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Ablenationalism in American Girlhood

Sami Schalk



ABSTRACT

American Girl is a multi-product brand that is marketed transnationally through discourses of gendered empowerment and education. While previous scholarship has commented on how American Girl encourages normative gender roles, consumerism, and limited notions of diversity, no scholars, to my knowledge, have discussed disability in relation to the brand. This article explores the representation of disability in the American Girl contemporary line through an analysis of books and doll accessories. Unlike issues of gender, race and class, which appear central to American Girl's depiction of contemporary girlhood, disability is a literal and metaphoric accessory in the brand. I contend that this representation of disability as supplementary is a prime example of ablenationalism explicitly targeted at girls.

KEYWORDS

American Girl brand, children's literature, citizenship, disability, dolls, neoliberalism



Introduction

Disability studies scholars Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell define ablenationalism as “the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship” (2010:113). Ablenationalism particularly manifests through “open rhetorical claims of a new era of inclusion for people with disabilities issued by the state Disabled people now perform their representational work as a symbol of expansive neo-liberal inclusion efforts” (116). The rhetorical and representational use of the inclusion of disabled people as symbolic of the superior and exceptional modern nation is circulated both within and outside the nation. In this article, I explore how ablenationalism operates in the contemporary fictional books and doll accessories of the American Girl brand through the combined gendered discourses of education, empowerment, and national identity. I argue that disability's inclusion in the brand is a means of touting the superiority, morality, and exceptionalism of the United States as embodied in the figure of the *American Girl*.



American Girl began as a small mail-order catalog company in 1986 and quickly grew. Mattel purchased the brand in 1998. American Girl now produces books (historical fiction, contemporary fiction, self-help, craft, and cookbooks), dolls, doll accessories, movies, girls' clothing and accessories, a magazine, and has an interactive website. American Girl also operates several flagship brand stores and retail outlets, bringing in at least 400 million dollars per year (Borghini et al. 2009). American Girl has also claimed that over 95 percent of girls in the United States have heard of the brand (Schlosser 2006). While American Girl is based in the United States, the brand now sells products via catalog and retail outlets in both Mexico and Canada, and online orders can be shipped internationally to most countries. American Girl products are not unremarkable generic books and toys, but expressions of US neoliberal and capitalist ideologies on display. Thus, though American Girl products represent girls only in the US, its distribution to girls around the world—encouraging them to literally buy (into) these ideologies—makes an analysis of ablenationalism in the brand vitally important to our understandings of disability and girlhood.

Previous scholarship on American Girl argues that the brand romanticizes and sanitizes history while encouraging consumerism (Brady 1997; Hade 1999; Nielsen 2002; Acosta-Alzuru and Lester Roushazamir 2003; Marshall 2008, 2009). Scholars also contend that the brand depicts surface-level diversity while actually promoting a deeply normative, homogenous, and exclusive version of girlhood (Inness 1998a; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Schlosser 2006; Osei-Kofi 2013). Indeed, American Girl books are often didactic about what constitutes an American Girl. As I will demonstrate, identity construction in the brand is ablenationalist because of how acceptance of disabled people is used to symbolize so-called good behaviors of the ideal American girl citizen who stands in for the US nation-state in these representations. While many scholars have discussed the role of age, gender, class, and race in various parts of the American Girl brand, none have discussed disability.¹

Girl of the Year: American Girl Contemporary Fiction

American Girl's ablenationalism can be traced first through their fictional texts. American Girl's Girl of the Year line of contemporary fiction contains chapter books accompanied by a matching doll and accessories which are manufactured for only one year.² Each Girl of the Year character is a ten- or

eleven-year-old who lives in the United States. Each American Girl character represents ideals such as wanting to improve the world, speaking up for what you believe in, persevering in the face of change and challenge, helping others, always doing your best, and being passionate, courageous, welcoming and unique.³ Embedded in these American Girl characteristics is the notion that these qualities are particular to girls of the United States as opposed to girls in the implicit elsewhere which, generally, goes unrepresented in the brand's products.⁴ All the books, with the exception of the Kanani texts, are narrated in the first person. This narration style encourages reader identification with the Girl of the Year character over secondary characters. At the end of each book there is a section that has either stories about real girls who do similar things as the character in the book or letters from American Girl magazine readers on topics addressed in the book in it. In these final sections, people with disabilities are occasionally mentioned or depicted as the object of charity or volunteer work.⁵ Of the thirteen Girl of the Year characters to date, however, none is disabled.

Disability in Girl of the Year books appears primarily in brief moments with minor characters, mostly in the form of temporary disability or injury. For example, in the Nicki books, people with disabilities are frequently discussed because Nicki and her mother are training a service dog, Sprocket. In *Nicki* (Creel 2007a), "people with physical challenges, [such as] those in wheelchairs ... people with hearing losses ... [and] kids with Down syndrome or cerebral palsy" (6) are mentioned as potentially benefitting from the service dog once he is trained.⁶ No people with disabilities actually appear, however, until the second book, *Thanks to Nicki* (Creel 2007b) when the protagonist goes to visit the young wheelchair user, Laura, who has been paired with Sprocket. Laura appears on 3 of the 102 pages in the story and her speaking takes up fewer than 3 lines of text. In this scene, Laura agrees to let Nicki pet Sprocket and thanks Nicki for doing the training, saying how much better her life is with a service dog. Laura's minor role here is to make Nicki feel good about spending so much time training Sprocket and then having to give up the dog she has come to love. Nicki describes petting Sprocket one last time as the worst moment of her life, but then asserts that seeing him go and sit next to Laura, exactly as he was trained to do, was the best moment of her life. In this scene, Laura is characterized only by her disability and her gratitude to Nicki; her only purpose in the book is to underscore the importance of Nicki's work and complete Nicki's character development. Here, what Nicki does for a disabled person is what makes her an American Girl whom readers are encouraged to emulate.

The 2012 Girl of the Year books, *McKenna* (Casanova 2012a) and *McKenna, Ready to Fly* (Casanova 2012b) introduced Josie Myers, the first and only disabled character to play a major role in the American Girl contemporary fiction line. Josie is a confident, smart, funny, blonde, white wheelchair user. She is a slightly older student assigned to tutor the main character, McKenna, when the latter struggles to keep up with school work and gymnastics. In the first book, Josie's primary role is to tutor and befriend McKenna. When McKenna is clearly uncomfortable about being near a wheelchair user, Josie puts her at ease by openly discussing how some people are initially discomfited around disabled people. McKenna's lack of ease is depicted as part of her own internal fears and uncertainty—her emotions are not represented as part of the oppression of people with disabilities. Instead, her discomfort is naturalized as a normal feeling for nondisabled people which can—and, indeed, must, under the dictate of ablenationalism—be overcome through increased interaction with people with disabilities. The naturalization of the discomfort of nondisabled people around disabled people is developed throughout the two books.

In both books McKenna expresses a cycle of mixed emotions towards people with disabilities, including guilt, pity, and inspiration. First, McKenna feels pity and guilt, especially in response to Josie's desire to find a cure for her disability. The idea that being disabled is particularly difficult—and thus potentially worthy of pity—is also indirectly implied by Josie's insistence on the importance of being upbeat, not blaming others, and not feeling bad for herself because of her disability. Josie's lack of sadness or self-pity, however, signals to McKenna that she should not feel sorry for herself while she is temporarily disabled by a sports injury. This eventually translates into Josie's being read as inspirational. For example, after a tutoring session McKenna thinks about Josie and reflects: "A disability sure hadn't held *her* back. She seemed so strong and confident. Honestly, I believe she could do anything she put her mind to" (56, emphasis in original).

The negative and patronizing emotions nondisabled people might feel in regard to people with disabilities are further depicted in *McKenna, Ready to Fly!* (Casanova 2012b). Here, McKenna reintroduces Josie to readers with the compensational statement that she "may not have full use of her legs, but Josie makes up for it with her sky-high grades, her flute-playing ability, and the way she's always helping others" (4–5). Snyder and Mitchell (2010) argue, "Compensation—or, rather, schemes of superpower overcompensation—rule the roost of neo-liberal explanatory systems" which undergird ablenationalism (117). While Josie is not

superpowered, she is certainly depicted as one of “the normatively disabled” (118) who can easily be brought into the life of the nation without challenging its ableist structures. Snyder and Mitchell insist that the normalization of some disabilities comes at the cost of further pathologizing “less easy to accommodate differences” (119) such as neurological and developmental disabilities. Notably, these types of disabilities, along with disabilities acquired through violence or war, are absent from representations of disability in the American Girl brand.⁷

The main plotline of *McKenna, Ready to Fly!* (Casanova 2012b) revolves around the healing of McKenna’s broken ankle and her getting back to gymnastics. However, in a subplot McKenna visits a horse riding center for people with disabilities in an attempt to support Josie’s dream of riding a horse. McKenna discovers that skills learned from doing gymnastics help her to coach kids at the center to deal with issues like overcoming fear, remembering to breathe, and visualizing, as well as sitting up straight. At the riding center, many people are described as having a disability including a “little girl’s [whose] arm ended at her elbow” (25), a rider whose “back was curved like the letter C” (31), a blind rider, and a girl whose “face looked lopsided” (48). Upon interacting with these children, McKenna repeats her cycle of experiencing mixed emotions. First, she expresses discomfort and fear; she says, “A part of me wanted to run out the door. Then I remembered the day I’d first met Josie. I’d felt nervous and not sure what to say or do—until I got to know Josie better” (25). The emotional tenor then shifts to guilt when McKenna tries to imagine being blind. She explains, “I closed my eyes for a moment, imagining what it would be like to ride a horse without being able to see. I didn’t like using crutches, but at least my injury would heal. I felt a twinge of guilt, opening my eyes to gaze out at the riders whose disabilities may *never* get better” (32, emphasis in original). Finally, the emotions shift again to inspiration; McKenna says, “I had come to the center for Josie, but I was surprised by how much I’d enjoyed my time—once I’d gotten past my fear. As I headed on crutches out of the riding center, I reminded myself that I was *lucky*. Lucky to get my cast off soon. Lucky that my physical challenges were only for a short time. *Lucky* to have a friend like Josie” (36, emphasis in original). McKenna’s focus on what she describes as her luck demonstrates how disabled characters function in this book to make nondisabled characters and readers feel good without questioning their privilege as nondisabled people.

The cycle of mixed emotions that I have identified is not limited to McKenna and thereby becomes naturalized in the books. When McKenna’s

teammates help volunteer at the riding center, Toulane, her friend, also exhibits discomfort and fear. McKenna recognizes these emotions in her and then helps her by facilitating interaction with kids at the riding center. Here it becomes clear that while these emotions are depicted as non-ideal, they are also represented as normal and natural reactions for nondisabled people to have upon first contact with people with disabilities since both McKenna and Toulane exhibit this cycle of mixed emotions in the books. The resulting implication is that discriminatory attitudes associated with these emotions are simply the result of ignorance and lack of interaction. Since all the nondisabled characters supposedly move beyond discomfort and fear to acceptance via inspiration, readers are encouraged to read these characters as good American Girls.

These books about McKenna naturalize nondisabled people's discomfort around disabled people. Nonetheless, Josie remains the most complex and active disabled character in the entire American Girl collection. She is aware of how her disability affects the way people treat her and she generally works against nondisabled people's stereotypes, and their discomfort and pity even as these emotions are naturalized through McKenna's narration. Additionally, Josie's disability (and discussions of her body and her wheelchair) are not central to every scene in which she appears. While her disability is frequently identified, this tends to occur in mundane ways that primarily highlight McKenna's newfound concern about accessibility. Strangely, however, physical accessibility is never represented as a problem. Instead, all the spaces McKenna encounters with Josie in their hometown of Seattle, Washington, from their school to the gym, from a restaurant to an outdoor cabin, are all accessible with ramps and elevators. There is even an adapted hiking trail. The seemingly fully wheelchair accessible world that Josie and McKenna live in supports the illusion that ableism—discrimination against people with disabilities—is merely an attitudinal barrier which can be easily eradicated. This representation of a fully accessible world also sends the message that the United States needs no economic or structural changes in regard to disability because full inclusion has already been achieved.

In addition, like Laura in *Thanks to Nicki* (Creel 2007b), Josie's role in the texts about McKenna (Casanova 2012a, 2012b) ultimately centers the nondisabled through her facilitation of the character development of the protagonist. Although Josie's relationship with McKenna is more mutually beneficial, the depiction of McKenna as strong, generous, and thoughtful is founded upon both her assistance to disabled people at the riding center and her determined recovery from injury—a determination particularly

inspired by Josie's ability to be happy and successful despite her disability. This overridingly patronizing attitude toward Josie remains evident even as she is represented as capable and independent in order to demonstrate to (assumed nondisabled) readers that there is no reason to be uncomfortable around disabled people.

This reading of Josie is further reinforced by the promotional and educational materials American Girl produced for these two books. The American Girl Spring 2012 E-Newsletter ⁸ makes Josie's function as a tool for facilitating McKenna's learning and growth explicit by stating that the inclusion of Josie is intended to emphasize an "issue important to moms and girls: appreciating those who are different from you" (American Girl 2012b). This statement indicates how disabled characters in American Girl fiction are used as devices to demonstrate or encourage the growth, kindness, and admirableness of the central American Girl character and the assumed nondisabled American Girl readers as well. In the curriculum document, *McKenna: Learning Guide*, under the section "Respecting and Appreciating Differences," American Girl encourages parents and educators to ask girls questions such as, "Have you ever felt uneasy for being different?" We read: "Josie is different because she uses a wheelchair, but coping with physical challenges has made her brave and confident. Has coping with one of your weaknesses ever made you stronger?" We are asked, "Do you think it's good that people are different? Why or why not?" (American Girl 2012a: n.p.). Here Josie is representative of difference writ large. This highlights how the target of these questions is again assumed to be nondisabled, or at least girls who not use wheelchairs, who would view Josie as distinctly different from themselves and take lessons about respecting and appreciating differences by discussing her character.

Emily Russell argues that disability is "a persistent 'not-me' figure in the rhetoric of American independence" (2011: 5). In American Girl contemporary fiction, disability is indeed a metonym for "not-me" or the non-racialized Other in the brand's representation of the American Girl figure.⁹ Despite the valuable aspects of Josie's character, overall, representations of disability in the Girl of the Year books primarily serve to facilitate the development of the American Girl protagonist who learns to be comfortable with, and respect disability as a metonym for all difference. The incorporation of disability into the American Girl contemporary line replicates the "new rhetoric of exceptional inclusiveness offered by states to affirm their superior modernity" (Snyder and Mitchell 2010: 124) in contemporary ablenationalism. In the texts, disability is represented as an othered, individual state of

being which is merely misunderstood by nondisabled people. This is problematic because it keeps the focus on nondisabled people and ignores the realities of ableism both within and outside of the United States. American Girl participates in ablenationalism by teaching girls that disabled people should be accepted *despite* how different *they* are from *us* and this surface acceptance is what makes girls good and, indeed, American.

Dolls and Accessories: Who Gets to be an American Girl?

Ten-year-old Melissa Shang, with the help of her older sister (Shang and Shang 2013), started a petition asking American Girl to create a disabled Girl of the Year. The petition, which was signed by over 144,000 people, generated a good deal of media buzz. The comments on news stories online were interestingly varied.¹⁰ While most of the comments were positive, supporting Shang and Shang by making claims that every girl deserves to feel special, a handful of comments were resistant. One type of resistance was exemplified in a hyperbolic response that claimed that if American Girl made a character in a wheelchair, then they would have to make a little person character and a character with Down syndrome and so on and so forth. Those who argued like this insisted that it was financially impossible for a company to produce such physically different dolls without driving up costs. A second type of resistance came from those apparently familiar with the brand. These comments often mentioned Josie and the many disability-related doll accessories in the catalog. In the minds of this second set of resistant commentators then, there appears to be no need for a disabled primary American Girl character since at least one major secondary disabled character and several disability-related doll accessories already exist. The argument is not then that disability has no place in American Girl, but that disability does not need or does not deserve a central place. Instead, it is implied that disabled girls should be satisfied with this marginal level of inclusion since it is better than nothing and, from the perspective of ablenationalism, it is better than those unnamed other places where disability is supposedly not included at all. This form of including disability stands in stark contrast to the more frequent representation of central characters from marginalized racial and class backgrounds throughout the brand. As a point of comparison, three out of thirteen American Girl of the Year characters are girls of color (Marisol, Jess, and Kanani), Chrissa's best friend is Indian American and one of Grace's best friends is African American. Two of the

thirteen characters are represented as working class (Nicki and Mia), one of Chrissa's friends is formerly homeless and one of Grace's best friends has a father who has recently become unemployed.

While American Girl has continued to introduce more representations of disability into the contemporary line, the way disability has been included merely contributes to the neoliberal individualism and consumerism of the brand identified by previous scholarship (Susina 1999; Acosta-Alzuru and Lester Roushanzamir 2003; Marshall 2009). As of January 2016, in addition to the characters Laura and Josie in the books, the American Girl contemporary doll line also offers a number of disability-related doll accessories including a wheelchair (available since 1996), traditional crutches (available since 2008), a service dog, hearing aids, an allergy-free lunch bag with allergy shot, dolls without hair (all available since 2012),¹¹ a diabetes care kit and forearm crutches (each available since 2016). Disability in the doll line is, therefore, often literally an accessory. With the exception of the dolls without hair and the hearing aids (which are drilled into the doll's head), items from the doll line that represent disability can be put on or taken off at will. They are accoutrements which do not challenge or change the uniform bodies of American Girl dolls nor the narratives these dolls and their accessories represent. Furthermore, the design and position of these disability accessories on the American Girl website reveal the questionable nature of such inclusion of disability in the brand.

In the American Girl catalog, the crutches are sold as part of the "Feel-Better Kit for Dolls" which includes crutches, arm and leg casts, cast stickers, bandage, and ice pack.

The wheelchair is designed more like the unsophisticated hospital wheelchairs that have to be pushed than the lightweight, sleek, and foldable chairs used by many young wheelchair users today—including Josie. The packaging and design of both these products imply that they are intended to represent primarily temporary rather than permanent disability. Similarly, the orange service dog vest, which is sold independently and fits any of the contemporary line dogs for dolls, reads "Service Dog in Training." This suggests that this accessory is for girls wanting to replicate Nicki's narrative of training a service dog rather than for disabled girls wanting to represent their own use of a service dog. Additionally, the options for dolls without hair and doll hearing aids can be found only by going to the Doll Hospital page of the American Girl website. In this case, the disability options which alter the physical doll are categorized as hospital-based needs similar to those of dolls that need to have limbs reattached or torsos that need to be repaired. Dolls without hair and



Berry Wheelchair for Dolls. Used with permission of American Girl Brands, LLC

dolls with hearing aids are not pictured in the catalog or anywhere on the American Girl website, as of this writing, except on the Doll Hospital page. Furthermore, these representations of dolls without hair and dolls with hearing aids are both white, blue-eyed dolls, and the doll with the hearing aid is blonde. This visual association of disability and whiteness, I argue, is an example of representational compensation which attempts to normalize disability by situating it alongside white privilege. A disabled non-white doll is seemingly outside the realm of the inclusivity of the brand. Overall, the design and position of most of the disability doll accessories in the catalog and website further reveal how disability is included only at the margins and often in explicit connection to medicine, healing, and whiteness.

The professed purpose of American Girl's contemporary "Truly Me" doll line, which allows girls to choose their doll's skin tone, eye shape, eye color, nose shape, hair color, and hair texture (within certain predetermined combinations), is to let girls create dolls just like them, right down to the matching outfits available for purchase. In her work on children's play, Robin Bernstein (2011) explicitly mentions American Girl as a brand which emphasizes scripted play, that is, play utilizing books and dolls which "accessorize each other" (162). While scripted play brands like American Girl invite certain narratives over others, children are still agents in this interaction, able to revise and challenge the narratives presented to them (Stumbar and Eisenstein 1999; Bernstein 2011). American Girl disability doll acces-

sories potentially allow disabled girls to model their dolls and doll play after themselves. This is important because, as Deborah Stienstra notes, “play of children with disabilities is often linked with therapy and part of rehabilitation work, rather than as being of value in and of itself . . . we do not know what girls with disabilities themselves understand as play and how they play” (2015: 64). Items in the American Girl collection open up possibilities for disabled girls’ doll play that are not available in the same quantity in any other major toy brand. However, given the economic disparities between nondisabled and disabled populations—especially disabled populations outside of the Global North—there is a significant chance that few families with a child or children with disabilities can afford the luxury of American Girl products. As of March 2016, American Girl dolls (including dolls without hair) cost \$115. The contemporary fiction books retail for \$10 each. The hearing aids each cost \$14, the wheelchair \$38, the Feel-Better Kit \$30, the allergy-free lunch bag \$28, and the service dog \$22 to \$28 for the dog, and \$18 for the vest. The diabetes care kit costs \$24, and the forearm crutches cost \$14. Furthermore, the lack of sustained narratives about disabled characters positions girls with disabilities outside of the scripted and shared narratives of the main American Girl characters.

Conclusion: Ablenationalism for Girls

Research in children’s literature and girlhood studies clearly demonstrates how products like books and dolls are intended to socialize children into the values and ideals of their societies (Miskec 2009; Sekeres 2009; Bernstein 2011). Sherrie A. Inness argues that such research “can reveal as much about adult culture as about children’s culture” (1998b: 2–3). These claims are particularly apt for the American Girl brand which promotes itself as educational and empowering and whose “ideological promotion is keenly targeted at mothers, and secondarily at grandmothers, to powerful effect” (Borghini et al. 2009: 371). On the back of each American Girl book, there is a blurb, like a mission statement, which concludes: “We take pride and care in helping girls become their very best today, so they’ll grow up to be the women who make a difference tomorrow.” This statement is employed to appeal to the parents and guardians of girls as well as to girls themselves.

While the brand never uses the term *girl power* explicitly, its emphasis on this form of empowerment is one of the reasons that disability is represented differently in American Girl products than are gender, race, and class.

Rebecca Hains (2012) defines girl power as a rhetoric of gendered empowerment which emerged in response to the girl crisis of the 1990s in which scholars like Mary Pipher (1994) and Carol Gilligan (1982) identified how the cultural devaluation of girls has long term effects on self-esteem and academic success. Nirmala Erevelles and Kagendo Mutua argue that the discourse of “Girl Power can be oppressive when brought to bear on disabled girlhood” because it relies “heavily on ableist ideologies of independence, assertiveness, and strength, laced with patriarchal notions of beauty and attractiveness. Girl Power, thus defined, leaves neither material nor discursive spaces for a differentially constituted *disabled* girlhood” (2005: 254, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Erevelles (2011) contends that disability is deployed as a political and analytical category to patrol the boundaries of citizenship. Similarly, Julie Avril Minich writes that “the corporeal images used to depict national belonging have important consequences for how the rights and obligations of citizenship are distributed” (2014: 2). Characters in the American Girl contemporary line are all natural-born citizens of the United States. Concepts of national identity and belonging are central to the brand as it seeks to define what constitutes an American Girl in terms of characteristics and behaviors.

Through its many products American Girl encourages girl consumers to conceptualize themselves as distinctly American citizens who uphold ideals of independence, exceptionalism, and benevolence. The combined discourses of girl power and national identity help undergird and produce ablenationalism, which, in this brand, is clearly displayed in how disability is rarely represented in the central narratives of the contemporary fictional books and how accoutrements of disability are incorporated only at the white, medicalized margins of the catalog. American Girl represents disability as a highly individual, non-political accessory which merely accentuates the normativity and goodness of the main American Girl figure. American Girl’s particular form of ablenationalism targets girls to bring them into the normative rhetorical fold of US national superiority and exceptionalism through the rhetorical and representational inclusion of disabled people.

While these representations are explicitly targeted at girls in the United States, the brand nonetheless has a transnational presence. The products are almost exclusively produced in China (Marshall 2012); the brand recently began catalog and retail outlet sales in Canada and Mexico (American Girl 2013; 2014b); and the most recent Maryellen historical fiction books are available in both English and Spanish (Tripp 2015b; a).¹² American Girl’s website also indicates that customers who order via phone or e-mail can

have products shipped almost everywhere in the world (American Girl 2015). As a result, American Girl's ablenationalism, as a collection of rhetorical and representational methods for using the humane treatment and inclusion of people with disabilities as symbolic of the modern nation, in this case the United States, circulates to broader, more transnational audiences far beyond the borders of the US. This representation of the United States as exceptionally inclusive of disabled people is promoted transnationally by American Girl despite the fact the US has not ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and the United States has frequently and consistently caused increased disability and disease in other nations through war, medical experimentation, and the withholding of medical resources.

The circulation of American Girl products thus highlights the significance of my argument that the representation of disabled characters and disability accessories in the American Girl brand is a form of ablenationalism which attempts to demonstrate to girls worldwide the exceptionally benevolent and progressive nature of the US in regard to disabled people. These representations actually obscure the ableism and failures of inclusion which permeate life with a disability in the United States, especially for disabled girls, as well as the ways in which the United States causes disability both within and outside of its borders. American Girl is thus an illustrative example of how combining the rhetoric of empowerment with discourses of national identity can expand and sustain ablenationalism, inculcating in girls the value of its bright and cheery neoliberal regime.



SAMI SCHALK is Assistant Professor of English at University at Albany, SUNY. Her research focuses on disability, race, and gender in contemporary American literature. Her work has appeared in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, and *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*.



Notes

1. Only Borghini et al., in their ethnography of the American Girl store, even mention disability. The authors quote a "young disabled participant [who] astutely observed from her wheelchair, "There's no real reality stuff here. Everybody's perfect. There's no wheelchairs. No life problems'" (2009: 370).
2. The books remain available for more than one year.

3. These ideals are adapted from blurbs about the Girls of the Year in the American Girl Archives webpage (American Girl 2014a).
4. *Jess* (Casanova 2006) and *Grace* (Davis 2015) are exceptions. Jess is depicted in Belize with her archeologist parents, where she is exposed to the class and educational differences between herself and a local girl, while Grace is shown on a family trip to France.
5. See the real stories and letters sections of Creel (2007a, 2007b); Yee (2011); Casanova (2012b); Haas (2013); Yep (2014).
6. See also Creel (2007a: 54, 67, 85; 2007b: 5–6).
7. In addition to the wheelchair-using secondary characters in the contemporary fiction books, there are only two major disabled characters—one blind girl and one deaf one—in the American Girl historical fiction books.
8. American Girl. 2012b. Spring 2012. *American Girl E-News*. Private email communication. I have been unable to locate a digital archive of their e-newsletters although there is about a year's worth of them online.
9. Marshall argues that the Nancy Drew series' representation of an empowered American heroine is founded upon a hierarchical representation of her in relationship to "exotic global girl strangers" (2012: 211). I argue that disabled characters serve a similar role as the racialized Other in American Girl contemporary fiction even though they all seem to be white.
10. I looked at the comments sections in online news stories about Shang and Shang's petition on CBS News (Sieczkowski 2013), in the Huffington Post (Bennett 2014), on BuzzFeed (Trowbridge 2014) and on HLN TV (Vingiano 2014).
11. Personal email communication from Susan Jevens in 2014.
12. Previously the Josefina books were also translated into Spanish, but the other historical books were not (Stumbar and Eisenstein 1999).

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