cheerful and fun-loving on the outside, but lonely, insecure, and serious on the inside" (Waaldijk 117). In this way, the Joop ter Heul series both "helped [Anne] to envisage her own diary" and "offered Anne a lonely heroine to identify with as a role model" (Waaldijk 117).

While the Joop ter Heul books are not a historical fiction series, their clear but often overlooked presence within one of the most famous records of a girl-sized view of history evocatively reminds us that what girls read—even if it is a seemingly superficial girls' series—can give them a form through which to find their voices, think, experiment, and, crucially, to move beyond. Waaldijk is quick to point out that despite the ways that the Joop ter Heul series influenced the content, form, and style of Anne's diary entries, Anne far surpassed the scope of van Marxveldt's series:

> In her diaries, Anne wrote about herself in relation to the world. She discussed whether she would withdraw her faith in humankind and decided not to. This is a wider and deeper question than van Marxveldt ever explored. Anne expressed her aspirations for the future, her wish to become a writer. In contrast, Joop ter Heul unquestioningly entered into marriage, motherhood, and some welfare work. Anne wrote about desire, her desire for love and a friend, be it man or woman….Anne Frank thought and wrote delicately, clearly, openly, and passionately about subjects that never seem to figure in the life of van Marxveldt's heroine. (117-118)

The similarities as well as the differences between the Joop ter Heul series and Anne's diary speak to the great potential of girls' series fiction. The form and content of a popular girls' series inspired Anne's writing but did not constrain it within the conventions of its genre**.** Of course, it goes without saying that not all girls have the intellectual and literary capacities of Anne Frank. However, her example demonstrates that girls' series fiction can prompt girls' creativity as well as encourage them to develop and assert their own voices in ways that depart widely from the trajectory of the series' characters. Inspired by stories about girls who live their lives and develop their own

perspectives of the world, girl readers can figure out ways to explore their own questions about desire, aspirations, and the ever-complex relationship between themselves and the world. As I have already argued, girls' historical fiction series are particularly apt materials for inspiring this kind of exploration, as they have been asking these kinds of questions for over a century. As girls' historical fiction series continue to be popular in the twenty-first century, we should be mindful of the ways that they can both limit and liberate girls.

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