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Magnetic Memory Things:
Children's Toys as Objects of Emotion, Memory, and Femininity in U.S. Public Culture

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Abstract

Public memory studies in rhetoric have typically neglected how we use shared memories to form, maintain, and pass down social norms through the objects we encounter and the practices we participate in during our everyday lives. This is especially true for children's toys, because they are understood as essential objects that help adults "raise" children in accordance with certain sets of values, beliefs, and norms. Furthermore, rhetorical studies have also struggled to explain the role of emotion in public memory discourse, assuming rather than explaining how emotion produces audience investment. "Magnetic Memory Things" addresses both issues by examining the conditions under which certain children's toys have been transformed into emotionally powerful objects of public memory—what I term "memory things." I propose a model of "magnetic memory" that analogizes the properties of an electromagnet to explain how the rhetorical force of affect and emotion "magnetizes" audience investment in public memory. This model brings together Sarah Ahmed's affective economies and Sara VanderHaagen's agential spiral to describe and explain how audience commitment in certain public memories is conditioned upon an object's circulation in public culture.

Analyses of the Easy-Bake Oven, LEGO, and American Girl demonstrate that assumptions about gender, class, and race, which permeate the creation of, adults' deliberation over, and children's play with toys, are deeply intertwined with emotion and that the accrual of affective force significantly affects people's ability to leverage the toys' meaning for public memories. Sometimes, as with the Easy-Bake Oven, those emotional attachments make it possible to negotiate conflicting gender ideologies. But nostalgic

memories can also limit a toy's effectiveness for public memory creation. As evidenced by the LEGO Friends controversy, deeply cherished memories that idealized LEGO as innocently gender-neutral limited feminist critiques and instead focused the debate on policing the borders of respectable femininity. Moreover, toys that are explicitly about public memory—such as American Girl's BeForever doll collection and related historical fiction—also rely on emotional attachments to encourage audience investment in certain values and invite their potential enactment.

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Morales-Eddy has been with me since the softball days and still laughs at my jokes and under no circumstances should we downplay how important that is. Kimmy Carter is my fellow perfectionist and knows the struggle of grad school and teaching as well as I do. My D.C. family—Margaret Riley, Selvi Sri Gerszewski, Chris Murray, and Kent Lambert—has also been deeply supportive. This was especially true that time they came to visit in Chicago and spent half the time without me because I forgot I had to leave for a conference that weekend. The time we did get to spend together, we spent watching *Bridezillas* and that turned out to be a nice bit of foreshadowing for the next few years of all our lives.

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My family has also been incredibly important for this project. I cannot help but think that the story my mom and dad, Gilda and Fred DeLaCruz, tell about me being overwhelmed by toys to the point of indifference on my first Christmas might be the origin story for this dissertation. But, most certainly, their unwavering support and willingness to stand back and let me make my own way through life brought me to this point. My sister, Rachael DeLaCruz, soon to be the other Dr. DeLaCruz, but with spaces and no relation to the Virginia Beach Dr. DeLaCruz, knows me better than anyone and why that joke will always be funny. We will always already be in this together as sister professors.

Most important of all is my husband, Zach Elder. As difficult as this experience has been for me, it has been harder on him because he has been strong in the moments when we both needed to be weak. Our lives have changed in ways we could have never imagined, and we have done that together. Let's see what happens next.

Dedication

To Mom and Dad
For reading all those books to me.
Or at least reading those few books over and over.
It really, really mattered.

To Sister
Don't worry. I'll always protect you from the dinosaurs.

To Zach
For changing my life in the best ways imaginable.

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Introduction

The Affective Force of Memory Things

In this dissertation, I seek to understand how contemporary Americans use public memory to perpetuate and negotiate emotional attachments to the values and beliefs that construct the boundaries of feminine and masculine gender norms. To this end, I examine the conditions under which certain children's toys have been transformed into emotionally powerful objects of public memory—what I term "memory things"—as a way of theorizing why some shared memories stick with us but others do not. Across disciplines, public memory is most often characterized as the use of the past for present purposes. In a figurative sense, we are thought to reach back in time in order to reconstruct stories about our past that can tell us something about who we are now and who we should be in the future—that is, what we value, what we believe. Public memory studies in rhetoric have typically focused on how people communicate shared values and beliefs through the public commemoration of significant historical events or people. This, however, is a narrow conceptualization that neglects how we use shared memories to form, maintain, and pass down social norms through the objects we encounter and the practices we participate in during our everyday lives.

The logic of this process, I argue, can be best seen in the generational relationship between adults and children. It is common parlance to discuss how to "raise" children. What does this mean, if not the communication—indoctrination, even—of one's values and beliefs? The logic of this system presupposes a temporal tautology: Who one becomes and

what one believes as an adult is predicated on what one learned as a child. What one might choose to pass on to a child is grounded in what one believes as an adult, which, again, is influenced by what one learned as a child, and so on. This circular reasoning is also steeped in emotion—in the sense that our attachment to these values and beliefs sticks with us in some form through adulthood and compels us to move into the future through the transmission of those ideas to our children.

I propose a model of "magnetic memory" that analogizes the properties of an electromagnet to explain how the rhetorical force of affect and emotion "magnetizes" audience investment in public memory. Magnetic memory relies on feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's model of affective economies, which suggests that affect and emotion are produced as an effect of an object circulating in public discourse.[1] For Ahmed, as an object circulates it becomes "sticky" with affect, making the object *feel* as if it matters to us. Magnets apply an invisible force that can attract or repel when put in proximity with other magnetic material. If you bring the same poles of two magnets together, you can feel this force as the two magnets repel each other. When you bring opposite poles together, they stick, and depending on the strength of the magnets, you can feel how difficult it is to separate the two. Electromagnets function a bit differently than regular magnets in that the base metal of an electromagnet only becomes magnetized when electricity runs through a wire coiled around the core. The object of analysis, in this case a toy, serves metaphorically as the core of an electromagnet—the central axis around which public memories involving

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[1] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

the toy "move."[2] The movement of electrons through the coiled wire (that is, electricity, a source of *power*) represents the toy's circulation in public discourse. The addition of electricity—charged particles in motion—creates a magnetic field and gives the electromagnet, and thus the toy, the ability to attract *and* repel through magnetic force. Over time, and depending on the particulars of how it circulates, a toy (or other object of memory) may become "magnetized" with affective force, turning it into a powerful object of emotion and of memory—a "memory thing." The particulars of an object's circulation are thus essential for explaining how a memory thing becomes "magnetized" with affective force.

In order to ground the magnetic memory model in rhetorical studies and public memory, I turn to rhetorical scholar Sara VanderHaagen's concept of the agential spiral, which is based on philosopher Paul Ricoeur's three-fold mimesis, as a way of thinking through the rhetorical process of circulation.[3] VanderHaagen's primary purpose in conceptualizing the agential spiral is to suggest a method of analyzing instances of public memory that center on the performance and representation of agency. She uses this concept very specifically within the context of juvenile biographies, which, by virtue of the

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[2] Although magnetic memory directs attention to affect and emotion by way of the object's circulation in public culture, the model still allows researchers to focus on a particular object. I turn to children's toys because I believe they are significantly implicated in the way that we pass down values and beliefs from adults to children and because they have been overlooked by public memory studies. But the same principles could apply to the objects of analysis more typically studied by public memory scholars, such as memorials, museums, libraries, documentaries, or presidential speeches.

[3] Sara C. VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women: Rhetoric, Public Memory, and Agency* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 17–22. See also Sara C. VanderHaagen, "The 'Agential Spiral': Reading Public Memory through Paul Ricoeur," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 46, no. 2 (2013): 182–206.

genre, suggests that the nature of the stories we tell about people exerting agency in the past are significant for the present because those stories provide a potential roadmap for action now and in the future. Although agents remain an essential part of my magnetic memory model, it is the image and function of the spiral that completes the model of magnetic memory. A spiral is an apt image for visualizing how an object might circulate in public discourse. Circulation is a rhetorical process that is both interpretive and productive. That is, in order for an object to circulate, someone (or a group of people) must interpret the content of the discursive field relevant to a given situation and make decisions about how to represent that content to a particular audience for a particular purpose in a particular context. Once that content is represented to an audience, it adds to the discursive field such that, ideally, another person (or group of people) must take that new information into consideration in order to re-engage the object in circulation. This new person (or group) can never engage with the object in exactly the same way as the previous person because of the rhetorical work that person had accomplished. Thus, instead of a circle, the spiral shape of the electromagnet's coil of wire suggests that the toy circulates over time in a repetitive motion that is parallel to what happened before but never quite the same. This correlates with the fact that memory is contingent and can never fully represent the past to which it is tied, thus changing slightly with each repetition. It is this spiraling circulation which potentially "magnetizes" the object with affective force and provides the opportunity for memories to change, regardless of whether one might characterize that change as good or bad.

The essential role of the agent in VanderHaagen's agential spiral is not to suggest, however, that all instances of public memory are self-conscious acts of remembering. For example, the Easy-Bake Oven circulated in public discourse when its marketers created comic book advertisements. These ads pulled on gendered assumptions about women's relationship to the kitchen and to baking, assumptions which did not exactly or necessarily reflect reality, as a way of making the toy relevant to an implied audience of girls. It is unlikely that the marketers considered themselves to be creating or participating in public memory. However, as various forms of the Easy-Bake's advertising circulated over time— thus increasing the relevant discursive field—the toy began to build a connotative association with the gender norms of traditional femininity. The affective force of this bond grew to the extent that it was and is still possible to use the Easy-Bake Oven as a metonym for traditional femininity. Because of the particulars of the toy's circulation, which I will discuss in depth in chapter 1, the association between the Easy-Bake Oven and traditional femininity was magnetized with affective force such that it is now extremely difficult to separate the Easy-Bake from that history in a plausible manner.

The model of magnetic memory advances our understanding of public memory by shifting critical attention away from the more formalized concerns of public commemoration to the ways in which people interpret, represent, and navigate a shared set of values, beliefs, and norms through the objects, symbols, and practices of everyday life. In their influential introductory essay in the edited collection *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott charge public memory scholars with the task of "understanding how particular memories

capture the imagination and produce attachments, and how memories achieve durability over time or compelling force in a particular context." The strength of the magnetic memory model is that it draws critical attention to how circulation in public discourse "produces, mediates, and sustains emotional connection" in relationship to memory.[4] I examine specific children's toys as both materially and discursively constructed memory things to show how, under certain conditions, children's toys can become emotionally powerful sites for not only the transmission of values and beliefs but also the deliberation and development of those values over time.

In particular, I consider the rhetorical process through which three toys—the Easy-Bake Oven, LEGO building blocks, and American Girl dolls—became memory things for dominant gender norms in the United States. I have chosen to attend to the production and reproduction of gender norms through public memory for several reasons. First, although there is good reason for public memory scholars to focus on self-conscious forms of public commemoration, such as statues or museums, I believe that the temporal connections between people, objects, and events implied by a memory studies lens has more to contribute to our understanding of the reproduction of social values, beliefs, and norms than the concentration on intentional, often government-sponsored public commemoration allows. Second, following scholars such as E. Danielle Egan, I am interested in understanding how emotion intersects with and sometimes undermines academic and popular feminist interventions because of adult concerns about protecting

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[4] Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 15–16.

childhood and, especially, girlhood from "unacceptable" displays of femininity.[5] Finally, I look to gender norms because the problematic, present-day representation of these norms through children's toys has been the subject of intense public controversy in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, I have chosen these specific toys for four reasons. First, each of these toys has maintained popularity and has been in production in some recognizable form for over three decades. The toys' longevity not only signals their importance to American childhood but also to American culture. These toys have accumulated histories of their own, which makes them especially fruitful cases for considering how emotion affects public memory. Second, each of these toys has been implicated in some kind of memory work, such as when activists use the widely shared memory of LEGO as a gender-neutral, creative toy as evidence for their argument against LEGO Friends, when sitcom characters remember their childhood experiences with the Easy-Bake Oven, or when American Girl books use historical fiction to connect present-day girls with an imagined history of empowerment. Third, each of these toys has a particular significance to girlhood and to feminism in the United States. American Girl arose out of a perceived need to provide girls with high-quality dolls that eschewed the stereotypical gender expectations of maternal nurturing and beautification that most associate with baby dolls and Barbie dolls. The Easy-Bake Oven first became a powerful symbol for traditional femininity and then transformed into a figure through which feminist-minded women could grapple with the

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[5] R. Danielle Egan, *Becoming Sexual: A Critical Appraisal of the Sexualization of Girls* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

simultaneous pressures of traditional femininity and feminist femininity on their lives.

LEGO has become a battleground on which feminists fight to negate the gendered divisions

between boys' and girls' toys. Finally, each of these toys is related in some way to twenty-

first-century concerns about the "pinkification" of girlhood, concerns which dominate

public debates.

Rhetoric and Public Memory

The concept of memory has a long history in Western rhetorical studies dating back

to Plato and Aristotle in classical Greece. Memory was later established by the Roman

orator Cicero as one of the five rhetorical canons, but it faded to the background of

rhetorical study in modern times. According to historian Frances Yates in her influential

volume *The Art of Memory*, the classical art of memory was a central tenet of rhetorical

study and practice and "belonged to rhetoric as a technique by which the orator could

improve his memory, which would enable him to deliver long speeches from memory with

unfailing accuracy."[6] In this way, the classical version of memory was focused more closely

on an individual's memory. However, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whom scholars

typically credit with the resurgence of memory studies in the academy, posed memory as a

collective, social activity. He asked, "How can currents of collective thought whose impetus

lies in the past be re-created when we can grasp only the present?"[7] Rather than framing

memory as an individual cognitive process, this modern tradition of memory hinges on the

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[6] Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966; New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.
[7] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 79.

assumption that it is possible, even necessary, for groups of people to share an understanding of the past. As Blair, Dickinson, and Ott also argue, the construction of those shared memories is "activated by concerns, issues, or anxieties of the present."[8]

The concept of public memory has developed in similar but slightly different ways across disciplines such as history, sociology, and literary studies. In history, especially, memory is often offered as an alternative to "official" history and, according to Stephen Cubitt, asks historians to reconceptualize "the nature of their own discipline and the knowledge it is geared to producing."[9] However, as Stephen H. Browne points out in a review of public memory scholarship in the communication discipline, rhetorical scholars are primarily concerned with a politics of public memory, which can be read as both a textual practice and an interpretive procedure. Browne argues that the public memory text is "a site of symbolic action, a place of cultural performance, the meaning of which is defined by its public and persuasive functions."[10] That is, rhetorical studies of memory focus on *how* people create, engage, and enact public memory and the consequences and

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[8] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 6. Many different terms have been deployed to describe this shared sense of the past, including collective memory, social memory, cultural memory, and popular memory. Scholars in rhetorical studies have primarily, although not exclusively, used the term "public memory," which signals rhetoric's general concern with how people make "discourses, events, objects, and practices" meaningful to others, primarily in a public setting. There has, however, been some effort in rhetorical studies to reconnect individual and collective memory. For example, VanderHaagen and Ray attempt to reconnect these two strands of memory work by showing how an individual can generate memory to influence broader belief. Sara C. VanderHaagen and Angela G. Ray, "A Pilgrim-Critic at Places of Public Memory: Anna Dickinson's Southern Tour of 1875," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 3 (2014): 348–74.
[9] Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.
[10] Stephen H. Browne, "Review Essay: Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995): 237.

implications that follow from those particular creations of, engagements in, and enactments of public memory.

Disciplinary preoccupations have had two important and interrelated effects on public memory studies in rhetoric. First, these studies have focused on objects of analysis that meet the criteria for a relatively narrow conception of a "public," what Mark J. Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit refer to as "texts that address the public-at-large."[11] Although the term "public" is by no means uncontested within the discipline, this classical sense of the publicness of a text deeply influences the character of the events, discourses, objects, and practices that are typically considered part of public memory. Thus, remembering in public becomes primarily equated with mostly self-conscious forms of public commemoration, which celebrate and memorialize historical events and people predominantly in the service of national identity formation and maintenance.

Building upon this, a second way that rhetorical studies centers the "how" of public memory is through the symbolic and material means through which people "do" public memory. Communication scholar Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argues in her book, *Frames of Remembrance*, that "to secure a presence for the past demands work—'memory work'—whether it is writing a book, filming a documentary or erecting a monument. Produced, in effect, is what I call here the 'infrastructure' of collective memory, all the different spaces, objects, 'texts' that make an engagement with the past possible."[12] To this end, rhetorical

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[11] Mark Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit (New York: Guilford Press, 2016), 3.
[12] Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 13.

scholars have explored public commemoration through an expansive repertoire of material and symbolic supports, which has included movies, biographies, currency, documentaries, Cold War maps, Post-It notes, newspapers, catechisms, epideictic speeches, the AIDS Quilt, and cemeteries, among other things.[13]

However, the predominant focus of public memory studies in rhetoric has been centered on public commemoration as it is expressed through material culture. The work of French historian Pierre Nora, published in English in 1989, on the concept of *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) has had an overwhelming influence on the discipline's approach. With very few exceptions, scholarship on objects of material culture in public memory studies in rhetoric has investigated places of public commemoration, such as monuments, memorials, or museums—what Blair, Dickinson, and Ott refer to as "memory

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[13] A few representative examples include the following: V. William Balthrop, Carole Blair, and Neil Michel, "The Presence of the Present: Hijacking 'The Good War'?," *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 2 (2010): 170–207; Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 595–626; Stephen H. Browne, "Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 2 (May 1999): 169–87; Calvin R. Coker, "Harriet Tubman, Women on 20s, and Intersectionality: Public Memory and the Redesign of U.S. Currency," *Southern Communication Journal* 82, no. 4 (2017): 239–49; Charles J. G. Griffin, "Movement as Memory: Significant Form in *Eyes on the Prize*," *Communication Studies* 54, no. 2 (2003): 196–210; Amy Lynn Heyse, "The Rhetoric of Memory-Making: Lessons from the UDC's Catechisms for Children," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 408–32; Nicole Maurantonio, "Material Rhetoric, Public Memory, and the Post-It Note," *Southern Communication Journal* 80, no. 2 (2015): 83–101; Cindy Koenig Richards, "Inventing Sacagawea: Public Women and the Transformative Potential of Epideictic Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 1 (2009): 1–22; Sara VanderHaagen, "Practical Truths: Black Feminist Agency and Public Memory in Biographies for Children," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 1 (2012): 18–41; and Elizabethada A. Wright, "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 51–81.

places." This incredibly fruitful endeavor has shed light on the various ways in which memory places and other commemorative practices not only "[lift] from an ordinary historical sequence those *extraordinary events* which embody our deepest and most fundamental values" but also "'instruct' their visitors about what is to be valued in the future as well as in the past."[14]

This dissertation seeks to expand upon this body of work by using children's toys as a starting point for considering how people negotiate and communicate "our deepest and most fundamental values" for the next generation by engaging in primarily non-commemorative public memory practices. Sociologist Michael Schudson argues that it is possible to be invested in the past without self-consciously invoking it through commemorative practices. For example, Schudson argues that although Americans have created very few self-conscious commemorations of Watergate, the significance of the scandal remains through its impact on legislation and language.[15] The Ethics in Government reform legislation enacted after Watergate changed Washington culture substantially, and people now often refer to all types of scandals as a "-gate"—such as

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[14] However, studies of material culture have not neglected the textual and otherwise symbolic supports that typically supplement the meaning-making of memory places. In one of the field's germinal essays, Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci Jr., writing about a critical approach to postmodern architecture, insisted, "The critic must take account of the structure's relation to the physical environment, cultural situation, and use, for all of these are as much a part of the 'text' as the building itself." Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci, "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77, no. 3 (1991): 263, 270. A good example of this approach is Balthrop, Blair, and Michel, "Presence of the Present," 170–207.

[15] Michael Schudson, "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory," *Communication Review* 2, no. 1 (1997): 3–17.

"Nannygate," when a Clinton nominee for attorney general was discredited for employing undocumented workers as her child's nanny. To some degree, these further uses of "-gate" position the new scandal in reference to Watergate's political significance, which sometimes results in ironic uses of the suffix, such as "Nipplegate," Janet Jackson's infamous wardrobe malfunction during Super Bowl XXXVIII. People do not use the suffix to "commemorate" Watergate. Instead the suffix offers people a set of values by which they can interpret and evaluate the affective importance of a new scandal.[16]

My intention in this project is to examine "non-commemorative" public memory. That is, rather than considering how people remember or pass on values through the self-conscious commemoration of historical events, people, places, and objects, this approach examines how people interpret, represent, and navigate values through the relatively mundane objects and practices of day-to-day life. Thus, my primary concern is not how people interpret and represent historical narratives through toys or about toys but rather how people interpret, represent, and negotiate—that is, rhetorically construct—a particular set of values (in this case, gender norms) through both material supports (the

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[16] Importantly, the memory that the "-gate" suffix relies upon has not remained static. In 2012, two U.S. government intelligence facilities were attacked in Benghazi, Libya, and four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens, were killed. After numerous allegations of cover-up and lying against President Obama and his administration, no less than ten separate investigations were conducted by U.S. authorities. No evidence to corroborate any of the allegations was found. Since then, the suffix "-ghazi" has been used in much the same was as "-gate." One example is "Bridgeghazi," also known as "Bridgegate," in which members of New Jersey governor Chris Christie's staff closed lanes of the George Washington Bridge to create traffic jams as retribution for Fort Lee's mayor's lack of support for Christie during the 2013 gubernatorial campaign. The political fallout from these scandals brings new relevance to the usage of the "-gate" suffix for younger generations but still relies on the term's original meaning to make sense.

toy) and symbolic supports (public debate, television, fiction, etc.). I am drawing a distinction between commemorative and non-commemorative public memory not because I believe they are always distinctly different but to highlight two main ideas. First, that values (which are themselves deeply historical) can be interpreted, represented, and communicated without recourse to specific or factual historical events. Second, that it is people's emotional attachment and desire to maintain certain values (rather than historical facts) that make public memories meaningful.

This shift in emphasis is important for several reasons. First, rather than focusing on more intentional forms of commemoration, this shift asks us to look at how people use everyday objects and practices in the creation of public memory. In a sense, this brings a form of feminist practice to public memory scholarship by stressing the potentially public and political nature of the everyday—and of things that *feel* personal despite being shared collectively at some level. This is not to imply that everyday objects and practices are necessarily oppositional to "extraordinary" objects and practices, as is suggested by Michel de Certeau's phrase "ordinary man."[17] Rather, I mean to suggest that our everyday objects and practices are a fruitful place to look to see how we manage our shared values and beliefs and that some values and beliefs—such as gender norms—are primarily passed on through this unself-conscious sense of public memory.

Second, this shift underscores the importance of the translation and transference of shared values and beliefs to the concept of public memory. Blair, Dickinson, and Ott argue

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[17] Instead I would suggest that both are polysemic and offer the potential for both the maintenance of values and a challenge to them. Michel de Certeau, Fredric Jameson, and Carl Lovitt, "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," *Social Text*, no. 3 (1980): 3.

that "memory narrates shared identities, constructing senses of communal belonging."[18] I would add to this that appeals to certain beliefs and values structure that sense of belonging. For example, Blair, Balthrop, and Michel contend that one of the ways by which national tombs of the unknown from World War I legitimate the establishment and maintenance of the nation-state (or empire) is by relying on the existing—but never formally stated—idea that the people who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the nation are heroes because the nation is worth protecting.[19] In this way, tombs of the unknown both reflect *and* constitute a set of values that define heroic sacrifice in relation to the nation. Military deaths are only heroic because the nation-state is believed to be worth dying for. The meaning of the monuments cannot come to full fruition without this underlying appeal to shared values and beliefs.

Third, shifting away from public commemoration provides an opportunity to examine different modes of power in relationship to "remembering" and "forgetting." Blair, Dickinson, and Ott call attention to the difficulties transferred through the "metaphoric borrowing" of terminology between individual and public memory.[20] They argue that ultimately the relationship between remembering and forgetting is often either assumed unproblematically or conceptualized too simplistically. Usually, the inclusion or creation of more memory is considered better because that accumulation is understood to diminish memory's inherent partiality. In this formulation, forgetting is a deficiency that we, as

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[18] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 7.
[19] Carole Blair, V. William Balthrop, and Neil Michel, "The Arguments of the Tombs of the Unknown: Relationality and National Legitimation," *Argumentation* 25, no. 4 (2011): 449–68.
[20] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 18.

critics and as part of the general public, must try to mitigate. In his book *Public Forgetting:*

The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again, Bradford Vivian discusses how, in both

academic and popular usage, forgetting "continues to signify a loss, absence, or lack" and is

typically posed as an opposite to memory and "as a hindrance to mature understanding and

full experience of a nourishing past."[21] This relationship between remembering and

forgetting has guided public memory research by centering a hegemonic model of power

that encourages researchers to focus on exposing the ideologies embedded in hegemonic

memory practices, recovering marginalized histories or identifying resistive memories as a

means for correcting the failings of those dominant memories, or unpacking the use of

memory as a means of assuaging collective trauma. Although this emphasis has led to

productive and important scholarship, conceptualizing forgetting as a deficiency fails to

explain how affect and emotion influence the reasons why one might choose certain

memory content to represent over others, and this approach can result in missing

important implications of a given interpretation of events.

Finally, focusing more closely on the values that are being communicated orients us

toward the essential role of affect and emotion in public memory. In a way, emotions imply

a process of collective memory making in the sense that, according to Sara Ahmed, "how

the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that

the process of recognition (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we already

know."[22] Despite this relationship, the theoretical development of public memory has been

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[21] Bradford Vivian, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again*
(University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 5.
[22] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 25.

troubled by its relationship to affect and emotion. Why do certain things get remembered or forgotten? What is it that makes one particular memory more compelling for an audience than another? In many ways, these reflect the central questions posed by rhetorical studies, and thus answers to them are necessarily complex and partial. Some recent scholarship has sought to examine how affect and emotion operate rhetorically to encourage an audience's affective investment in a particular message in particular circumstances. However, as Hariman and Lucaites point out, within rhetorical studies, emotions have been long understood as a liability; emotion is necessary for persuasion, but potential manipulation follows it like a shadow.[23] Consequently, until recently the discipline of rhetoric has largely avoided engaging with emotion and affect. This poses a particular problem for public memory studies. As Blair, Dickinson, and Ott have observed, the assumption that memory is "animated by affect" is one of the foundational assumptions of public memory scholarship. That is, rather than an assessment based on a fully developed account of the past, public memory persuades audiences through "some kind of emotional attachment." However, public memory scholarship has done little in the way of explaining why some public memories are "considered worth arguing about, or even in some cases, worth dying for."[24] The magnetic model outlined in the next section seeks to explain how certain objects become charged with affect, making them useful for creating emotional investment in public memories.

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[23] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, "Dissent and Emotional Management in a Liberal-Democratic Society: The Kent State Iconic Photograph," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2001): 6.
[24] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 6, 7, 14.

The Affective Force of Magnetic Memory

The model of magnetic memory provides an approach for analyzing how memory things are created. For an object to become a memory thing, the following must occur: An object must circulate in public discourse in a way that "charges" the object with affective force. Depending on conditions in the present, this history of circulation, which includes how we *feel* about the object, is part of the discursive field from which particular memories are made. This is one level on which emotions are connected to public memory. Whether or not an object becomes a memory thing is dependent upon rhetorical choice—how a memory maker might interpret the discursive field for a particular audience for a specific purpose. In what follows, I pull from VanderHaagen's concept of the agential spiral to describe and highlight the rhetorical facets of Ahmed's model of emotion. This account, couched in the electromagnet analogy, explains how emotions intersect with public memory such that certain things and not others come to matter for certain audiences.

Affect, Emotion, and Affective Economies

There is very little consensus among scholars about the meanings of the terms "affect" and "emotion" or how they relate to one another or to discursive practices more generally. However, "affect" is usually used to refer to bodily sensations, whereas "emotion" typically indicates the cognitive evaluation and assignment of those sensations through language. For example, we may feel the sensation of our heart racing and skin sweating, but in order to distinguish those sensations as "fear" or as "excitement," we must rely on language in order to assign meaning to them. Because we feel one before determining the other, affect and emotion are usually conceptualized as separate but

related. However, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that this

distinction is primarily analytic. Although she says that affect and emotion are not the same

thing, they also must happen one after another and "cannot simply be separated at the level

of lived experience." "Sensations," Ahmed tells us, "are mediated, however immediately

they seem to impress upon us." This assertion is important for public memory studies

because whether one wants to focus on the bodily sensation of affect or the cognitive

experience of emotion, one can only understand that feeling within a particular context

that provides the necessary knowledge to make sense of how one feels. Ahmed offers the

term "impression" for thinking about affect and emotion without implying that they can be

separated at the level of human experience. She explains that "an impression can be an

effect on the subject's feelings ('she made an impression'). It can be a belief ('to be under an

impression'). It can be an imitation or an image ('to create an impression'). Or it can be a

mark on the surface ('to leave an impression'). We need to remember the 'press' in an

impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very

affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves a mark or a trace." If affect

impresses *upon* us and generates emotion as a result of that contact, then it follows that an

emotion is not merely an interior, psychological state: emotion is also social, cultural, and

rhetorical. For Ahmed, neither people nor objects possess emotions. Instead emotions arise

from "contact"—how we respond to the "press" of objects or others. Thus, "the objects of

emotion take shape as effects of circulation."[25] In other words, emotion is produced when

an object circulates in public discourse.

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[25] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 6, 10, 25.

However, Ahmed is careful to explain that this circulation is not a model of contagion in that one could directly pass on an emotion to someone else. Emotions are not essential qualities that someone or something "has." Instead, emotions must be interpreted (which happens during the process of circulation). Furthermore, interpreting an emotion necessarily involves miscommunication, "such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling." In other words, even when we share feelings, we are not necessarily "feeling-in-common."[26] Thus, for Ahmed, it is not emotions that circulate, because that would imply a "feeling-in-common." Instead, when an object of emotion circulates, it may cause multiple people to feel something, but it does not necessarily cause the same interpretation of those feelings.

Take, for example, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Let's say two people are standing in front of the wall, the best-known feature of the memorial. One is a baby boomer and Vietnam veteran who recognizes names on the wall. The other is the grandchild of this veteran, born after 9/11, whose conception of war has been defined entirely by the loss of a parent in the War on Terror. The wall itself does not hold an emotion. But through its circulation (in this case by people visiting it), the wall impresses upon the vet and the grandchild and invites them to reflect upon their knowledge and experiences of war, death, and national belonging. The vet, like many other veteran visitors before, may be prompted by a name on the wall to remember the death of a close friend. The grandchild may be moved to remember the parent lost in an entirely different war, in addition to having learned in school or from the grandparent that many people died during

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[26] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10, 11.

the Vietnam War. In turning away from the wall to each other, the two are both likely to

feel sadness for the family member lost in the War on Terror. In this way, they are likely

sharing the "press" of sadness, but they interpret and relate to that feeling differently. Their

contextual frameworks for interpreting sadness may be different, but they nevertheless

share an impression of sadness—and it is this mutual feeling that buttresses the wall's

rhetorical power. If the emotions produced through interaction with the wall did not

resonate for audiences this way, the wall would not be as powerful a memory place as it is.

The affective force generated through contact with the memorial is central to the meaning

and significance of it. Furthermore, the different contextual frameworks brought to bear on

that contact may also produce unintended interpretations or reactions, such that the two

visitors are inclined to consider the meaning of belonging through family and friendship

rather than (or in addition to) nationality, as typically prompted by monuments of public

commemoration.

Through its circulation in public discourse, the wall at the Vietnam Veterans

Memorial has become an object of emotion, and as it continues to circulate, it becomes

"sticky, or saturated with affect" such that it continues to be meaningful over time and also

accumulates meaning in ways not necessarily intended by its original context. Ahmed uses

the concept of affective economies to explain how objects become sticky with affect. She

bases affective economies on Marxian critiques of capital, and as such she argues that

"emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or

commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation." For Marx, surplus value is

generated through the movement of money to commodities and back to money. She quotes

from Marx's *Capital*: "The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value or is valorised. And this movement converts it into capital."[27] Affective force is thus a form of surplus value that is added to an object rather than replacing it. Therefore, objects that accrue affective force through circulation—that is, memory things—become "sticky" with affect (or in the terms of this dissertation, "magnetized" with affective force) and ready, as Blair, Dickinson, and Ott put it, to "capture the imagination and produce attachments," as well as "achieve durability over time."[28]

Notably, Ahmed's model of affective economies provides "a theory of passion not as the drive to accumulate (whether it be value, power or meaning), but as that which is accumulated *over time*."[29] If a memory thing accumulates emotion, or affective force, through its circulation, then the process of circulation demands attention, not only to understand how it became a memory thing but also to understand how it was useful for public memory.[30] If objects of emotion get "sticky"—or become magnetized—with affect as they circulate, then we can look to "what sticks" as a starting point for examining why and how certain memories stay with us. In this way we must look back to the creation of an object and the particular ways it circulated to consider how it accrued affective force. This analysis of circulation not only helps us to understand the emotional valence of past and

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[27] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11, 45.
[28] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 15–16.
[29] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45. Emphasis added.
[30] I use the term "affective force" because it points to the relationship between emotion and power, as well as the fact that a force can move in various directions such that the accumulation of it cannot simply be equated with a "positive" value.

current memories but also gives us a way to think through how that "sticky stuff" of memory might be transformed as we move forward in time.

Memory Things

Memorials and monuments are places of public commemoration that prompt us to remember significant historical events in ways that are informed by a particular set of values and beliefs. But objects like memorials are not the only things that make impressions upon us. The concept of a memory thing is intended to illuminate how affect and emotion can attach, or in Ahmed's terms "stick," to quotidian objects over time, transforming them into powerful forces of public memory. Unlike memory places which typically commemorate extraordinary events or people, I intend the term "memory thing" to highlight how everyday objects—such as children's toys—are implicated in the communication of "our deepest and most fundamental values."

I adopt the term "thing" from "thing theory," a form of critical theory developed in the early 2000s and based on German philosopher Martin Heidegger's distinction between objects and things that questions the nature of materiality or objecthood. Literary theorist Bill Brown argues that thing theory gives us ways to think about "the history in things," or "the crystallization of the anxieties and aspirations that linger there in the material object."[31] That is, the term "thing" acknowledges that objects accumulate histories and that our comprehension of those histories is shaped by emotion. Things, however, are not

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[31] Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998): 935.

merely objects with a history. Brown, one of the more prolific contributors to thing theory, suggests the difference between objects and things:

> As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. . . . We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.[32]

Although one reading of Brown's description suggests that things manifest from the *breakdown* of established subject-object relations, I offer that objects of memory assert themselves as memory things when enough affect and emotion have accumulated such that our relationship to the object changes—for better or for worse. Brown's filthy windows provide a particularly helpful analogy. Typically, dirt builds up on windows over time. The first bits of dust that stick may not be very noticeable, but eventually enough dirt will accumulate to the point that if one does not acknowledge the presence of the window itself rather than looking through it, the window will become too filthy to be used for its intended purpose. By turning attention to the window itself, rather than what is on the other side, we are forced to acknowledge the thing. It is my contention that memory things

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[32] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4.

assert themselves as relevant to the creation of public memory because they accumulate emotional significance as they circulate through public culture. Not all of the objects that enter our lives will necessarily have this effect. Not all objects that circulate in public discourse will accrue enough affective force to move us in significant ways. But some will. Thus, the accumulation of an object's affective force is conditioned upon the manner in which it circulates.

Rhetorical Circulation

Ahmed is not focused on public memory per se, but rather on "how we become invested in social norms," which I am suggesting is indelibly connected to public memory. Her model of affective economies follows the work of feminist and queer scholars, such as Judith Butler, who have demonstrated how repetition produces social norms such as the family or heterosexuality. "Such norms appear," Ahmed says, "as forms of life only through the concealment of the work of this repetition."[33] I contend that the repetitive manner in which an object circulates is not only essential for understanding how emotions accumulate and to what effect but is also rhetorical. If we turn our attention back to the model of magnetic memory, we can look toward the coiled wire and the electricity that powers an electromagnet. In this analogy, the coiled wire represents the circulation of the object in public discourse. Electrons circulate through the wire, magnetizing the iron core—making it capable of sticking and repelling. Although there is no need to take the model literally, the fact that electricity is generated by the movement of electrons suggests that circulation is not a static process. It moves in a spiral path—a repetitive circular

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[33] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

pattern with a difference. The spiral indicates that change is possible within circulation, accounting for the accumulation of affective force (though it is not necessarily limited to that).

VanderHaagen's "agential spiral" provides a way to consider the rhetorical nature of repetition. In her book, *Children's Biographies of African American Women: Rhetoric, Public Memory, and Agency,* VanderHaagen examines how agency is represented and enacted in biographies written for children about three significant black women, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Shirley Chisholm.[34] As part of this project, she expands upon previous work to develop the concept of the agential spiral, the purpose of which is to clarify and emphasize the role of human agency within the processes of public memory. The spiral links "agents" not only in the present moment but also across time. With specific reference to the creation of historical narrative, she suggests that the spiral connects agents in a basic pattern: "Historical events occur, are recognized as significant 'actions' and are recorded; historians, curators, memorialists, and other interpreters translate these events into explanatory narratives of human action; and readers, listeners and other members of the public engage these narratives in order to understand the meaning of the past for the present. Then audience members become actors and contribute again to the cycle of interpreting and creatively imitating human action."[35] Essentially, VanderHaagen is describing the agential spiral as a circular process of rhetorical interpretation and rhetorical production that is connected by rhetorical action. There are three stages in the

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[34] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women.*
[35] VanderHaagen, "The 'Agential Spiral,'" 183.

cycle that VanderHaagen describes, and those three stages correspond to the three "folds" of philosopher Paul Ricoeur's concept of three-fold mimesis. It is through VanderHaagen's reading of Ricoeur that the spiral, rather than the circle, becomes relevant for thinking about how memory things might accrue affective force through circulation.

Ricoeur argues that people use narratives to make sense of the temporal nature of human action and experience. He refers to the act of composing this narrative as "emplotment." Ricoeur posits that the particular way that actions are emplotted in a narrative reflects, among other things, the values, beliefs, and norms of the time period in which the narrative is generated. Indeed, he goes as far to say that "if, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated." However, this narrative is not a simple reflection of those values. Rather, Ricoeur argues, emplotment occurs through "mimetic activity, the active process of imitating or representing something." Importantly, mimesis is not simply a mindless copy, it is a "creative imitation."[36] For our purposes, representation and imitation point to repetition as a key element of circulation.

Ricoeur outlines three stages of mimesis, which he calls mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$, and mimesis$_3$. Mimesis$_1$ "is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal characters." Therefore, mimesis$_1$ is the starting point, the body of shared knowledge from which narratives can be constructed. The second stage of mimesis, in which emplotment—that is, the creative

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[36] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Karen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 33, 45, 57, 58.

construction of a narrative and first "round" of imitation—occurs, is mimesis$_2$. Ricoeur considers mimesis$_2$ the "pivot" of the analysis and argues that the text is made meaningful through "its faculty of mediation," a process of "configuration" through which mimesis$_1$ is linked to mimesis$_3$.[37] Mimesis$_2$ is a moment of rhetorical interpretation and production in which a text (of some kind) is created for an audience for a specific purpose out of the field of knowledge that exists in mimesis$_1$. In the case of producing public memory, the purpose is to remember something such as a set of values or beliefs. It is important to note that in moving from mimesis$_1$ to mimesis$_2$ we have moved through time. Mimesis$_1$ is always something that exists before mimesis$_2$ precisely because mimesis$_2$ is a particular interpretation of mimesis$_1$. Once a text is created in mimesis$_2$, it exists in the present moment, but will also exist in the past as time passes. It can be "read" now or in the future. Mimesis$_3$, then, points to the moment when the audience (or in Ricoeur's terms, the reader) receives the text. Mimesis$_3$ creates the possibility for change to the extent that the act of reception can constitute an audience and persuade them to move in the "real world." Regardless, through the interpretive process that creates mimesis$_2$ of out mimesis$_1$ and the reception of that text in mimesis$_3$, the discursive field of mimesis$_1$ has changed.

Although VanderHaagen's work focuses specifically on the interpretation and representation of agency in biographies for children, the image of the spiral is more broadly helpful, because it visualizes the cumulative possibility implied by the repetition of this interpretive process over time. Although Ricoeur focuses on the circle of mimesis, he does indicate that he "would rather speak of an endless spiral that would carry the

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[37] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* 54, 71.

meditation past the same point a number of times at different altitudes."[38] This spiral

formation, then, points to the possibility of expanding the pool of inventional resources,

which enriches future interpretation and rhetorical production.[39] This expansion of

$mimesis_1$ can occur at the moment of $mimesis_2$ when the primary text is produced and

from any change in human action made possible at the moment of $mimesis_3$, the act of

reception.

It is possible to align the rhetorical process of public memory with the mimetic

process that Ricoeur outlines. Because $mimesis_2$ is created out of $mimesis_1$, it suggests that

the past is an important resource for rhetorical production in the present—a central

concern of public memory. Although when referencing "the past," scholars of public

memory are most often referring to historical events, it is entirely possible to connect "the

past" directly with shared ideas, values, and beliefs because, as Ricoeur's three-fold

mimesis demonstrates, the stories we tell ourselves are already essentially vehicles for

communicating a particular interpretation of a set of ideas, values, and beliefs.

Rhetorical Studies and Childhood

This dissertation examines the role of children's toys in public memory through a

rhetorical approach, which highlights the purposefully constructed and contingent nature

of discourse. In her book, *American Lobotomy*, Jenell Johnson describes a rhetorical

perspective as one that "adjusts our focus away from the divine glare of universal truth and

toward symbols in all their messy, earthly contingency: images framed by history; language

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[38] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 72.

[39] Note that this does not mean there will be less "forgetting."

bound by culture and convention; signs with unstable referents; narratives written, spoken, repeated, translated and understood by someone, somewhere, sometime."[40] The role of the rhetorical critic, then, is to examine how those messy symbols have been put together in such a way that they become legible and meaningful for an audience in a particular context. This approach hinges on the polysemic nature of discourse, which allows not only the critic but also the author and the audience to interpret meaning differently, given their different positions with regard to context.[41] Furthermore, as Blair, Dickinson, and Ott have argued, rhetoric is most clearly distinguished "from other critical protocols (cultural studies or literary criticism, for example) [because] it organizes itself around the relationship of discourses, events, objects, and practices to ideas about what it means to be public."[42] However, they argue that the limit of what rhetorical scholars might consider "public" is by no means static and is instead considered flexible and up for debate.

Despite this elasticity, within rhetorical studies the term "public" has not often been used to describe children, childhood, or the discourses, objects, events, and practices associated with children and childhood. The lack of attention from a public-centered discipline is not surprising because, particularly in the Western world, childhood is conceptualized as a time of life that is significantly offset from the reality of the adult world. Since the emergence of modern childhood in the early nineteenth century, most Americans have associated children with the private realm of the family home, in which children live

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[40] Jenell Johnson, *American Lobotomy: A Rhetorical History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 12.

[41] Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84, no. 4 (1998): 395–415.

[42] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 2–3.

under the protection and direction of their parents. However, the increasingly large

interdisciplinary field of childhood studies has revealed not only the socially and culturally

constructed nature of childhood but also its relevance to the public realm. For example, in

his definitive book on the history of childhood, *Huck's Raft*, Stephen Mintz argues that "the

history of childhood is inextricably bound up with the broader political and social events in

the life of the nation—including colonization, revolution, slavery, industrialization,

urbanization, immigration, and war—and children's experience embodies many of the key

themes in American history, such as the rise of modern bureaucratic institutions, the

growth of a consumer economy, and the elaboration of a welfare state."[43] Furthermore,

Henry Jenkins, in the introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader*, points out that "almost

every major political battle of the twentieth century has been fought on the backs of our

children," including the introduction of child labor laws during the Progressive Era that

helped to constrain the child to the private realm, the deeply political and tragically public

role of black children during the civil rights era, and the rise of the Moral Majority and its

claims to "family values" during the Reagan era.[44] The predominant political battle over

childhood in the twenty-first century has been about the relationship between racism and

police brutality, best encapsulated by images of hoodies and hands up in surrender

intended to claim the long-denied image of childhood innocence for America's black

children.

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[43] Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), viii.
[44] Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's Culture Reader,* ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

The broader field of communication studies has generated a healthy body of

scholarship centered on children. These studies, however, are primarily situated within a

developmental psychology model and are focused on the effects of media on children's

behaviors. Furthermore, they generally follow quantitative social scientific research

methods. A much smaller strand of communication studies research also exists that, similar

to the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, understands childhood as a social or

cultural construction and typically uses humanistic or qualitative social scientific methods.

This smaller strand of research usually takes a qualitative media studies or mass

communication studies approach and is focused on the effects of advertising aimed at

children and images of children or childhood in mass media.[45]

In a sense, then, the conceptual realm of childhood is calling out for rhetorical

attention. The strength that a rhetorical approach brings to an analysis is its focus on the

complex ways that people make meaning for particular reasons in specific contexts. As

Blair, Dickinson, and Ott point out, rhetoric is not "a genre of discourse" but rather "a set of

theoretical stances and critical tactics that offer ways of understanding, evaluating, and

intervening in a broad range of human activities."[46] Instead of seeking to understand

objective truth, rhetorical inquiry investigates how people leverage the contingent nature

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[45] For example, see Victor J. Viser, "Thematics and Products in American Magazine Advertising Containing Children, 1940–1950," *Communication Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 1999): 118–32; Kyle Asquith, "Knowing the Child Consumer through Box Tops: Data Collection, Measurement, and Advertising to Children, 1920–1945," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 32, no. 2 (March 2015): 112–27; Fern Johnson and Karren Young, "Gendered Voices in Children's Television Advertising," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 4 (December 2002): 461–80.
[46] Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 3.

of language and other symbol systems to address or constitute particular audiences in particular contexts for particular reasons. Therefore, in attempting to connect childhood with rhetorical studies, we must ask, how do adults make the period of life we call childhood meaningful? How do adults make meaning for children? How do we make sense of the relationship between children and adults? How do children make meaning for themselves, as well as for adults?

Although scholars of rhetorical studies in communication have done much work since the mid-twentieth century to widen the realm of objects of study, relatively few studies have centered on children, childhood, or the discourses, objects, events, and practices associated with children and childhood.[47] However, public memory studies within rhetoric and communication do contain a few important exceptions, such as Sara VanderHaagen's essay on biographical narratives of Sojourner Truth written for children and Amy Lynn Heyse's study of the United Daughters of the Confederacy's catechisms for children.[48] Arguably the only sustained rhetorical intervention into childhood studies is VanderHaagen's recent book, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*.[49]

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[47] Some exceptions include Harriette Kevill-Davies, "Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 235–78; Rae Lynn Schwartz-DuPre, "Portraying the Political: *National Geographic*'s 1985 Afghan Girl and a US Alibi for Aid," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 4 (October 2010): 336–56; Leslie Hahner, "Practical Patriotism: Camp Fire Girls, Girl Scouts, and Americanization," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 2008): 113–34; and Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess," *Women's Studies in Communication* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 34–59.
[48] VanderHaagen, "Practical Truths," 18–41; Heyse, "Rhetoric of Memory-Making," 408–32.
[49] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women.*

Beyond the primarily historical emphasis indicated by Mintz and Jenkins, but signaled by VanderHaagen's and Heyse's studies, the general cultural orientation to children and to childhood in the United States is deeply saturated with a concern—an anxiety, even—about how to convey historical and cultural knowledge to the next generation, whether through parenting practices, education, consumer culture, or some combination of these. While there are many means through which one might communicate values and beliefs to children (such as the juvenile biographies VanderHaagen studies), toys are exceptionally positioned for this function. In *Toys as Culture*, renowned play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith argues that toys are culturally significant and positions them as a form of communication. He states, "[Toys] are like words which we use to mean things to each other. Play is a form of human communication and so are toys."[50] The way that people in the United States understand what a toy is—that is, what it is capable of communicating or "doing" to its user—affects the ways in which people use them to make meaning.

Toys are a more complex object of analysis than they might seem at first glance. For one, toys have multiple audiences. We generally think of children as the audience of toys, but depending on a child's age or access to financial resources, parents also constitute a large portion of a toy's audience. Furthermore, a range of other non-parent adults have a stake in children's toys, such as educators, friends and relatives, medical practitioners or counselors, and even cultural critics. This opens up a wide variety of possible interpretations of a toy's meaning. Second, historically, toys have served a number of different purposes. They have been used as educational tools, to develop motor skills or

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[50] Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986), 259n14.

literacy. Some toys develop artistic skills, while some invite children to mimic adult actions.

Some toys replicate features of the adult world, whereas others engage imagination and

fantasy. Third, toys travel through time. Some toys are cherished and get passed down

through generations. Others—and this is especially true since the 1950s, when the toy

market began expanding significantly—have been in continuous production for years, even

decades, and some version of one's grandparents' and parents' favorite toys is likely still

available for purchase. Finally, in both academic and popular discourse of the late

twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, toys are often figured as social problems.

Sociologist Joel Best points out that "suspicions about play's dark side often focus on

children's playthings—toys. Toys, we are warned, can turn good children into bad actors."[51]

The pervasive nature of these concerns makes toys an especially fruitful site to see how

values, beliefs, and norms are communicated and enacted by adults and children alike.

The Moral Project of Childhood

Public memory studies in rhetoric can contribute significantly to studies of

childhood and children's toys by focusing on those processes that function to construct and

communicate a system of values and norms across generations. Sociologist Daniel Cook

argues that we should conceptualize childhood as a "moral project" because doing so

"focuses investigation not so much on any specific prescription or proscription regarding

children—although these are crucial to the examination—but more directly on the ways in

which childhood itself *requires* ethical determinations of one kind or another for its

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[51] Joel Best, "Too Much Fun: Toys as Social Problems and the Interpretation of Culture," *Symbolic Interaction* 21, no. 2 (1998): 197.

existence." He points out that no one in American culture is "against" childhood. Instead, people make moral decisions that set the boundaries of good and bad, of acceptable or unacceptable, of proper or improper forms of childhood. Cook contends that we must move away from "battling over which childhoods are correct and where others went wrong" by turning analytic attention to *how* "good" and "bad" childhoods or "right" and "wrong" practices are constituted.[52] Rhetoric and public memory offer an interpretive lens through which to examine these processes. In order to do so, it is necessary to understand how the predominant conceptualization of childhood developed and the role that children's toys played in that history.

Protect and Preserve

The social anxiety surrounding children's toys is, at least partially, the product of childhood innocence, the prevailing paradigm of American childhood since the nineteenth century. This version of childhood charges adults with a moral imperative to protect children's innocence, which is understood to be perpetually vulnerable to outside threats. Historians of childhood generally agree that this Romantic vision of childhood, which idealized children "as symbols of purity, spontaneity, and emotional expressiveness," emerged in the eighteenth century and by the mid-nineteenth century was cemented as the prevailing discourse of childhood.[53] The diffusion of these ideas across many aspects of life would have widespread consequences in American culture.

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[52] Daniel Thomas Cook, "Childhood as a Moral Project," *Childhood* 24, no. 1 (February 2017): 3, 5.
[53] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 77.

This is not to suggest, however, that prior to the development of modern childhood parents did not take great care in raising and protecting their children. During the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth, Puritan beliefs about childhood dominated child-rearing discourses in the United States. The Puritans, a religious reformist sect, were deeply invested in "properly rearing, disciplining, and educating" their children because they believed that, if raised properly, the next generation would enact their desire to erase sin, uplift Christian piety, and carry their religious beliefs into the future. Guided by the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and infant depravity, Puritans believed that if children died before reaching Christian salvation then they would suffer eternal torment in hell. They considered children to be inherently sinful and thought that their corrupt impulses needed to be controlled through religious instruction. Thus, for the Puritans, childhood was defined by deficiency, and children needed careful *religious* training to shape their minds and bodies properly. The very survival of the Puritan mission depended on it.[54]

During the late eighteenth century, however, the Romantic view of childhood, which centered beliefs about children's innate innocence rather than their original sin, began to compete with the Calvinist vision of childhood. The Romantic ideal of childhood emphasized children's "fragility, malleability, and corruptibility" and prolonged their dependency on adults' protection.[55] Anna Mae Duane argues that nineteenth-century childhood was defined by "vulnerability, suffering, and victimhood." For Duane, "a child's

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[54] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 12.
[55] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 77.

suffering body [represented] the epitome of sentimental expression" and thus demanded

adult intervention and protection.[56] Historian Karin Calvert argues that by the second half

of the nineteenth century, white children were deemed "virtually angels incarnate who,

should they die in infancy, would transmute back into their angelic state."[57] These ideas

had an especially exacting effect on girlhood, as it became necessary to ensure girls' sexual

purity prior to marriage. In many ways, this relationship is emblematic of the inherent

tension within childhood innocence: the more adults applied sentimental value to children,

the more adults sought to regulate them.

The boundaries and protections of childhood innocence that developed over the

eighteenth century, however, did not apply to all children. Performance studies scholar

Robin Bernstein argues that "this innocence was raced white" and was perpetuated, at least

in part, by "the archetype of 'innumerable pale and pious'—one might say white and

sinless—'heroines' of nineteenth century sentimental fiction," such as Harriet Beecher

Stowe's Little Eva.[58] Furthermore, scholars such as Hazel Carby and Ann DuCille have

argued persuasively that the cult of true womanhood, which relied upon an assumption of

white women's sexual purity, was defined largely in opposition to racist assumptions about

black women's inherent promiscuity.[59] Bernstein argues that because nineteenth-century

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56 Anna Mae Duane, *Suffering Childhood: Violence, Race, and the Making of the Child Victim* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 3.
57 Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600–1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 105.
58 Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 6.
59 Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention:*

childhood innocence was fundamentally based on sexual innocence and purity like that of

the cult of true womanhood, that innocence "divided white and black children in much the

same way it did white and black women." In addition to their assumed exclusion from

sexual purity, black children, Bernstein contends, were further removed from the

protections of childhood innocence through the idea that they did not and could not

experience pain, a notion promulgated by the widespread circulation of caricatures of

emotionally and physically insensate black children, such as the pickaninny. Because

victimhood and the capacity to suffer had become such defining features of childhood

innocence, Bernstein argues, "the libel that African American juveniles were invulnerable,

did not suffer, and were not victims, then, defined them out of childhood itself," a notion

that would remain intact until the mid-twentieth century when African Americans'

resistance "unmasked racial innocence."[60]

Additionally, the expansion of childhood innocence in the nineteenth century

coincided with capitalist expansion and the growth of cities and industry, which provided

urban, white, middle-class parents with the means to protect and extend childhood for

their children. Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that as ideas about childhood innocence

proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, the expectations for what counted as

childhood began to teeter between the economic and the emotional, eventually settling on

the emotional.[61] That is, whereas children were once "valued for their labor or as property"

Sex, Text, and Convention in Black Women's Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[60] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 29, 42.

[61] Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xviii.

and were given protection in return, children's experiences before adulthood—that supposedly inherent moral innocence of youth—became something worth protecting and developing in its own right.[62] This distinction, however, was heavily predicated upon a family's social position. According to Mintz, middle-class children were protected from work, often by being sent to school, while the demand for lower-class children's labor increased and became even more vital to the family's survival.[63]

The turn of the twentieth century saw further expansion of industry, especially in factories, which, according to Mintz, "generated a voracious demand for child labor at the same time that it disrupted rural household industries, stimulating a massive migration" from farms and villages in both Europe and the United States "to rapidly growing cities and factory towns." Child labor, which existed prior to industrialization, became more visible, and more dangerous, as the setting of children's labor moved from agricultural or domestic settings to factories, mines, and street trades. The idea that all classes of children warranted a childhood devoted to play and education, rather than one consumed by long working hours and dangerous conditions, led to the child labor reform movement, which eventually ended most forms of child labor and resulted in compulsory schooling for all. By the 1950s, nearly universal high school attendance across the United States indicated the widespread acceptance of childhood innocence and the successful conversion of childhood into a prolonged and protected state.[64]

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[62] Leslie J. Harris, "The Court, Child Custody, and Social Change: The Rhetorical Role of Precedent in a 19th Century Child Custody Decision," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 31.

[63] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 136.

[64] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 134, 181.

Toys in History

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, prior to the full sedimentation of childhood innocence and the onset of industrialization, the word "toy" referred to objects that both adults and children used for amusement. According to historian Howard Chudacoff, very few American homes during this period would have had toys that resemble commercial toys in the modern era. Homemade or otherwise domestically produced playthings such as "tops, hoops, kites, marbles, stilts, sleds, bows and arrows, puzzles, cards, blocks, and dolls" existed, but rarely would one household have all of these.[65] Many of these items were considered educational, and historians often point to John Locke, who argued that certain toys could aid children's intellectual development, such as alphabet blocks.[66]

In the antebellum period, the American toy industry was in its earliest stages, and formal toys were still relatively uncommon even for the middle class. But mid-nineteenth-century technological developments, such as sheet-metal stamping, improved printing techniques, and molding machines, increased the demand for children's toys. Chudacoff argues that in addition to serving educational purposes, more toys during the latter half of the nineteenth century began to "[foster] pure joy and fantasy," although educators still expressed ambivalence about toys that did not impart useful skills or exercise. Popular toys for boys, such as bicycles, balls, sleds, and guns, oriented boys to the outdoor world. In contrast, the doll industry also expanded during this time, and dolls designed by women

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[65] Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 32.
[66] John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989).

promoted mothering and nurturing habits. Chudacoff notes that during the nineteenth

century, a more distinct children's culture emerged as children slowly gained more leisure

time and used that play time in ways adults did not necessarily approve of or anticipate.[67]

By 1903, the U.S. toy industry had grown enough to support the industry's first

annual toy fair for toy manufacturers and retailers. Initially, there was not much variation

in the types of toys available from year to year. Toy makers still advertised primarily to

adults, and most toys reflected the values and skills adults wanted to teach their children.

However, this was also the period in which brand names began to permeate the toy market,

as they did with other commodities.[68] By the late 1920s, toy makers started to see the value

of advertising directly to children and did so by appealing to fantasy and novelty. Between

1929 and 1933 the industry's revenues decreased by almost half, and Mintz suggests that

by the 1940s toy manufacturers began using movie and cartoon tie-ins as well as celebrity-

inspired toys, such as Mickey Mouse watches and Shirley Temple dolls, to fill the gap, thus

connecting toys to other forms of media.[69] This shift marks the permeation of consumer

culture into the adult-protected space of childhood, and as time passed the distinction

between toys advertised to parents and toys advertised to children would only continue to

grow.

Despite increasing appeals to children, toy makers considered adults a major

audience for advertising and stressed the educational value of toys. Take, for example, an

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[67] Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 75, 83, 92.
[68] Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 116.
[69] The late 1920s is also when the first social science studies on the effects of movies on children were conducted because of concerns about movies' detrimental effects on morality. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 217.

article in *Parents' Magazine* from 1930, entitled "Toys that Teach." In this article, "toy consultant" Janet M. Knopf encourages parents (that is, mothers) to use care when choosing toys for their children. She stresses that toys are "a tool through which a child sees his world" and thus a child's play "is a very serious business." For Knopf, an educational toy is one that promotes "self-reliance, coordination between body and mind, concentration, ability to work with one's fellows, and to adjust to situations when one meets them." Unlike in the 1950s and '60s, when the number, types, and brands of toys increased significantly, in 1930 Knopf points to items from the adult world, such as potter's clay, carpentry tools, or sewing materials, that parents could adapt to the particular child's level. For younger children, toys that required physical manipulation such as nested blocks or "a pyramid of graduated discs" could help mothers solve the inconvenience of children's "natural need" to play with what is around them, such as "opening and closing the refrigerator door or uncovering and covering the garbage pail."[70] Although the particular meaning ascribed to "educational toys" varied across the twentieth century, it remained a class marker for "discerning" parents who were preoccupied with the proper development and future success of their children.

During the post-World War II baby boom, parents and grandparents spent more money on toys than ever before. Many new and now-iconic toys hit the market during this period, some of which still exist in some form today, including Candy Land, a board game; Mr. Potato Head, a plastic model toy; and Silly Putty, a bouncing polymer compound. According to Mintz, toy sales increased from $84 million in 1940 to $1.25 billion in 1960.

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[70] Janet M. Knopf, "Toys That Teach," *Parents' Magazine*, November 1930, 21, 72.

As before, toys were implicated in the maintenance and production of gender roles and norms, but the focus of the toys shifted slightly during this time with war toys that reflected Cold War-era anxieties and dolls that emphasized beauty and fashion over maternal nurturing.[71] Although the earliest toy fad in the United States was the yo-yo in the late 1920s, television united children's interests in ways and at speeds not previously possible. For example, over ten million coonskin hats were purchased at the height of the popularity of the television series *Davy Crockett* in 1955. Television's purported influence over children generated a significant amount of adult anxiety. The first book-length study on the detrimental effects of television on children, *Television in the Lives of Our Children*, was published in 1961. The study prodded fears that the innocence of childhood was at risk and that television would end up producing children who "have no sense of values, no feeling of wonder, no sustained interest."[72]

The toy industry changed substantially in the later twentieth century. Mergers and acquisitions dominated in the 1980s, leaving fewer but larger corporations in control of the market. There was also a significant amount of retail consolidation, and discount stores like Toys 'R' Us grew in prominence between the 1960s and '80s. Much like the clothing industry, the U.S. toy industry moved much of its manufacturing to Asia, especially China. In *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture,* Ellen Seiter argues that although much critical attention is directed at toy commercials, the toy industry has worked in many

[71] Kevill-Davies, "Children Crusading against Communism."
[72] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 277, 278.

other ways to increase sales, such as construing toys as year-round purchases and

investing in sophisticated market testing and character licenses.[73]

When Toys Become the Problem

Although the toy market has changed immensely since the early twentieth century

and is no longer *centered* around an appeal to parents, adult's expectations for toys are far

from absent in the toy market and have dominated academic and popular discourse about

toys since at least the 1970s. By the 1980s, there were clear distinctions between high-

quality, educational toys directed to parents and "mass-market" toys advertised to

children, which were a source of great anxiety and moral outrage for many parents.

Sociologist Joel Best argues that the second half of the twentieth century saw a rise in

criticism of and collective action against the toy industry and certain kinds of toys deemed

to impart undesirable values to children.[74] During this time various advocacy groups

worked to raise awareness about hazardous toys, war toys, racist toys, sexist toys, and even

occult toys by stressing children's vulnerability and innocence. The arguments leveled

against these troublesome toys assumed that if children played with toys that represented

undesirable values, then children would begin to exhibit those values and ultimately suffer

objectionable consequences. Although specific class values were rarely made explicit in

these protests, Seiter points out that critics of the toy industry typically exempted

educational toys marketed in high-end stores and catalogs from the protests against mass-

market, nationally advertised toys. Furthermore, she stresses that "educational" and

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[73] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 196.
[74] Best, "Too Much Fun," 201.

"quality" toys represent an alternative to the mass-marketed, one that is linked to cultural capital (à la Bourdieu) rather than financial capital.[75] Both are advertised; both communicate something. The primary difference is how adults perceive the toy's capacity to communicate a particular set of values.

Gendered toys have been on the feminist radar especially since the 1980s, when the toy market (like most consumer markets at that time) began to rely more heavily on color as a means of gender identification. But in the twenty-first century, concerns about the way in which extremely feminine toys teach girls outdated, stereotypical, or otherwise inappropriate gender norms have dominated public anxieties about toys. Although some public discourses and scholarship mention the negative effects that some toys may have on boys—due, for example, to a pervasive emphasis on aggression—the major public debates about toys in the twenty-first century have focused almost entirely on girls. This emphasis is due, at least in part, to the increased attention that girls and girlhood began to receive from both popular and feminist discourse in the 1990s. A brief overview of the development of girls' studies in relationship to popular discourses about girls in the United States helps to illustrate the centrality of gender, and girls specifically, to present-day gender politics with regard to girlhood.[76]

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[75] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 238; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[76] The academic field of girls' studies has, of course, not been limited to American scholars; however, since this project is primarily focused on how discourses about gender and toys have played out in the United States and girls' studies developed somewhat differently in different geographic and historical contexts, I have narrowed my focus here, primarily, to the development of discourses about U.S. girls.

Girlhood Revisited

Although the field of girls' studies is still generally subsumed under the larger

umbrella of women's or gender studies, the early 1990s mark an important moment in the

field's development.[77] By this point, the effects of the social justice movements of the 1960s

and 1970s on people's awareness of gender stereotypes had opened up the space for some

academics to begin questioning the lives of women before they became women—that is, to

begin questioning what it means to be a girl.[78] The American Association of University

Women published two landmark studies in 1991 and 1992—*Shortchanging Girls,*

Shortchanging America, and *How Schools Shortchange Girls: The AAUW Report*—that

connected girls' drop in self-esteem at puberty to their experiences in schools.[79] The

studies found that due to institutionalized sexism, the education that girls and boys were

receiving was not equal: girls were being discouraged in a number of ways from pursuing

the natural and physical sciences and mathematics; schools were treating sexual

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[77] The boundary between academic and popular discourses about girls and girlhood has been permeable. Although each may have somewhat different goals and perspectives, each has influenced the other in important ways. Many respected scholars in girls' studies have published books that cross over into the popular press or are in conversation with popular press texts, and many popular press texts have influenced the scholarly trajectory of girls' studies in the United States.

[78] Elline Lipkin, *Girls' Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), 16.

[79] American Association of University Women, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America* (Washington, DC: AAUW, 1991); American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls: The AAUW Report a Study of Major Findings on Girls and Education* (New York: Marlowe and Co., 1995). The studies stirred up an enormous amount of public interest, and as Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin point out in their survey of U.S. girls' studies, the reports also generated a fair amount of alarm. See Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies," in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–28.

harassment casually, which perpetuated the idea that girls do not deserve respect; and girls were often rewarded for passive behaviors, which were now understood to be at odds with a full education. Shortly after, and in conjunction with the AAUW, journalist Peggy Orenstein published *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. For this book, Orenstein spent time in eighth-grade classrooms at two different California middle schools, one suburban and one urban, during the 1992–1993 school year to see if the studies' findings played out in the manner the AAUW had described. Her book ultimately provided a narrative for the two AAUW reports that confirmed their findings. She argued:

> Without a strong sense of self, girls will enter adulthood at a deficit: they will be less able to fulfill their potential, less willing to take on challenges, less willing to defy tradition in their career choices, which means sacrificing economic equity. Their successes will not satisfy and their failures will be more catastrophic, confirming their own self-doubt. They will be less prepared to weather the storms of adult life, more likely to become depressed, hopeless, and self-destructive. In order to raise healthier girls, we must look carefully at what we tell them, often unconsciously, often subtly, about their worth relative to boys. We must look at what girls value about themselves—the "areas of importance" by which they measure their self-esteem—as well as the potential sources of strength and competence that, too often, they learn to devalue.[80]

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[80] Peggy Orenstein, *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), xxvii–xxix.

While the AAUW and Orenstein focused primarily on the causes of the confidence gap in

the school system, in her best-selling book, *Reviving Ophelia*, psychotherapist Mary Pipher

articulated the notion of a U.S. "girl-poisoning culture" that, at the moment of adolescence,

"limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them

traumatized." The title's allusion to *Hamlet*'s Ophelia is telling: "Wholeness," Pipher

claimed, "is shattered by the chaos of adolescence. Girls become fragmented, their selves

split into mysterious contradictions." When girls enter adolescence, they are suddenly

faced with "girl-hurting 'isms,' such as sexism, capitalism and lookism" that they did not

have to contend with as children. Adolescent girls, Pipher argued, are torn between their

own desires and the pressure to live up to restrictive social standards. This ambiguity often

results not only in a loss of self-esteem but also in destructive behaviors.[81] As girls' studies

scholar Elline Lipkin summarizes, Pipher identified themes that resounded throughout

much of the early literature and popular discourse on girlhood: "the loss of a powerful,

confident, fearless childhood self, and the assumption of the mantle of sexualization along

with the mores, fears, and expectations of cultural femininity—and for many girls, the

sense of a diminished vision of their potential."[82] Together, academically informed, popular

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[81] Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 12, 20, 23. Pipher's book has since been roundly criticized by a number of scholars because of the biased nature of Pipher's sample, which comprised almost entirely middle-class, Midwestern, white girls from her private practice. For an example of research that complicates Pipher's findings, see Julie Bettie, *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). According to Ward and Benjamin, *Reviving Ophelia* "spent three years on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list and has sold over 1.5 million copies" (at least, as of the publication of their essay in 2004—the book is still in print); Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work," 17.
[82] Lipkin, *Girls' Studies*, 29–30.

press texts helped to define what I, for brevity's sake, will refer to as a "girls' crisis

discourse" in the United States. This crisis discourse generally defined the problems of

girlhood in the late twentieth century through the issues of institutionalized sexism in

schools; the loss of self-esteem at puberty; the increasing sexualization of girls in the media

and their resulting loss of innocence, which occurs alongside the continuing pressure on

girls to conform to aspects of traditional femininity; and the pernicious influence of

consumer capitalism on girls' environments and choices.

In her introduction to the 2004 edited collection *All about the Girl: Culture, Power,*

and Identity, Australian cultural theorist and girls' studies scholar Anita Harris provides an

important transition statement that rings true for this dissertation: "[W]hereas a 'first

wave' of girls' studies aimed to expose and rectify the oppression experienced by young

women, today it tackles the legacy of its own interventions."[83] With the rising public

concern for girls in the 1990s came a growing interest in developing consumer markets for

and about them in the 2000s, which brought along a new set of problems for scholars to

contend with.[84] As Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin point out, "Appealing to

girls and their parents as consumers required a softer sell than the crisis literature

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[83] Anita Harris, introduction to *All about the Girl*, ed. Harris, xvii–xxv.

[84] U.S. girls now have a century-long history of being targeted by consumer capitalism. For important texts regarding girls (as well as children more broadly) and consumption, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

provided. Soon the adult marketplace, too, was flooded with books and resources for

parents and teachers celebrating everything girl."[85] Along with these popular discourses,

girls' studies scholars have since struggled to balance these two aspects—celebration and

alarm—because, as Ward and Benjamin point out, the danger lies not in either one message

or the other, "but in the cultural schizophrenia that divides and polarizes them." They go on

to say that "researchers have struggled to hold these two aspects of experience together"

but that this struggle is necessary to represent realistically girls' lived experiences.[86]

This struggle has been of particular interest to the media studies and cultural

studies strains of girls' studies, which have focused heavily on the effects of "girl power"

discourses over the last ten or so years, as well as girls' ability to navigate these

discourses.[87] Additionally, British and Australian girls' studies scholars have heavily

influenced the academic work in these strains in the United States. Media studies scholar

Emilie Zaslow suggests that the girls' crisis discourse, especially the thread represented by

Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, "led the way for a girl power discourse market that focused on

reclaiming the innocence of girlhood while empowering teen girls to fight against a hostile

social environment." Zaslow argues that the corporatized girl power discourse of the 1990s

resulted from "advertisers, media producers, retailers, and product designers quickly

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[85] The quotation continues with examples: "for example, the literally hundreds of parenting books on the market dispensing advice about raising girls, Web sites such as the United States Department of Health and Human Services 'Girl Power' Initiative,' the huge number of book clubs organized by and for mothers and daughters, etc."; Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work," 21–22.

[86] Ward and Benjamin, "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work," 22.

[87] For example, see Mary Celeste Kearney, ed., *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

[realizing] that by using the pro-girly, pro-individual style adopted by the third-wave and riot grrrl movements they could capitalize on the desire to solve the 'problems' caused by both feminism and gender oppression, as well as the guilt faced by mothers who were scapegoated by the feminist backlash."[88]

Essentially, girl power discourse is the result of the incorporation of the desire to empower girls into hegemonic cultural production. Girl power discourse takes the idea that girls and women need to be empowered in order to face the difficulties of structural sexism and transforms it into an already-existing reality of empowerment in which girls and women have an inherent ability to exert individual power and have little trouble navigating the "remains" of structural sexism. Zaslow describes the mentality embodied in the figure of the girl-powered girl:

> She believes that she should be treated as an equal to her male peers, that she should be in control of her own body, that she is entitled to play tough and be smart, that she can, and will, support herself financially, and that her future should be self-determined. Furthermore, she believes that she has a core of inner (girl) power on which to draw as she combats oppression and directs her own life. But the girl of girl power culture also feels she has a right to enjoy her sexuality, to revel in the desire she elicits, and to have a future in which the care of a child, and sometimes a husband, is of central importance.[89]

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[88] Emilie Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17, 31.
[89] Zaslow, *Feminism, Inc.*, 4.

Alongside the general trend since the mid-1980s toward gender-specific marketing, girl power discourses have only become more and more pervasive since the 1990s, deeply influencing the various markets and forms of cultural production aimed at girls and women. At the same time, feminist studies and girls' studies scholars have increasingly focused on untangling the contradictions promoted by girl power by situating it within larger discourses of capitalist production and neoliberal discourses of individual choice and self-determinism.[90]

Pretty in Pink?

But how does all of this girl power discourse—aimed primarily at parents and their pubescent daughters—translate into the world of younger girls and their toys?[91] For one, some toy makers embraced this feminist focus on girls—as well as its political message— and began producing toys meant specifically and primarily for girls and girls' empowerment. American Girl, created by former educator Pleasant Rowland, is one example of a company that centered girls as its only audience.[92] Furthermore, girl power

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[90] For example, see Michelle S. Bae, "Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism," *Visual Arts Research* 37, no. 2 (2011): 28–40; and Meenakshi Gigi Durham, "The Girling of America: Critical Reflections on Gender and Popular Communication," *Popular Communication* 1, no. 1 (2003): 23–31.

[91] Until about the mid-2000s, girls' studies was primarily concerned with the issues faced by adolescent girls and young women (that is, people in and around the ages of fourteen to twenty-five). But as the markets have become increasingly segmented by age, in addition to gender, scholars and cultural critics have begun to raise questions and concerns about the application of girl power discourses to younger girls (between the ages of about four and thirteen). For example, see Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, eds., *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

[92] Although girls remain American Girl's primary audience, in 2017 the company released its first boy doll, Logan Everett, as a friend and bandmate to the contemporary character Tenney Grant, a rising star in the Nashville music scene. "American Girl Gives Girls More Characters and More Stories to Love in 2017!," American Girl, February 14, 2017,

discourses have influenced and styled cultural and consumer production for younger girls

in at least two major ways within the last two decades—through the "pinkification" of

girlhood and the rise of princess culture. In their book *Packaging Girlhood*, which is written

for a popular audience, psychologists Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown give voice to the

prevailing concern over pink. Pink, alongside other pastels, they argue, "announces

sweetness, innocence, and security (in all those pink bedrooms). Wherever there is pink,

there are angels, princesses, hearts, and flowers." In opposition, the colors associated with

boyhood—blues, reds, greens, and blacks—have come to "convey action and

aggressiveness." Lamb and Brown argue that because these colors have become so tightly

associated with boys or girls, but not both, the choice of color has actually become "a choice

of characteristics, qualities, and labels—those associated with stereotypes of girls (girly,

cute, sweet, innocent, soft) and stereotypes of boys (active, sporty, aggressive, strong,

bold)."[93]

  A similar argument is made by those concerned with princess culture. In the

introduction to the first scholarly edited collection on princess culture, published in 2015,

historian Miriam Forman-Brunell and media studies scholar Rebecca Hains summarize the

popular concern over the princess: "Although critics acknowledge that the princess might

encourage girls to feel good about their selves, they argue that the idealized figure

generates a false sense of self-confidence not at all grounded in genuine accomplishments.

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https://www.americangirl.com/wcsstore/AG/images/CustomerService/NewsReleases/20
170214.pdf.

[93] Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from
Marketers' Schemes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 19.

By reinforcing the unrealistic assumption that power can only be had through magnificent clothing, fabulous wealth, and gorgeous looks, the princess fosters damaging self-scrutiny and a diminishing sense of self."[94] Other than the general shift in focus from the school system to media and toy cultures, the underlying issues identified in the debates about pinkification and princess cultures—self-esteem, beauty, and traditional femininity—are quite similar to the issues revealed by the early girls' scholars of the 1990s. The major difference between the 1990s and the 2000s is the existence of this intense and pervasive consumer market that targets girls of younger and younger ages through the use of incredibly bold and pinkified girl power imagery.

Neutralizing Pinkified Toys

The response from feminist scholars, critics, and activists has been swift and intense. In 2011, Peggy Orenstein, the journalist whose exposé *SchoolGirls* helped to launch public interest in girls' issues in the 1990s, published a new book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture.*[95] Although concerns about gendered marketing existed well before the book was published, it represents a tipping point in U.S. public discourse about gendered marketing for children.

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[94] Miriam Forman-Brunell and Rebecca C. Hains, eds., *Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls' Imaginations and Identities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), xxi. The line between academic and popular discourse on princess cultures is especially blurred at the moment. Although Rebecca Hains has published numerous scholarly works on girls' studies issues, she is also one of the primary voices in the popular debate over princesses and gender-neutral toys. Her most recent book, *The Princess Problem*, is a manual for parents that coaches them on how to teach media literacy to their daughters. Rebecca C. Hains, *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2014).
[95] Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

In it Orenstein addresses the possible dangers for young girls—including her own daughter—of a beauty-centered, girl power consumer market dressed up in pinkification and princess culture. Although concerted efforts toward gender-neutral parenting date back at least to the 1970s, in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Orenstein both encapsulated and proliferated the growing frustration of feminist scholars, critics, and activists, as well as progressive-minded parents, with profoundly gender-segregated markets for children. Shortly after the book's publication, a more specific debate began to arise in public discourse. In December 2011, when LEGO announced the arrival of its newest addition, LEGO Friends, SPARK activists responded with a petition on Change.org asking LEGO to return to its former and supposedly gender-neutral marketing practices. On the heels of this controversy, in November 2012, thirteen-year-old McKenna Pope created a petition on Change.org urging Hasbro, the current producer of the Easy-Bake Oven, to release a gender-neutral version of the toy oven so that boys could feel more comfortable playing with the toy. In both of these public debates, the figure of the "gender-neutral toy" was centered as a solution to gendered marketing. Furthermore, in 2017, "in response to thousands of impassioned requests from fans for more options," American Girl announced the release of Logan Everett, the company's first boy doll.[96]

Whether or not gender-neutral toy advocates are a numerical majority, many companies and retail outlets have responded to their concerns by producing gender-neutral versions of toys and recategorizing toys by subject rather than gender. Other solutions—such as teaching children media literacy—have also been offered, with some

[96] "American Girl Gives Girls More."

success, but have not gained the level of media attention that gender-neutral toys have.

Although the movement has made more progress in countries such as the United Kingdom

than in the United States, major toy retailers such as Target and Toys 'R' Us (before filing

for bankruptcy in 2018) have recategorized their toy aisles by subject. Existing toy

companies have responded by producing "gender-neutral" versions of their toys, and new

toy companies have sprouted to fill the gap in the market. Furthermore, a large child-

rearing resource website, *A Mighty Girl*, which was created to help parents empower their

daughters by providing advice for finding empowering books, toys, movies, and music for

girls, made an official statement in 2015 supporting a shift toward gender-neutral toys.[97] I

call attention to the gender-neutral toy because it is representative of a larger issue within

feminist interventions into girlhood, which is the unintentional devaluation of femininity

through interventions intended to promote gender equality.

Gender-Neutral Toys

The concept of the gender-neutral toy can be traced back, at least, to the second-

wave, liberal feminist call for gender-neutral child-rearing in the 1970s and 1980s. As

sociologist Karin A. Martin summarizes, this group of liberal feminists "wanted to open up

possibilities for girls and to remove limitations on their lives. They encouraged expanded

roles for girls at home, at school, at work, and in the media. They argued for girls to have

access to sports, trucks, math, science, blue jeans, and short hair, all previously off limits.

Furthermore, they encouraged renouncing or at least limiting, for example, dresses,

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[97] Carolyn, "Signs of the Times: Why a Mighty Girl Supports Gender-Neutral Toy Signage,"
www.amightygirl.com, August 14, 2015, http://www.amightygirl.com/blog?p=9619.

makeup, fairy tales, and housework, all understood as constraints on girls' lives." These are, of course, very similar to the concerns voiced in the early 1990s, in the 2000s, and again in the 2010s. In addition to these concerns, some of the problems with the 1970s and 1980s arguments for gender-neutral child-rearing have remained, with some adjustments to the changing historical circumstances. Martin argues that "the liberal feminist call for gender-neutral child rearing did not fully grapple with how sexuality is entangled with gender, nor did it fully eradicate heterosexism and homophobia." Despite attempts to critique homophobia and heterosexism, these liberal feminists' writings failed at doing so. In their attempt to assuage parents' fear of homosexuality in children, their arguments would often imply that "gender-neutral child rearing would not cause homosexuality and might even prevent it."[98] In her study of comprehensive parenting advice books (as opposed to single-issue advice books on topics such as sleep or discipline) with publication dates ranging from 1992 to 2002, Martin found a similar problem. This more recent literature typically acknowledges that gender is socially constructed, and that different treatment of boys and girls will produce differences, which is similar to the arguments of liberal feminists. Many texts also approve of gender-neutral parenting, although not all are convinced it works. Furthermore, Martin claims, "most advisors approve of behaviors that were nearly taboo 50 years ago—preschool boys playing with dolls, girls and boys playing together, girls playing sports, and the like. In many ways," Martin says, "the call of second-wave feminists,

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[98] Karin A. Martin, "William Wants a Doll. Can He Have One? Feminists, Child Care Advisors, and Gender-Neutral Child Rearing," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 4 (August 2005): 458, 459, 460.

especially as it concerns girls, has been heard."[99] However, although homophobia and heterosexism remain, and the books primarily treat homosexuality as a problem, the focus of these fears is now more highly concentrated on boys. That is, whereas the idea of girls doing traditionally masculine-coded things has gained widespread acceptance—however limited that may still be—the idea of boys doing traditionally feminine things remains suspect.

The Crossover Problem

In her 2007 ethnographic study of performances of masculinity at a suburban California high school, sociologist C. J. Pascoe argues that "fag discourse" demonstrates a more complicated relationship between gender and sexuality than the term *homophobia* allows. She asserts that becoming a fag through boys' ritualized jokes about faggots or faggotry "has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity." Pascoe observed that there were specific behaviors for which boys could be called a fag, which included "exhibiting any sort of behavior defined as unmasculine (although not necessarily behaviors aligned with femininity): being stupid or incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional, or expressing interest (sexual or platonic) in other guys."[100] Ultimately, Pascoe concludes that it is not male homosexuality that is considered pathological within fag discourse; rather it is the lack of masculinity. Although a lack of masculinity is not necessarily equivalent to the presence of

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[99] Martin, "William Wants a Doll," 474–75.

[100] C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 54, 57.

femininity in the fag discourse Pascoe studied, when this lack of masculinity is identified in

the child-rearing manuals studied by Martin, it is most often attributed to effeminacy or an

interest in things stereotypically associated with femininity and homosexuality. For

example, in one of the parenting manuals Martin studied (published in 1996), the authors

warn parents that if "a three-year-old plays only with dolls, shuns male playmates, and/or

regularly wants to dress in girls' clothing, a discussion with his doctor may be helpful."[101]

Thus, if young boys remain too interested in toys and other things typically associated with

femininity and girls—that is, not displaying enough masculinity or interest in masculine-

coded things—then this becomes the primary warning sign for parents that their son might

be homosexual. In these texts, homosexuality—or even just the threat of it—is still

characterized as a problem that requires professional help.

In this dissertation, I refer to this prejudice against homosexuality and boys having

an interest in feminine-coded things as "the crossover problem." Although they do not use

the term, Lamb and Brown identify the crossover problem—that is, that "girls can freely

embrace what used to be 'boy territory' in ways boys could never venture into what is still

'girl territory.'" They stress, however, that "the assumption that a girl has full and

unfettered access to male territory is an illusion. Whatever she chooses to do, she is told in

a number of subtle ways that she needs to do it like a girl. This means doing it with grace,

doing it nicely or with a sexy, flirty air, and doing it knowing that others will see and

comment on her doing it." Thus, Lamb and Brown identify the many disconcerting ways

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[101] Martin, "William Wants a Doll," 474.

that girls are subtly, and not so subtly, made to "do it like a girl" regardless of the "territory"

into which they venture.[102]

However, this inconsistency between the public acceptance of boys' and girls' ability

to cross over into other "territories" leads to another problem, one that is sometimes

mentioned but rarely explored in academic and popular texts: the continual devaluation of

femininity. In her influential 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of*

Identity, feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler states that people "do" or accomplish

gender through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal

over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[103] That is,

people produce gender through their day-to-day actions; they do not simply exist as

gendered. Gender, in this framework, is an active process of becoming, which occurs

through the repetition of actions that have come to be understood as masculine or

feminine. In her subsequent and similarly influential 1993 book, *Bodies that Matter: On the*

Discursive Limits of "Sex," Butler argues that this process consists of both the invocation of a

gendered norm—an idea about gender that has come to seem natural and timeless—and

the repudiation of a "constitutive outside," which contains "abject identities," or all that is

unacceptable to a recognizable gender norm.[104] In order for groups or individuals "to

affirm their identities as normal and as culturally intelligible," in Pascoe's terms, they must

name the abject in addition to rejecting it. Through this process, not only do "people hold

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[102] Lamb and Brown, *Packaging Girlhood*, 210, 211.
[103] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999), 43–44.
[104] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3. Additionally, I am relying on Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*.

other people accountable for 'doing gender' correctly," but the "'threatening specter' of

failed gender" is also repeatedly recognized and then repudiated.[105] When "just the idea" of

boys donning dresses "causes panic," it is not simply a matter of disciplining boys or

masculinity. Girls and femininity are named as the abject, continuing a cycle of devaluing

femininity. The relationship between masculinity and femininity is not simply one of

category; it is a relationship of power that correlates with structural inequity between men

and women, boys and girls.

The crossover problem creates important consequences for arguments about and

solutions offered for gender-specific toys. In particular, the current popular

conceptualization of gender-neutral toys masks this ongoing and historical devaluation of

femininity in relation to masculinity. I contend that this devaluation happens through the

recent emphasis on anxieties about toys that exude a surplus of femininity—that is,

"pinkified," princess, or otherwise "too girly" toys—which constructs them as unacceptable

(or, at least, as undesirable) options for the scholars, activists, and parents advocating

against sexist toys for young girls. By subtracting, then, this feminine surplus, the "gender-

neutral" toy emerges as an object suitable for both girls and boys. This construction,

however, elides the historical relationship between gender neutrality and masculinity,

particularly as constructed through toys. The result is a masculine-coded neutral toy that

has been stripped of its visible femininity, which ends up being the seemingly suitable

alternative to gender-specific toys. This ongoing and unconscious devaluation of femininity

within feminist arguments about children's toys leads me to question what this means for

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[105] Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*, 14.

the possibility of recapturing and redefining toys specifically targeted to girls for feminist-minded and empowering ends while femininity continues to be devalued.

Conclusion

This dissertation applies the metaphor of magnetic memory to the circulation of children's toys in public and popular culture in order to demonstrate how we become emotionally attached to certain objects and practices and the values, beliefs, and norms those things come to represent. Chapters 1 and 2 both consider popular toys that have come to carry distinct, though complex, associations with gender norms and how those norms are perpetuated and negotiated as the toys continue to circulate in public and popular culture. In chapter 1, I examine how the Easy-Bake Oven developed into an effective metonym not only for the norms of traditional femininity but also for the emotional pressures associated with those norms. Specifically, I show how the Easy-Bake's earliest marketing materials from the 1960s and '70s established the toy oven as an enduring symbol of traditional femininity. Then I consider how people have deployed memories of the Easy-Bake Oven in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a way of grappling with the contradictions between the overlapping ideologies of traditional femininity and feminist femininities, as well as an attempt to make the toy relevant for boys by associating it with professional cooking. Chapter 2 examines feminist calls for a return to gender-neutral marketing when, after several decades of catering almost entirely to boys, LEGO introduced a new product line, LEGO Friends, specifically for girls in 2011. I look closely at how LEGO's advertising from the 1960s through the 1980s played off parental concerns about safety, creativity, and personal autonomy to cultivate LEGO's now-

long-standing association with gender-neutral, creative play and its reputation as a socially responsible company. Moreover, I consider how problematically classist assumptions and fears about girls' sexualization saturated feminist criticisms of LEGO Friends in ways that suggest a struggle over "acceptable" versions of feminist-minded femininity for young girls. Chapter 3 takes a slightly different angle and considers how American Girl's historical and fictional doll characters might operate as what Ricoeur referred to as "a set of instructions that the individual reader or the reading public executes in a passive or a creative way."[106] Specifically, I analyze American Girl's newest historical fiction series, *My Journey with . . .*, which incorporates a time-traveling element and a gamebook structure (like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series) in ways that encourage readers to apply the lessons learned in the stories to their own lives. Moreover, because of the long-standing and deeply troubled association between dolls and racism in American culture, I consider how the *Journey* books for the BeForever collection's two African American doll characters, Addy Walker and Melody Ellison, work to extend the protections of childhood innocence to African American children by cultivating the readers' identification and empathy with the problems faced by African Americans by turning the reader into the heroine of her own story.

The metaphor embedded in the model of magnetic memory can help us better understand how, through circulation, the everyday objects of childhood in public and popular culture might accrue affective force and become powerful objects of public memory around which values, beliefs, and norms are magnetized and "stick" with us over

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[106] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 1: 77.

time. This model draws its power from its focus on how emotional connections are produced and mediated through the repetitive processes of rhetorical interpretation and production. Although conventional public memory studies in rhetoric have focused on various incarnations of formal and informal forms of public commemoration, this project is primarily focused on how people situate and use memory things to contribute to the reproduction, maintenance, and negotiation of collectively shared social values, beliefs, and norms. Although scholars such as Bernstein and Seiter have demonstrated that toys contribute to the production and preservation of racial meaning and class distinctions, public concerns for these issues have mostly taken a backseat during the twenty-first century. For this reason, this study focuses primarily on the relationship between public memory and dominant gender norms because of the way twenty-first-century "pinkification" debates about children's toys have been dominated by intense public scrutiny over "inappropriate" displays of femininity and sexualization. However, as the following chapters suggest, assumptions about race and class inevitably shape the nature of what adults consider "appropriate" displays of femininity and feminine-coded values. All of these ideas and assumptions about gender, class, and race that permeate the creation of, adults' deliberation over, and children's play with toys are deeply intertwined with emotional investment. By combining Ahmed's affective economies and VanderHaagen's agential spiral within the metaphor of an electromagnet, the model of magnetic memory helps us to understand better how emotions power the affective force of public memory such that certain things, values, and norms come to matter for us while others do not.

Chapter 1

"The Greatest Girls' Toy since Dolls!":

Traditional Femininity, Feminism, and the Easy-Bake Oven

The Ohio-based toy company Kenner Products launched the Easy-Bake Oven in November 1963, just in time for the Christmas season. The first five hundred thousand toy ovens sold out so quickly that Kenner ended up tripling its production of the toy the following year.[1] By 1966 Kenner had sold more than one million Easy-Bake Ovens and twenty million boxes of Easy-Bake Mixes.[2] The toy oven has remained successful since its introduction and has been on the market in one form or another since its release.[3]

Kenner's earliest marketing for the Easy-Bake Oven was aimed specifically and almost exclusively at young girls. But this was not a necessary choice. In fact, the original idea that sales manager Norman Shapiro pitched to Kenner executives was for a children's version of the small ovens used by New York City street vendors to cook and warm up pretzels, a decidedly male enterprise.[4] Before the U.S. toy industry ramped up and diversified its production in the 1950s and 1960s, the range of toys that were advertised and understood to be specifically for girls was quite limited. Toys intended for girls primarily consisted of dolls and doll-related toys, miniature tea sets, and toys related to

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[1] Todd Coopee, *Light Bulb Baking: A History of the Easy-Bake Oven* (Ottawa: Sonderho Press, 2013), 37.

[2] Coopee, *Light Bulb Baking*, 108.

[3] Coopee documents thirty different models from 1963 to 2013 and asserts that over thirty million ovens had been sold up to that point.

[4] Coopee, *Light Bulb Baking*, 6.

housework.[5] Because cooking was generally considered a domestic chore, the Easy-Bake fit easily into that existing domestic schema. However, it stood apart from those housework toys as well because the Easy-Bake allowed children to imitate the adult occupation of cooking realistically and it was productive in a way that other housework toys for girls, such as toy vacuums or ironing boards, were not. Playing with the Easy-Bake Oven as the manufacturers intended resulted in a cake or other baked treat that resembled an adult-made baked good, in appearance if not in size, which could then be eaten by the baker or given to someone else. Although the Easy-Bake challenged the assumption that boys should be the primary audience for active and productive toys, its marketing relied on a particular version of traditional femininity centered around the physical and emotional labors of cooking and caring for the family, ultimately reinforcing the idea that girls, like women, should attend to the family and to others before themselves.

In spite of (and possibly because of) its relationship to these prescriptive and constrictive gender norms, as one of the few new and exciting toys meant especially for girls the Easy-Bake Oven quickly earned its place as an icon of girlhood in American culture and continued to circulate such that the toy eventually transformed into an effective metonym not only for the norms of traditional femininity it came to represent but also for the emotional pressures associated with those norms.[6] Because of this history of

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[5] Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 67–79. This division is also visually evident in major department store catalogs by the way in which toys are grouped together and through the language used to describe the toys.

[6] Another historical condition that contributed to the Easy-Bake's immediate success was the public emphasis on scientific and technological progress regarding consumer goods—especially domestic appliances—during the early Cold War era. Beginning in the 1950s,

circulation, memories of the Easy-Bake Oven demand a significant emotional response from the American public, especially from girls and women. This emotional attachment makes the toy useful for the creation of public memories that work to shape and define the meaning and significance of femininity. Thus, the Easy-Bake's lasting significance is also profoundly informed by how *memories* of the toy circulated in American culture. As the first few waves of children introduced to the Easy-Bake Oven matured into adults, the Easy-Bake-Oven-as-symbol also began to appear in adult forms of popular and public culture. Furthermore, the development of feminist femininities, which have grown alongside traditional forms of femininity rather than replacing them, has created a situation in which women must carefully navigate the ambivalent expectations of femininity. Memories of the Easy-Bake have been deployed in ways that prompt people to evaluate not only the boundaries between femininity and masculinity but also their relationship to the sets of values and norms implied by those boundaries.

In this chapter, I explore two key ways that people have used memories of the Easy-Bake Oven to grapple with contradictions arising from the pressure to balance divergent

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Americans purchased an unprecedented number of appliances—which, as art historian Karal Ann Marling suggests, "stood for something fundamental to postwar understanding of national identity: a sense of freedom, of effortless ease, of technological mastery, modernity, and access to conveniences formerly reserved for the very rich." Although electric and cast-iron toy ovens had existed for decades prior to the release of the Easy-Bake in 1963, Kenner touted newly patented technology that allowed the Easy-Bake to repurpose two ordinary 100-watt light bulbs as a source of heat. The bulbs were contained within the toy, thus protecting little fingers from being burned. This innovative and quirky use of the common household light bulb made the toy appear safer than earlier electric toy ovens that relied on heating elements like those found in today's toaster ovens. Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

values and norms. First, I examine references to the toy oven in relationship to popular culture portrayals of feminist-minded women. On several occasions, humorous references to the Easy-Bake Oven in sitcoms from the 1990s and 2000s suggest how feminist-minded women might need to navigate lasting emotional attachments to aspects of traditional femininity. The sitcom characters' emotional responses to the Easy-Bake and their reluctance to disavow wholeheartedly the norms of traditional femininity suggest that, although feminine forms of cooking still function to subordinate women in a gendered hierarchy of power, some of the values related to the responsibility of caring for others may be worth preserving.

Second, I consider how the crossover problem shapes the conditions under which boys and men are able to be associated with the toy without risk to their masculinity. In her 2012 petition asking Hasbro for a gender-neutral version of the Easy-Bake Oven, McKenna Pope exemplified the logic of the crossover problem by connecting the toy oven with male celebrity chefs and professional forms of cooking rather than with domestic cooking. However, this reasoning can be seen even earlier in *The Easy-Bake Oven Gourmet*, in which the author, journalist David Hoffman, juxtaposes male and female celebrity chefs' childhood memories of the Easy-Bake Oven with miniaturized gourmet recipes created especially for the toy oven by those chefs. Rather than ridding the toy of its perceived excess of femininity, a masculinized memory of the Easy-Bake gives boys and men access to the toy in a way that essentially bypasses histories of feminine domestic cooking and thus women's contributions to that realm, further relieving men from the responsibility of caring for others before themselves.

Therefore, this chapter proceeds in three sections. I first establish how the Easy-Bake Oven circulated as an object of emotion in ways that ensured it accumulated significant affective force as a symbol of traditional femininity, particularly with regard to the gendered values associated with feminine forms of domestic cooking. To this end, I examine the Easy-Bake Oven's print and television advertising, catalogs, and other media texts from, primarily, the 1970s and the 1980s. In the second section, I consider sitcom characters' memories of the Easy-Bake Oven in several episodes from *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *How I Met Your Mother*. Finally, in the third section, I examine the public debate sparked by thirteen-year-old McKenna Pope's petition asking for a gender-neutral version of the Easy-Bake Oven and its relationship to the portrayal of celebrity memories of the toy oven in *The Easy-Bake Oven Gourmet*. This analysis of the Easy-Bake Oven's creation and subsequent circulation demonstrates how, under certain conditions, children's toys can become emotionally powerful sites for not only the transmission of gender norms but also the deliberation and development of those norms over time.

Playing in the Kitchen

Mid-twentieth-century gendered discourses of food and cooking deeply influenced the Easy-Bake Oven's relationship to aspects of a white, middle-class ideology of traditional femininity. Overall, researchers studying food, cooking, and gender agree that the task of cooking is culturally associated with women. As cultural studies scholar Sherrie Inness points out, "American society (like the majority of societies around the world) structures itself around the assumption that women perform the cooking in the home and the

majority of associated food-related tasks, from shopping for groceries to setting the table."[7]

There are, of course, exceptions to this outside of the home, such as the professional male

chefs who have dominated American fine dining for more than a century.[8] But overall,

domestic cooking is an area in which women are typically understood to have primary

responsibility for day-to-day feeding work in the home. Furthermore, as sociologist

Marjorie L. DeVault argues in her book *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Care*

as Gendered Work, "feeding work has become one of the primary ways that women 'do'

gender."[9] Through this repetition, the obligation of feminine domestic cooking has come to

seem like a "natural" expression of femininity through which someone is identified as

sufficiently and appropriately womanly or not.[10]

Furthermore, class and race operated in early and mid-twentieth century cooking

discourses in ways that both benefited and problematized white, middle-class women's

lives but primarily denigrated and erased the crucial roles that African American women

had historically played as wives and mothers in their own homes, as well as in white

women's homes as domestic servants or, earlier, as enslaved labor. Kenner did not include

African American children in their advertisements until the late 1970s, and even then,

black children's appearances were few and far between. However, this is not to suggest

that girls outside of the narrowly defined intended audience did not play with or desire the

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[7] Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 8.

[8] See Rebecca Swenson, "Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity and Food," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 1 (March 2009): 36–53.

[9] Marjorie L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 118.

[10] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 9.

toy. Indeed, by the 1960s there was a growing audience of middle-class African Americans, such as the intended audience of *Ebony Magazine*, who were asserting their consumer power. Several Kenner products were featured in *Ebony* articles that suggested ideas for Christmas toys. One 1967 article, for example, pictured Kenner's Big Burger Grill and Easy-Wash Dishwasher. Although the Easy-Bake Oven was not named or pictured, it was referred to obliquely.[11]

However, in keeping with the majority of the toy industry in this period, Kenner produced ads for the Easy-Bake Oven that assumed an audience of young white girls, who were most certainly middle class or above, in order for their parents to afford the toy and its various accessories. This is important because if connections to gender norms define a standard by which to evaluate the femininity of white girls and white women, then girls of color and women of color are necessarily precluded from the norm. That is, as much as this analysis is about how gender norms are constructed, it is also about how whiteness invisibly supports those norms. The analysis that follows is focused on describing how Kenner imagined a white, middle-class audience and the implications arising from that imaginary, which subjects all girls to a hierarchically gendered and racialized system of power. The terms of this imaginary are always already embedded in U.S. racism and white supremacist ideology. Therefore, the Easy-Bake Oven and the traditional femininity it has come to signify may not generate the same emotional attachments from people excluded

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[11] "Wonder Year for Christmas Toys," *Ebony*, November 1967, 122–23. The article states, "Learning to cook will be easy with miniature grills and ovens where hamburgers, hot dogs, pancakes and pizza can be prepared."

and oppressed by these systems of power. Nevertheless, excluded audiences are still typically aware of and subjected to the standards that are based on the intended audience.

Despite their relative invisibility in cooking culture, masculine forms of cooking heavily influenced people's perceptions of what constituted appropriate expressions of feminine domestic cooking around the mid-twentieth century. In her definitive book on gender, cooking, and cookbooks, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*, Inness argues that the relationship between masculine and feminine cooking is structured by a set of assumptions she calls the "male cooking mystique," which emerged out of men's cooking literature from the first half of the twentieth century and continues in similar forms to the present. In tandem with the abundant cookbooks written for women, the assumptions of this mystique establish a hierarchy of men's and women's "attitudes and relationships toward food and cooking" that "formulate an image of men's cooking as being antithetical to women's" in ways that "often offer more power and status to men than to women." Essentially, the male cooking mystique operates in ways that assure men, who happen to find themselves in situations in which they might need or want to cook, "that cooking is not an endeavor that will make them effeminate."[12] Therefore, according to Inness, when men choose to cook, they must do so in a way that protects them from the feminine space of the kitchen. To begin with, cookbooks and food writing aimed at men emphasize that men prefer heavy, heartier foods and that they must guard against the frilly, sweet, or decorative foods supposedly preferred by women. Furthermore, a woman must work to serve food that aligns with a man's tastes or else risk losing his romantic

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[12] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 19, 21.

attention, whereas men need not concern themselves with women's preferences because everything they do will impress. Moreover, men should only cook on rare occasions, except when cooking outdoors or cooking meat, and when they do cook there is an expectation that their audience will acknowledge their skill and success. That is, men have no obligation to cook, but women do, and their labor typically garners no recognition or appreciation. Further, women are often considered less skilled in the kitchen, despite their greater experience.[13] These dynamics suggest not only the gendering of the physical labor of domestic cooking but also the gendering of emotional labor. That is, on the one hand the familiar act of preparing food suggests not only who can or should be cooking but also what one should cook, where one should cook, how one should cook, and when one cooks. On the other hand, feminine domestic cooking also implies a responsibility of care, which entails the reasons why one cooks in the first place and for what end, as well as who is empowered to evaluate the result of one's efforts.

The Physical Labor of Cooking

Unlike the cookbooks studied by Inness, the Easy-Bake Oven is a three-dimensional object. In order to play with the toy, children interact with it and its components in ways that are usually scripted. Performance studies scholar Robin Bernstein has shown that although children may do any number of unexpected things with their toys, toys still provide their users with scripts, and those scripts define the most likely uses of the toy and the implications of those uses.[14] Because the Easy-Bake is a fully functional cooking toy, it

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[13] See Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 17–36, esp. 19, 21.

[14] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

scripts the labors of cooking into children's play. That is, there is a kind of "play labor" demanded by the toy when it is put to use as intended. At every turn, the play labor scripted by the Easy-Bake Oven and its marketing is gendered distinctly feminine, in accordance with the gender norms that shaped the cooking culture of mid-twentieth-century white, middle-class women. Although the toy changed to some degree every few years as new models were released and kitchen technologies changed (e.g., as the microwave became commonplace), the toy has remained a symbol of traditional femininity.

To start with, the Easy-Bake Oven's advertising strongly implies that girls are responsible for the physical labor of cooking. The majority of the Easy-Bake Oven commercials and comic book advertisements aimed at girls consistently depict girls' play labor with the toy. Although it is not surprising that the commercials would need to demonstrate how the toy works, girls—almost without exception—are shown playing with the toy and its components, that is, stirring the ready-made mixes, pouring batter into cake pans, or inserting the readied pan into the toy.[15] The repetitive and consistent nature of the focus on girls' labor in the toy's commercials over time suggests that girls are the primary, intended, and most recognizable users of the toy. Even in a commercial published on December 1, 2015, on the official YouTube channel of Hasbro, the toy oven's current producer, the strength of this trend appears difficult to overturn despite a few visual and discursive cues for masculinity.[16] The fifteen-second spot is for the Easy-Bake Baking Star

[15] For example, see Light Bulb Baking, "Easy-Bake Oven Commercial (1963)," *YouTube*, published October 1, 2013, accessed November 12, 2018, https://youtu.be/XcY0ghee5Sc.
[16] Hasbro Brands, "Easy-Bake Baking Star Edition Ultimate Oven," *YouTube*, published December 1, 2015, accessed November 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yti9h-30Pyg.

Edition Ultimate Oven, which was a new model produced after the 2013 release of the

"gender-neutral" version of the Easy-Bake Ultimate Oven. This new model is white, with

silver, gold, pink, and purple accents. As in most other Easy-Bake commercials, a home

kitchen provides the backdrop. (We know it is a home kitchen because despite its

expensive and trendy surfaces and appliances, a woman, presumably a mom, drying a dish

appears briefly in the background.) When sprinkle-topped treats are not being digitally

flourished across the screen in formations reminiscent of the synchronized swimmers of

1940s and '50s films, both a boy and a girl are shown using the toy together, but again the

focus is on the girl preparing and using the toy. There is a brief, two- to three-second

window when you can see the boy stirring either cake batter or frosting, but in the first

seconds he is partially obscured by the toy and the edge of the screen. Then, the frame

spirals around the bowl and his hands, but it is only clear that those hands are the boy's if

the viewer picks up on the fact that he was stirring something in the first place. In other

words, his actions during the commercial—other than when both characters are shown

biting into cookies at the end—are partially obscured and detached from his person by the

way in which the commercial was produced. Thus, this commercial provides very little

support for the idea that boys could be an important audience of the toy.

In addition to this long tradition of using girls to sell the toy, the Easy-Bake also

suggests a setting for that physical cooking labor. That is, there is an important relationship

between the physical structure and appearance of the toy and the adult space it implies.

The shape of the toy suggests a particular setting—the kitchen—which is generally

understood to be a feminine space. Although the Easy-Bake Oven has appeared in many

forms since it was first introduced, it has consistently invoked the form of a home kitchen or kitchen appliance, such as a stove top, an oven, and, beginning in 1978, a microwave.[17] The earlier models of the Easy-Bake Oven may seem awkwardly related to kitchen design trends for present-day audiences, since ovens are now more typically located below the stove top and the earlier models of the toy mimicked both an oven and a range sitting atop continuous counters, which was a relatively new concept in modern kitchen design in the 1950s and '60s.[18] Not only does the shape of the toy reference the kitchen, but it is consistently depicted and used within a home kitchen in both the commercials and the comic book ads. The only exceptions to this are in the earliest commercials for the original model. In these commercials, the toy sits in front of a blank background on a plain surface at counter height, which allows the toy to appear as a stand-in for the kitchen.[19] This close connection to the home kitchen signals the Easy-Bake Oven's long-lasting relationship with traditional forms of domesticity and femininity.

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[17] See Coopee, *Light Bulb Baking*.

[18] Leslie Land, "Counterintuitive: How the Marketing of Modernism Hijacked the Kitchen Stove," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 41–61.

[19] See Light Bulb Baking, "Easy-Bake Oven Commercial (1963)"; and The Jim Henson Company, "Jim's Red Book: Easy Bake Oven Commercial," *YouTube*, published June 3, 2001, accessed November 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po3yc7-MgXM. The one exception I found to this was during Kenner's Action '70 infomercial TV spot, in which all the toys highlighted were shown out of their normal contexts. Arguably, however, the Easy-Bake still acts as a stand-in for the home kitchen in that setting. *Action '70/Kenner Toys*, 1970, Inventory Number DVD13761 T, TV Television Collection, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles. In addition to home kitchens, the comic book ads depict the toy at "The Easy-Bake Oven Factory" and in a toy store. See "Sally Visits the Easy-Bake Oven Toy Factory," *Mickey Mouse*, 1972, No. 139, Comic Book 00729 Vault, Comic Book Collection, Library of Congress.

These scripts for physical labor do not just suggest who should cook or where one should cook; the scripts also imply what one should cook. The toy's accessories and its advertising suggest that the Easy-Bake was primarily intended to bake sugary treats, especially cakes, which suggest decoration, ornamentation, and excess, further connecting the toy with traditional femininity. For the 1963 model, cake was especially prominent in the commercials and ads aimed at girls, as well as the ads directed to mothers in women's magazines and in trade catalogs sent to retailers. For example, a 1964 article in *Parents' Magazine,* featuring new toys for the Christmas season, introduced the Easy-Bake with the line "Let's bake a cake, eat it, too!"[20] The toy was most often depicted alongside either an array of cakes, brownies, and cookies or packages of cake mixes. The Easy-Bake's connection to cake is no accident. Cake has held a singular place in the gendered memory of American food and cooking, and this was especially true in the decade before and for several years after the toy was released. As cultural studies scholar Joanne Hollows points out, the time and effort that went into baking and decorating a cake "offered the opportunity to make both feminine competences and female labor visible" during a period when the expansion of convenience foods threatened to obscure the visibility of women's labor and care in the kitchen.[21] According to historian Karal Ann Marling, midcentury cookbooks—especially Betty Crocker's 1950 *Picture Cookbook*—heavily promoted cakes as

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[20] "It's Kenner! It's Fun!," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1964, 97.
[21] Joanne Hollows, "The Bachelor Dinner: Masculinity, Class and Cooking in *Playboy,* 1953–1961," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 2002): 144. Alan Warde also finds evidence to support this: "the term home-made is most frequently deployed in respect of buns and cakes, evidence of the particular significance in the 1960s of home baking as a symbol of traditional housewifery"; Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste: Culinary Antimonies and Commodity Culture* (London: Sage, 1997), 137.

"the ultimate in aesthetic fare." Cake, Marling explains, was "a test of mother love and womanly competence, the battleground between packaged mix and mastery of the culinary arts, between modern ease and old-fashioned, time-consuming kitchen drudgery." The aesthetic of intricately decorated cakes was also understood as profoundly feminine in its representation of sweetness and fragility.[22]

Moreover, when considered alongside the Easy-Bake Oven, the Big Burger Grill, which Kenner introduced in 1967 in an attempt to replicate in the boys' market the success that Easy-Bake had had with girls, reinforces the Easy-Bake's relationship to traditional femininity. The grill conforms to a number of masculine stereotypes, which imply scripts that suggest who should cook, where one should cook, and what one should cook. Like its popular cake-baking predecessor, the Big Burger Grill also used a light bulb as a heating source. According to print advertisements in Kenner's trade magazines, both boys and girls could make "hamburgers, hot dogs, pancakes, cheeseburgers, grilled cheese, home fries, and many more!"[23] Although the advertisement text notes that the Big Burger Grill is appropriate for both boys and girls, in context with the Easy-Bake Oven, it is clear that the toy grill was designed with boys envisioned as the primary audience. Unlike the Easy-Bake Oven's commercials, which centered girls' play labor, the Big Burger Grill's print advertisements always show a boy playing with the toy.[24] In every case, the boy is holding

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[22] Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 224.

[23] "Kenner's New Big Burger Grill," *Kenner '67,* 1967, T. Catalog 9509.99 .K456 K456 1967, The Stephen and Diane Olin Toy Catalog Collection, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, The Strong Museum, Rochester, NY.

[24] I have been unable to find any commercials for the Big Burger Grill. Typically, Kenner heavily promoted its toys on television, so if the company did not do this for the Big Burger Grill, it is possible that that lack influenced the toy's lack of success.

up the toy's plastic guard while flipping a burger.[25] When a girl is depicted, she is situated

behind the toy and either watches the boy use the toy or takes a bite from a burger.

Additionally, the Big Burger Grill was clearly influenced by what Inness calls the

male cooking mystique, which associates men with the outdoor grilling of meat. Similar to

the way the shape of the Easy-Bake Oven approximated and stood in for the home kitchen,

the Big Burger Grill was shaped much like an electric grill and thus implied an outdoor

space and an outdoor form of cooking. The male cooking mystique suggests that men can

cook meat outdoors on a grill without worry of social reprisal because the outdoor grill is

understood to protect masculinity rather than to hamper it.[26] Since the grill is

geographically situated outside of the kitchen and the home, it distances and distinguishes

a specialized form of masculine cooking from the supposedly less important task of the

day-to-day feminine domestic cooking implied by the kitchen. Because of this hierarchy,

outdoor cooking was especially important for connecting boys with cooking. The Big

Burger Grill's advertising and packaging reinforced this by setting a scene reminiscent of a

park picnic. The toy sits on a table covered in a red or blue gingham tablecloth, and a boy

and girl sit at this table. Furthermore, the grill also has another outside-of-the-home

connotation through its relationship to the fast-food drive-in. According to historian

Katherine Parkin, in the mid-twentieth century, drive-in or fast-food restaurants were

often marketed to fathers as a place to take children as a special treat or to give mother a

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[25] The advertisements basically show the same image over time, with small modifications.
[26] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 28–29.

break from her daily cooking routine.[27] The toy's advertisements strongly suggest the toy's

relationship to the drive-in and the greasy food prepared by line cooks in professional (if

not upscale) kitchens. For example, the ads and packaging include a small graphic of a

drive-in burger joint. The 1967 copy reads: "NOW! Boys and Girls can grill and enjoy drive-

in treats from home."[28] In either case, a clear separation is maintained between the types of

food cooked by men at a drive-in or on an outdoor grill and the types of food prepared by

women in the home kitchen.

Thus, the Big Burger Grill implies the types of food that are appropriate for men or

boys to make. Inness argues that men and meat (especially steak) are "so closely linked in

the American imagination that it is almost impossible to separate the two."[29] Meat

references the narrative of prehistoric man hunting for his meal and wielding power over

prey. Cooking meat can also be understood as a display of wealth, since red meat,

especially, is relatively expensive. Because of these associations, meat also signals and

constructs taste preferences by linking men and boys to heartier, heavier, and often more

expensive foods. Even though the toy grill was advertised as capable of cooking a variety of

foods, its signature dish and namesake was the burger. In this way, the Big Burger Grill

differed significantly from the Easy-Bake Oven because it required fresh meat for its main

dish, rather than prepackaged mixes. Descriptions of the toy in promotional materials

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[27] Katherine J. Parkin, *Food Is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 201.
[28] "Kenner's New Big Burger Grill."
[29] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 26.

indicated that kids needed to "Use Mom's meat and dairy products."[30] Presumably, the mother would have to do more than simply make raw meat available; she would have to assist in its preparation and cleanup to ensure that the meat was handled safely.

The necessity of mom's labor and resources also suggests that the appropriate times when boys should cook are limited and that they are only responsible for completing a portion of the meal. As Inness demonstrates, the male cooking mystique suggests that, like men, boys cook only for special occasions, emergencies, or otherwise by choice. The primary responsibility for the day-to-day cooking falls squarely on women. Additionally, although the toy requires inputs from the home kitchen, and most likely had to be used there as well, this condition does not associate it with that space. Rather, it reinforces the assumption that even when men are encouraged to cook, women are still responsible for the majority of the food preparation. According to Inness, "Although a man was doing the grilling, he might not be doing much of the cooking labor. A woman probably performed the more feminine work of food preparation, chopping vegetables, fixing a salad, and making any necessary side dishes for the meal."[31] The Easy-Bake requires no such intervention from mom. Indeed, that implied independence was arguably part of the toy oven's allure.

Finally, there is also an important difference in the ways that the two toys require (and, thus, depict) food preparation versus cooking. With the Easy-Bake Oven, the physical

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[30] "Kenner's Big Burger Grill," *Kenner 1969*, 1969, p. 37. NK9509.99.K456 K456 1969, The Stephen and Diane Olin Toy Catalog Collection, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, The Strong Museum, Rochester, NY.
[31] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 28.

labor that is visible consists primarily of food preparation and finishing. Ads show girls

stirring batter and frosting, inserting pans into the toy, and decorating treats. The "cooking"

primarily occurs inside of the toy, requiring girls to wait passively for the cake to bake.

Although later versions of the Easy-Bake would include larger viewing windows, the

cooking process remained at least partially obscured by the toy itself. The Big Burger

Grill—with its cooking apparatus on the outside—allows for a much more visually

apparent and necessarily interactive cooking experience. In the promotional materials, a

boy is depicted flipping a burger. This interactive process of cooking even includes "baked"

foods such as hamburger and hot dog buns, which are cooked on the grill using bun molds.

Some versions of the ad include a bowl with mix in it (presumably for the hamburger bun),

but no one interacts with the bowl in the ad. Although the directions included with the toy

warn that the clear cooking lid should remain down while food items are being cooked,

many of the foods referenced by the toy require some kind of interaction during the

cooking process. For example, burgers and pancakes need to be flipped to cook evenly.

Thus, the toys also imply how one should cook. The Big Burger Grill demands interaction

during cooking, rather than the passive waiting required to bake with the Easy-Bake Oven,

a difference which ultimately replicates the conventional dichotomy of the active masculine

and passive feminine.

The Emotional Labor of Cooking

Like many of Kenner's (and later, Hasbro's) products created for a boys' market, the

Big Burger Grill did not have the lasting market power of the Easy-Bake and was

discontinued after about five years. The Easy-Bake's success, at least in part, has to do with

the fact that the toy spoke more clearly to the emotional labors required of girls than the grill toy did for boys, who, generally, were not expected to do much emotional work with regard to cooking or other domestic obligations. Indeed, the burden of responsibility for cooking is not limited to the physical preparation of food; it also implies emotional labor in the form of an expectation of care, which is key to understanding the implications of the toy's relationship to traditional femininity. According to DeVault, the notion of care is and has been important for feminist discourse because "it captures the significance of women's traditional activities, pointing to characteristic skills and strengths that arise from caring activity and its embeddedness in social relations." Much of the feminist scholarship on care is derived from Carol Gilligan's work on the ethics of care. However, DeVault cautions that although Gilligan was careful to distinguish care as an activity, because she theorized an abstracted framework for care, not all work that followed hers was as careful to do so. DeVault argues that the concept of care needs to remain particular, otherwise "care becomes an aspect of identity, attached to individuals as a 'trait' rather than a course of action to be chosen, resisted, or negotiated in some new form." DeVault points out that the concept of "work" is primarily "an honorific label" because "it refers to activities that those with public, politically powerful voices take seriously as socially necessary." But rather than attempt to redefine care as work, DeVault suggests that we use the gap in meaning between the terms as a means for questioning "the consequences of calling this activity work and not that one," thus questioning the shape of the social division of labor rather than only attempting to access that which has been defined as out of bounds. [32] Thus, with

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[32] DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 237, 238, 239.

regard to the Easy-Bake Oven, to call attention to the emotional labor implied by the assumption that women should bear the responsibility of care gets at some consequences of subjecting girls and women to a system of power that strips society's ability to recognize the existence or significance of one's labors. A close reading of the Easy-Bake's marketing— including comic book ads and commercials—reveals assumptions about one's motivation for, satisfaction from, and evaluation of cooking.

Marjorie DeVault and Alan Warde both indicate that there are two aspects of caring, which provide different motivations for acting. First there is caring in the sense of "caring for someone, tending to their needs," or as DeVault puts it, "doing the maintenance work."[33] Second, there is caring about someone, "an emotional, personal dimension of the activity," in which, according to Warde, "concern is manifest in the process of pleasing [the family]."[34] The emotional landscape of feminine domestic cooking generally requires women to care for others primarily in ways that subordinate their own preferences in order to sustain the family.[35]

In the years surrounding the introduction of the Easy-Bake Oven in 1963, the "tending to others' needs" dimension of this responsibility of care took on a valence of consumerism particular to that period. In the 1950s and '60s, the rise of convenience foods deepened the contradiction between the display of care through the physical labor of cooking and the erasure of the visibility of that aspect of care when women relied on frozen, canned, or prepackaged meals and home technologies that emphasized

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[33] Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste*, 130; see DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 239.
[34] DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 239; see Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste*, 130.
[35] DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 236.

convenience.[36] As Marling points out, the care once displayed through the use of time and energy in cooking was then diverted by advertisers into the manipulation of the appearance of foods, especially in the decoration of cakes but also in the production of intricate Jell-O salads and in the process of making food appear to be something else, such as "deep-fried pastry cups in the shape of magnolia blossoms [made] especially to hold individual servings of canned fruit cocktail."[37]

In addition to physical labors, the need for women to make "appropriate" consumer choices that would benefit the family also became a means for women to demonstrate their commitment to care. During the postwar/Cold War era and especially after Richard Nixon's kitchen debate with Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, white, middle-class, and newly suburban families participated in a politically charged discourse of conspicuous consumption that tied consumer power and the accumulation of supposedly technologically innovative consumer goods to national success, national strength, and democracy.[38] However, the pressure on suburbanites to conform to and display a relatively homogenous, affluent, and

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[36] See Marling, *As Seen on TV.*

[37] Marling, *As Seen on TV,* 221–23.

[38] See Kate Baldwin, "Cold War, Hot Kitchen: Alice Childress, Natalya Baranskaya, and the Speakin' Place of Cold War Womanhood," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 135–52; Kate Baldwin, *The Racial Imaginary of the Cold War Kitchen: From Sokol'niki Park to Chicago's South Side* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015); Nicole Williams Barnes, "Making Easier the Lives of Our Housewives: Visions of Domestic Technology in the Kitchen Debate," in *Home Sweat Home: Perspectives on Housework and Modern Relationships*, ed. Elizabeth Patton and Mimi Choi (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 89–104; Liz Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Beatriz Colomina, Ann Marie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim, eds., *Cold War Hothouses: Inventing Postwar Culture, from Cockpit to Playboy* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); and Marling, *As Seen on TV.*

leisurely lifestyle intersected with the pressure to display individuality through

consumption.[39] This tension was especially apparent in the wide proliferation of kitchen

appliances during this period. Women were now charged with choosing and, thus,

providing their families with, as Marling puts it, "the very best model from the limitless

assortment of colors, features, and prices the free market had to offer."[40] Thus, women's

consumption decisions functioned to display the family's wealth, leisurely lifestyle, and

class status and provide motivation for tending to the external social needs of family

members while simultaneously meeting their internal domestic needs. In this way, as Kate

Baldwin suggests, "consumption itself becomes women's labor," and the planned

obsolescence of kitchen appliances about every three to five years ensured that this

emotional motivation for taking the responsibility of care, diverted through consumer

choice, was never fully sated.[41]

The release of new Easy-Bake models—and, thus, new commercials and ads—

followed a similar pattern. Many of the commercials and ads stressed the newness of the

model they were advertising, thus implying that prior versions were out of date. The ads

emphasized this obsolescence by referencing the model's new design and elaborating on its

improved features. For example, Kenner's 1970 comic book ad entitled "Good Grief, Janie!"

hinged on the working timer feature added to the Super Easy-Bake Oven. The title of the ad

is Janie's friend shouting out concern that the girls forgot about the cake they were baking

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[39] Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[40] Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 243.
[41] Baldwin, "Cold War, Hot Kitchen," 139.

in Janie's Super Easy-Bake Oven. Janie, however, is calm and collected because she knows

her model has a twenty-minute timer that rings when the cake is done. As Janie frosts the

finished cake, her friend remarks, "Oh, Janie—that's a big, beautiful cake!" This exclamation

not only reinforces how easy it is to use this new model but also references the fact that the

model came with two different-sized cake pans and could bake larger cakes than previous

versions. Janie then describes the toy's other new features—a warming oven with

temperature control, a large viewing window, a fold-away range top, and other play

instruments—which are "just like [those] on my mommy's new oven."[42] This reference to

mom's oven, as well as references to being able to bake or cook like mom, occurs in many

ads and commercials, linking girls directly into the discourses of consumption aimed at

women.

In addition to emphasizing the appeal of new features, the 1972 comic book ad

entitled "Sally Visits the Easy-Bake Oven Toy Factory" also uses the Easy-Bake brand's

prior successes to convince girls they should want the toy. In this ad, Sally gets to see

several Contemporary Easy-Bake Ovens moving down a factory conveyor belt. The man

showing her around the factory tells her, "and this is where Kenner makes the greatest

girl's toy since dolls!" suggesting that the toy should be high on a girl's wish list (not to

mention exclusive to girls' wish lists). Then he tells her, "More than 5 million little girls like

you baked their first cake in an Easy-Bake Oven!"[43] This appeal is suggestive of the

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[42] "Good Grief, Janie!" *Bugs Bunny,* 1970, No. 132, Comic Book 00256 Vault, Comic Book Collection, Library of Congress.

[43] "Sally Visits the Easy-Bake Oven Toy Factory," *Mickey Mouse*, 1972, No. 139, Comic Book 00729 Vault, Comic Book Collection, Library of Congress.

postwar/Cold War suburban mentality that pushed people to consume in order to belong. Here, if Sally does not buy one, she risks being left out of something so wonderful that five million girls had to have it.

Regarding the latter dimension of this expectation of care, pleasing others, when women cook for men or for the family, they must do so, according to DeVault, "with assiduous attention to [others'] needs and preferences, carefully working to please, day after day."[44] The male cooking mystique, of course, suggests that men are not required to attend to the same expectation of care. Rather, Inness argues, men are encouraged to cater to themselves.[45] According to DeVault, "This kind of asymmetry reinforces a gender distinction; it contributes to the culturally produced idea that women and men are different, and that different behaviors are central to 'being' men and women."[46] Thus, this seemingly natural distinction, Warde adds, "serves largely to confirm the subordination of women in society more widely."[47] This subordination happens primarily because, in order to demonstrate that they care, women have to defer their own preferences in order to please family members.

The primary way in which the Easy-Bake Oven's marketing suggests that girls should use the toy to please others is by centering brothers and fathers as the intended recipients of the treats the girls bake. That is, with only a few exceptions, when people are shown consuming treats in the commercials and ads, they are primarily boys and fathers,

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[44] DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 234.
[45] Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 33–35. See also Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food and Families* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1988).
[46] DeVault, *Feeding the Family*, 234.
[47] Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste,* 131.

but girls are only rarely shown eating.[48] For example, in the three earliest commercials for

the original Easy-Bake Oven, boys appear as enthusiastic, if somewhat pesky, siblings who

can't wait to get their hands on dessert.[49] However, when fathers appear, they typically

hold a more substantive role. For example, in the comic entitled "The Phantom Strikes," a

girl is using her Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven to bake a cake. But a male figure lurks

behind her in the shadows. In some frames only his eyes are seen. As the girl puts the cake

pan into the toy, she says with a smile on her face, "In only 12 minutes I'll have a delicious

cake . . . if that old phantom doesn't snitch it! Hmmm . . . I wonder . . ." After the cake is

finished, she calls to her mother to show her what she has baked. But two hands reach out

of the shadows and steal the cake. In the penultimate frame, the girl holds a note left by the

empty plate that reads, "The Phantom strikes again!" In the last frame, her father is eating

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[48] There are a few exceptions. Around 1972 there were two commercials in which girls were shown eating cake. In one for the Contemporary Easy-Bake Oven, an older girl bakes treats for her younger sister and younger brother. In the other, a girl is using the Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven with her mom, and the girl is shown licking frosting from a spoon. There are also two commercials for the Mini-Wave Easy-Bake Oven in the early 1980s that show girls eating. In one, two girls are using the toy and shown eating cake; however, the commercial is set up in a way that makes this more of a mother-daughter learning experience. In the other a mom, a daughter, and a son are gathered around the toy. The girl licks some frosting, but the boy takes a large bite. See *Commercials*, c. 1972, Inventory Number VA11423 T, TV Television Collection, UCLA Film and Television Archive; Light Bulb Baking, "Easy-Bake Oven - Betty Crocker Commercial (1972)," *YouTube*, published September 7, 2010, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he3wZOd2mzc; Ads "R" Us, "Easy-Bake Oven Commercial (Betty Crocker Mini-Wave Oven) 1980," *YouTube*, published October 8, 2015, accessed March 9, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cir8DV_DbRg; and Light Bulb Baking, "Easy-Bake Oven - Mini-Wave Commercial (1982)," *YouTube*, published September 7, 2010, accessed March 9, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUZMhKL285c.
[49] For example, see Light Bulb Baking, "Easy-Bake Oven Commercial (1963)," *YouTube*, published October 1, 2013, accessed November 12, 2018, https://youtu.be/XcY0ghee5Sc.

the cake and says, "Oh! Oh! Caught with the goods . . . er . . . the goodies!" With a smile on

her face, the girl exclaims, "Daddy! You're the Phantom!! I knew it all the time!"[50] A later

commercial, produced about 1978, for the Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Mini-Wave Oven,

begins in a home kitchen with a father lifting the top of a cake holder and lamenting the

lack of cake. The daughter says sympathetically, "Poor Daddy, I'll bake you one in my new

Mini-Wave Oven." The dad asks questions about the toy as he watches her use it, and the

commercial ends with each of them holding an iced cake. The father says, "Mmm, that's

good," and takes a bite. Instead of eating hers, the girl looks down at the plate and says

jokingly, "Daddy, we're out of cake again!"[51]

The examples of girls consuming the toy itself alongside the examples of boys and

men consuming the treats made by girls are significant because they point to the cultural

assumption that girls' satisfaction is prompted not from the consumption of what they

themselves have produced but instead by the enjoyment displayed by others, as well as the

excitement of possessing and using the toy. This recurring emphasis subordinates a girl's

needs, tastes, and preferences to those of her family. This constant deference to others,

however, also implies another problem. The responsibility to determine to what degree a

girl or woman is able to perform to the satisfaction of the standards set for the

responsibility of care is not held internally but is instead decided externally. That is, girls

and women are not only subordinated through deference to others, but they are also

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[50] "The Phantom Strikes," *Little Lulu*, 1973, No. 230, Comic Book 00652 Vault, Comic Book Collection, Library of Congress.

[51] *Commercials. Kenner. Betty Crocker Easy Bake Mini-Wave Oven*, 1979, Inventory Number VA8304 T, TV Television Collection, UCLA Film and Television Archive.

subordinated because they do not have the power to judge or evaluate the results of their own actions.

A 1969 comic book ad for the Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven exemplifies the complexity of this problem and shows how evaluation or judgment operates in the text to position girls within a gendered hierarchy. In the first frame of the ad, entitled "Now I Bake Betty Crocker Cakes Just Like Mommie!," a dark-haired girl is admiring her blond friend's Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven. Over the next few frames, the blond girl notes all of the toy's envy-worthy details, which include new design features such as the "big watch it bake window," the toy's ease of use, and its versatility and productivity—elements meant to motivate a desire to own and use the toy. In the fifth frame the dark-haired girl, after having taken a small bite of a brownie, expresses envy over her friend's toy: "Ummm! Gosh you're lucky!" In the next frame, which depicts only the toy, boxed mixes, and baked treats, the blond girl responds to her friend's envy by stressing that she can also always buy more mixes with her allowance. Finally, in the last frame some time has passed, and the envious, dark-haired friend has now acquired her own Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven. The blond girl reassures her, "See now that we both have Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Ovens by Kenner— it's even more fun!" The dark-haired girl's father appears in the corner of the frame holding a half-eaten slice of cake up to his smiling mouth. The girl replies to her friend, "Yes— Daddy says I'm the best cook in the whole world."[52]

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[52] "Now I Bake Betty Crocker Cakes Just Like Mommie!" *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, 1969, No. 350, Comic Book 00725 Vault, Comic Book Collection, Library of Congress.

Unlike most other ads for the Easy-Bake, this ad depicts both girls eating (or about to eat) treats made with the toy. Typically, the only people in Easy-Bake commercials or ads shown eating are pesky brothers or father figures. This limited depiction signals a motivation to tend to and please men in particular but also the family more generally. However, the depictions of these two girls eating have a different purpose. In the first instance, the blond girl has offered her friend a brownie. She emphasizes (as signaled by both an exclamation mark and bold font), "They're delicious!," an assertion that demands an affirmative response from her friend. Importantly, this moment comes after four frames in which the blond girl shows off her toy and her baking prowess. Thus, she is not baking cakes and offering brownies to please her friend. Rather, she is displaying her status, which she achieved by acquiring an Easy-Bake Oven, learning to master it, and demanding that her achievement be acknowledged. That status is affirmed externally twice. The first time is when the dark-haired girl responds positively to the brownie and with envy for the toy. The second time is when the dark-haired girl has acquired the toy, used it, and given cake to her friend and her father. The dark-haired girl's envy and subsequent mimicry of the blond girl's performance suggests that the blond girl was performing her white, middle-class femininity correctly through her decision to own and use the Easy-Bake. In other words, the blond girl could not confirm her own status, her own self-worth, but instead she required an evaluation originating outside of herself.

In the second instance of a girl eating in the comic, which occurs in the final frame, the tables have turned, and the blond girl serves in the affirmation role for her friend. The blond girl has accepted a piece of her friend's cake and assures the dark-haired girl that

they are both now on equal footing when she says that with each of them owning an oven

"it's even more fun!" However, embedded in her assurance is the reminder that she had

previously one-upped the dark-haired girl by owning and mastering the Easy-Bake Oven

first. The dark-haired girl responds in kind by trying to undermine the blond girl's

superiority by calling on her ability to please her father. She says to her blond friend,

"Yes—Daddy says I'm the best cook in the whole world." But her word—that is, her own

evaluation of herself—is not enough proof of her ability to please. Instead, she relies on her

father's authority in order to demonstrate her superior ability to tend to her family.

Notably, she doesn't say "Yes, the toy is fun" or "Yes, I love baking cakes" or anything that

would suggest she has acquired the toy and used it in service of her own desires. Instead,

her acquisition and use of the toy has allowed her to tend to and please her family and to

prove something about herself (and, by extension, her family) to others outside of her

family. Thus, the interaction between the two girls is about confirming for each other that

they have achieved a particular status through the performance of traditional femininity's

expectation of care. However, the drive to consume, perform, or produce to a measure of

satisfaction that is determined by others and located outside of one's control means that

there is always something more to want or some way to better one's self. In other words,

girls expend a considerable amount of emotional labor to achieve an expectation of care

that demonstrates an acceptable performance of femininity, but realizing that goal and,

thus, personal fulfillment, is ultimately unattainable. The consequence of the responsibility

for evaluation being located outside of oneself is that girls are portrayed as unable to

develop a sense of self independent from others. Thus, this gendered hierarchy of care not

only subordinates women to men, or femininity to masculinity, but it also evacuates women's ability to determine which standards are satisfactory and which are not.

The consequences of the emotional labor implied by the Easy-Bake Oven's association with care do not simply apply to this one area of girls' lives. The responsibility to others above oneself, the seemingly unending standards set by external factors, and the inability to judge oneself are the costs of traditional femininity resonating across all areas of girls' lives and, eventually, women's lives. These ideological assumptions were deeply inscribed within the branding of the Easy-Bake Oven from its inception. After a couple of decades of the toy circulating as an object of this emotional labor, the Easy-Bake Oven accrued a significant amount of affective force. By the late 1980s and 1990s, if not earlier, the Easy-Bake Oven had been transformed from a child's plaything to an enduring symbol of traditional femininity.

Gender Jokes

The rhetorical work done by Kenner and its advertisers in the 1960s and '70s tells only part of the story about how the Easy-Bake Oven developed into an emotionally powerful object—that is, a memory thing. If the toy's original circulation shows us how deeply the toy oven is related to the demands of traditional femininity, then its continued circulation—this time in adult forms of popular and public culture—provides an opportunity to investigate how memories of the toy continue to charge the memory thing with affective force in ways that not only transmit values and norms but, through the translation of those ideas into new contexts, also potentially develop or alter our relationship to those values and norms over time.

In this section, I turn my attention to the rhetorical means through which the Easy-Bake Oven, as an immediately recognizable symbol of traditional femininity, circulated in U.S. popular culture in the 1990s and 2000s in ways that suggest that women must negotiate the conflicting assumptions of and about femininity and feminism. Specifically, I examine the way in which the Easy-Bake Oven was used during this period to negotiate this tension through jokes about gender norms in situation comedies such as *Seinfeld, Friends,* and *How I Met Your Mother*. Examples from these shows make nostalgically humorous references to the Easy-Bake Oven, usually regarding a character's wanting or owning the toy as a child. The jokes are funny because of the incongruity, or ambivalence, that is highlighted by the juxtaposition of the female characters' emotional connection to memories about the iconically feminine toy oven alongside the characters' more typically feminist mindsets, lifestyles, or circumstances. The nature of each character's reluctance to fully abandon certain norms of traditional femininity demonstrates different difficulties arising from the contradictory values of conflicting femininities.

In general, sitcoms provide an important space for cultural deliberation over social change, especially regarding portrayals of feminist women. As communication scholar Bonnie Dow argues in her book *Prime-Time Feminism*, "a study of television's treatment of feminism is, to some degree, a study of mass-mediated cultural attitudes toward feminism . . . what we like about feminism, what we fear about feminism, and, perhaps more interesting, what aspects of feminism we simply refuse to represent in popular narrative." Furthermore, sitcoms from the 1990s and 2000s provide an opportunity to consider portrayals of women in popular culture in which the acceptance of a certain version of a

feminist mindset or feminist lifestyle is assumed and considered normal, both by the

characters in the sitcoms and the implied audience. Writing of 1980s sitcoms such as

Designing Women, Dow suggests that a "postfeminist" discourse rather than a "feminist

backlash" best explains how some popular and public discourse after the women's

liberation movement is able to "question certain feminist issues and/or goals [while

assuming] the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals." Thus, while "a woman's right

to pursue employment and education" has been "thoroughly absorbed into popular

consciousness," the figure of the working woman remains a threat to the mother-caregiver

and the heterosexual nuclear family.[53] Memories of the Easy-Bake Oven in 1990s and

2000s sitcom episodes not only highlight how this tension plays out but also demonstrate

that portrayals of this postfeminist conflict have intensified over time.

Elaine from Seinfeld

In *Seinfeld,* a popular show on the air between 1989 and 1998, a significant

reference to the Easy-Bake Oven occurred in the sixth episode of season nine, which aired

on November 6, 1997.[54] In this episode, Jerry Seinfeld is dating a woman named Celia.

When they arrive at her apartment, Jerry sees the enormous collection of old toys that Celia

had inherited upon her father's recent death. Jerry wants to play with the toys, but Celia

insists that they are priceless collectibles that have never been played with. The nostalgic

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[53] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), xxii, 89, 91. Dow turns to Judith Stacey's definition of postfeminism: "the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism." Judith Stacey, "The New Conservative Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 8.
[54] "The Merv Griffin Show," *Seinfeld,* Season 9, Episode 6, aired November 6, 1997, www.imdb.com.

pull of the toys is so strong that despite the promise of a sexual relationship with Celia, all

Jerry can think about is figuring out a way to play with the toys. One evening when they are

watching TV at her apartment, Celia asks Jerry to get her an aspirin for her headache. As he

looks for the aspirin in her bathroom medicine cabinet, out of her sight, he chooses a pill

that may cause drowsiness. When Celia falls asleep on the couch, Jerry is able to play with

some of the toys.

Here we see the setup for the overarching joke. Jerry drugs Celia not to take sexual

advantage of her but to play with her toy collection. The situation is presented as humorous

because the opportunity for Jerry to enact his nostalgia for the toys outweighs his sexual

desire for Celia. This is an unusual reversal since the show largely focuses on the main

characters' sexual exploits, whether successful or not. Furthermore, the joke takes for

granted that the show's audience understands that drugging women for any purpose is

wrong. But by using this gag in conjunction with the toys, the joke suggests something

about the power of childhood nostalgia. The desire to return to that seemingly innocent

time of life invoked by toys warrants throwing out values held in the present and acting in

a way that is decidedly not innocent. The audience knows that nostalgia still is not an

acceptable reason to drug Celia, yet the joke is funny because Jerry willingly and eagerly

abandons adult values in order to perform childishness.

The joke extends further when Jerry concocts a scheme with his friend George. On a

subsequent occasion, rather than drugging Celia with pills, the two men lull her to sleep

with a dinner of turkey and boxed wine and subject her to boring home videos of George's

boyhood. Once again, when Celia falls asleep, Jerry and George enthusiastically play with

some of the toys. The joke escalates, because now George's nostalgia for toys is added to Jerry's, and both take precedence over Celia's well-being and personal autonomy.

The joke intensifies again when Jerry and George's friend Elaine realizes that Jerry has involved George in his scheming and has drugged Celia again. She is exasperated by their behavior, and her conversation with Jerry highlights the incongruity taken up by the joke:

Elaine: You took him over to Celia's?

Jerry: What? It's a victimless crime.

Elaine: What about the woman who's been drugged and taken advantage of?

Jerry: Okay, one victim.

Elaine: I think it's unconscionable.

But later, when George mentions he saw an Easy-Bake Oven in Celia's collection, all of Elaine's feminist-minded concerns vanish.

George: Hey, last night I found a whole Weeble village, right behind the Easy-Bake Oven.

Elaine: Easy-Bake Oven?

A timer dings, and the scene is switched to Celia's apartment with her asleep at her dinner table while Elaine, Jerry, and George are gathered around the coffee table with several toys, including a green 1969 Betty Crocker Easy-Bake Oven prominently displayed next to Elaine.

Elaine: Who wants a cupcake?

George: Oh! Me, me, me, me!

Jerry: You know that batter is, like, thirty years old?

The mere mention of the Easy-Bake Oven causes a total reversal in Elaine's position. This reversal can be read in various ways that fit within the joke but have different implications. The changed attitude could just be another step that escalates the joke. She could simply be understood to represent the audience's general understanding that drugging and taking advantage of women is wrong. In this reading, when the Easy-Bake is mentioned, Elaine crosses the line to join Jerry and George in their nostalgia-driven antics, even if her reasons are narrower. But if we take into consideration other aspects of this scene, such as the emphatic and almost smug tone of her delivery of the line "I think it's unconscionable," as well as the longer-term development of Elaine's character as a thirty-something, single, childless, working, and unapologetically sexually active woman, then she could also be interpreted as taking a feminist perspective—one that grants her the moral high ground in a scene about victimizing women but alienates her from the members of the audience who have committed to the nostalgic premise of the joke. Thus, when George mentions the Easy-Bake and Elaine's feminist resolve instantly melts away, her embrace of the traditional domesticity and femininity of the toy is no longer simply about enacting nostalgic desires; it also becomes a (temporary) disavowal of feminism. This is underscored as Elaine embraces the role of the caregiver by excitedly offering the others cake and then serving George cake but never eating it herself, closely following the narrative established by the Easy-Bake's early advertising.

***Monica from* Friends**

This vacillation between the expectations of traditional femininity and a feminist

mindset is further complicated in two nostalgic references to the Easy-Bake Oven in the

sitcom *Friends,* which aired from 1994 to 2004. The first reference occurred in the twenty-

first episode of the third season, which aired on April 17, 1997.[55] The second occurred in

the thirteenth episode of season seven, which aired on February 1, 2001.[56] Both pertained

to memories of Monica Gellar's childhood and how she loved to play "restaurant." In the

1997 episode, Monica is working at the 1950s-themed Moondance Diner, where she has to

dress up in a poodle skirt and stuff her bra to a ridiculous size. During the time that she has

worked there, she has met a man named Pete, who not only has developed a crush on her

but also happens to be a billionaire. Although Monica does not return his feelings, the two

remain friendly. In this episode, Pete offers her a job as the head chef at a restaurant he has

just purchased. Back home, and still in her poodle skirt (itself a symbol of 1950s girlish

femininity) and stuffed bra (which sexualizes that memory), Monica discusses Pete's offer

with her friend Rachel:

> Monica: Can you believe he just offered me a restaurant?
>
> Rachel: What a jerk. You want me to kick his ass?
>
> Monica: I mean, this has been like my dream since I got my first Easy-Bake Oven and
>
> opened Easy Monica's Bakery. (Long pause for laugh track.) I mean, I would kill for

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[55] "The One with the Chick and the Duck," *Friends*, Season 3, Episode 21, aired April 17, 1997, www.imdb.com.
[56] "The One Where Rosita Dies," *Friends*, Season 7, Episode 13, aired February 1, 2001, www.imdb.com.

this job. I mean, I could totally do this job. (Takes the stuffing out of her bra.) And,

God knows, I've paid my dues. But Pete's just doing this because he has a crush on

me.

Unlike the Easy-Bake Oven's appearance in *Seinfeld,* this joke does not have overarching

significance for the episode's plot line. Rather, it adds to Monica's character development

and back story. The joke is immediately funny because of its juxtaposition of sexuality and

sexualization against the supposed innocence of childhood.[57] To understand the joke's

deeper significance to Monica's character, it is helpful to know her prior work history. In

the first season, Monica is a poorly paid sous chef at a high-end restaurant called Iridium. In

the second season, she gets a promotion to head lunch chef and purchaser at Cafe des Artes

but gets fired that same day for accepting gifts from a food distributor.[58] Desperate to find a

job, she reluctantly takes the waitressing job at Moondance Diner.[59] Despite her talent,

Monica up to this point has struggled to maintain a successful career track as a chef. Thus,

on the surface, this reference to the toy highlights the significance of Pete's offer because of

Monica's lifelong desires to be taken seriously as a chef. This aspect of the joke requires the

audience to understand and accept that playing with the Easy-Bake Oven as a child could

be a formative experience with lasting impact.

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[57] Western culture has a long-standing obsession with the eroticism of children and childhood. See James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[58] "The One with Five Steaks and an Eggplant," *Friends*, Season 2, Episode 5, aired October 19, 1995, www.imbd.com.

[59] "The One with the Bullies," *Friends*, Season 2, Episode 21, aired April 25, 1996, www.imdb.com.

In this sense, however, this moment is unusual for an Easy-Bake Oven reference because rather than the domestic homemaker narrative, Monica is tied to the professional chef narrative, which is generally masculine. The impact of this difference, however, is limited by the sexualized nature of the joke, which serves as a verbal and visual reminder of Monica's struggle to be taken seriously as a chef. When Monica delivers the line, she is standing in her kitchen still dressed in her sexualized Moondance Diner poodle skirt, which—in addition to referencing the precariousness of girlhood innocence—exaggerates her body by pulling in her already small waist and further amplifying her stuffed bust line. Easy Monica's Bakery, thus, plays off her visually exaggerated—and decidedly not serious or professional—femininity and sexual availability. This visual pun is stretched further when Monica stresses her ability to do the job while removing her fake breasts. As the laugh track punctuates each step of the joke, it becomes clear that this excessive and sexualized femininity is difficult to take seriously. However, removing her fake breasts not only calls attention to them but also potentially suggests to the audience that she exerts a measure of control over her sexualized image by donning or removing it at will. Although Monica may be limited by her sexual objectification, it is not necessarily totalizing.

The second reference in *Friends* to the Easy-Bake Oven comes several seasons later, after significant back story and major plot lines have been established. In this episode, Monica and her brother Ross find out, through a newspaper ad, that their parents are selling their childhood home. The two struggle with this, although it is harder for Ross, because (as established previously and reinforced in this episode) their parents

unconsciously favored Ross over Monica. Together they go to their childhood home to sort through boxes of their childhood things. They talk with their father, Jack Gellar.

> Mr. Gellar: I'm sorry we can't store your childhood things anymore.
>
> Monica: That's okay, I can't wait to see everything again. All the memories.
>
> Mr. Gellar: I don't know what's in the boxes down here, but I do know there are six or seven Easy-Bake Ovens in the attic.
>
> Monica: I used to love to play restaurant.
>
> Ross: Not as much as you loved to play uncooked batter eater.
>
> Monica: Hey, it is unreasonable to expect a child to wait for a light bulb to cook brownies.

Without requiring knowledge of the characters' back stories, this joke plays off people's knowledge of or experience with the toy. The light bulb has always been a defining feature of the Easy-Bake Oven, because it was the first toy oven to use such technology. Commercials and advertisements, which often mentioned the light bulb as an innovation or as a safety feature, either attempted to make the baking time seem reasonable or focused on the end product rather than the cooking time. The humor in *Friends*, of course, arises out of the incongruence between how much time the toy consumes to cook one small item and children's willingness to wait. Furthermore, the sheer number of Easy-Bakes in the Gellars' home could suggest the longevity and strength of Monica's dream to become a chef, which Monica has achieved by this point in the show.

The joke becomes more nuanced and derisive, however, if the audience has knowledge of Monica's "Fat Monica" back story. Fat Monica is depicted in flashbacks with

actor Courtney Cox in a fat suit. Although Monica's struggle with overeating and being

overweight as a teenager is established in season two (prior to the first Easy-Bake

reference), it is not until the eighth episode of the fifth season, called "The One with All the

Thanksgivings," that the audience is able to understand how deeply entwined Fat Monica is

with Monica's occupational dreams and choices.[60] In this episode, which consists primarily

of flashbacks to previous Thanksgiving days, the audience learns two biographical details

about Monica. The first is that she decided to become a chef because of Chandler, who met

Monica when he was her brother Ross's college roommate. Because of his own childhood

issues, Chandler hated Thanksgiving food, so Monica, then a high school senior, offered to

make him macaroni and cheese. When she asked him if he liked it, he told her, "Oh yeah, it

was great. You should be a chef." With big, innocent eyes, Monica exclaimed, "Okay!" and

the ensuing laugh track prompts the audience to connect this flashback scene with present-

day Monica. The second detail that the audience learns about Monica is that the reason she

lost weight was that she overheard Chandler telling Ross, "I just don't want to be stuck here

all night with your fat sister." By the next Thanksgiving, Fat Monica has transformed into

slender and, thus, sexy Monica, rendering Chandler speechless and overcome with the

sexual attraction that he failed to have for Fat Monica.[61]

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[60] "The One with the Prom Video," *Friends*, Season 2, Episode 14, aired February 1, 1996, www.imdb.com; "The One with All the Thanksgivings," *Friends*, Season 5, Episode 8, aired November 19, 1998, www.imdb.com.
[61] This is complicated even further by the fact that when this information is revealed to the audience, they know that Chandler and Monica are secretly sleeping together. Furthermore, Monica will eventually go on to marry Chandler and adopt a child with him.

Fat Monica is only depicted in flashbacks as a young adult, about eighteen or

nineteen. But because her fatness is blatantly attributed to overeating, it is easy for the

audience to assume that younger, Easy-Bake Oven-playing Monica had similar habits.[62]

Moments of incongruity arise when the social deviance of Monica's former self is compared

with her now-normal, present-day self. Therefore, when Mr. Gellar points out that Monica

had six or seven Easy-Bake Ovens, it is clear to the audience that the number was more

likely due to Fat Monica's tendency toward excess than to the strength of her dream of a

career. Indeed, the knowledge that Fat Monica took Chandler's suggestion to heart might

imply that Monica has *chosen* to remember the toys in the context of her adult choices,

rather than in the context of her Fat Monica childhood. Thus, Monica's memory of playing

restaurant with her Easy-Bake Ovens—one that contained the possibility of transcending

the constraining homemaker narrative—is interrupted by Ross's snarky invocation of Fat

Monica through coded language. This interruption requires her to remember her childhood

failures in performing acceptable femininity. Thus, a potentially transformative memory is

restrained by laughter at Fat Monica—laughter that "requires that the audience believes in

and supports the social norms and expectations that Fat Monica mocks."[63] These norms, of

course, also reinscribe the white woman, however narrowly defined, as the model for

attractiveness and beauty.

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[62] Monica is shown eating a hoagie before her prom and even gets mayonnaise on Rachel by accident. See "The One with the Prom Video."

[63] Amy Gullage, "Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and Friends," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 182.

***Lily from* How I Met Your Mother**

Of the three examples, Monica in *Friends* comes the closest to achieving a balance

between a version of feminist femininity and traditional femininity. She is a caretaker of

her friends, allowing them to live with her, cooking Thanksgiving meals for them, and even

sometimes cleaning up behind them. But she also often puts these opportunities to work

for her, such as when she uses her friends as guinea pigs for new recipes or when she relies

on their labor to support her career.[64] Ultimately, Elaine's relationship to traditional

femininity is not really "resolved" in the *Seinfeld* episode. Her vacillation seems less a part

of her character than it is about the circumstances of the episode and the show's drive to do

the provocatively funny thing. On the other hand, Lily, from *How I Met Your Mother,* which

aired between 2005 and 2014, has a much more ambivalent relationship to this tension, in

which the influence of the postfeminist discourse to which Dow pointed results in specific

consequences for Lily. Indeed, this reference to the Easy-Bake Oven points more toward an

intensification of postfeminist concerns about the survival of the family than to a tension

between traditional femininity and feminist femininity. The reference occurred in season

two, episode eleven, which aired on December 11, 2006.[65] The structure of this sitcom

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[64] In "The One with the List" Monica uses Rachel and Phoebe to test out the recipes she has been hired to create that must contain the fake chocolate product Mocklate. In "The One with the Stoned Guy" Rachel serves as a waitress when Monica tries to impress a potential employer, and in "The One with the Dirty Girl" Monica teams up with Phoebe to start a catering business. See "The One with the List," *Friends*, Season 2, Episode 8, aired November 16, 1995, www.imdb.com; "The One with the Stoned Guy," *Friends*, Season 1, Episode 15, aired February 16, 1995, www.imdb.com; and "The One with the Dirty Girl," *Friends*, Season 4, Episode 6, aired November 6, 1997, www.imdb.com.
[65] "How Lily Stole Christmas," *How I Met Your Mother*, Season 2, Episode 11, aired December 11, 2006, www.imdb.com.

emphasizes the nostalgic nature of the reference. In the year 2020, the narrator, Ted

Mosby, is telling his two kids the long story of how he met their mother, a story that is

deeply intertwined with the lives of his best friends Marshall, Lily, Robin, and Barney. The

majority of the show is shown as a flashback to the early twenty-first century. To further

complicate the frame story, the characters in these primary flashbacks often have their own

flashbacks, recalling when they were children or when they were in college, or even

remembering moments that occurred in or between prior episodes.

The episode with the Easy-Bake reference is a Christmas show. The bulk of the

episode deals with Ted and Lily's friendship. At the end of the previous season, Lily had

walked out on Marshall, her fiancé, in order to pursue an art career.[66] Marshall was

devastated by this, and Ted, Barney, and Robin struggled to help him move on. By this

episode, however, Lily has returned after realizing that an art career was not feasible

because she was not talented enough and that what she truly wanted was to be with

Marshall. She overhears an answering machine message in which Ted calls Lily a bitch,

presumably to get Marshall out of his depressive state. Ted will not apologize for the

message or back down from his claim, so the majority of the episode is about how that fight

unfolds and gets resolved.

Toward the end of the episode, Marshall gives Lily her Christmas present, a Betty

Crocker Dual-Temp Easy-Bake Oven. Lily is ecstatic but also surprised by the gift because,

although she has always wanted one, she had never mentioned that to Marshall. Marshall

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[66] "Come On," *How I Met Your Mother*, Season 1, Episode 22, aired May 15, 2006, www.imdb.com.

explains that the present was Ted's idea. Ted flashes back to the moment in their college

years when Lily confesses how much she wanted one. In the flashback, Ted and Lily are

sitting on the floor of Ted and Marshall's dorm room, which is filled with smoke. They both

appear dazed, so it is clear to the audience that the two have been smoking marijuana quite

heavily.

> Lily: When I was a kid, all I wanted was an Easy-Bake Oven. I begged and I begged,
>
> but all I got was a stupid LEGO set because my feminist mom didn't want me
>
> conforming to traditional gender roles.
>
> Ted: Easy-Bake Oven, that's what I'm gonna call my van.

This joke doesn't just refer to the Easy-Bake's connection to femininity in order to create

humor; that connection is the joke. The joke depends on the audience recognizing an

interpretation of the toy as a symbol of traditional femininity, as well as recognizing a

negative feminist interpretation of that connection, which allows for the dichotomy

between the Easy-Bake and LEGO. Without much knowledge of the character's

backgrounds, viewers could interpret the joke in a few different ways. For one, the joke

highlights the gap between playing with children's toys and taking on adult gender roles. It

suggests that there is not a necessary relationship between the two, as is often assumed or

claimed. The bitterness driving the joke could also be understood as a rejection of Lily's

mother's feminist ideals because the joke portrays feminism as setting up an untenable all-

or-nothing scenario that denies women their desires. Or it could imply a milder case that

does not reject feminism entirely, but rather uses guilt to call into question and struggle

with the feminist principles developed in earlier generations that are then used as a lens to

examine her life choices. Lily is aware of and even subscribes to many feminist ideas (for example, she is at college pursuing an education degree), but she feels shame because she wants something—traditional femininity—that is rejected by that ideal. That Ted and Lily are high when she makes this comment highlights to some degree the shame that Lily feels about wanting the toy. She only confesses it to Ted when her guard is down. In the eight years between this conversation and the Christmas when she receives the present, she never mentions the toy to Marshall; her silence is significant because the two are consistently portrayed as an incredibly, and almost absurdly, close couple.

This interpretation is especially important when it is put into the larger context of the show. Receiving this gift, at this moment in the show when Lily has just returned to Marshall, cements her choice to prioritize a domestic position, one in which she is expected to have nurturing relationships with her close friends, to cook for Marshall, to make sacrifices for Marshall's career, and to bear children. Although there are moments throughout the show when Lily expresses sincere and deeply felt frustration with this position, she is never at risk of leaving Marshall again. Thus, there is a way in which this instance reinterprets the Easy-Bake Oven and a woman's desire for it as representative of women's struggles between conflicting life outcomes—the traditional role of wife and mother or the feminist role of the independent woman—rather than as a simple symbol for traditional femininity. The affective force of the Easy-Bake Oven and the particular narrative of family and caregiving it represents pulls Lily back into the fold.

Tending to the Tension

All of these references from popular sitcoms can be understood as moments in which the tension or ambivalence created by an imbalance in the "social, political, and institutional impact of feminism" becomes visible.[67] Certainly, much of this ambivalence could be explained by Dow's observation that "hegemony is at work" in sitcoms such that "the potentially threatening idea (a woman on her own) is made less threatening when she is slotted into familiar roles and relationships that assure the audience that little has really changed"; the variety of potential interpretations allows the gamut of feminist to anti-feminist women to be potential viewers. Because the material successes of feminist politics have been uneven, women cannot always act in a way that is in concordance with whatever feminist beliefs they might hold. This is not to suggest, however, that these sitcom scenes are literal representations or universal examples of this social and cultural ambivalence. These examples do not necessarily demonstrate how women deal with these tensions, but they do indicate the kinds of issues that women (particularly progressive-minded women) must often negotiate in their lives—and the outcome is usually not a stereotypically hardline feminist stance. Rather, the outcome remains somewhere in the middle, continually held in tension. Further, there is not a one-size-fits-all feminist outcome, even if popular and public discourse sometimes characterizes or treats feminism as monolithic.

In these sitcoms, humor and the Easy-Bake Oven are used to highlight this ambivalence, both to expose the absurdity that can arise from it and to resolve the tension,

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[67] Lisa Maria Hogeland, "Against Generational Thinking; or, Some Things That 'Third Wave' Feminism Isn't," *Women's Studies in Communication* 24, no. 1 (2001): 110.

however temporarily or unevenly. It is significant that Monica, in *Friends*, can entertain the possibility of becoming a professional chef. That ability, in and of itself, is not a concern of the show's overarching narrative. The show assumes it is acceptable for a woman to be a professional chef. This speaks to the successes that liberal feminism had in opening previously male-dominated occupations to women.[68] Monica's achievement of that goal, however, is not a simple narrative of taking advantage of an available opportunity. Rather, Monica struggles to exist in the cutthroat restaurant industry despite confidence in her culinary abilities. She is forced to take a job at a cheesy diner, a position that is presented to the show's audience as demeaning because it objectifies and exaggerates her body. Monica's job at the diner is humorous because she is forced to participate as a 1950s feminine stereotype, which is in contradiction to her character, who is clearly intended to be enlightened (to some degree) by feminist ideas. But she does the job—often unhappily—because she is left without much choice if she wants to continue to work in the restaurant industry.

Although these references point to a process of negotiation that could potentially help women navigate feminist ambivalence, the repeated longing for and connection to a form of traditional femininity that *appears* desirable in certain moments suggests a problematic relationship between the version of feminism in question and whiteness. In other words, what aspect of traditional femininity is understood as desirable in these moments that reference the Easy-Bake? In the example in which Monica recalls Easy Monica's Bakery, she has to make a decision about whether or not to take Pete's job offer.

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[68] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 87.

She is troubled by the offer, however, because she understands it to be predicated on a desire for reciprocal feelings, even if he insists otherwise. It is possible she understands the likelihood of negative consequences. Pete could get angry if she never reciprocates his feelings, which would destroy their friendship. But rejecting the job (and thus Pete) is tantamount to putting his well-being before her own, which is not a particularly feminist move. In this way, the Easy-Bake and her sexualized Easy Monica's Bakery stand in for her well-being as the thing and the memory that support and legitimize her goal to be a head chef at any cost. By falling for Pete at the eleventh hour, she removes that conflict because she can then give her loyalties—both sexual and professional—freely, which by her own construction is a prerequisite for accepting the power that Pete, as an extremely wealthy white man, can confer. By choosing Pete and his restaurant, Monica places her loyalties with the power and protection provided by white masculinity.

Several episodes later, Monica must ultimately break up with Pete and give up this opportunity because he chooses to pursue a ridiculous Ultimate Fighting Championship career without deference to or consideration of how this decision affects Monica. Monica breaks up with Pete not simply because she dislikes his decision but because she cannot stand to see him come to harm. As Audre Lorde argues, the "pitfall" of the logic of the "patriarchal invitation to power" is that "it is easier . . . for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will

be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace."[69] Given Lorde's observation, we could read Monica as giving in to the dangerous patriarchal promise of protection that Pete will provide as employer and romantic partner. But Monica ends up sacrificing her goals for Pete anyway, because despite Monica's original change of heart, Pete is not required to care about the well-being of others. Monica spends a considerable amount of time fretting over the possibility of hurting Pete's feelings when she did not immediately return them. Pete, in his decision to become an Ultimate Fighting Champion, does not appear to have considered the impact on Monica at all and is entirely deaf to her completely reasonable concerns. In her decision not to work for Pete if she is not with him romantically, Monica continues to sacrifice herself for the relief of others. She can only profit from his power if she submits romantically. Once the power conferred by Pete's position as a wealthy white man is retracted, Monica is once again out of a job. In referencing Lorde here, I do not intend to overstate the "danger" that Monica faces in this example. Ultimately, her position as a white woman does protect her from some of the "danger" her unsuccessful tryst with white masculinity could have produced, in that she is not physically harmed, she never goes without food or shelter, and although she struggles to find a suitable job, she is able to find work and continue supporting herself. In this way, Monica's complicated negotiation of traditional femininity and feminism is underwritten by privileges conferred through whiteness, which protect her from extreme consequences.

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[69] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 118, 119.

However, Monica's choice to sacrifice this career windfall in protest may also suggest the idea that some values—such as the responsibility of caring for others—remain essential to women's lives despite the likely consequences given the structural imbalance of power. In this example, the problem is not Monica's choice to sacrifice her career for another; rather it is Pete's blindness or unwillingness to consider Monica's needs that create the conflict in the first place. In these examples, men are consistently able to escape the responsibility of caring for others. In *Seinfeld*, the punchline is Elaine's reversal, which undermines her original criticisms of Jerry and George's behavior. In *How I Met Your Mother*, the focus is on repairing the damage caused by Lily's decision to leave Marshall to pursue a career—not on Marshall's unwillingness to change his life to better hers.

In each case, the shows have constructed the women's decisions as the primary problem. This is not to suggest that the shows portray Jerry, Pete, or Ted as unproblematic characters, but the emotional balance of romantic or platonic relationships is predicated on a female character's taking on the responsibility of care and thus subordinating her needs to the needs of others. This unbalanced application of responsibility is also evident in the way the Easy-Bake has circulated in public culture. Recently, in November 2012, the Easy-Bake Ultimate Oven became the center of a public controversy about the highly gendered nature of children's toys. The toy came under fire for being so feminine that it was difficult for boys to be associated with the toy and avoid being ridiculed for gender nonconformity. The particulars of the controversy suggest that the toy could only become appropriate for boys by neutralizing the Easy-Bake Oven's connection to the domestic kitchen and femininity, ultimately abdicating them of the responsibility to care for others.

Coming Out of the Kitchen

The controversy began after McKenna Pope, a thirteen-year-old girl from New Jersey, tried to buy her four-year-old brother an Easy-Bake Oven for Christmas but was thwarted because the toy only existed in pinks and purples. She felt that these colors promoted the idea that "women cook, men work" and that they would embarrass her brother in front of his friends.[70] In response, Pope posted a petition on Change.org (and made an accompanying YouTube video) asking the toy's current manufacturer, Hasbro, to "feature males on the packaging and in promotional materials for the Easy-Bake Oven, as well as offering the product in different, non-gender specific colors, i.e. primary colors." After all, she suggested, there is "a multitude of very talented and successful male culinary geniuses, i.e. Emeril, Gordon Ramsey, etc." Making these changes, she said, would work to create "gender equality, and help the children of today become what they're destined to be tomorrow."[71]

As the petition gained signatures, major news networks and other media outlets began reporting on Pope and her quest.[72] By December 21, the petition had garnered more

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[70] "Controversy over Easy-Bake Oven for Boys Heats Up," *Portland [Maine] Press Herald*, December 7, 2012, http://www.pressherald.com/2012/12/07/controversy-over-easy-bake-oven-for-boys-heats-up_2012-12-08/.

[71] McKenna Pope, "Hasbro: Feature Boys in the Packaging of the Easy-Bake Oven," *Change.org*, posted November 2012, accessed March 9, 2019, https://www.change.org/p/hasbro-feature-boys-in-the-packaging-of-the-easy-bake-oven.

[72] For example, Checkey Beckford, "Girl Starts Campaign for Gender-Neutral Easy-Bake Oven," *NBC New York*, November 29, 2012, http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Hasbro-Easy-Bake-Oven-for-Girls-Boys-Gender-Equality-181452721.html; Emanuella Grinberg, "Teen Says Pink Toy Ovens Discourage Boys from Kitchen Play," *CNN*, December 6, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/06/living/gender-toy-marketing-petition/index.html; Traci G. Lee, "Teenager Tells Hasbro to End Gender Stereotyping," *MSNBC*, December 4,

than forty-five thousand signatures, and several male chefs had spoken out in support.

Hasbro agreed to meet with Pope and publicly announced that it already had plans to

introduce a "gender-neutral" version in the following year, which would be marked as such

by its black coloring and silver and blue accents.[73] This announcement (and the new

version's release in 2013) generally quieted the controversy over the "too girly" Easy-Bake

Oven.[74] Indeed, after her meeting with Hasbro, Pope indicated in an interview with

MSNBC's Lorena Ruiz that although she "see[s] the toy industry, as a whole, dominated by

gender inequalities," she understood this particular matter as resolved.[75]

In her petition, and supported in later interviews, Pope is clearly relying on an

established feminist viewpoint to suggest that, by excluding boys from the Easy-Bake's

potential audience, Hasbro is upholding and contributing to the outdated idea that women

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2012, http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/teenager-tells-hasbro-end-gender-stereotyp; Katie McDonough, "Eighth Grader Takes on the Easy-Bake Oven," *Salon*, December 3, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/12/03/eighth_grader_takes_on_the_easy_bake_oven/; and Bonnie Rochman, "One Girl's Quest to Make the Easy-Bake Oven More Boy-Friendly," *Time*, December 3, 2012, http://healthland.time.com/2012/12/03/one-girls-quest-to-make-the-easy-bake-oven-more-boy-friendly/#ixzz2FPyWMaUE.

[73] Emanuella Grinberg, "Hasbro to Unveil Black and Silver Easy-Bake Oven after Teen's Petition," *CNN*, December 18, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/18/living/hasbro-easy-bake-oven/index.html.

[74] For example, Victoria Cavaliere, "Hasbro to Make Easy-Bake Oven for Girls AND Boys," *New York Daily News*, December 18, 2012, http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/hasbro-easy-bake-oven-girls-boys-article-1.1222592; Lindsay Davis, "Boy-Friendly Easy Bake Oven Coming," *ABC News*, December 18, 2012, http://abcnews.go.com/US/boy-friendly-easy-bake-oven-teen-girl-bat/story?id=18003828; and Kharunya Paramaguru, "Hasbro Reveal Plans for Gender Neutral Easy-Bake Oven," *Time*, December 19, 2012, http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/12/19/hasbro-reveal-plans-for-gender-neutral-easy-bake-oven/.

[75] Lorena Ruiz, "Meet McKenna Pope, 'Foot Soldier' Challenging Gender Stereotypes," *MSNBC*, December 22, 2012, http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/meet-mckenna-pope-foot-soldier-challenging.

should have the primary responsibility for cooking in the home. Her reason for creating the

petition is that she felt that the pink and purple version of the toy subjected boys to

embarrassment or ridicule or otherwise precluded boys from using it. Here, inequality for

women is created by excluding men. Pope makes a case for including boys by highlighting

the fact that men *already* have socially acceptable avenues for entering kitchens, and for

wanting to cook, through the doors of the restaurant industry. Many of the petition's

supporters echoed this sentiment. For example, commenter Anjanette Sanchez stated that

"My son is 5 and he loves cooking. He asked for an easy bake oven for Christmas, but being

that the typical color and packaging is aimed towards girls, it did not seem appropriate. I

like that he makes the connection. Many of the popular cooking shows including Cake Boss

are led by men." Another commenter, Ramona Whittaker, says that "I'm signing because I

believe that all children should be treated equally. Why can't a little boy own an easy bake

oven? they love to cook too. I know my nephew does:-) a good percentage of chefs are men.

##thinkaboutit."[76] These comments hinge on the idea that an overtly feminine-coded Easy-

Bake Oven needs to be neutralized in order to include boys and that the existence of

professional male chefs justifies boys' inclusion. Indeed, as support from celebrity

professional chefs such as Bobby Flay and Michael Lomonaco increased, this became the

commonsense reasoning that the media used to connect Pope's petition with the larger,

ongoing debate about pinkification and gender-neutral toys.[77] According to this line of

argument, it follows that if we provide boys with a version of the toy that would not subject

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[76] Pope, "Hasbro: Feature Boys."
[77] "Top Chefs Back Gender-Neutral Easy-Bake Oven," *CBS Money Watch*, December 12, 2012, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/top-chefs-back-gender-neutral-easy-bake-oven/.

them to ridicule, then we are ultimately promoting equality for women. If boys are

included, then we are supporting women's equality because we have accepted that women

should not bear the solitary burden of cooking.

While I am not questioning Pope's motives, nor am I intending to offer up a thirteen

year old's argumentative skills as a straw figure, this logic conflates the act of cooking in the

home with the act of cooking as an occupation. If we connect the legitimacy of a boy's

version of the toy oven to the existence and prevalence of professional male chefs, then we

are not asking boys to cook in the home, for the family, or in deference to others in the way

that girls and women are expected to do. Instead, boys are being directly connected to

occupational forms of cooking outside of the home. While we could understand male chefs

in restaurants as cooking for others, this ignores the power, profit, and prestige that are

potentially tied to this profession but are certainly not connected to domestic cooking.

The roles of the celebrity chef and of televised cooking shows are important for

understanding this conflation. The male chef has long been a figure of gourmet restaurants,

and as communication scholar Rebecca Swenson points out, "the professional chef has long

been male," dating back at least to the founders of French cuisine, who positioned

themselves as elite culinary educators of French women. The entry of televised cooking

shows and networks has done little to abate this pattern of denigrating feminine domestic

cooking. To its credit, the Food Network has created a range of successful cooking shows

with male and female hosts, who sometimes work together. On the surface, then, the

network has propagated a basic image of gender equality in cooking. The effectiveness of

that imagery can be seen in Pope's invocation of the male celebrity chef, which must imply

the importance of the female celebrity chef in order to uphold her logic. However, a closer

analysis of the Food Network's lineup suggests that the male cooking mystique still

dominates the rhetoric of men's cooking. In Swenson's 2009 study of the Food Network,

she found that "the most striking way in which the binary between the genders is

maintained is through the absence of discussion by male hosts of cooking as everyday,

family-centered labor." On the Food Network, female hosts, despite their public presence

on network television, are more likely to offer tips and advice for "solutions to meal

preparation and situate cooking firmly in the private, domestic kitchen," whereas male

hosts are more likely to "[construct] cooking as a professional, public challenge rather than

a domestic chore." In line with earlier patterns of cooking rhetoric, the "responsibility of

care" taken by the male celebrity chef is distinguished from the care taken by the female

celebrity chef by tying rewards to exterior spaces and disengaging from and obscuring "the

benefits of 'achieving manhood' through nurturing, family-centered labor."[78] Thus, as with

the cookbooks from which Inness derived the concept of the male cooking mystique, on the

whole the Food Network continues to suggest that women cook with care for others, such

as the family, in mind, whereas men cook for prestige.

The underlying problem here is the crossover problem in which girls and women

may move more freely between feminine-coded and masculine-coded spaces without

censure, whereas men and boys are emasculated by nearly any attempt to cross over into

feminine-coded spaces. In this scenario, men are seen to be emasculated when connected

to feminine domestic cooking, but women are made equal to men when connected to

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[78] Swenson, "Domestic Divo?" 40, 50, 51.

professional cooking. That is, the issue is not simply that of disciplining masculinity to avoid homophobic insinuations. In both cases, femininity retains its position as the abject, which ultimately continues a cycle of devaluing femininity and that which has come to be associated with it.[79]

Importantly, Pope was not the first to rely on this problematic logic to argue for women's equality, nor will she likely be the last. Indeed, this logic is commonplace. It was directly connected to the Easy-Bake Oven nine years earlier in *The Easy-Bake Oven Gourmet* cookbook of 2003, which was created specifically to emphasize the impact of the toy on the childhoods of celebrity chefs. The cookbook combines the twentieth-century gendered logic of cookbooks and food writing with the twenty-first-century version promoted by celebrity chefs. Alongside each recipe is a brief recollection of a chef's relationship to the Easy-Bake Oven, or to cooking more generally.

The women chefs featured in the book are more likely to share memories of their mothers or grandmothers and of wanting to feed people, to make jokes about miniature desserts and dieting, to recall being envious of other girls who had the toy, or to claim a kind of natural inclination toward or fascination with the kitchen. But for the men featured, remembrances follow well-established avenues to protect their masculinity. For example, Rick Bayless attributes his boyhood desire for an Easy-Bake Oven to the fact that he is the fourth generation of restaurateurs and grocers, and "was always comfortable in the kitchen but frustrated that he wasn't allowed to do anything more than help." His parents

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[79] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999); and C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

eventually "gave in and gave him an oven of his own, a turquoise-colored Easy-Bake Oven."

Food writer Mark Bittman denies any memory of the Easy-Bake or other toy ovens. He does

remember helping his grandmother make blintzes, but he distances himself from that

feminine lineage by saying he has "no clue" whether that memory had an impact on his

career choices. Instead, he attributes moving away from home at seventeen and facing a

"cook or die" situation as his origin story. Bobby Flay's childhood memory of the Easy-Bake

Oven is now well known since he has shared it numerous times in interviews. In the

cookbook, he is pictured in an old photograph posing with an Easy-Bake model from the

early to mid-1990s. The story goes that Flay asked for an Easy-Bake for Christmas, but his

father "quickly dismissed it as 'a girl's thing' and suggested they get Bobby a G.I. Joe action

figure instead."[80] His mother decided to get him an oven anyway. Of course, he would later

become one of the best-known chefs in America. On the whole, for men with memories of

the Easy-Bake, it is the connection to their eventual—and successful—careers as

restaurant owners, executive chefs, authors, and television hosts that helps them sustain

and maintain their masculinity.

However, there are two important exceptions. Martin Howard and Art Smith, who

are both openly gay, embrace femininity in their remembrances of the Easy-Bake Oven.

Howard explains that his mother first taught him to bake—not cook—but that it was a

neighborhood girl and friend who had an Easy-Bake who "led him further 'into the world of

pastry.'" The two spent hours playing with the toy and eventually graduated to full-size

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[80] David Hoffman, *The Easy-Bake Oven Gourmet* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2003), 45, 49,
59.

mixes and his mom's electric mixer. He tells a story of the two learning the hard way not to

lift the beaters out of the bowl with the power still on. He says, "Our cakes looked really

good in pink. . . . Unfortunately, pink didn't look quite as good on Laurie's mother's walls."

Smith also shares a story about playing with the toy with a female neighbor because his

parents refused to buy him such a girlie toy. Smith credits "growing up on a farm, [and

being] surrounded by remarkable women who loved to cook" as the reason for his

"appreciation for food and family dinners at an early age."[81] Unlike Flay or Bayless, Smith

and Howard feature women and girls prominently in their memories of how the Easy-Bake

Oven affected their love of cooking. Since the two men are openly gay, they do not have to

protect themselves from the "specter of homosexuality" that haunts traditional

heterosexual masculinity; they are free to be associated with, and appreciative of, their

connection to feminine domestic cooking.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have linked an analysis of how the Easy-Bake Oven became a

symbol of traditional femininity with contemporary examples of that symbol's circulation

in popular and public culture. This analysis demonstrates how the Easy-Bake-Oven-turned-

memory-thing accrued affective force in such a way that memories of the toy have been

used to negotiate and perpetuate the normative boundaries of femininity and masculinity.

Ultimately, the Easy-Bake's deep association with traditional femininity, especially with

respect to the responsibility of caring for others, does not preclude its use as a figure

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[81] Hoffman, *Easy-Bake Oven Gourmet*, 87, 115.

around which people might contend with conflicting femininities, but the particularities of that emotional investment do constrain attempts to associate the toy with boys or masculinity. In this way, calls for a gender-neutral Easy-Bake Oven based on the professional kitchen obscure the implication that the act of crossing over into domestic forms of cooking poses a risk to accepted forms of men's and boys' masculinity. Deemphasizing the Easy Bake's connection to domestic cooking ultimately perpetuates the terms of the crossover problem by devaluing the historically feminine responsibility of caring for the family or for others.

A careful look back at the Easy-Bake Oven's emergence onto the market suggests that the toy's miniaturization of the home kitchen and its early advertising established a deep association with domesticity and gendered food and cooking discourses, which are embedded within a mid-twentieth-century ideology of traditional femininity in the United States. The constraints created by the male cooking mystique not only influenced the creation of the Easy-Bake Oven itself but also the toy's advertising in ways that produced, emphasized, and reproduced gender norms, which in turn scripted expectations for the physical and emotional labors connected to domestic cooking. These factors defined girls as the appropriate audience for the toy and identified what girls should produce with the toy (cakes and other sweet treats) and the location where girls should be cooking (the home kitchen). In addition, the Easy-Bake's comic book ads demonstrate the implications for girls that arise from the invitation to defer oneself continually that is embedded in the responsibility of care traditionally demanded by these midcentury cooking discourses. In conjunction with structural imbalances of power, this responsibility of care ultimately

requires that girls be responsible to others above themselves, that girls be held to a set of standards in which they have no say or control, and that their performance of those standards be judged by others rather than themselves.

Despite this fraught connection to traditional femininity, the Easy-Bake Oven's repeated appearances in popular culture, particularly within sitcoms, demonstrate not only that rhetorical circulation is a dynamic and ongoing interpretive process but also that repetition—as visualized by the coiled wire of an electromagnet—is essential for conceptualizing how affective force might be accrued over time, thus transforming the significance of a memory thing. Although humorous uses of Easy-Bake Oven memories in sitcoms point to important tensions and ambivalence between women's relationships with traditional femininity and feminist femininity, a deep feeling of affection for the toy permeates each memory. Because each reference to traditional femininity through the Easy-Bake Oven is constructed to make meaning in the contemporary moment, the Easy-Bake does not have to stand solely for the negative effects of traditional femininity. It can also become a site for the negotiation and renegotiation of the ambivalent material realities produced by the uneven successes of feminist movements.

Chapter 2

"This Isn't the LEGO I Know":

Nostalgia, Sexualization, and the LEGO Friends Controversy

On December 19, 2011, *Bloomberg Businessweek* magazine published a cover story

about the LEGO Group's newest attempt "to finally click with girls."[1] Gracing the cover of

the magazine was one of the LEGO Friends collection's newly minted "mini-dolls,"

Stephanie. Unlike the boxy bodies and cylindrical heads of LEGO's iconic yellow miniature

figures (or "minifigs"), this mini-doll is LEGO's busty, blond bombshell, its "billion dollar

girl," according to the cover. Much like a classic pin-up, she looks confidently at the viewer

through large blue eyes and accentuated eyebrows. Rather than appearing full-length,

Stephanie's large, cartoonish feet are cropped out of the picture, which distorts her size,

elongates her legs, and makes her pastel pink skirt appear shorter than it is. Her bustline is

highlighted by the glare of an unseen spotlight. The character is already several years older

than the age group for which the toy is intended, but these visual cues suggest a young

woman in command of her sexuality.[2]

Despite (or, possibly, in addition to) the distinct girl power vibe, the cover image is

unsettling. The same unseen spotlight that accentuates Stephanie's bust also casts a drop

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[1] Bradford Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 19, 2011. The text of the cover story first ran on *Bloomberg Businessweek*'s website on December 15, 2011, prior to LEGO's official announcement of LEGO Friends, which can be found at the following URL along with the cover picture: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-12-14/lego-is-for-girls.
[2] LEGO Friends is intended for girls between the ages of about seven to twelve, but the Friends characters can drive cars and have jobs.

shadow behind her classically shaped claw hand, which is raised forward ever so slightly—

subtly suggesting forward movement. Pictured in front of a stark white background,

Stephanie and her looming, shadowed hand are reminiscent of Marion Crane's violent

shower death scene in *Psycho*, but in a striking reversal of power she holds the detached

head of a minifig in her hand, as casually as if it were a purse. Like the classical image of

Herodias's daughter, Salome, delivering the head of John the Baptist to her mother,

Stephanie offers up the head of the minifig to the viewer, a casualty of her dangerous

seduction. If that image is not enough to get the message across, the caption below the

minifig's head reads, "Watch out, boys." Clearly, this girl means business.

 And business she made. Historically, LEGO's attempts to market directly to girls did

not garner much interest or success, but LEGO Friends was a smash hit from its start in

January 2012, selling over twice as many sets as the company expected within its first six

months.[3] By February 2013, LEGO reported that Friends had "exceeded all expectations

and more than doubled the initial sales forecasts for its first year in market," and it remains

one of the company's top-selling themes.[4] LEGO Friends is the first major LEGO theme for

girls that the company produced after regaining its financial footing because of missteps in

the late 1990s and early 2000s largely due to overextending its brand.[5] In 2004, the LEGO

Group hired a new CEO, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, the first CEO from outside LEGO's founding

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[3] Roar Rude Trangbæk, "Successful Launch of LEGO Friends," LEGO.com, August 31, 2012, https://www.LEGO.com/en-us/aboutus/news-room/2012/august/half-year-result_2012.
[4] Roar Rude Trangbæk, "LEGO Friends Doubled Expectations for Sales in 2012," LEGO.com, February 21, 2013, https://www.LEGO.com/en-us/aboutus/news-room/2013/february/LEGO-friends-doubled-expectations-for-sales-in-2012.
[5] As of 2019, LEGO has several offerings for girls, including LEGO Elves, LEGO Disney, and LEGO DC Super Hero Girls.

family. Knudstorp is credited with reviving the company by cutting extraneous products

and licenses and investing in massive market research and advertising campaigns. The first

round of market research focused entirely on boys, and among other things, LEGO found

that the widespread idea that "modern kids don't have the attention span to stick with

painstaking challenges" was untrue. These findings led the LEGO Group to increase the

difficulty of "builds," which it had been previously decreasing to compete with the speed of

computer games.[6] The LEGO Group began similar research for the girls' market in 2007,

and these efforts would eventually lead to the introduction of LEGO Friends in 2012.

Already by 2010, the LEGO Group was financially back on track, bringing in over one billion

dollars in the United States alone.[7]

LEGO Friends differs from previous LEGO sets in a couple of ways. For one, there is

the new mini-doll, which sports what LEGO claims is a more "realistic" body, including a

thinner waist and noticeable bustline. The mini-doll is five millimeters taller than the 1

5/8-inch-tall classic minifig, and while mini-dolls are compatible with LEGO bricks in some

ways, they do have more limitations than the minifigs.[8] The Friends collection also

introduced several new pastel colors to the LEGO palette, such as new shades of purple and

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[6] The term "builds" refers to a style or form of construction of LEGO bricks. It can refer to LEGO-curated sets or to free-form building.

[7] Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," 71–72.

[8] Mini-doll heads and hair are compatible with minifigs, and the dolls share the same claw hand and thus can hold the same items as the minifigs. However, the mini-doll's claw hands do not rotate, and the legs do not articulate separately as do the minifig's legs. The mini-dolls also do not have holes on the backs of the legs, so the dolls cannot snap into place in a seated position. The *Bloomberg Businessweek* cover image distorts the size of the mini-doll, making it appear much larger than the minifig, which likely contributed to protesters' early belief that mini-dolls were almost entirely incompatible with regular LEGO bricks.

teal.[9] Furthermore, the collection was anchored by the stories and personalities of five

fictional girls—Mia, Emma, Andrea, Olivia, and Stephanie—in their clearly suburban town,

Heartlake City. For example, the locations that originally populated this pastel-colored

town included a house, a café, a salon, a horse academy, a tree house, and a veterinary

clinic.[10] The sets from LEGO Friends stand in stark contrast to the company's most popular

product line, LEGO City, which does not come with elaborate story lines, is branded in dark

primary colors, and consists of sets such as a firehouse, a police station, and various forms

of heavy machinery.

The *Bloomberg Businessweek* article, exceptionally friendly to LEGO's corporate

interests, suggests an attempt on LEGO's part to head off major objections to these new

changes. The article offers justification for the choices LEGO made in order to cater to the

girls' market. The article reads as both a *mea culpa* for LEGO's previous failures to address

girls (even providing an infographic to point out those failures, entitled "The LEGO Girl

Graveyard") and an affirmation that, with the creation of LEGO Friends, LEGO has now

committed itself to taking girls seriously as builders and on their own terms. The article

begins with an immediate concession to Peggy Orenstein, who in *Cinderella Ate My*

Daughter criticized LEGO for its practice of marketing exclusively to boys. Orenstein says,

"The last time I was in a LEGO store, there was this little pink ghetto over in one corner. . . .

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[9] Pink already existed in the LEGO palette.

[10] Like other LEGO product lines, the various options available change from year to year, and many new sets have been added to the collection. Most can be viewed online at the unofficial but widely utilized archive brickset.com.

And I thought, really? This is the best you can do?"[11] In response to her criticism, the article

agrees that because "LEGO play develops spatial, mathematical, and fine motor skills, and

lets kids build almost anything they can imagine," parents, especially moms, are "frustrated

that their daughters are missing out." The article concedes that LEGO's attempt to salvage

and revitalize the company in the early 2000s, while incredibly successful, resulted in a

brand directed overwhelmingly at boys. Continuing its tacit support of the company, the

article vaguely admits to LEGO's past mistakes at targeting girls, suggesting that LEGO had

"misapprehended gender differences in how kids play." However, instead of operating as a

criticism, this concession sets up the article's main argument, which is that LEGO Friends

should be and will be successful because it uses "scientific" research to understand and

take into account *natural* gender differences in children's play. The article points out that

LEGO applied the same "field research" to develop LEGO Friends for girls that they used to

target boys and to reestablish the brand in 2005 and 2006, a move that has been heavily

celebrated in the business industry press. Importantly, the article characterizes LEGO's

research as "more cultural anthropology than focus groups," even revealing that the

research team's nickname is "anthros." This emphasis on anthropology suggests an attempt

to establish LEGO's findings as more scientific and scholarly, and thus more serious and

more reliable, than typical marketing research.[12] This rhetorical move also situates LEGO

as a trustworthy company that goes the extra mile to get to the bottom of what kids are

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[11] Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," 70. For Orenstein's original comments about LEGO, see
Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New
Girlie-Girl Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 38.
[12] Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," 70.

about. The implication of the article's argument is that, through this research, LEGO has sufficiently responded to pinkification criticisms such as Orenstein's because the company is no longer marketing exclusively to boys. Indeed, in a separate press release, LEGO claims that with this research it is now "heeding the way girls naturally build and play" to create a "LEGO building experience fully optimized to girls' tastes and interests."[13]

According to the article, LEGO's researchers made several important findings about the way that girls play, which they then translated into the design of the LEGO Friends sets. For one, the researchers found that girls were primarily concerned with beauty. Hanne Groth, the LEGO manager in charge of market research, explains that the concept of beauty signaled a need for "harmony (a pleasing, everything-in-its-right-place sense of order); friendlier colors; and a high level of detail." This finding influenced the setting of Heartlake City, a suburban backdrop rather than an urban or fantasy setting, and the addition of new pastel colors to the LEGO palette. Second, LEGO's earlier research found that boys liked to build linearly, directly from start to finish, and sometimes against the clock. But LEGO's new research found that "girls prefer 'stops along the way'" in order to focus on "storytelling and rearranging."[14] Thus, supposedly unlike other LEGO kits, the pieces for the different items included in each Friends set are separated into multiple bags, which allows the user to build and then play with a segment of the kit without having to complete the

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[13] "LEGO Group to Deliver Meaningful Play Experiences to Girls with New LEGO FRIENDS," LEGO.com, December 19, 2011, https://www.LEGO.com/en-us/aboutus/news-room/2011/december/lego-group-to-deliver-meaningful-play-experiences-to-girls-with-new-lego-friends.
[14] Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," 72–73.

entire set.[15] Finally, as one of LEGO's design directors, Rosario Costa, explains, the research indicated that "girls needed a figure they could identify with, that looks like them," which differed from the research on boys that suggested boys "play with minifigures in the third person." Given this, LEGO created the mini-doll, "a more realistic, relatable and stylized figure," onto which girls could then, presumably, project themselves.[16] Ultimately, through the friendly reporting of *Bloomberg Businessweek* and its own press releases, LEGO presents itself as doing a service for girls by "reluctantly embracing gender stereotypes in order to connect girls with the enriching possibilities of construction play."[17] This stance serves LEGO's purposes because it allows the company to expand its reach to include girls without disrupting the successful hypermasculine marketing practices LEGO currently directs at boys. But perhaps more importantly, the company's show of reluctance allows it to speak to the concerns of multiple audiences. Parents who do not have a problem with the idea of natural gender differences can wholeheartedly embrace "the way girls naturally play and build," and slightly more skeptical audiences may be satiated by LEGO's ambivalence about its own research findings. However, not all audiences were convinced by LEGO's equivocation.

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[15] LEGO would later claim that this is how all LEGO sets are prepared. See Roar Rude Trangbæk, "LEGO Group Commentary on Attracting More Girls to Construction Play," LEGO.com, January 12, 2012, https://www.LEGO.com/en-us/aboutus/news-room/2012/january/lego-group-commentary-on-attracting-more-girls-to-construction-play.

[16] Wieners, "LEGO Is for Girls," 73.

[17] Derek Johnson, "Chicks with Bricks: Build Creativity Across Industrial Design Cultures and Gendered Construction Play," in *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2014), 82.

LEGO Friends Controversy

Despite LEGO's attempt to curtail criticism of LEGO Friends through press releases

and the corporate-friendly article, the new product line's reliance on pinkified colors, the

turn to Barbie-like mini-dolls, and the focus on domestic and friendship themes in order to

target girls brought immediate and heavy censure from girls' advocacy groups, feminist

and cultural critics and bloggers, and even many longtime LEGO fans. The primary outcry

over the pinkification of LEGO Friends began shortly after LEGO's official announcement

with two blog posts from two twenty-two-year-old SPARK Movement activists, Stephanie

Cole and Bailey Shoemaker Richards.[18] SPARK, a girls' advocacy group fighting to end the

sexualization of girls, quickly teamed up with developmental psychologist and girls

advocate Lyn Mikel Brown to create a Change.org petition calling for LEGO to stop using

sexualized stereotypes to sell its toys and to advertise to boys and girls equally. In the

petition, Cole and Shoemaker Richards linked to a Samsonite-era LEGO commercial and a

1981 LEGO print ad, which they claimed "invited girls to play with LEGO in a way that

didn't appeal to this lowest common denominator version of girlhood, but gave us credit

for being creative, smart, and imaginative."[19] Importantly, SPARK's protest ignited a public

debate centered around the overwhelming prevalence of princess culture and the

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[18] Stephanie Cole, "What the MiniFig?! LEGOs Build the Wrong Message for Girls," SPARK Movement (blog), December 20, 2011, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2011/12/20/what-the-minifig-legos-build-the-wrong-message-for-girls/; Bailey Shoemaker Richards, "LEGO's Listening, but They're Not Quite Hearing Us," SPARK Movement (blog), December 21, 2011, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2011/12/21/3675/.

[19] Stephanie Cole and Bailey Shoemaker Richards, "Tell LEGO to Stop Selling out Girls! #LiberateLEGO," Change.org, December 22, 2011, https://www.change.org/p/tell-lego-to-stop-selling-out-girls-liberatelego.

pinkification of girls' toys (and other products for girls). Various arguments for and against

LEGO Friends circulated widely across major news outlets, such as the *New York Times*,

NPR, and *Time*, as well many informal blogs, LEGO fan sites, general cultural commentary

sites, and social media platforms.[20]

The essence of the LEGO Friends controversy can be boiled down to a conflict over

what the LEGO brand means to people and how that meaning should or should not be

represented in the company's product lines and advertising. It is important to note here

that no one involved in the debate, even those deeply dedicated to undermining feminist

arguments against LEGO Friends (as well as undermining feminists themselves), argued

that girls did not deserve the same access to open-ended, creative play or the spatial

reasoning and other gateway-STEM skills that LEGO is widely understood to promote in its

users. The primary difference between parties was whether they agreed that the changes

made to LEGO Friends could override the benefits of the toy, which are implied by a widely

shared, deeply nostalgic memory of a creative, gender-neutral building toy. That is, despite

disagreements about the nature and effect of LEGO Friends, most participants, for or

against Friends, claimed to understand the company to be socially responsible and to

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[20] Furthermore, as marketing professors Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and Erika Kuever's research indicates, the comment sections of the online articles and blogs provided many individuals with the opportunity to voice their opinions and engage in public debate with other interested parties. Their findings regarding commenters' arguments map quite closely onto the arguments provided by the major players of the debate. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on debate participants who published articles or blog posts rather than on the comment sections. Gry Høngsmark Knudsen and Erika Kuever, "The Peril of Pink Bricks: Gender Ideology and LEGO Friends," in *Consumer Culture Theory*, ed. Anastasia E. Thyroff, Jeff B. Murray, and Russell W. Belk (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2015), 171–88.

consider LEGO bricks to be an essentially gender-neutral building toy that promoted children's creativity and imagination. One contributor, Margaret J. B. Bates, writing for *Legendary Women*, begins her critique of Friends by pointing out that "Lego was originally built on the concept that the colorful blocks were made for girls and boys and would encourage shared play."[21] For Bates, then, LEGO bricks are themselves neutral and the company's reputation is connected to the philosophy that that form of inclusivity seems to imply. Additionally, Lyn Mikel Brown, the developmental psychologist who supported SPARK's petition, notes in a blog post for the *Huffington Post,* "The brilliance of LEGO is the opportunity for creative play and all young children will grab that opportunity if it's offered with enthusiasm. . . . This has always been LEGO's brilliance. It's why they've been parents' go-to toy."[22] Comments such as these reveal a shared sense by Friends detractors that the LEGO Group and LEGO's bricks are about wholesome and creative, gender-neutral play but that the company's more recent marketing strategies have turned the company away from its mission. In comparison, Jesus Diaz, a Gizmodo blogger writing in defense of Friends, argues that:

> The pieces on the sets are fine. They are just LEGO pieces. Interchangeable,
>
> functional, flexible. *Neutral*. They are not special for girls. The instructions are ok
>
> too. Sure, they are for making a beauty shop or a pastel convertible. But kids don't
>
> have to follow them. In fact, they will break them and create new stuff, as it always

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[21] Margaret J. B. Bates, "The LEGO Friends Protest," Legendary Women (blog), January 25, 2012, http://legendarywomen.org/content/lego-friends-protest.

[22] Lyn Mikel Brown, "#LiberateLEGO!" *Huffington Post* (blog), December 28, 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lyn-mikel-brown/legos-for-girls_b_1172876.html.

has happened. That's the whole point of LEGO. I know because I've been building

them since the late 70s, the golden era of LEGO, when I was a little kid putting bricks

together with my brothers and *my sister*.[23]

Not unlike the women quoted above, Diaz makes an argument premised on the idea that

LEGO bricks are inherently neutral because they allow kids to exercise their innate

creativity. Diaz, however, implies that gender coding and stereotypical marketing practices

are no match for children's creativity, whereas Bates and Brown suggest that those

practices do have an effect.

Importantly, each of these arguments references the past in order to assign

significance to the characterization of LEGO as a gender-neutral, creative toy. Bates and

Brown both point to LEGO's past to imply that LEGO had once agreed with their

perspective. For Bates, "Lego was originally built on the concept," and for Brown, "LEGO

once invited girls to play."[24] In this way, they rely on the public's emotional investment in

LEGO's past, which is assumed to be in line with the present-day values Brown and Bates

suggest are at stake, as a way to drum up concern about LEGO's decision-making with

regard to LEGO Friends in the present. Diaz also signals LEGO's past but does so through a

childhood memory of playing with LEGO bricks not only with his brothers but also with his

sister. Furthermore, he adds a sense of sanctity to his memory by stressing that his

experience occurred during "the golden era of LEGO," a period that he implies defines "the

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[23] Jesus Diaz, "Hey Anti-LEGO Feminists, 'LEGO for Girls' Actually Kicks Ass," Gizmodo, January 3, 2012, https://gizmodo.com/5872578/hey-anti-lego-feminists-lego-for-girls-actually-kicks-ass. Emphasis in original.
[24] Bates, "The LEGO Friends Protest"; Brown, "#LiberateLEGO!"

whole point of LEGO."[25] For Diaz's personal memory to serve as plausible evidence for his

audience, it must resemble a similar and widely accepted memory of LEGO.[26]

References to LEGO's past and especially to childhood memories of playing with

LEGO bricks are significant to the nature of the debate because of how those references

signal emotional attachment and because of how those emotions help to define the

plausibility of an argument for different audiences. The affective force of this shared

memory is so strong that threats to that idealistic attachment (whether in the form of girlie

stereotypes or the insinuation that the LEGO brick is not inherently neutral) result in

arguments steeped in emotion. For Diaz, the implication that gender coding and

stereotypical marketing practices could interfere with the "true" experience of playing with

LEGO violates the sanctity of his childhood memory and is thus anathema. He ends his self-

described rant against "anti-LEGO feminists" by declaring that "no, Lego Friends is not an

attack or a way to impose roles. It's precisely all the contrary. They are the ally, not the

enemy. Because, fortunately, building things using your imagination doesn't have anything

to do with sex. The rest is just an artificial debate from people who are clueless about *the*

true nature of this toy, which has been played for decades by boys and girls alike."[27]

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[25] Diaz, "Hey Anti-LEGO Feminists."
[26] For an audience to consider the memory plausible evidence, however, does not mean
that his overall argument would necessarily convince the audience. As another debate
participant and long-time LEGO fan David Pickett points out specifically about Diaz's post,
"Some are content to ignore [LEGO's marketing practices and sexualized mini-dolls] to
focus on the LEGO bricks in Friends, but these elements are the crux of the complaints
leveled against LEGO Friends so we have to talk about them if we are interested in having
an honest debate about this issue." David Pickett, "The LEGO Gender Gap: A Historical
Perspective," Thinking Brickly, January 2, 2012,
http://thinkingbrickly.blogspot.com/2012/01/lego-gender-gap.html.
[27] Diaz, "Hey Anti-LEGO Feminists." Emphasis added.

Notably, Diaz does not consider that the argument against Friends is part of a larger debate about the pinkification of children's toys more generally. Instead Diaz's comments frame SPARK's and other opponents' arguments about LEGO Friends as an assault on our ally the LEGO Group and the "true nature" of the LEGO brick by those who dare to challenge its memory.

Diaz is not alone in making this kind of argument. An entire blog (with no attributed author) entitled "Feminists Freak Out over LEGO Friends" was published specifically in response to SPARK's petition and activist activities. The blog claims its intent is to "[shed] light on [SPARK's] omissions, skewed facts & images," and there are over a dozen posts that attempt to do just that. One of the primary means through which this blog seeks to discredit SPARK's argument, besides characterizing SPARK activists as angry, attention-seeking, agenda-pushing radical feminists, is to show that they did not know enough about LEGO and its history to make legitimate claims against it. The blog attempts to counter many of SPARK's claims with facts about LEGO and LEGO Friends, but the reasoning it uses in many posts demonstrates a central (and possibly unconscious) fear of the threat that SPARK's objections pose to how LEGO is conceptualized in public and popular discourse. For example, in response to Bailey Shoemaker Richards's SPARK blog post, the blog says, "Another amazingly uneducated comment by Bailey, 'We were sort of disappointed by the lack of imagination that went into it.' It's as if she doesn't realize the builder is the one who 'adds imagination' to *any* LEGO building experience."[28] Similar to Diaz, beyond the

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[28] "Cease Fire?" Feminists Freak Out over LEGO Friends, accessed October 27, 2018, http://feminists-freak-out-over-lego-friends.blogspot.com/p/cease-fire.html. Emphasis in original.

emotionally charged ad hominem attack, the blog suggests that feminist arguments against Friends violate the sanctity of the LEGO brick's reputation as a gender-neutral, creative toy. Thus, only those who "are clueless" or "amazingly uneducated" about LEGO could make suggestions to the contrary.

Despite Diaz's fervent claim to LEGO's memory, SPARK activists Stephanie Cole and Bailey Shoemaker Richards, who are considerably younger than Diaz and would only have experienced LEGO as children in the 1990s after its gender-neutral heyday, also express strong emotions at threats to a strikingly similar version of LEGO's memory. In their case, however, the sexualized nature of Friends is the threat to the memory of LEGO. Cole, who is "royally pissed off" about the pinkification of LEGO, argues that "some girls might miss out on all the fantastic, adventurous imaginative play that only comes around once a childhood." Even though she admits that she "was never a Legos kid," she still "fondly remembers epic Lego vs. Playmobile battles with [her] sister and cousin."[29] Even though Cole admits she does not personally have an emotional attachment to LEGO, she worries that other girls might miss out on the imaginative play she nevertheless understands LEGO to provide. In a later, more measured post, Cole moves away from personal experience and refers to the company's reputation when she says that "since LEGO has always been known as a toy company that values the educational and developmental benefits of its products, we at SPARK hope that LEGO will still see the value of making sure their *Friends* line, and

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[29] Cole, "What the Minifig?!" Ironically, Playmobile, which Cole says she preferred, includes figures that are more like LEGO's mini-dolls than LEGO's minifigs.

the rest of their products, send better messages to girls."[30] In this way, SPARK attempts to

characterize their position against LEGO as one of disappointment rather than anger.

Shoemaker Richards sums up this sentiment, lamenting, "This isn't the Lego I know."[31]

It is not a quirk of individual memory that people on both sides of the controversy,

who were of varying ages and generations, shared a similar memory of LEGO and LEGO

bricks. The idea that the LEGO brick is a toy capable of inspiring all children's creativity

rather than their conformity is an image that LEGO deliberately built through major

advertising campaigns in the 1960s through the early 1980s. These ad campaigns were

primarily directed at mothers and positioned the building toy as high-quality and

educational, a market segment that trades on middle- and upper-middle-class aspirations

regarding children's development and achievement. Pierre Bourdieu, in his book

Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, argues that if a family relies on

cultural capital rather than financial capital to maintain their social position, then it is more

likely that they will confer status on a toy based on "their own schemes of perception and

appreciation and, more precisely, according to their educational strategies."[32] LEGO

successfully tapped into this inclination. It was through LEGO's advertising that the toy

came to embody a potent source of cultural capital. By marketing itself this way, LEGO was

able not only to distinguish LEGO sets from low-end, mass-market toys that did not provide

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[30] Stephanie Cole, "Why Are We Still Talking About LEGO?" SPARK Movement (blog), April 17, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/04/17/why-are-we-still-talking-about-lego/.
[31] Shoemaker Richards, "LEGO's Listening."
[32] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 223.

(or were not perceived to provide) the same educational values, but also to establish a

reputation as a company committed to helping parents uphold those class-based values.

The long-term success of LEGO's marketing strategy is visible in people's present-day

critiques of LEGO Friends. For example, in a 2012 post on MomsLA.com, a blog for mothers

in Los Angeles, a contributor wrote that "Polly Pocket and Barbie already exist alongside a

thousand knockoffs. LEGO is supposed to be different. . . . I love the concept of LEGOs as a

box of blocks that you can build anything with. I love that and because I can control what

my girls play with, that will be what LEGOs are to them."[33] This mom believes that, at its

most basic level, playing with LEGO provides children with open-ended, creative play and

that the type of play LEGO provides is different from and better than that which one might

get from Polly Pocket or Barbie or any number of "knockoffs," which are understood not to

be educational because they are seen as limiting girls' play due to their reliance on a

sexualized femininity (or as Cole puts it, "Barbie-fication").

Because of the widespread success of LEGO's twentieth-century marketing

campaigns, during the LEGO Friends debate activists were able to leverage LEGO's own

advertising and the reputation that advertising had rhetorically constructed in support of

their argument against Friends. Specifically, many activists and protesters circulated a

LEGO ad from 1981, which showed a young girl in boyish overalls and pigtails proudly

holding up her LEGO creation in tune with the caption, "What it is, is beautiful."[34] Not only

did this ad serve as a nice bit of irony, since present-day LEGO has insisted that its research

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[33] "LEGO Friends: Why My Daughters Won't Be Playing with Them," MomsLA, January 17, 2012, https://momsla.com/why-my-daughters-wont-be-playing-with-lego-friends/.
[34] "What It Is, Is Beautiful," *Women's Day*, November 3, 1981.

demonstrates girls primarily value beauty, but opponents of LEGO Friends have also

heralded this ad as evidence that LEGO once understood its toys to be gender neutral and

that since the company was capable of gender-neutral marketing in the past, it could make

the choice to return to those values in the present. It is this logic that underpins statements

from SPARK such as this: "During the meeting, SPARK members reinforced that our

criticism of LEGO stems from a place of fondness, and that our disappointment comes from

holding LEGO to a higher standard of toy-making—one that is gender-neutral and allows

kids to engage in the benefits of construction play without the intrusion of outmoded and

harmful gender stereotyping."[35] This nostalgic connection to middle-class values of

children's development and achievement, which raises LEGO above other "knockoffs," is

crucial for understanding the subtext of the controversy, because it allowed SPARK

activists to characterize the sexualized aspects of LEGO Friends as a kind of moral betrayal

against parents and, by extension, society at large. Although twenty-first-century parents

and critics still distinguish between high-end educational toys and mass-market toys, the

primary way of representing this problem in the twenty-first century has been through

debates concerning the pinkification, and thus an implied sexualization, of cultural

products being marketed to girls. As part of this larger debate, toys are often hyperbolically

construed as capable of either supporting or wrecking girls' futures. Even when authors

carefully make measured conclusions, emotionally intense reasoning and examples ensure

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[35] Bailey Shoemaker Richards, "The Meeting: When SPARK Met LEGO," SPARK Movement (blog), April 23, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/04/23/the-meeting-when-spark-met-lego/.

that there is not much middle ground to be found. Parents are told they have something to worry about: Sexualized toys will corrupt your daughters.

LEGO's earliest marketing campaigns in the United States, which were directed primarily at mothers with young children, constructed an image of LEGO as a company supportive of parents and dedicated to a form of creative play available to boys and girls. SPARK activists used a face-value interpretation of LEGO's advertising as proof that the company had violated its own moral commitment to children and to parents, an emotional claim intended to motivate parents, as well as LEGO, to act. Simultaneously, SPARK also used this nostalgic vision of LEGO to imply that the company could easily implement SPARK's suggestions and return to supporting parents' values by, in a sense, going back to its old, gender-neutral ways.

However, SPARK's interpretation of LEGO's advertising and reputation in order to make this argument not only relies on hyperbolic sexualization claims, but it also misrepresents much of LEGO's historical reality. That, in and of itself, is not particularly surprising since people often misrepresent the past for a new purpose in the present. But by analyzing the context in which Americans came to understand the LEGO Group as a socially responsible and parent-friendly company and LEGO building sets as a means for transmitting valuable cultural capital to their children, it is possible to consider more carefully the problematically classist assumptions about femininity at work in the LEGO Friends controversy. Further, an analysis of LEGO's historical product lines and marketing practices demonstrates that they were decidedly not gender neutral. Ultimately, I argue that SPARK's nostalgic criticisms of LEGO Friends signal a present-day struggle within

pinkification debates over what constitutes an "acceptable" version of femininity and how

parents might ensure that the cultural capital embedded in that acceptable femininity gets

passed down to their daughters so that the girls may avoid becoming "at-risk," sexualized

girls.

Thus, from this point the chapter proceeds in four movements. In the next section, I

provide a brief history of the LEGO Group and LEGO's introduction into the United States.

Then I consider how emerging ideas about the roles of parental authority and children's

autonomy in the home provided the context in which LEGO established its reputation in the

United States. To this end, I examine how LEGO's American advertising from the 1960s

through the early 1980s worked to establish the building toy as a high-end educational toy

through a discourse of creativity. In the subsequent section, I analyze LEGO's history of

marketing to girls in order to demonstrate the long-standing issues with LEGO's approach

to gender. Finally, I consider how hyperbolic sexualization discourse interacts with

SPARK's nostalgic criticisms to define a vision of acceptable and unacceptable forms of

middle-class, twenty-first-century, feminist-minded femininity.

Building a History

A brief history of LEGO is necessary to understand fully the progression of LEGO's

U.S. reputation. LEGO made its humble beginning in the small town of Billund, Denmark,

when Danish carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen opened up shop in 1916. Throughout the

1920s he restored and developed buildings and made wood furniture by hand. According

to Danish professor Lars Konzack, in 1931, during the difficult years of the Great

Depression and despite repeated warnings from his family that toys were an unprofitable

business, Christiansen began making "affordable wooden toys—brightly colored animals, piggy banks, and racing cars he hoped to sell to the farming families in the area."[36] In 1934 he named the company LEGO, "a contraction of the Danish phrase *leg godt*," which means "play well."[37] In 1936 LEGO adopted the motto "*Det bedste er ikke for godt*," which is usually translated as "The best is not good enough," and thus cemented LEGO's commitment to making quality products. Furthermore, Konzack argues that LEGO's cultural tradition "had its roots in the 19th century National Romantic Movement and what was known as Biedermeir culture, respecting family and church values and close ties to the local community."[38] Thus, from the beginning, and well before the LEGO brick made its debut, the company that would become the LEGO Group was built on a foundation of traditional and community-centered values.

The company expanded over the 1930s and '40s and eventually began making plastic toys in 1947. According to LEGO historian Sarah Herman, the first plastic injection machine that LEGO purchased included several sample toys to help demonstrate its capabilities. Among those toys was Kiddicraft's Self-Locking Building Cubes, which inspired the creation of LEGO's Automatic Binding Bricks, the predecessor to the bricks used today.[39] In 1954, according to Konzack, Ole Kirk Christiansen's son Godtfred Kirk Christiansen was "inspired by a conversation with a toy buyer from a department store"

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[36] Lars Konzack, "The Cultural History of LEGO," in *LEGO Studies,* ed. Wolf, 2.
[37] Sarah Herman, *A Million Little Bricks: The Unofficial Illustrated History of the LEGO Phenomenon* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012), 5.
[38] Konzack, "Cultural History of LEGO," 2, 8.
[39] Later in 1988, during a patent lawsuit with Tyco Industries, Ole Kirk's son, Godtfred Kirk Christiansen, admitted that he and his father essentially copied the Kiddicraft bricks with only a few minor changes; Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 16.

about the need for a toy system that would require consumers to keep coming back for more. Godtfred began to reevaluate the two hundred or so toys LEGO was producing at that time and created a list of ten qualities that he believed a good toy system would achieve: unlimited play potential; play for girls and for boys; fun for every age; year-round play; healthy, quiet play; long hours of play; development, imagination, creativity; the more LEGO, the greater value; extra sets available; and quality in every detail.[40] From this list, Godtfred designed what would become known as the LEGO System, which centered the toy around a central building theme, the Town Plan. With the LEGO System children and parents could be continuously encouraged to add to their collection of LEGO sets.

In 1958, Ole Kirk Christiansen passed away, and Godtfred officially took over the company. In the same year, LEGO perfected the now-well-known knob-and-tube shape, which increased quality by allowing the bricks to snap together, making building more complex structures easier. The company continued to expand internationally, and eventually Godtfred began to consider the American market.

LEGO's history in the United States began in 1961, when LEGO granted the Samsonite Corporation, which was at the time primarily a luggage company, an exclusive licensing contract to produce and sell LEGO sets for the American market. But once Samsonite opened a new factory in Colorado in 1965, it began producing sets according to its own designs. LEGO scholars generally agree that LEGO was not exactly a ringing success in the American market during this period. Herman suggests that Samsonite struggled on two fronts. For one, Samsonite had to rely heavily on catalog retailers such as Sears and J. C.

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[40] Konzack, "Cultural History of LEGO," 2, 9. See also Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 21.

Penney to advertise and sell because "of the staggering size of the American market."[41]

Second, histories of LEGO suggest that Samsonite struggled to maintain the quality of the

product. For example, when the LEGO Group switched to a more reliable plastic in 1963,

acrylonitrile butadiene styrene, Samsonite continued using the inferior celluloid acetate.[42]

Herman argues that "Samsonite's core experience in marketing and selling luggage was not

specific enough to the delicate nature of the toy industry." Therefore, in 1972, the LEGO

Group decided to end the contract with Samsonite. The LEGO Group established LEGO USA

in Brookfield, Connecticut, in 1973, eventually moving to Enfield, Connecticut, in 1975. [43]

In 1977 Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, LEGO's third generation, joined the company's

management team, and in 1979 he was appointed the president and CEO of the LEGO

Group.[44] The late 1970s and early 1980s are known as LEGO's Golden Age, and it was

during this period that LEGO produced its most iconic items, including the LEGO minifig

and the LEGO Space, Castle, and Pirate themes. With the success of these products, LEGO

conquered the American market.[45] Throughout the 1990s, LEGO continued to expand its

product lines, branched out into children's clothing and video games, and invested in more

LEGOLAND amusement parks across the globe. Most business experts agree that the

expansion away from its core product led LEGO to record its first deficit in 1998. The

company continued to decline until 2004, when Kristiansen stepped down and appointed

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[41] Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 48.
[42] Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 29.
[43] Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 48.
[44] Herman notes that the family name was spelled differently on Kjeld Kirk's birth certificate, but no reason for this change is given. Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 20.
[45] Konzack, "Cultural History of LEGO," 4.

founding-family outsider Jørgen Vig Knudstorp as the new CEO. During the early 2000s,

LEGO continued to diversify its products because of a growing fear within the company

"that future children wouldn't play with LEGO bricks but only with video games, and that

playing with plastic toys would become a thing of the past."[46] Knudstorp, however, took a

different stance and revitalized the company by cutting extraneous business expenses and

launching an intensive international marketing research campaign, which business

analysts have widely credited as saving the company by refocusing its efforts on the needs

of its core audience: boys. By 2008 LEGO had introduced new product lines such as Ninjago

and was back to making multi-million-dollar profits. In September 2014, *Time Magazine*

reported that LEGO had become the world's largest toy company, surpassing even the toy

giant Mattel, whose longtime big-seller, Barbie, had been experiencing declining sales.[47] A

month later, *Time* would name LEGO the most influential toy of all time, claiming that

"since its debut in 1958, LEGO has also redefined the potential of playthings, allowing kids

to build permanent structures from scratch, in all kinds of shapes and sizes, and 'take them

anywhere they want.'"[48] *Time's* assessment of LEGO's cultural significance not only

associates the toy with creative play but also characterizes LEGO as having redefined an

essential element of childhood, toys, from its inception.

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[46] Konzack, "Cultural History of LEGO," 5.

[47] Jacob Davidson, "LEGO Is Now the Largest Toy Company in the World," Time.com, September 4, 2014, http://time.com/money/3268065/lego-largest-toy-company-mattel/.

[48] Olivia B. Waxman, "The 13 Most Influential Toys of All Time," Time.com, October 29, 2014, http://time.com/3089384/influential-toys/.

Creative Toys and Cultural Capital

Although LEGO's history can easily be told as a typical profit-driven business

narrative, the public predominantly perceives the company to be morally responsible and

dedicated to children's development and education. This perception is not an accident;

LEGO's advertising actively cultivated that narrative over several decades. For example,

when Samsonite introduced the LEGO System to the American market in a *New York Times*

advertisement in March 1961, it cast a wide net of rationales to convince parents that LEGO

could contribute to their children's developmental needs. For parents concerned with their

child's physical development, the ad claims that LEGO "actually sharpens manual dexterity"

and informs parents that there are simpler sets for younger children and more complex

sets for older children. For parents concerned about creative play, LEGO assures parents

that even though "each LEGO set contains instructions on how the system works and

suggestions as to models that can be built with each set," LEGO, as a "toy system," exceeds

instructions and provides kids with "limitless creative building." Even "creative-minded

adults find the system a fascinating and rewarding hobby," the ad states, which suggests

that the toy could promote collaborative play between children and parents that would

also be interesting for parents, in addition to making a more subtle claim that suggests that

children who play with LEGO might grow into creative and well-adjusted adults. For

parents concerned with cost or endurance, the ad argues that LEGO is a toy that lasts

because it is made of durable plastics and can be reused many times to build "anything

within the realm of imagination." For parents concerned about education, the ad tells them

that they can write LEGO for information about exclusive sets for elementary classes. And if

the message has not yet been communicated, the ad states explicitly and emphatically that "LEGO is educational! LEGO is creative!" The introductory ad demonstrates clearly how LEGO adapted its marketing to appeal to an array of American parenting concerns prominent in the mid-twentieth century.[49]

In the 1950s and '60s, American discourses of child development and parenting emphasized the parents' role in a child's proper development, and educational toys were understood as tools for ensuring that certain values were passed down. Although so-called educational toys have been a staple of American toy boxes for over two centuries, by the mid-twentieth century a new wave of educational toys that stressed the importance of creativity had begun to take on a renewed significance as parenting concerns shifted. Prior to the 1950s, psychological theories of behaviorism dominated child-rearing discourses. Proponents of these theories postulated that through strict routines and firm discipline parents could control their children's development and thus shape their children into productive members of early-twentieth-century industrial society.[50] But in her book *Adult Supervision Required: Private Freedom and Public Constraints for Children,* sociologist Markella Rutherford shows that, by the late 1950s, psychologists had mostly supplanted behaviorist principles with theories of developmental psychology, which were influenced by Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Rutherford claims that developmental psychology "discarded the previous image of children as unformed creatures in need of

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[49] "LEGO . . . the Sensational Play System of Europe Now Brought to America by Samsonite," *New York Times*, March 12, 1961, 32.

[50] See Markella Rutherford, "Children's Autonomy and Responsibility: An Analysis of Childrearing Advice," *Qualitative Sociology* 32, no. 4 (2009): 339.

training and substituted a model of children as intuitive and exploratory beings whose impulses and wants were indicative of their developmental needs and critical to fulfilling their future potential."[51] According to design historian Amy Fumiko Ogata, advice born from the developmental parenting model encouraged parents to intervene in a child's life "earlier than had been traditionally accepted, and it became a parent's job to stimulate and guide the growing child even before he or she entered school."[52]

Rutherford argues that one consequence of the developmental model is that parents were increasingly held *morally* accountable for how their children turned out, and thus parents needed to pay careful attention to advice from child-rearing authorities to help guide their actions.[53] These authorities contributed to a large, and continually growing, body of parenting guides, advice columns, and consumer objects that were intended to instruct, advise, and assist parents with the formidable task of raising "better" children. Importantly, popular forms of child-rearing advice, typically embodied by magazines such as *Parents,* primarily assumed a white, middle-class audience of mothers who, Rutherford argues, were "especially likely to feel the demands to stimulate their children's intellectual and educational achievements in order to pass on their economic and cultural status to their offspring."[54]

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[51] Markella Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required: Private Freedom and Public Constraints for Parents and Children* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 19. Furthermore, Rutherford points out that Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* was an influential text that interpreted the principles of developmental psychology for popular audiences.

[52] Amy Fumiko Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

[53] Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required*, 20.

[54] Rutherford, "Children's Autonomy and Responsibility," 340.

By the 1960s, Cold War concerns also exerted influence on child-rearing discourses. For white, middle-class parents of the postwar and Cold War eras, the suburban landscape was a haven from outside threats. The suburban house, and the idyllic life it implied, rose in importance during this time because of the privacy and protection that space promised from outsiders (Communists in the abstract but African Americans and other people of color in practice). While the suburban home had become a space of protection, it was also a place in which white, middle-class families understood themselves as taking a stand for the American way of life. During the postwar and Cold War eras, sociologists and social critics suggested that individuality promoted democratic ideals, whereas conformity signaled ties to communism. But according to architecture historian Dianne Harris, the importance of individuality was held in tension with "the growing homogeneity of suburban life," since the irony of the suburb was that a level of conformity was necessary in order to maintain appearances. However, Harris argues that these sociologists' and social critics' "writings called for individuality as achieved through residential privacy as the antidote to conformity." In this way, "privacy fostered self-expression and inward contemplation, both of which facilitated freethinking."[55] Harris elaborates this logic:

> Backyards and houses, then, became key to individualization, a means to autonomy and ultimately, it was hoped, to the strengthening of democracy. The key was to increase the amount of leisure time for suburbanites and to help Americans— especially the new middle majority—achieve a degree of distinction, without

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[55] Dianne Harris, "Race, Class, and Privacy in the Ordinary Postwar House, 1945–1960," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006), 133.

appearing eccentric or radically different. The balance was crucial: one's house and

garden should reflect one's outlook and personality but should conform to a level of

embellishment already established in the neighborhood and following the

guidelines set out in taste-making books and journals.[56]

In other words, it was understood as possible to carve out a space within the predictable

suburban lifestyle to ensure the possibility of free-thinking individualism without

sacrificing the cultural capital gained through the conformity that was necessary to

maintain the appearance of a leisurely suburban life. This was, however, a precarious ideal

deeply situated in the racial and class-based politics of the period.

These Cold War-era concerns about suburban conformity and democratic

individualism influenced shifts in postwar parenting discourses by stressing the

importance of trusting children's sense of their basic physical needs. Rutherford found that

in midcentury parenting advice, "children were being portrayed as autonomous individuals

who could assert their rights" and that parents were expected to "set a few clear and non-

negotiable boundaries around matters of safety" but also to give children the freedom to

explore their "natural" sense of independence by allowing disagreement and negotiation.[57]

However, this emerging form of children's autonomy remained restricted to daily home life

and, especially after the growing fears about stranger danger which began in the 1960s, did

not apply outside the home.[58]

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[56] Harris, "Race, Class, and Privacy," 133.
[57] Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required*, 50–51.
[58] Rutherford, "Children's Autonomy and Responsibility," 346.

In conjunction with the idea that play and exploration would help children develop the skills necessary for a well-adjusted adult life, the suburban home became the primary setting for the development of a child's autonomy. In the 1950s and '60s, separate playrooms were still the luxury of the solidly middle and upper classes, but according to Ogata, the open plans of midcentury suburban architecture typically provided for play space near the kitchen and in other common areas of the house. Bedrooms provided more play space and gave children some semblance and expectation of privacy. If, as Harris argues, the backyard and the garden provided adults with the opportunity to develop their inner selves and distinguish themselves from the crowd, then the playroom provided children time alone with their toys, which child-rearing experts considered essential to children's development of autonomy.[59]

Children's toys have played a number of roles in American society, but one of the most prominent roles is as a facilitator of achievement. As media studies scholar Ellen Seiter points out in her definitive text, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*, "grandiose claims for the educational benefits of toys have been around since the nineteenth century."[60] There is, however, little actual evidence of this connection. Rather, play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith contends, "What is more obvious is that, since the appearance of toys in the seventeenth century, we have steadily and progressively developed a *belief* that there is a connection between toys and achievement."[61] Despite the

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[59] Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child*, 77.
[60] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 67.
[61] Brian Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture* (New York: Gardner Press, 1986), 125. Emphasis added.

lack of direct evidence, the toy industry and the advice industry throughout the early and

mid-twentieth century portrayed the so-called "educational toy" as capable of providing

children with developmental advantages, a kind of head start toward achievement. In

general, this advertising strategy dovetailed nicely with the increasing influence of the

developmental model of child-rearing discourses, as well as consumerism, on people's daily

lives. Historian J. H. Plumb, writing of eighteenth-century England, notes that "few desires

will empty a pocket quicker than social aspiration—and the main route was, then as now,

through education, which combined social adornment with the opportunity of a more

financially rewarding career for children."[62] The same was true of the twentieth-century

United States.

Not all toys, however, were understood to provide the same benefits, and it was up

to the parent, usually the mother, to choose wisely. Although advertisements and advice

columns from the early twentieth century placed some emphasis on the connection

between creativity and education, Ogata argues that a shift in the importance and character

of "creativity" occurred after World War II. Toys that had once been sold under the rubric

of educational toys were by midcentury being criticized by educators, psychologists, and

advice columnists for "[becoming] mindlessly didactic tools of social competition rather

than open-ended objects that might stimulate original thinking."[63] For example, a 1960

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[62] J. H. Plumb, "Children and Consumption," in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (London: HarperCollins, 1984), 292.

[63] Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child*, 50. Historian Lisa Jacobson has shown that parents from as early as the 1920s and 1930s were encouraged by child experts and play reformers to purchase educational toys that would provide multiple play possibilities, stimulate creative activity, and hold children's interest longer. Thus, the concept of creativity and

article in *Parents' Magazine*, while advocating for open-ended play, suggested a middle

ground for parents: "When selecting toys and games, include some which provide free self-

expression as well as those which come with rules and instructions."[64] Consequently, toys

that had once been sold as "educational" were often recast by marketers as "creative" toys.

By the 1960s, creative toys had become the measure for the cultural capital that

educational toys had previously defined. Thus, LEGO's claims to creativity and education

attempted to align their basic plastic brick building toy with middle-class concerns about

children's proper development, achievement, and successful futures.

Safely Nurturing Creativity in the Samsonite Era

Samsonite's subsequent LEGO System ads elaborated on the claims of the earlier

New York Times ad. LEGO stressed two major qualities: safety and creativity. First, LEGO's

complete disavowal of warlike play suggested not only that childhood should remain a

period of innocence but also that LEGO shared parents' concerns and was committed to

helping them protect their children from outside threats. For example, a 1964 ad in

Parents' Magazine reassures parents that "[LEGO] doesn't shoot, it doesn't kill," thus setting

it apart from the multitude of war-related or war-themed toys filling up the toy catalogs

and store shelves.[65] In 1965 and 1966, years in which U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War

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creative play appeared as a part of a rationale for wholesome, educational toys at least as early as the interwar period. See Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[64] Ruth Brecher and Edward Brecher, "Creative Ability . . . What Is It? Who Has It? What Makes It Flourish or Falter?," *Parents' Magazine*, November 1960, 88.

[65] "LEGO," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking,* December 1964. See also Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 71.

began to escalate, two slightly different ads published in *Parents' Magazine* boldly display the word "Peace" in medieval-style font, a visual choice that adds a feeling of tradition and piety. In both, the main text reads: "There is, in this nervous world, one toy that does not shoot or go boom or bang or rat-tat-tat-tat. Its name is LEGO. It makes things."[66] Rather than focusing children on destruction, LEGO instead turns children's attention toward constructive play. Furthermore, at the bottom of the 1965 ad, the copy reads:
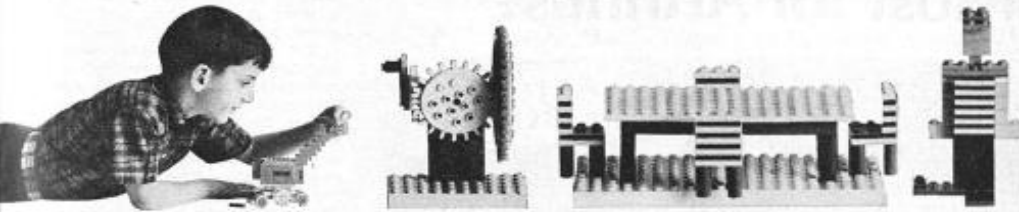
> Let somebody else's child get his kicks tracking a little kid through a gun sight. Let somebody else's child build a bomb shelter in the hollow of an old tree. Remember when the hollow of an old tree was just fun? Heck, war isn't very adventurous anymore. We think there's lots more adventure in a medical lab, or at the U.N. That's one reason we make LEGO. And that's a great reason to buy it.[67]

The implications of this message assure parents that LEGO is safe for kids and can help keep their kids safe. First, the ad ironically invokes the sanctity of children and childhood by turning a gun on the child. The ad implies that the child with the gun lacks morality and innocence. But by putting the gun in the hand of "somebody else's child," the ad invites parents to see themselves as morally better than those parents who would allow their children to play with toys that might be physically or emotionally harmful. The implication is that war toys and war play do not foster children's creativity or imagination and thus war toys have wrongly invaded the imaginative and innocent space of childhood

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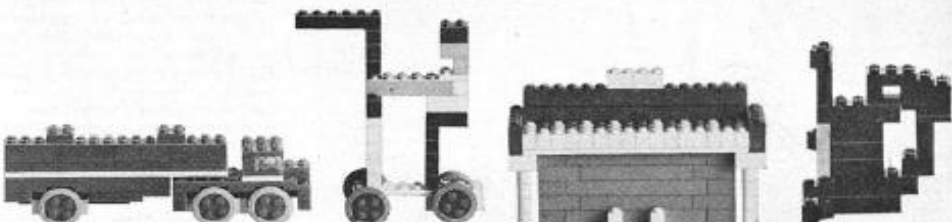
[66] "PEACE," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1965; "PEACE," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1966.
[67] "PEACE," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1965.

Figure 2.1: From *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1965.

and put the child at risk. Second, the ad provides parents with an alternative to those problematic war toys by offering a nostalgic vision of childhood innocence. References to outdoor play, which by the 1960s was beginning to become less common, prompt parents to project a nostalgic memory of childhood onto their children's lives. Although LEGO is, ostensibly, an indoor toy, the children in the ad are playing in front of a blank background, which allows parents to see what they want to see, to imagine whatever setting they wish. Third, the ad connects children's play with their future. Given the uncertainty surrounding the escalating war in Vietnam and ongoing military conscription, LEGO's promises of scientific or international political successes reassure parents that their children are not being encouraged to go to war, either literally or figuratively. Finally, the ad posits all these as concerns that LEGO shares with parents.

At the same time that LEGO opposed these outside threats to children's safety, the ads also suggested that LEGO could help guide children's inner development through autonomous, creative play. Seiter points out that by the 1960s and '70s, toy advertisements consistently used buzzwords such as "creativity," "imagination," or "activity" as a way of marking certain toys as promoting play that encouraged physical and mental development. This association separated creative toys from toys that existed for mere entertainment and the supposedly passive activity of watching television. Toys that could both entertain and teach were necessary because, as Seiter argues, "supplying a toy just so a mother could win time to herself did not jibe with the increasing emphasis on a mother's constant monitoring and stimulation of her child."[68] One way Samsonite's ads speak to these concerns is by

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[68] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 71, 73.

placing a high value on the correlation between creativity (along with, arguably, the

qualities that give rise to creativity) and making something with one's hands. Without

context, this could suggest activities such as making a mud pie or building a lean-to out of

sticks; however, the ads imply that the LEGO System raises that basic action of making

something to a higher level. In a 1972 ad in *Good Housekeeping*, this idea is implemented

metaphorically:

> Kids build LEGO. LEGO builds kids. The two ways your child can make his mark in
>
> life are with his mind and his hands. And if he can develop his mind and his hands
>
> doing something he enjoys, all the better. That's what LEGO is about. More than just
>
> a building toy, LEGO makes anything your child's mind imagines, anything his hands
>
> build. So you might say as he builds LEGO . . . LEGO builds him.[69]

Importantly, two examples of the rhetorical device of chiasmus frame these few sentences.

This use of chiasmus prompts the audience to consider the causal relationship between

kids and LEGO. By zeroing in on the connection between the child's mind and hands, the ad

reaffirms the contemporary idea that children have an innate capacity for creativity and

asserts that parents should turn to LEGO in order to help the child develop those qualities.

Furthermore, by asserting that building with LEGO bricks facilitates the child's creativity in

an unobtrusive manner, LEGO centers itself as a responsible choice for parents because it

allows parents to direct their children in particular ways without overtly appearing to do

so. For example, an earlier 1964 ad in *Good Housekeeping* enthymematically suggests that

LEGO can help parents ensure their child is on the right track without being overbearing:

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[69] "Kids Build LEGO," *Good Housekeeping*, December 1972.

"Johnny thinks he's playing . . . that's the clever thing about LEGO."[70] As with the chiasmus

in the previous example, LEGO enriches play with learning and creativity. A 1967 ad from

Parents' also points to the importance of the child's interiority by declaring LEGO to be "the

thoughtful toy" that is "not just another empty-minded amusement."[71] In this way, LEGO

could be understood to have a kind of built-in layer of supervision. LEGO became a toy that

allowed parents to retain control over their child's mental development without appearing

to violate the private mental space that was deemed necessary for the development of

autonomy. Ultimately Samsonite's LEGO ads suggest that, by purchasing LEGO, parents are

not merely buying their children a toy; they are demonstrating their taste as middle-class

consumers who make discriminating purchases to further their children's futures by

working to develop their children's minds in a productive manner. Thus, LEGO is not

merely a thoughtful toy for children, it is also a toy for thoughtful parents.

The Golden Age of Creativity

Unlike other construction toy staples such as A. C. Gilbert's Erector sets, sales of

which had steadily declined over the 1960s, eventually bankrupting the company, by 1978

LEGO had conquered the American market. Scholars have attributed this success to a

number of factors. Herman suggests that it was the introduction of the LEGO minifig in

1978 that pushed LEGO into the realm of the iconic toy.[72] Konzack states that it was the

introduction of LEGO themes, such as LEGO Town, LEGO Space, and LEGO Castle, that drove

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[70] "Johnny Thinks He's Just Playing," *Good Housekeeping*, December 1964.
[71] "LEGO . . . the Thoughtful Toy," *Parents' Magazine and Better Homemaking*, December 1967.
[72] Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 61.

LEGO's success.[73] Regardless of the reason why, 1978 to 1988 is the most memorable

period of LEGO's history in the United States, and it is the period that the SPARK activists

and others pointed to in 2011 and 2012 in order to illustrate that LEGO once shared the

value set that promotes gender-neutral toys and play.

The period itself is significant because by the late 1970s and early 1980s the last

vestiges of the behavioral parenting model had been replaced by the developmental

parenting model for middle-class families. This change is important because of the way that

the concept of children's autonomy affected the parent-child relationship. According to

Rutherford, the developmental parenting model asked parents to "recognize children's

natural insights in negotiating daily routines and expressing disagreement with their

parents." In this sense, parents no longer needed to impose strict routines and discipline on

their children to mold them into successful adults. This did not mean that parents should

not set any rules or routines or discipline their children, which is what is suggested by the

often negatively used term "permissive parenting." Rather, Rutherford suggests, parenting

had become a process of "constant active negotiation between parents and children in

setting and maintaining those rules," which parents could personalize to meet the needs of

their particular family. Essentially, the parents' role in the parent-child relationship shifted

from an authority who imposed rules to a guide meant to help children discover their way

through developmental milestones, an orientation to parenting that dovetails nicely with

the advice literature's mandate to promote curiosity and creativity in children.

Unsurprisingly, Rutherford reports that middle-class parents often "expressed sheer

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[73] Konzack, "Cultural History of LEGO," 4.

exhaustion with the routine defiance they encountered over simple daily activities like meals, bathing, brushing teeth, dressing, and getting from place to place." But middle-class families tolerated these encounters because they understood such exchanges to provide their children with a highly valued sense of self-expression and independence.[74]

The ad campaign that LEGO ran for LEGO PreSchool sets (renamed Duplo in 1979) and LEGO's Universal Building sets in major women's magazines such as *Parents'*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Day* between 1977 and 1983 associate LEGO with this middle-class parenting discourse in two major ways. First, the ad campaign powerfully visualizes the newly solidified parent-child connection by creating an intimately visual link between the "parent-viewer" and the child in the ad through the LEGO creation. Although the Samsonite ads also attempted to connect the parent-viewer and child, the connection is deepened in the Golden Age ads because all the ads visually enlarge and center the child, rather than the toy itself. Most of the ads showcase a single child (both girls and boys from preschool age to no older than age twelve) in front of a blank, neutral background, and the large captions reference creativity, imagination, discovery, and pride—both the child's pride for the LEGO creation and the parent's pride for the child's accomplishments. This focus implies the importance of treating each child as an individual with singular needs and desires, which parents—alongside LEGO—are meant to nurture.

Moreover, the children in most of the ads appear to be making eye contact with the parent-viewer. They are often holding up their creation as if they might it hand off to the parent-viewer, and their eager and excited faces intimate that they are seeking approval

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[74] Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required*, 59.

from the parent-viewer. For example, in a 1978 ad in *Woman's Day*, a young girl is looking

at the camera and holding up her creation to the parent-viewer. She says through the

caption, "Look what I built with LEGO!"[75] Not only do parents get to witness their child's

creativity in action and their child's pride in accomplishment, but the parents also get to

share the excitement and pride of that moment. This suggests an interactive and

emotionally positive connection between the parent-viewer and the child in the ad. Two

ads, both from 1977, deviate slightly from this structure. In these two ads, the children are

in the process of building and playing with what they have created. The ads do not have

quite the same emotional effect as the ads utilizing eye contact, but they do put the parent-

viewer in a voyeuristic role. From this position, the parent-viewer can watch the child amid

the creative process without interrupting it. This is especially reinforced in the text of an

October 1977 ad in *Good Housekeeping*, which features a boy in the midst of finishing an

airplane-like creation. The copy reads, "LEGO is a playmate for the mind, a pal for the

imagination. Watch your child build. Watch him experiment, problem-solve, triumph! See

his creativity in action. You may see your child as you never have before." The message to

parents is clear: LEGO will help you instill these important values in your children, possibly

in ways you cannot yet imagine.

The second way that the ad campaign links LEGO to the dominant parenting model

is by deftly positioning LEGO as a toy that could mitigate exhausting parent-child

negotiations and instead provide parents with the opportunity to enjoy, and even revel in,

their child's developmental accomplishments. For example, the same 1977 ad from *Good*

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[75] "Look What I Built with LEGO!" *Woman's Day*, April 1978, 99.

Figure 2.2: From *Woman's Day,* April 24, 1978.

Housekeeping focused on redirecting negative interactions into a positive parent-child

bond: "With LEGO Building Bricks, the child's the boss. He can build exactly what he wishes.

Tear it apart if he wants to. Play games he invents. LEGO is a playmate for the imagination.

Watch your child build." Because LEGO's uniqueness arises out of the toy's ability to snap

together and apart easily, it allows children to exert control over their surroundings by

choosing to be constructive or destructive in their play. Parents are encouraged to watch

("Watch him experiment, problem solve, triumph! See his creativity in action") and wait for

the child to come to them to display the creations.[76]

In this ad campaign, LEGO's role as a mediator between parents and children is no

longer just a claim; it has been enacted in a visual metaphor. This visual parent-child bond

is reinforced through the ad text. Importantly, the ads do not simply point out how the

parent is working for the child's future, but the ads also allow parents to enjoy their

present relationship with their child and take enjoyment from the child's accomplishments,

both of which are facilitated by the parent's decision to give the child LEGO. For example, in

a 1978 ad from *Parents' Magazine*, which features a young boy holding up the truck he

built, the text reads:

> His vivid imagination. His spirit of invention. They're qualities you love to see in
>
> him, and nobody knows better than you how important it is to choose a toy that will
>
> bring out his best. That's why we talk to parents as well as children . . . Building with

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[76] "The Most Beautiful Thing Your Child Can Make Is Make-believe," *Good Housekeeping*,
October 1977, 49.

LEGO bricks lets your child feel what it's like to feel proud. And when he comes to

you and says, "Look what I built with LEGO"—his pride is your joy.[77]

If, as Seiter argues, "class difference is enacted, practiced, compared . . . in the kinds of toys

that parents choose for their children," then LEGO's advertising ensured that LEGO became

associated with middle- and upper-middle-class manners, tastes, and comportment by

appealing to the values (educational, creative) that contemporary parenting discourses

suggested were necessary to encourage self-expression, independence, and—by

extension—future success (thus ensuring the child would remain the parents' "pride and

joy").[78] However, as the market for girls' toys increased in importance and visibility over

time, the uneven application of these values across genders in LEGO's advertising and

product lines would eventually make LEGO a target of feminist concerns.

The LEGO Girl Graveyard

Although the present-day dominant parenting model has not strayed far from the

developmental model that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, one thing that has

changed substantially is the wider cultural focus on girls. The second-wave feminist

movement helped to turn academic and popular attention toward girls and the structural

problems that they faced. This attention, in part, also spurred the development of

consumer markets for and about girls in the 1990s and in the 2000s. This was the era of

girl power, girlie-girl culture, and everything pink. Consumer markets were paying an

unprecedented amount of attention to girls and making things available to them that had

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[77] "He's as Proud of That Truck as You Are of Him," *Parents' Magazine*, September 1978, 17.
[78] Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 212.

not before existed specifically for girls. At the same time, popular and academic feminists

raised concerns about how the increasingly bold and pinkified, princess, and girl-power

imagery risked pigeonholing girls into the limited and, they claimed, potentially dangerous

realm of beauty-focused femininity. Other than a mildly successful push for gender-neutral

toys and toy aisles in the early 2010s, these feminists' concerns have mostly fallen on deaf

corporate ears. Pinkification has only intensified over the last couple of decades. For

anyone involved in any way with markets for girls' cultural products since the turn of the

twenty-first century, it would be almost impossible to have missed this "turn to pink" and

the accompanying feminist criticisms.

It is clear from the *Bloomberg Businessweek* article from 2011 that LEGO was fully

aware of this ongoing debate about how to market appropriately to girls and that feminist

critics would not approve of the clearly stereotypical offerings for girls the company was

about to endorse. As part of its strategy, LEGO made a point of disassociating LEGO Friends

from its previous girl-centered offerings, even going so far as to construe them as

embarrassing. This time, LEGO asserted, it was listening directly to girls' tastes and

preferences. However, as this section will show, the logic behind LEGO's "new" approach to

girls has not actually changed much from the logic behind its previous approach. This is

important not only because of SPARK's nostalgic claims suggesting that LEGO used to

understand girls and "gave [them] credit for being creative, smart, and imaginative" but

also because so many people collectively remember LEGO as a gender-neutral toy.[79]

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[79] Cole and Shoemaker Richards, "Tell LEGO." Derek Johnson has pointed out that it is not
clear if SPARK misunderstood, misremembered, or simply did not know LEGO's history or
if the blog's authors relied on this nostalgic claim to provide LEGO a less embarrassing way

For Boys and for Girls

Despite Samsonite's supposed lack of expertise in the toy industry ad world, its marketing campaigns did provide American parents with a consistent image of LEGO as a toy that inherently fostered the creativity and imagination of their children. Part of what makes LEGO's old advertising a viable source of evidence for opponents of LEGO Friends is that in the 1960s and early 1970s LEGO generally did not make explicit claims about gender. LEGO did not have to be explicit in this period because gender roles for children had not yet been heavily questioned in popular discourse. Most people understood and accepted that miniature versions of mom's vacuum, ironing board, or oven were meant for girls and that boys played with construction and building toys (such as A. C. Gilbert's Erector set, which had been exclusively targeted at boys). Furthermore, although pink and blue color coding did make an occasional appearance in major retail catalogs of this period, color had not yet become a primary marker of gender. Instead, gender coding was communicated much more subtly through product placement in catalogs and in stores, and likely by the sales personnel in those stores. Moreover, during this period the use of masculine pronouns to refer to a generic person was taught as grammatically accurate and was common practice, and its presence in LEGO ads is an important and telling slippage in the language that LEGO typically used to refer to children. The company usually used an actual generic term such as "children" or "your child."

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to shift its marketing strategy in SPARK's desired direction. Johnson, "Chicks with Bricks," 91.

Thus, it is entirely possible for contemporary audiences to understand copy such as this from a 1968 ad in *Redbook*, "Give your child enough LEGO and his imagination may get carried away," as flexible enough to be referring to, or at least applicable to, both boys and girls.[80] That a girl is pictured in this particular ad helps to reinforce that perception, although she is dwarfed in the image by a huge LEGO elephant statue and a boy on a ladder who is working on that statue. Although many LEGO ads showed boys, girls did appear in several LEGO ads and were depicted playing with LEGO, but usually with a boy. The Peace ads from 1965 and 1966 included a young girl, who appears to be about the same age as the boy in the ad. Two ads from 1967, one of which was published in *Life Magazine*, include a picture of an older girl building a suburban house.[81] The 1968 *Redbook* ad shows a young girl playing with LEGO.[82] A commercial available on YouTube from the Samsonite era specifically states that LEGO is appropriate for girls.[83] The ads were also reinforced by Samsonite's packaging and a few customer and retailer catalogs, which often included images of girls playing with LEGO.

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[80] "Give Your Child Enough LEGO," *Redbook*, December 1968, 39.

[81] This same image is reused in other places as well. See "LEGO, the Toy They Won't Be Tired of by Dec. 26th," *Life Magazine*, November 17, 1976, 13; and "LEGO . . . the Thoughtful Toy."

[82] "Give Your Child Enough LEGO."

[83] 1955 LEGO System Commercial, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0aGLzfZ3HJU&feature=youtu.be&list=PLVrotqT19he v8ES75NR7zpJadtoCYdZ2Z. Although this commercial is dated 1955 by the YouTube uploader, LEGO was not available through Samsonite in the United States in 1955. The ad must be from between 1961 and 1972, but I have been unable to confirm any dates for commercials produced for Samsonite. SPARK activists and other debate participants circulated this particular video along with LEGO's 1981 "What It Is, Is Beautiful" ad during the LEGO Friends controversy, and audiences widely accepted the video as authentic.

Furthermore, Herman states that in 1971 LEGO released two sets that only featured

girls on the boxes. These sets included a dollhouse-style living room and kitchen. In 1974,

LEGO released the Family set, which included the parts to build five figures: a grandmother,

a mother, a father, and two children (a younger boy and a somewhat older girl). Although it

is not certain that these sets were available in the United States, as LEGO released them

after the Samsonite contract ended and before LEGO had established a headquarters in the

United States, figures from the Family set, according to Herman, were included in the

"home sets," such as the 1974 Complete Kitchen set.[84] Other than the fact that only girls

were pictured on the boxes, LEGO did not blatantly categorize these "home sets" as for girls

or directly suggest that girls be excluded from playing with other sets.

Despite this somewhat more equal representation of girls and boys in the

advertising (at least in comparison to the present day), LEGO's advertising strategy and

product design in the 1960s and early '70s reflected a distinct gender bias. This bias was

most visible when LEGO tried to acknowledge girls specifically and when LEGO focused on

matching particular sets to age level. Take, for example, a 1969 information booklet made

by Samsonite to help salespeople pitch LEGO to mothers who were seeking toys for their

children.[85] This booklet essentially lays out a mock interaction with a mother. She first asks

the salesperson, "What could you suggest in a really great toy?" Samsonite's suggested

response is, "The best toy I know is LEGO. It lasts forever and children never tire of it." This

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[84] See Herman, *Million Little Bricks*, 62.
[85] Samsonite Corporation, "Presenting LEGO Building Toy," 1969, T Catalog, NK 9509.99
.S27 P74, The Stephen and Diane Olin Toy Catalog Collection, Brian Sutton-Smith Library
and Archives of Play, The Strong Museum, Rochester, NY.

kind of back and forth question and response between the mother and the salesperson

continues for eleven more pages. Each page includes one question and one answer, as well

as an illustration of a child playing with LEGO. In ten of twelve cases, the child is clearly a

boy.

The two exceptions picture an infant girl (marked by a bow in her hair) and a child

referred to as a "little girl." On the page with the little girl, the mother says, "I'm looking for

a toy for a little girl who has a birthday coming up." The salesperson's response is, "Every

girl has lots of dolls and loves to build houses and furniture for doll play." Unsurprisingly, in

the illustration the girl is holding a doll and standing next to a house made of LEGO. Boys in

this booklet, however, in addition to being shown in the act of constructing something, are

depicted as a construction worker, a pilot, a graduate, an artist, a snorkeler, and a

successful student. Girls can play with LEGO because they can build dollhouses and play

housewife with it. Boys can do whatever they want. Girls are passive; boys are active. This

kind of gender stereotyping, perceived by many people to be common sense at the time, is

indicative of the problem about which present-day activists are still concerned. Whereas

girls and boys can both legitimately build and play with LEGO, the way that they play and

enact creativity is shown and claimed to be naturally different.

The second exception in the brochure includes an infant girl opening a box of LEGO

bricks. In this case, the mother says, "My goodness! There's so many different packages of

LEGO. I don't know which package to buy." The salesperson responds, "LEGO has a package

scientifically designed for every age and pocketbook. The age is marked on the box." This

response demonstrates how LEGO advertising responds to midcentury concerns about the

stages of childhood development and the matching of an appropriate toy to a child's age. Not only is LEGO dedicated to the science of child development, but the company carefully delineates sets by age level and stresses that there is a LEGO product appropriate for all ages. This is a savvy business practice that assuages parents' concerns about developmental milestones and safety while at the same time suggesting that it is always appropriate to purchase LEGO no matter your child's age. Additionally, it also hints at another assumption that LEGO's advertising and products have consistently made but that became more distinct in the succeeding decades. This is the idea that girls will eventually age out of LEGO because their interests will become so different from that of boys. Age becomes especially important for LEGO as the company begins to market larger LEGO bricks, which will eventually become known as Duplo, to the preschool market.

Ultimately, Samsonite's LEGO ads encouraged parents (primarily mothers) to purchase LEGO for all their children. What parents chose to purchase for their boys or their girls was at least partially dependent on the parents' orientation to gender norms. By providing domestic toys and by stressing that dollhouses were solely the purview of girls, LEGO allowed parents to distinguish the toy by gender (thus selling to more parents) without taking a direct stance on appropriately gendered activities. The brick itself may be essentially gender neutral, but what was done with those bricks was deeply subject to prevalent gender norms. This kind of indirect gender stereotyping would continue and expand in full force during LEGO's Golden Age.

Girls of a Certain Age

The marketing tactics in the Golden Age women's magazine ads work for present-day activists' purposes because the ads appear to include girls in equal numbers, the children all wear similarly plain and boyish clothing (by today's standards), the ad copy assigns imaginative qualities to both boys and girls, and all the children build complicated (but, importantly, age-appropriate) structures. However, SPARK's present-day conceptualization of this Golden Age ad campaign as being indicative of LEGO's commitment to both boys and girls (understood in twenty-first-century terms as its commitment to gender neutrality) has several problems because it neglects how age and gender have functioned together to structure LEGO's various product offerings over the years.

For one, LEGO has consistently assumed that girls will age out of LEGO, which has had the unfortunate consequence of denying girls more complex builds. For example, in 1984, an ad from *Woman's Day* claimed that "the LEGO advantage" was "un-outgrowable." This ad is different from the typical ads, which show a single child, in that it uses multiple children at various ages. There are three rows with three pairs of children and one more row with only one pair. The viewer's eye is meant to read each row from left to right and from top to bottom, and the accompanying text follows this order as well. The first pair of children are toddlers constructing a structure with Duplo. The next pair has one of the toddlers from the previous pair with a slightly older girl. These two children add to the previous structure. This pattern continues across all three rows until the fourth row, which includes an older boy and a toddler. The text below the rows reads:

The LEGO System starts here, with the big blocks of a Duplo Pre-school set. And it

grows as your child grows. Because blocks from Duplo and LEGO sets work

together. And we make more sets with more special pieces than anyone. It's the toy

kids add to rather than outgrow. That's the LEGO advantage. Our toys are un-

outgrowable.[86]

This ad is indicative of several ways that age and gender intersect in LEGO's advertising.

First, it makes LEGO's market segmentation by age quite literal by depicting in linear

fashion progressively older children. In terms of the company's advertising in the United

States, the most important thing that LEGO did in this period was to refine its market

segmentation tactics by age. By working to delineate more clearly the age groups for which

the various LEGO sets were most appropriate, the company was able to expand its

relevance across a wider time span of childhood and create more targeted advertisements.

Not only did age stratification allow LEGO to speak more directly to appropriate

developmental milestones for specific age groups, but it also helped the company to enter

the burgeoning preschool market with the Duplo line, which included larger blocks and

figures that were safe for children as young as one year old and were also compatible with

the regular LEGO sets.

Second, the connectability of LEGO and Duplo reinforce the growth metaphor and

suggests that LEGO sets are also a smart financial purchase because they remain relevant

not only as the child grows but also as the family grows. The last row brings this home by

showing one of the toddlers from the first row placing the signature Duplo googly eyes

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[86] "Un-outgrowable," *Woman's Day*, December 11, 1984, 57.

piece on the top of the complicated structure that the older boys had finished in the previous row, while one of the older boys cheers him on.

Third, the growth metaphor suggests that LEGO is invested in children of all ages. However, girls are only present in the first two rows of the ad when toddlers and young children are playing with Duplo and beginner LEGO sets. The middle pair of children in the second row consists of two girls. The older girl is blond and has curly hair. She is looking at the younger girl and appears to be shrugging as if she is unsure what to do. In the next group, this same blond girl is paired with a slightly older boy. He is placing bricks on the top of the structure, while the girl leans on the surface in front of them with her head in her hand looking wistfully either toward the boy or at the piece he is adding to the toy. Regardless, the message is clear: Girls age out of LEGO because their interests eventually take them elsewhere, apparently away from toys and toward boys.[87] But the older boys who constitute the third row remain engaged in the build; they add more complex pieces such as wheels and what appears to be a small pulley system, possibly pulled from LEGO's Expert Builder sets (which would later become LEGO Technic).

In addition to LEGO's marketing, several of its product lines from this period also reflect the idea that girls age out of LEGO because they have different interests than boys.

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[87] A commercial very similar to this ad also ran in 1984. In it a young boy plays with Duplo and hands a piece off to a slightly older girl who adds some LEGO pieces. She then hands that off to an older boy who is playing with LEGO Castle, and he adds to the collaborative piece as well. He hands this off to an even older boy who is using one of the LEGO Expert vehicles, and the older boy adds the piece to another more complicated creation. Then the little boy comes back asking for his Duplo piece. Again, we see that the girl does not advance past the basic Universal Building sets. See Beta MAX, "1984 Lego and Duplo Commercial," *YouTube*, published on November 29, 2014, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWLwJGPJXrY.

Figure 2.3: From Woman's Day, December 1984.

This is best demonstrated through LEGO's very short-lived Scala product line for young

girls, introduced in 1979 and discontinued in 1980. LEGO Scala used special bricks that

clicked together to form bracelets, necklaces, rings, pendants, and a mirror. This new

format essentially removed all substantive building and instead asked girls to create

jewelry and look at themselves wearing it.[88]

Fabuland, introduced in 1977 for ages three to seven and discontinued in 1989, is

another example of LEGO's assumptions about girls' play but a slightly subtler one.

Fabuland is similar to Friends only in the sense that it is character- and story-focused and

the Fabuland ads refer to the product line as "play 'n' pretend sets."[89] Fabuland assumes

that some children are less interested in building and prefer to play pretend. The sets

require much less building—for example, the walls of the buildings are typically one

piece—and more closely resemble dollhouses than LEGO's other theme sets. Fabuland was

also unique in that it was accompanied by stories for parents to read aloud and, according

to LEGO's official history, was the first LEGO theme "to feature licensed products such as

storybooks, playing cards, children's clothing and animated TV series."[90]

Fabuland characters were all anthropomorphic animals and were the first to receive

official names, such as Edward Elephant and Hannah Hippopotamus. Despite the inclusion

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[88] LEGO would resurrect the Scala name in 1997 as a set of dolls that once again included minimal building.

[89] Despite initial criticisms, Friends has been found to have slightly more complicated builds than other LEGO sets marketed to boys. See Rebecca W. Black, Bill Tomlinson, and Ksenia Korobkova, "Play and Identity in Gendered LEGO Franchises," *International Journal of Play* 5, no. 1 (January 2016): 64–76.

[90] "LEGO Fabuland," LEGO, accessed October 7, 2018. https://www.LEGO.com/en-us/LEGOhistory/articles/legoland-fabuland-89ed9a0951314507915def5b1dbdcb0a.

of animal characters and more traditionally "masculine" settings, such as a service station,

than are typical in the LEGO Friends sets, gender norms still structured the characters'

occupations and the spaces they inhabited. For example, Marjorie Mouse is a housekeeper

while Ernie Elephant is a street sweeper. Michael Mouse goes driving in his new car while

Catherine Cat stays in her kitchen.[91]

Furthermore, when children are present in Fabuland ads, they are predominantly

girls, although boys do appear sporadically in Fabuland instruction booklets.[92] The text of

an ad for Fabuland that features Catherine Cat's house hints that this world is meant for

girls:

> LEGO Fabuland is something brand-new for children who love to pretend! The
>
> emphasis is on play, so building is quick and easy. The rooms are roomy enough to
>
> play inside. And the sassy animal figures can star in any drama your child dreams
>
> up. Six different Fabuland sets—all the fun your child can imagine.[93]

Here the focus is on the set's resemblance to a dollhouse. The descriptor "sassy," an

unusual reference for children's toys, imports troublesome forms of stereotypical

femininity, such as the trope of the sassy black woman or the provocatively outspoken, and

usually sexualized, woman. In this ad, Catherine Cat is depicted on the balcony with a

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[91] In this regard, Fabuland characters and occupations were very similar to popular children's books by American author Richard McLure Scarry.

[92] However, it is not clear from online archives if these are the same instructions that appear in American sets. See "Instructions for LEGO 3663 Merry-Go-Round," Brick Instructions, accessed October 7, 2018, http://LEGO.brickinstructions.com/en/LEGO_instructions/set/3663/Merry-Go-Round.

[93] "Fabuland," *Good Housekeeping*, November 1979, 22.

speech bubble that reads, "Wait'll you see the FABULAND storybooklet. It stars ME!"[94]

Taken together, the copy and speech bubble suggest at least two possible readings. It is

possible to interpret Catherine Cat as an empowering figure who is prompting girls to

make themselves the star of their own story rather than a supporting character. Or

Catherine Cat's anthropomorphic combination of sass, drama, and self-involvement might

suggest other stereotypical assumptions about women's attachment to appearance and

beauty as constituted through the male gaze.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of story-focused sets, with

Fabuland LEGO again targeted products with less complex builds primarily at young girls.

The most complicated LEGO set directed specifically to girls during the Golden Age period

was LEGO Homemaker, which was introduced in 1979 in the United States for the

intermediate builder range, ages five to ten, and was discontinued in 1982.[95] In this case,

LEGO was not shy about this theme's relationship to girls. The introductory text for the

Homemaker theme in LEGO's 1979 retailer catalog reads:

> It's a first for LEGO Systems! A toy line designed specifically with girls in mind. The
>
> new Homemaker sets come with adult figures, kids, and all the accessories that
>
> make a house a home. There are three popular themes in all—the Family Room,

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[94] "Fabuland."

[95] According to the Unofficial LEGO Sets/Parts Collectors Guide, LEGO Homemaker was introduced in Europe, Australia, and Canada in 1971, and not all sets were available in the United States. Regardless, the sets themselves reflect LEGO's assumptions about girls' play and interests.

Kitchen and Bath. A perfect collection for the LEGO homemaker. So get ready for all

that shelf activity as Mom discovers new LEGO products for girls.[96]

Thus, advertisements for LEGO Homemaker closely followed established expectations for

the girls' toy market. Furthermore, only girls appear in Homemaker ads or the Homemaker

section of retail catalogs. Ad copy reinforces this connection, such as this line from a 1979

ad in *Woman's Day*: "Just what your daughter's been waiting for!"[97] For both Fabuland and

LEGO Homemaker, the clear analog is the dollhouse. The 1979 Homemaker ad even

suggests that girls are more interested in furniture arrangement, decorating, and

accessories, all staples of the dollhouse. But the problem is not that these sets encouraged

kids to play pretend more than to build. After all, once the minifig was introduced in 1978,

commercials for LEGO Town, Space, and Castle typically stressed play stories over building.

Rather, Fabuland and Homemaker, which existed only in the preschool, beginner, and

intermediate age range, appeared off-limits or unrelated to boys.

Contrast these three Golden Age product lines, all of which have been discontinued,

with LEGO Expert Builder, introduced in 1978 for ages nine to fourteen. Its descendant is

still in production today under the name LEGO Technic. During the Golden Age, the product

line included such models as the Auto Chassis, Farm Tractor, Harvester, Dune Buggy, Go-

Cart, Sky Copter, Mobile Crane, Fork Lift, Bulldozer, Motorcycle, and Auto Engine. For the

Expert Builder product line, LEGO advertised directly to boys through six ads that ran in

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[96] LEGO Systems, Inc., "LEGO brand products: '79," 1979, T Catalog, NK9509.99.L445 L445 1979, The Stephen and Diane Olin Toy Catalog Collection, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, The Strong Museum, Rochester, NY.
[97] "Advertisement: LEGO," *Woman's Day*, December 18, 1979, 41.

Boy's Life magazine and several comic books between 1978 and 1983. Rather than the focus on creativity seen in the women's magazine ads, the Expert Builder series is all about building to specification. Each ad primarily features one model. Technical jargon and diagrams are used to point out special features of each model, and the page layout calls to mind technical specs. Two of the ads even include a grid-line background behind the vehicle, which enhances the technical feeling. Gone is the focus on creativity and unlimited imagination. Instead, the emphasis is on realism, both in the look of the finished product and the implied skill level necessary to put it together. The boxes and pieces heavily emphasize black and other dark colors instead of the usual primary color palette, making Expert Builder one of LEGO's first uses of color as a gender marker. The Expert Builder ads suggest to boys that the payoff is in the challenge and in the expertise that one gains from mastery. With that mastery comes not only bragging rights but also pride in the accomplishment of a difficult, and adult, task. The ads tell boys to "show your friends what an expert builder you are" and state that "You'll be proud to say, 'I did it myself.'" Even though a builder would most likely require the included instructions to build these sets, the ad copy obscures this in saying, "You build it from the ground up." This is not the LEGO System that builds kids as kids build with LEGO. Rather, the Expert Builder series is "Definitely not kid's stuff."[98]

These Golden Age ads and products suggest that when LEGO tries to speak *specifically* to girls through particular product lines, rather than to children more generally, gendered assumptions about play structure those products and reveal that LEGO's

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[98] "Challenge #8859," *Boys' Life*, November 1981, inside cover.

Figure 2.4: From Boys' Life, November 1981.

conception of "children" is based on how the company imagines the way that *boys* play. That is, when LEGO is speaking to boys and girls, it does not actually consider the similarities or differences of girls' play in relation to boys' play. Rather, like many toymakers, scientists and social scientists, psychologists, and parenting advice gurus, LEGO lumps girls in with boys. There is not a similar contradiction for girls to cross over—at this age—into boys' territory as there is for boys at any age. What works for boys is assumed to be good enough for girls, and girls have benefited from that to an extent, but whatever qualities might be considered the "girl" part of girls' toys are never considered important for boys. Furthermore, much as tomboys are eventually coaxed, if not coerced, into becoming "ladies," girls are always aged out of LEGO's target marketing scheme. As versions of LEGO sets increasingly gain complexity and realism, girls begin to drop out of the marketing.

It is important to understand that LEGO knew in the late 1970s and early 1980s that it was purposefully focusing the majority of its products on themes for which it understood boys to be interested and that its attempts to reach girls were ancillary and wrapped up in gender stereotypes. The introduction of LEGO Friends was not the first time that the company had found it necessary to defend its position. A LEGO-friendly article published in the *New York Times* in 1977, when LEGO was jump-starting its major advertising campaigns in the United States, demonstrates the company's attitude toward that critique:

As a privately owned multinational company, LEGO has encountered some unexpected problems. For instance, the company has been the target of feminists for promoting some LEGO sets—particularly advanced units just entering the United

States market—as boys' products. Mr. Holck Anderson agrees that the company

should be more neutral. But Mr. Ambeck-Masden said: "We know that boys are

interested in these things, and they have been developed for boys. We have a few

boxes especially made for girls, too. We can't change the whole world's attitudes

toward children and sex roles."[99]

Not unlike the 2011 cover story in *Bloomberg Businessweek*, this article acknowledges

LEGO's problems with gender but casts the company as a reluctant participant in gender

normalization and, to some extent, the victim of overwrought feminists. Despite SPARK's

claims, and a general public consensus, that LEGO was once a company committed to the

best interests of both boys and girls, LEGO's twentieth-century attempts to create and

market product lines specifically for girls relied heavily on gendered stereotypes and the

assumption that there are innate differences between girls' and boys' play.

Therefore, a nostalgic call to return to the "gender-neutral" Universal Building sets

advertised in the Golden Age women's magazine ads poses a set of problems when

considered literally. The claim that these ads show that LEGO was once a gender-neutral

toy is based on several visual cues in the ads, and in some cases the absence of certain

visual cues. For one, the ad campaign pictures both boys and girls, and in two ads even

pictures a boy and a girl together. This is somewhat unusual in today's toy market, in which

boys and girls are not often pictured playing together. Because of LEGO's intense focus on

boys over the last couple of decades, the mere presence of a girl feels unusual, and boys and

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[99] Robert D. Hershey Jr., "Lego: How It All Came Together," *New York Times*, December 25, 1977.

girls together become an especially noteworthy image when viewed in the twenty-first century. Second, most of the ads—and certainly the 1981 ad that circulated during the Friends controversy—picture young children, either preschool age or quite close to it, which implies innocence and in the twenty-first-century context helps to assuage—and also elide—some concerns about sexualization. In conjunction with their young ages, the children are wearing similar clothing—primarily jeans or overalls and shirts with colors that generally do not signal present-day cues for femininity. But this comparison obscures the fact that 1970s unisex clothing trends were, according to fashion historian Jo Paloetti, essentially masculine.[100] For unisex clothing to be considered legitimate, it required the erasure of obvious feminine coding. Most of the feminine-coded traits that surfaced in men's clothing in these years (such as "velvet jackets and flowing shirts" or "expanded color palettes, softer fabrics, and a profusion of decorative details") were not adopted in the long term, in the way that pants were adopted for women's fashion.[101] A similar logic is at work with the primary color palette of the pictured LEGO sets. Finally, the ads advertise sets that LEGO at the time referred to as "Universal Building sets," which coincides nicely with present-day gender-neutral terminology.[102] However, what is not apparent in the present-day context from these ads is the fact that although the Universal Building sets were not linked by name to a specific object (such as a house or car or airplane), each set included pictures of what could be built with the set and instructions to help kids build

[100] Jo B. Paoletti, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).
[101] Jo B. Paloetti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 59.
[102] Similar sets still exist on a smaller scale and are called "Basic" LEGO sets.

those things. This was especially true for the "advanced" level of Universal Building sets for ages seven to twelve that were created to provide more realism, inching closer and closer to LEGO's Expert Builders Series, which was intended specifically for boys. Ultimately, a literal interpretation of the ads as gender neutral calls into question present-day definitions of gender neutrality and the concept's dependence on the devaluation of femininity through the reliance on masculine coding and the erasure of feminine coding.

Conversely, if the nostalgic reference to the Golden Age ads is not intended to be taken literally, such that the reference indirectly imports existing arguments and conclusions from twenty-first-century pinkification and sexualization debates, then a different set of issues emerges. In the next section, I consider the issues stemming from the relationship between nostalgia and sexualization discourse.

Make LEGO Great Again

Bloomberg Businessweek's decision to use a mini-doll on the cover as if it were a cover model for a celebrity or fashion magazine is emblematic of the way in which girls and young women in the twenty-first century have been positioned as empowered to take over the world while simultaneously at risk of exploitation and regulation. It is an interesting choice for a cover because while the article itself carefully works to legitimize LEGO's choice to center a beauty-based, "girlie" femininity, the cover image provocatively exploits those same elements of the Friends sets, which most clearly embody the cultural anxieties attached to girls' empowerment: a sense of control over one's sexual awareness.

In her book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, youth sociologist Anita Harris argues that young women, girls, and girlhood have become the site where

people deal with the precarious social and economic logic of late modernity, which requires people to invest in themselves and make choices to ensure their success without state intervention. Harris contends that "power, opportunities, and success are all modeled by the 'future girl'—a kind of young woman celebrated for her 'desire, determination and confidence' to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals." According to Harris, this vision of young women was made possible by the new possibilities that feminism opened for girls and the way in which ideologies of individualism and choice meshed with broad conceptualizations of girl-power feminism to make girls "the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity." The result is that "educated, young, professional career women with glamorous consumer lifestyles appear to be everywhere," but unfortunately, the realities of young women's lives do not typically match this precariously put together picture-perfect success story. Unsurprisingly, then, one of the downsides of being uplifted as the twenty-first century's prototypical version of success is that girls and young women have simultaneously been subjected to more intense social scrutiny and regulation.[103]

Generally speaking, Harris is primarily concerned with young women and, to some degree, adolescent girls. However, the phenomenon she describes applies to younger girls to the extent that we understand children must be raised to "be" a certain way as adults. This means that the anxieties tied to the notion of the future girl are translated, at least in part, through dominant parenting discourses. Rutherford argues that one of the most

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[103] Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1, 6, 8.

important changes in parenting models in the twentieth century was the emphasis on children's private autonomy and the expression of emotion as a fundamental source of children's self-development. She asserts that since the 1980s self-esteem has become "the chief indicator of both children's present well-being and their future success." The result is that in order to be eventually seen as whole and moral adults capable of making good choices that lead to success, children must have a properly developed sense of emotional competence and self-esteem. While children's inner lives have taken on this increased significance, Rutherford argues that children's public lives have become increasingly constrained and stripped of responsibility and independence. Instead, parents must constantly supervise their children, further entrenching childhood as "a period of dependence, irresponsibility, and incompetence."[104] In the uncertain socioeconomic environment of late modernity, parents are charged with protecting children from outside threats to their proper emotional development.

One area in which young girls are specifically perceived to be at serious and constant risk is from sexualized media and cultural products. This concern developed largely out of academic and popular feminist critiques of the girl-power cultural industry, which itself grew out of increasing social anxieties in the 1980s about girls' lack of self-esteem. Ultimately, sexualization is said to interfere with girls' ability to learn how to make the kinds of choices that parents (as representatives of society at large) think girls must make in order to be successful in our increasingly insecure world. During the twenty-first century, and especially since the publication of Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My*

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[104] Rutherford, *Adult Supervision Required*, 152.

Daughter in 2011, public concern about the harmful effects of sexualization on young girls

has been wrapped up in the debates over the pinkification of girlhood, particularly with

regard to toy choice, of which the LEGO Friends controversy is emblematic.

In her book *Becoming Sexual: A Critical Appraisal of the Sexualization of Girls*, social

psychologist R. Danielle Egan deconstructs the knowledge claims underlying anti-

sexualization narratives. She argues that the logic behind sexualization is tautological and

relies upon a basic set of assumptions about the way in which "the toxic mix of sexualizing

media and commodities (e.g. Bratz dolls, thongs, tee-shirts) transforms girls between the

ages of 8 and 12 (or 'tweens') into self-sexualizing subjects at risk for a host of mental,

physical, cognitive and relational problems." These assumptions play into the prevailing

parenting discourse that Rutherford argues essentially charges parents to protect

children's inner lives from outside, or public, threats, even if that requires regulating their

independence. Moreover, Egan argues that the sexualization literature, which is spread

across many disciplines, "all too often . . . relies upon hyperbole instead of empirical

research" about what girls are actually doing. Ultimately, Egan demonstrates that the

empirical research on girls' sexuality or sexual activity does not support the heightened

level of risk implied by anti-sexualization narratives. However, the crux of her argument is

that the heart of the matter is not whether the sexualization literature is misguided, but

rather the fact that "underneath the hyperbole lies the desire to defend against the

unbearable costs of living in an increasingly fragmented, alienating, and unequal cultural

landscape." Essentially, the anxiety occurs because the relatively unstable social conditions

of late modernity get transferred into fears about the corruption of girlhood, which

ultimately equate to the "[transformation of] middle-class white girlhood into something monstrous and pathological." Egan contends that this monstrous girlhood symbolizes the ruinous and defiled future of middle-class, heterosexual femininity.[105] In this way, attempts to regulate girlhood femininity are born out of a more general concern about the possibility of a future and the duty that parents have to protect that future.

Although the claims made by SPARK activists and others critical of LEGO Friends are not quite so hyperbolic as to imply that LEGO Friends alone can turn girls into corrupted and hypersexed monsters, they do deploy evocative language and reasoning intended to stir up emotional concern related to this wider anxiety as an impetus for parents to take action. It is important to understand how these types of hyperbolic sexualization claims affect the effectiveness of feminist arguments such as that against LEGO Friends because of the way that the hyperbolic claims allow attention to be turned away from a critique of the underlying power structures in a gendered social hierarchy toward the regulation of "correct" forms of femininity. Moreover, these hyperbolic claims open the door for more specious concerns about feminist hypocrisy and agenda-setting, such as those proffered by people such as Jesus Diaz or the author of the Feminists Freak Out over LEGO Friends blog.

Because public memories of LEGO and LEGO bricks wield such affective force in American public memory, those criticizing LEGO Friends faced an uphill battle. SPARK activists' original blog posts and social media presence expressed much more disdain and anger than later posts in which they attempted to clarify and justify their specific criticisms.

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[105] R. Danielle Egan, *Becoming Sexual: A Critical Appraisal of the Sexualization of Girls* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 2, 5, 7.

However, SPARK consistently framed their criticisms of LEGO through disappointment and nostalgia. Rather than contesting the public's shared memories of LEGO's reputation, SPARK's arguments relied on those memories to persuade parents that LEGO Friends is misguided: "But we all know that smart marketing does *not* equal social responsibility, and since LEGO has always been known as a toy company that values the educational and developmental benefits of the products, we at SPARK hope that LEGO will still see the value of making sure their Friends line, and the rest of their products, send better messages to girls."[106] Furthermore, SPARK implored LEGO to rethink its position because "we know LEGO can be that one company that offers girls the message that they have choices."[107] Embedded in this plea to LEGO is a request for SPARK's audience to look back to LEGO's history to see how LEGO could improve the Friends product lines in ways that reflected a version of that shared memory of gender neutrality. SPARK's petition, in particular, relied on the 1981 "What it is, is beautiful" ad which concentrates the viewer's attention on a little girl with pigtails wearing boyish overalls. This image serves not only as a stand-in for SPARK's (as well as other critics of Friends') conceptualization of gender neutrality, but it also stands in for SPARK's conceptualization of a respectable, feminist femininity.

To point out this problem is not to suggest that SPARK activists or others speaking against LEGO Friends do not have reasonable objections to aspects of the new product line or to portray them as angry feminists "out to get the LEGO Friends banned because [they]

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[106] Cole, "Why Are We Still."
[107] "Our Letter to LEGO," SPARK Movement (blog), January 20, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/01/20/our-letter-to-lego/.

hate pink."[108] Rather it is to point out and interrogate the emotionally evocative nature of

these assertions that are meant to persuade people to act based on fears about young girls

who *might* learn to "[refuse] the norms of 'respectable femininity' and middle-class sexual

decorum." And as part of a call to action, the strength of this kind of fear is potent. As Egan

explains, "The extremity of the scope and damage put forward by activists attempts to

strike fear and anxiety in the reader. . . . Adult inaction, we are told, is tantamount to child

abuse."[109] Parents *must* act in order to protect their daughters from the danger posed by

"the lowest common denominator version of girlhood."[110] However, this call to action is

deeply based on unexamined assumptions about appropriate gender presentation and

inappropriate transgressions of femininity in relationship to middle-class gender norms.

The boundaries of acceptable femininity are largely determined by class-based

assumptions of manners and taste. At this level, taste and manners are not determined by

individual preference but are culturally designated.[111] Thus, qualifiers and descriptions

that separate the tasteful from the tasteless are not indisputable. Rather, they are often

highly contested. However, Egan argues that "Middle-class perceptions and/or fantasies

regarding the poor have been taken for granted as truthful and have underpinned social

movements (social purity, hygiene, and eugenics), disciplines (hygiene, medicine,

criminology, sociology, and psychology), and institutions (public health and social work)

which sought to regulate and normalize the erotic practices of the working class, the poor,

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[108] Shoemaker Richards, "Meeting."
[109] Egan, *Becoming Sexual*, 81, 111.
[110] Cole and Shoemaker Richards, "Tell LEGO."
[111] Bourdieu, *Distinction*. See also, Egan, *Becoming Sexual*, 81–89.

the immigrant, or the colonized."[112] Within the context of the pinkification and

sexualization debates, such as during the LEGO Friends controversy, such assumptions

seek to regulate and normalize a version of "acceptable" girlhood femininity that must

eschew overtly feminine-coded visual markers or stereotypical feminine interests and

instead espouse "neutralized" versions of stereotypically masculine visual markers and

pursuits. Thus, LEGO Friends, with its unabashedly feminine occupations, interests, and

appearances is anathema to middle-class standards of femininity, standards that warn

parents of the possible corruption of their daughters or a risk to their future success.

In the case of the LEGO Friends debate, feminist activists and critics communicate

the boundaries of respectability through an affect of dismissiveness. For example, here are

some ways that opponents refer to what they consider to be the sexualized aspects of LEGO

Friends:

> What it comes down to is this: our problem isn't with the line itself (although
>
> we probably wouldn't play with it). Our problem is with the way that LEGO is saying
>
> that girls need pastel blocks, cupcakes, and lipsticks.[113]

> I don't want them to be hemmed in by pink or shopping mania.[114]

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[112] Egan, *Becoming Sexual*, 81.

[113] Melissa Campbell, "LEGO: The Good, the Bad, and the Frilly," SPARK Movement (blog), January 19, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/01/19/lego-the-good-the-bad-and-the-frilly/.

[114] Bates, "The LEGO Friends Protest."

Comic strips with the new LEGO Friends characters going to a cafe (yawn) and instead of a surfing themed activity, there's an activity centered around a lost puppy (double yawn).[115]

They live in Heartlake City and have a penchant for pastels and flowers and purses. You know, all those things that little girls are genetically programmed to looooove . . . Oh, boy.[116]

We want you to remember that there are lots of girls not interested in sets that invite them to lounge poolside with drinks and sing in clubs. Take a look at the ones in our petition video—those are *real* girls.[117]

In all these examples, the markers of femininity the authors consider to be stereotypical—such as manically shopping for cupcakes and lipstick or lounging at a café or pool instead of actively surfing—are ridiculed or otherwise dismissed as legitimate interests. Some hedging occurs, which attempts to suggest that the Friends sets are not entirely useless, but ultimately a value judgment is made because, after all, "we probably wouldn't play with it."[118] The audience is prompted to understand that these things have no real substance. Real girls, we are told, do not want these things.

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[115] Seila Rizvic, "LEGO Magazine: Girl Stuff and 'Regular' Stuff," SPARK Movement (blog), January 12, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/01/12/lego-newsletters-girl-stuff-and-regular-stuff/.

[116] Sumathi Reddy, "'Good Guy' Goes for Girls," *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2012, sec. New York, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203513604577143034143271506.

[117] "Our Letter to LEGO." Emphasis added.

[118] Campbell, "LEGO: The Good."

Beyond policing the details of these boundaries, pinkification and sexualization

discourses focus feminist attention almost entirely on how *girls* are negatively affected by

sexualized toys and marketing practices. Thus the possible effects of questionable

corporate marketing practices aimed at boys becomes an afterthought. For example, in a

later SPARK blog post by Shoemaker Richards, after several paragraphs outlining the ways

that LEGO Friends might harm girls (through bullying, body image issues, and low

academic performance), she writes, "The LEGO friends line is an unnecessarily gender-

stereotyped toy that, given the combined messages it sends, is more likely to hinder girls

(and boys) than help them."[119] Boys are literally a parenthetical worry. This focus on girls is

certainly reasonable because girls have historically been objectified and constrained in

ways that boys typically have not. However, because activists and critics focus almost

entirely on the limitations that girls face, they are unable to confront the limitations that

boys face under this same troublesome hierarchy. Let me be clear. By emphasizing this

problem, I am not suggesting that by turning our attention to girls we are somehow directly

hurting or neglecting boys and are thus wrong to worry about girls.[120] Rather, the singular

focus on how *girls* might be *harmed* by sexualized toys ignores the significance of the

positive things about girls' toys to which girls do have access but to which boys do not. It

also neglects the harm boys might face from other issues stemming from questionable

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[119] Bailey Shoemaker Richards, "Still No LEGO Meeting, But the Conversation Continues," SPARK Movement (blog), February 1, 2012, http://www.sparkmovement.org/2012/02/01/still-no-lego-meeting-but-the-conversation-continues/.

[120] This is an argument that pops up after the original flurry of concern about girls' self-esteem and academic opportunities in the 1990s.

marketing practices. Because these related issues are ignored, heterosexual norms of femininity and masculinity that relentlessly devalue that which is primarily considered feminine become the primary scale by which potential harm or safety is measured.

Similarly, activists and critics involved in the Friends debate do not suggest that boys are at the same level of risk from questionable marketing practices at which girls are considered to be. In part, this happens because, in their critiques, they often frame marketing strategies for boys as if they were in opposition to marketing strategies for girls (rather than existing alongside each other). For example, another SPARK activist, Melissa Campbell, points out that, unlike the negative message sent to girls by LEGO Friends, "toys marketed to boys—including pretty much any LEGO that isn't part of the Friends line— send a much healthier message that boys can be anything: cops, spacemen, pirates, kings, city workers, engineers, presidents."[121] Rather than comparing the negative outlook that LEGO's portrayal of gender across franchises might imply for both boys and girls, this claim compares the negative aspects of Friends on girls with the positive aspects of other LEGO sets on boys.

Furthermore, Campbell's claim that LEGO sets marketed to boys promote healthier messages ignores the stereotypical portrayal of men, boys, and masculinity in the majority of LEGO's offerings. For instance, LEGO City cartoons, available on Netflix, revolve primarily around the conflict between police minifigs and criminal minifigs. Rather than speaking in sentences, the minifigs primarily grunt their way through the cartoon story lines in which the criminal minifigs consistently outsmart the police minifigs. This unimpressive

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[121] Campbell, "LEGO: The Good."

representation of masculinity emphasizes aggression and conflict over expression and cooperation and is repeated in some form across most of Lego's offerings, whether a licensed property such as LEGO Star Wars or a proprietary one such as LEGO Ninjago.

Certainly, there are feminist critiques of LEGO that point to problems with boys' cultural products, and even criticisms that treat boys as parentheticals are acknowledging that the issue exists. However, lurking behind this focused concern about girls is a problematic assumption derived from pinkfication and sexualization debates. That is, there is a way in which the structure of sexualization arguments requires girls to be passive victims of sexualized marketing practices. Egan, who has conducted a thorough examination of the literature, explains that "although the discourse on sexualization presumes that once ignited a girl will seek out her own objectification (e.g. in a life on the pole), a boy doing the same is simply inconceivable. A passive, victimized, or objectified heterosexual boy is anathema in our contemporary culture, unless it is subjected to the homoerotic or perceived homoerotic gaze or touch."[122] Here we see that the same stereotypical assumptions that are claimed to objectify girls are also used to suggest that they are passive receptors of sexualized material in order to position them as at risk and in desperate need of intervention.

On the one hand, such discourse implies that a girl's fall from grace is almost guaranteed by mere exposure to sexualization. For example, because SPARK activists frame the issue in terms of the cultural belief that LEGO play promotes children's future success and interest in STEM fields, they imply that LEGO Friends interferes with that role,

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[122] Egan, *Becoming Sexual*, 66.

essentially denying or limiting girls' access to all of these purported benefits.[123] As the

economy has shifted from industry to a knowledge economy, the onus placed on parents to

steer children in the direction of the sciences has increased substantially. This is already a

difficult task for parents with girls, because systemic sexism in those fields makes success

for women extremely difficult. Thus, the sexualized femininity wrought by Friends is

understood to bring further risk to an insecure situation. For example, Shoemaker Richards

says that "LEGO helps kids develop spatial skills and ingenuity, and strong spatial skills

results [*sic*] in increased numbers of people pursuing higher education and careers. . . .

LEGO says they want to reach out to girls to help them develop a love of building, but

they've created a limited arena for girls' participation in the type of creative building that

LEGO should encourage." Earlier in the post, she suggests that LEGO limits "girlhood play"

by focusing on "external appearance and limited activities, from decorating a house to

getting constant makeovers."[124] Rather than adding to a girl's experience of playing with

LEGO, the sexualized aspects of LEGO Friends, she claims, interfere with girls' ability to

cultivate *desirable* forms of creativity (and thus future success). Whatever one decides the

benefits of "regular" LEGO might be, the sexualized aspects of Friends are assumed to

override them. For example, blogger Margaret J. B. Bates, writing for LegendaryWomen.org,

asserts that "play time is extremely important for growing children. It's how they develop

physically, emotionally, and cognitively. It's also supposed to be a flexible and freely chosen

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[123] The idea that LEGO is generally understood as a gateway for STEM has been especially
potent since the introduction of LEGO Mindstorms in the 1990s, which incorporates
robotics into building play, thus linking creativity more directly to interest in STEM.
[124] Shoemaker Richards, "Still No LEGO Meeting."

activity. When you constrict girls (or individuals who identify as female) to a world of beauty shops and malls, then you're telling them this is their role; this is who they're supposed to be. It isn't flexibility and it *is* taking away their choices."[125] Parents are warned that sexualization interferes with a girl's ability to adhere to the choices deemed appropriate for success. Instead girls will be more likely to accept, apparently, a life of vapid, useless consumerism and narcissistic vanity, even though being an interior designer or fashion designer, while possibly stereotypical and not related to STEM, are also occupations through which one might achieve success. But there is apparently nothing redeemable in unacceptably "feminine" forms of creativity or occupations.

On the other hand, as Egan suggests, a boy falls from grace only insofar as he becomes "inappropriately" connected to femininity through homoerotic assumptions. Boys are at risk of being labeled sissies if they play with girls' things or show interest in the feminine, and several debate participants and most feminist critics more generally acknowledge this as problematic. In both cases it is one's proximity to femininity that creates the problem. However, very few, if any, claim that the emphasis on aggression and conflict in LEGO's marketing to boys desperately requires intervention or that the marketing practices might go so far as to override the building toy's supposed benefits to spatial awareness or interest in STEM as Friends is assumed to do. If anything, many of the occupations (whether a part of fantasy play or not) that Campbell lists inherently imply some kind of aggression or ability to navigate conflict. Indeed, very few people expend effort arguing that boys are being limited by the emphasis on aggression in the way that

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[125] Bates, "The LEGO Friends Protest." Emphasis in original.

girls are limited by sexualization.[126] After all, we commonly refer to the problem of increasingly gendered toys as "pinkification," not "blueification" or "aggressification" or even "genderfication," despite the fact that the problem includes all these factors. Instead, the problem is defined exclusively to be pink and the "excessive" femininity it implies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have juxtaposed an analysis of LEGO's historical marketing practices and attempts to reach the girls' market with contemporary concerns about the pinkification and sexualization of girls' toys in relation to LEGO Friends to demonstrate how emotional investments in certain public memories affect the arguments that are possible or plausible in the present. Ultimately, activists involved in the LEGO Friends controversy were constrained by the prevailing public memories that conceptualize LEGO as a socially responsible company and LEGO bricks as a formative and creative children's toy intended for both boys and girls. Although SPARK attempted to qualify their arguments in ways that protected the sanctity of the LEGO company in American memory, the loudest criticisms against SPARK's and other feminists' arguments expressed some level of disbelief or outrage at the idea that one could dare imply that the LEGO brick could be anything other than gender neutral at heart. This suggests that if SPARK had not qualified their argument through a nostalgic frame, the negative response could have potentially been even harsher and alienating to those who might otherwise support their cause.

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[126] Literary and feminist scholars Shannon R. Wooden and Ken Gilliam's *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age*, while not specifically about LEGO or aggression, is one such recent exception. Shannon R. Wooden and Ken Gilliam, *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

Unfortunately, by casting the problem as one of saving the idealized memory of a loved toy and the cherished company that makes it, we are left with the unsatisfactory outcome in which femininity is devalued despite the desire to empower girls. If we interpret the nostalgic frame literally, then we risk devaluing femininity in service of a questionably masculine conceptualization of gender neutrality. Or if we interpret the nostalgic frame as a desire to "return to" a moment in which girls' lives were more stable or less easily corruptible—ideal conditions that never actually existed—then our ability to help girls navigate a difficult world or to effect change in the world is handicapped. Ultimately, the nostalgic frame functions to render SPARK incapable of offering a systematic critique of LEGO's problematic history with gender stereotyping or furthering the public's understanding of how children's toys communicate knowledge about power through gender. Instead, the debate ends up regurgitating the problematic premises of anti-sexualization debates that focus attention on policing the borders of respectable femininity.

By taking a step back and analyzing LEGO's history more systematically, it is possible to see how assumptions about class and gender have always been a part of LEGO's cultural presence. As early twentieth-century, discipline-focused parenting practices gave way to the more emotionally centered, developmental psychology parenting model during the midcentury, LEGO's advertising strategies followed suit. Samsonite ads emphasized security, creativity, and education, which addressed middle-class concerns about children's proper development, achievement, and successful futures. LEGO ads from the late 1970s and early 1980s use a visual metaphor to enact LEGO's role as a mediator between parents

and their children—girls and boys. LEGO's strategy hinged on cultivating a widespread perception of the toy as inherently able to foster creativity and imagination—skills which, according to contemporary parenting discourses, encouraged self-expression and independence, values understood to put children on the path to future success. However, despite some present-day claims to the contrary, LEGO's advertising strategies and product designs were not gender neutral and instead reflected a distinct gender bias that assumed, among other things, that girls were less interested in the mechanics of building and would eventually lose interest and age out of LEGO entirely. Furthermore, present-day interpretations of LEGO's Golden Age advertisements as gender neutral elides important issues such as the continual devaluation of femininity in advocating for a sense of neutrality that privileges masculine norms and erases feminine norms.

In the end, my analysis demonstrates that how LEGO has circulated and how it continues to circulate in public and popular culture—and thus how we come in contact with LEGO—matters because of the way that memory things impress upon us and emotionally magnetize our values and beliefs. The emotions guiding this controversy over LEGO's memory demonstrate Sarah Ahmed's argument that "even when we feel we have the same feeling"—for example, when we have emotional investment in the idea that LEGO bricks are gender neutral—"we don't necessarily have the same relationship to that feeling."[127] Thus how one interprets the "protection" of that memory of LEGO differs. In other words, this chapter demonstrates how affective force is generated through the

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[127] Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10.

circulation and generation of a memory thing in public discourse and how possible

emotions are shaped by how one associates that feeling with a set of values and beliefs.

Thus, some people are moved to protect the memory of LEGO's gender neutrality by

seeking to remove newly instituted stereotypes that threaten that memory, while others

repel the possibility that LEGO's gender neutrality could be sullied at all.

Chapter 3

Fostering Emotional Ties across Time and Race

in American Girl's Time-Slip Historical Fiction

In 1986, a woman with a relatively rare yet aptly puritanical name, Pleasant

Rowland, founded the Pleasant Company, which would eventually come to be known solely

by its brand name, American Girl. Rowland jump-started the Pleasant Company in 1986

with three American Girl dolls, complete with clothing, accessories, and furniture. Each

doll's character was connected to a specific point in American history and brought to life by

a collection of stories that fleshed out the doll's personality and historical concerns. The

original three doll characters were Samantha Parkington, "a bright Victorian beauty," Molly

McIntire, "who schemes and dreams on the home front during World War II," and Kirsten

Larson, "a pioneer girl of strength and spirit who settles on the frontier."[1] Since then, many

new dolls have been added, several of which have brought some degree of class, race, and

historical diversity to the collection. In the early years, Rowland operated the company "out

of a rented warehouse with makeshift plywood packing stations," but after over thirty

years and one corporate buyout, American Girl has become one of Mattel's "power brands,"

bringing in over $342 million in 2018.[2] The company has sold over 157 million books and

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[1] Susan S. Adler, *Meet Samantha: An American Girl* (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 1986).

[2] Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13; "Mattel Reports Full Year and Fourth Quarter 2018 Financial Results," Mattel Newsroom, February 7, 2019, https://news.mattel.com/news/mattel-reports-full-year-and-fourth-quarter-2018-financial-results.

32 million dolls since its inception, ultimately spreading Rowland's vision of an educated and empowered girlhood through a vast, interrelated web of consumer products.[3]

In an interview, Rowland tells the story that the seeds for American Girl were planted during two events in 1984. First, Rowland visited Colonial Williamsburg that year and was "blown away" by how "History and American traditions truly came alive there." She described herself as wondering, "Isn't there some way that I can make the magic of this historic place come alive for little girls?" Second, when Rowland was shopping for her eight- and ten-year-old nieces during the Christmas season of 1984—the year of the Cabbage Patch craze—she was unsatisfied with what she ultimately considered to be lowbrow options: Cabbage Patch or Barbie. She was disappointed not only by what she perceived to be the toys' low quality and their relationship to a narrow sense of womanhood (either as a mother or as a sexual object) but also because "they didn't say anything about what it meant to be a girl growing up in America." Importantly, Rowland emphasized the value of a nostalgically mythic American childhood, explaining that "I had a happy childhood, and it was a time when family life was simpler. I loved to read as a little girl. I can remember discovering books in my grandmother's second-floor bookshelf that my dad had had when he was little. I discovered the Oz books there. I remember just delving into them, barely moving for days at a time, flung across my bed. I was an avid reader. And I had three sisters. We played with our dolls. It was just a simpler time. I loved

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[3] "American Girl Fast Facts," Americangirl.com, accessed January 21, 2019, https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/fast-facts.

it."[4] This mythologized origin story for American Girl's creator underscores the importance of public memory to the brand that she developed.

On the whole, Rowland placed a great deal of importance on the communication of historical memory as a means for inculcating certain traditional values while simultaneously shielding girls from "that onslaught of mass culture trying to sexualize little girls too early."[5] As Emilie Zaslow points out in her definitive cultural analysis of American Girl, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, "Rowland believed that her dolls, with their anatomical incorrectness, their young age, and their historical clothing, served to protect girls in their tween years" from the increasingly visible representations of "youthful sexuality" and the sexualization of girls and women in 1980s media.[6] It was Rowland's affective ties to a nostalgia-laden set of values—a longing for and desire to protect the assumed innocence of girlhood and a robust education of American history and tradition—that produced the idea for American Girl. However, despite Rowland's relatively conservative ideas about the value of girlhood innocence, she also envisioned girls as the protagonists of their own lives, who were not overshadowed by other characters, especially boys, and who had some semblance of thoughtfulness and agency over their own choices and actions. In particular, the series books which accompanied each of the dolls suggested that girls are capable of exercising agency in their

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[4] "Pleasant Rowland," in *Forbes Great Minds of Business: Companion to the Public Television Series*, ed. Gretchen Morgenson (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1997), 126–28.

[5] Pleasant Rowland, quoted in Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 47.

[6] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 47.

own worlds. The stories accompanying the historical American Girl dolls ensure that they are more than just dolls. They are characters with character.

Like most texts written specifically for an audience of children, American Girl's historical fiction serves an educational purpose and the intentions of the texts are not particularly subtle. Take, for example, the introductory text from American Girl included in each of the BeForever books:

> The adventurous characters you'll meet in the BeForever books will spark your curiosity about the past, inspire you to find your voice in the present, and excite you about your future. You'll make friends with these girls as you share their fun and their challenges. Like you, they are bright and brave, imaginative and energetic, creative and kind. Just as you are, they are discovering what really matters: Helping others. Being a true friend. Protecting the earth. Standing up for what's right. Read their stories, explore their worlds, join their adventures. Your friendship with them will BeForever.[7]

This introductory text explicitly suggests that the historical doll characters serve as models for the reader in her own life. The text directly engages the intended audience through the use of the second person and provides specifics about the ideas that its readers are meant to take away from the books. Readers are enjoined to establish emotional connections through the bonds of friendship. These bonds are predicated on the opportunity to share in the characters' "fun and their challenges" and are achieved by exploring their worlds and

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[7] See for example, Kirby Larson, *Growing Up with Aloha: A Nanea* Classic (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 2017).

joining their adventures through the act of reading. The text prompts girls to interpret the

historical doll character through predetermined personality traits in order to encourage

their emulation of those qualities. If girls accomplish this, then they will "discover what

really matters." This statement somewhat more subtly implies that the lessons learned

within the books will prepare girls for the adventures and challenges they might face in

their own lives.

Much like the juvenile biographies that rhetorical scholar Sara VanderHaagen

studies, American Girl's historical fiction books "exhibit their hybrid role as texts for

children and as texts of public memory by addressing themselves to imagined audiences

who are in turn invited to use the narratives of the past as resources for action in the

future."[8] These texts do so by specifically inviting girls to identify with the characters

through empathetic emotional investment, essentially prompting them to accept the

mantle of American Girl's set of values, beliefs, and norms that the historical characters

represent. In this way, American Girl's classic series potentially operates, as VanderHaagen

puts it, "in ways that explicitly and deliberately invite appropriation by readers." Because

American Girl's sole focus is on shaping the contours of girlhood, the company's historical

fiction potentially encourages girls to envision themselves as capable actors within their

own worlds. This is significant because although American Girl is advertising a specific set

of values and norms, with which one may or may not agree, the invitation for the audience

to appropriate the historically situated lessons from the books must also acknowledge and

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[8] Sara C. VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women: Rhetoric, Public Memory, and Agency* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 108.

accept that not only might that audience exert some level of agency within their own lives but also that they might do so in unexpected ways.

In this chapter, I concentrate on how readers are invited, in VanderHaagen's words, to be "active interpreters of public memory" in American Girl's newest take on historical fiction, the *My Journey with…* books, first released in 2014.[9] These new books incorporate time travel and a "choose-your-own-adventure"-style framework. In them, a contemporary girl with whom the readers are meant to identify travels back in time and interacts with the historical doll character. The choose-your-own-adventure narrative structure, which is more generically known as a gamebook, means that the reader does not merely engage with the narrative through the relatively passive act of reading but must instead "take action" by making decisions that affect the story's outcome. In this way, the *Journey* books go a step further than the classic series and position the reader herself as a character in the story, essentially inviting girls to interact with history rather than remain a spectator of it. Thus, the *Journey* books provide an overt connection between the values exhibited by the characters and their possible application in one's life first by providing a model that explicitly links the past with the present and then by necessitating that a reader "practice" making decisions according to those values.

That is, the *Journey* books not only interpret moral lessons for girls but also provide opportunities for readers to make decisions and experience the possible outcomes that flow from their choices. My argument here is in contrast to most scholarship that interprets American Girl's fiction as a form of normative control rather than as encouragement to

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[9] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 108.

resist norms. However, the *Journey* books put more trust in girls' capacity to interpret the

instructions implied in the texts and provide them with a safe space to practice enacting

their interpretations in accordance with the values set forth in the texts. Certainly, these

texts are not free from the binds of normative values, but they provide more potential for

exploration and interpretation than other scholars typically recognize.

Furthermore, the dolls that embody American Girl's historical characters and the

historical issues to which they are indelibly tied can never be fully separated from

American Girl's historical fiction. This link becomes especially significant with respect to

the dolls that represent African Americans. Performance studies scholar Robin Bernstein

argues that in the United States dolls "create propinquity between the idea of childhood

and the racial project of determining who is a person and who is a thing." "Thus," she

argues, "dolls tuck racial politics beneath a cloak of innocence."[10] As some of the most

visible and specifically African American dolls available through the U.S. toy market,

American Girl's Addy Walker and Melody Ellison serve as crucial sites for the potential

perpetuation of racialized gender norms and the potential reform of those norms. With

respect to American Girl's classic series, Zaslow argues that American Girl speaks to this

problem by positioning black girls under the protection of childhood innocence.[11] In this

chapter, however, I examine how the *Journey* books for Addy and Melody encourage and

rely upon the readers' emotional investment in the historical doll character as an American

girl to cultivate readers' identification and empathy with the problems faced by African

[10] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 18.
[11] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 123.

Americans at specific points in U.S. history. Although it is true that Addy and Melody are

subjected to the types of violence, oppression, and discrimination that their historical

counterparts faced, through the *Journey* books readers can both "see" and "feel" how these

experiences take a physical and emotional toll on the characters and "practice" different

ways to deal with those problems. For these characters, the *Journey* books allow the reader

to experience the historical doll character's feelings alongside and with that historical doll

character rather than merely "watching" the character feel something, thus erasing at least

some of the emotional distance between the present moment and events that are more

typically presented as belonging only to the past.

Importantly, my rhetorical analysis of American Girl's *Journey* books does not speak

directly to the texts' possible effects on girls but instead uncovers the myriad ways that

adults conceptualize children's needs and explains how adults attempt to respond to those

imagined needs. That is, this chapter is concerned primarily about how the texts attempt to

communicate and engage girls with certain ideas. Instead of asking whether or not

American Girl is doing something correctly or whether it meets my (or another's) critical

standards, this analysis seeks to explain the range of *desired* engagement and response

prompted by the texts. In this way, the chapter seeks to answer sociologist Daniel Cook's

call to focus "more directly on the ways in which childhood itself requires ethical

determinations of one kind or another for its existence," in that the analysis considers how

the texts' assumptions shape the desired contours of girlhood.[12] This chapter asks: How

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[12] Daniel Thomas Cook, "Childhood as a Moral Project," *Childhood* 24, no. 1 (February 2017): 3.

does the *Journey* series attempt to shape, communicate, and invite its audience of young

girls to accept and act according to a particular set of values? What are those values, and

what might they tell us about present-day conceptualizations of childhood? Not only does

this type of rhetorical analysis provide important background for other scholars who are

concerned with measuring reader responses, but it also offers insight into how the text

uses emotion to construct a particular vision of the past in service of those values and how

the text prompts or invites children, especially young girls, to rely on that vision of the past

as a means for making sense of the present and the future. In other words, how does

American Girl's historical fiction attempt to make the ideas and values invoked within the

books stick with readers?

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I briefly review the existing

scholarly literature on American Girl. Then I consider how the rhetorical structure of the

Journey books complicates the relationship between children's historical fiction and public

memory through a rhetorical analysis of a representative *Journey* book for one of American

Girl's original historical doll characters and the unofficial fan favorite, Samantha

Parkington. Finally, I analyze how Addy and Melody's *Journey* books attempt to elicit

emotional reactions from their readers in ways that prompt readers to understand and

empathize with the realities and the significance of the difficult situations that black girls

have faced in the United States.

Constrain or Empower?

The scholarship that has focused primarily on the earlier years of American Girl has

emphasized that the conservative nature of Rowland's vision of girlhood and her narrow

portrayal of American history have overshadowed the potentially empowering desire to

make girls' lives a central concern. In her 2012 dissertation about girls' reflections on

American Girl, Veronica Medina helpfully identifies three major strains within the

literature: the normalization of a stereotypically feminine subjectivity, the formation of a

universalized American national identity, and the whitewashing of historical

representation.[13] Although some scholars such as Maria Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy Kreshel

have argued that American Girl's construction of femininity is empowering, Jennifer Miskec

disagrees and claims that, despite the expressed goal of subverting traditional gender roles,

"the American Girl series endeavors to teach appropriate behaviors, rewarding the

interpellation of its characters."[14] These behaviors, according to scholars, include a concern

with surface appearances,[15] a desire to conform to moralistic "good girl" behaviors,[16] the

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[13] Veronica E. Medina, "'And That's What I Think Being an American Girl Is All About!': Girls' Reflections on American Girl and Contemporary American Girlhood" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 2012).

[14] Maria Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, "The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood through Representation, Identity, and Consumption" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1999); Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Peggy J. Kreshel, "'I'm an American Girl . . . Whatever That Means': Girls Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 1 (2002): 139–61; Jennifer M. Miskec, "Meet Ivy and Bean, Queerly the Anti-American Girls," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2009): 158.

[15] See, for example, Kim Chuppa-Cornell, "When Fact Is Stranger than Fiction: Hair in American Girl Stories and Dolls," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37, no. 2 (2013): 107–25; Sherrie A. Inness, "'Anti-Barbies': The American Girl Collection and Political Ideologies," in *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: New York University, 1998); Carroll Ferguson Nardone, "Ways of Knowing: Ideology and Representation in American Girls Texts" (Ph.D. diss., New Mexico State University, 2002); Nancy Gail Story, "Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection: The Corporate Construction of Girlhood" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 2002); Jan Susina, "American Girls Collection: Barbies with a Sense of History," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1999): 130–35.

[16] See for example, Miskec, "Meet Ivy and Bean"; and Story, "Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection."

privileging of domestic activities,[17] and a preoccupation with consumption.[18] Indeed, the

primary academic critique of normative femininity with respect to the American Girl

phenomenon has concentrated on how Rowland's somewhat contradictory blend of

conservative and feminist values became intertwined with the hyper-commodification of

girlhood and girl power media that developed during the 1990s. Jan Susina describes the

complex integration of marketable products within the American Girl brand as a

"commercial supersystem." He argues that "Pleasant Rowland's American Girls Collection is

part of the tradition of the commodification of children's literature that marches under the

banner of offering instruction and age-appropriate delight," a mentality he traces back to

John Newbery in eighteenth-century Britain, who is considered one of the first publishers

to recognize the importance of children's literature in bookselling. That Susina describes

the American Girl collection in the title of his article as "Barbies with a Sense of History" is

telling: he argues that the difference between Barbie and American Girl is primarily one of

surface appearance because both are indelibly bound to consumerism.[19] At the very least,

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[17] Inness, "'Anti-Barbies'"; Lise Mae Schlosser, "'Second Only to Barbie': Identity, Fiction, and Non-Fiction in the American Girl Collection," *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* 1, no. 4 (2006); Story, "Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection."

[18] Nina Diamond et al., "American Girl and the Brand Gestalt: Closing the Loop on Sociocultural Branding Research," *Journal of Marketing* 73, no. 3 (2009): 118–34; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Diane Carver Sekeres, "The Market Child and Branded Fiction: A Synergism of Children's Literature, Consumer Culture, and New Literacies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2009): 399–414.

[19] Susina, "American Girls Collection," 130–31, 133–35.

as Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace suggests, American Girl is an "especially rich example of the intersection of late twentieth-century consumerism and female subjectivity."[20]

Furthermore, many scholars have taken American Girl to task over its representation of racial identity and its whitewashing of national identity. While some, such as Fred Nielsen, are content with the idea that seven-year-olds "do not need, and probably should not have, unexpurgated history," others express deep-seated concerns about how ideologies of American exceptionalism, colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy coalesce with strategically "safe" historical inaccuracies to provide an extremely limited version of history that obscures hierarchies of class, race, and gender, and limits claims to national belonging.[21] Acosta-Alzuru argues that "since the dolls/characters are presented as historical, then they—*themselves*—represent, through personification, the American past. In other words, the AG Collection reconstructs the past in a particular way, rendering in the process a version of American history (and American identity)."[22] In contrast, Zaslow suggests that, while American Girl's representation of race, racism, and nationality is undoubtedly uneven, critics should not oversimplify the broad range of difficult questions that American Girl must navigate to "represent race at a time when it is

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[20] Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 153. See also Diamond et al., "American Girl and the Brand Gestalt"; Nardone, "Ways of Knowing"; Schlosser, "'Second Only to Barbie'"; Story, "Pleasant Company's American Girls Collection."

[21] Fred Nielsen, "American History Through the Eyes of the American Girls," *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 25, nos. 1–2 (2002), 90. See Daniel Hade, "Lies My Children's Books Taught Me," in *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context,* ed. Roderick McGillis (New York: Routledge, 2000): 153–64; Inness, "'Anti-Barbies'"; Miskec, "Meet Ivy and Bean"; Medina, "'And That's What I Think'"; and Acosta-Alzuru, "The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood."

[22] Acosta-Alzuru, "The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood," 88–89.

now common for 'proponents of colorblindness' to consider racial categories, race awareness, and the suggestion 'that race matters in human interaction' to be distasteful and itself racist." In her analysis of American Girl's classic historical fiction, Zaslow found that the stories in the classic series provide political, economic, and social context for racism and discrimination against African Americans but fail to contextualize as systemic injustices the experiences of discrimination for characters of other races and ethnicities, such as Native Americans, Italians, the Irish, and Latinos (especially when these groups were first "becoming" Americans). Instead, ethnic Others in the American Girl universe are used primarily to suggest that differences can be neutralized through business savvy, entrepreneurialism, and "an industrious American spirit," features that uplift the myth of social mobility and "problematically [imply] that Americanness and equality is available to all who work hard for it."[23]

The most recent, and most comprehensive, work on American Girl is Zaslow's *Playing with America's Doll*, published in 2017. Importantly, unlike the majority of the scholars mentioned above, Zaslow makes an argument about American girl's relationship to feminism and consumerism that reflects a more recent turn in media studies scholarship that eschews a definitive either/or stance.[24] Unlike Miskec, who argues that "the American Girl character that subverts, even in the smallest ways, the normalizing discourse of 'good girl'—where 'good girl' typically means such qualities as obedient, patient, and

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[23] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 138.
[24] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 5–6. See also Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee, "Introduction: Commodity Activism in Neoliberal Times," in *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, ed. Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2–3.

restrained—is promptly brought back into the bounds of 'normal' by story's end," Zaslow

insists that a "'yes—and' position challenges the notion that a product cannot both market

female identity *and* also generate a social justice message."[25] That is, rather than looking for

evidence that suggests whether American Girl espouses feminist ideas or not, Zaslow

argues that it is more productive to analyze the "brand's contradictory embrace of resistive

ideologies . . . and its simultaneous reification of normative femininity."[26]

Zaslow's "yes-and" approach highlights that earlier literature on American Girl is

primarily concerned with persuasive effect. What kind of effect might American Girl stories

and commodities have on a girl's sense of self? Does American Girl promote passivity? Does

it create frivolous consumers? Does it perpetuate racist and colonialist histories? These

concerns are unsurprising since the brand was purposefully created and transparently

presented as a means to impart a certain set of values and ideas to girls—values that most

people likely recognize but with which they might or might not agree. But as Acosta-Alzuru

and Zaslow both point out, no matter how well-meaning a critic might be, a critical reading

of a text and the target audience's reading of that same text will not necessarily align.[27]

There is no necessary direct relationship between the two. How then might scholars or

critics assess the cultural impact of American Girl? Although it is possible to attempt to

measure effects on real audiences through surveys, observations, and other social scientific

methods, this chapter takes a different approach, using the methods of rhetorical and

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[25] Miskec, "Meet Ivy and Bean," 158; Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 73 (emphasis in original).
[26] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 73.
[27] Acosta-Alzuru, "The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood," 23.

historical analysis to demonstrate that American Girl's historical fiction texts are

rhetorically constructed in ways that "engage readers and elicit responses within a certain

range of possibilities," to borrow a phrase from VanderHaagen.[28] I seek to turn attention to

how the creators of the *Journey* books—adults attempting to influence children's thinking

and behavior—envision and then incorporate into the narrative expectations for readers to

take up the ideas, beliefs, and values contained within stories of the past. Because of its

widely accepted connection to children's learning, historical fiction is an especially

illustrative place to examine how this process of the generation and reproduction of public

memory plays out.

My Journey with American Girl

Suzanne Rahn argues that most historical novelists for children "are less interested

in great historical events and figures than in showing children what it was like to live and

grow up" in the past.[29] But in order to explore the past, especially at the level of lived

experience, authors must make choices, and as Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott

point out, they do so "wittingly or unwittingly . . . on the basis of how they understand or

value their present conditions."[30] Although VanderHaagen argues that "historical children's

literature constitutes a vital vehicle for public memory," she points out that "it has not been

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[28] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 107.
[29] Suzanne Rahn, "An Evolving Past: The Story of Historical Fiction and Nonfiction for Children," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 15, no. 1 (1991): 3.
[30] Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 7.

widely studied as such."[31] However, if we consider that historical narratives, at the moment

of interpretation, must be influenced to some degree by present conditions, then it follows

that historical fiction potentially serves as a powerful source of public memory, particularly

for those narratives that attempt to interpret and represent values through the lens of day-

to-day life.

This explicitly didactic orientation to the lived experienced of the past—to the

"spirit" or "sense" of an age—has important consequences for analyses of historical fiction

as a form of public memory, especially for stories with female protagonists. American Girl's

use of historical fiction as an instructional tool for girls' empowerment is complex.

Although many scholars have since pointed to the conservative outcomes of American

Girl's protectionist brand of feminism, Rowland's concern for childhood innocence

coincided nicely with contemporary popular feminist concerns about the growing

pervasiveness of sexualized messages in American culture during the 1980s. For initial

audiences, then, stories about clever, active, can-do girls from the past, all of which were

conveniently located before the perceived onslaught of '80s sexualized imagery, were

considered feminist and empowering.

However, the majority of historical stories that feature fully agentic heroines are

necessarily anachronistic. As Kim Wilson points out, a strict interpretation of "historical

fiction poses a particular problem for authors who wish to provide their stories with

compelling female leads, in that women—and girls especially—of preceding centuries have

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[31] Sara C. VanderHaagen, "A Tale of Two Wheatleys: The Biographical Fiction of Shirley Graham and Ann Rinaldi," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2018): 243.

enjoyed considerably less independence of mind and body than their equivalent in the

modern age."[32] As Zaslow argues, American Girl's historical fiction gets around this

problem by adhering more closely to "neo-historical fiction," a genre which Elodie

Rousselot argues employs a paradoxical logic that "on the one hand strives for a high

degree of historical accuracy, while on the other it is conscious of the limitations of that

project." For Rousselot, neo-historical fiction is structured by "a simultaneous attempt and

refusal to render the past accurately."[33] In other words, American Girl's neo-historical

fiction constitutes a self-conscious act of public memory in which the past exists to serve

the present. Indeed, Pleasant Rowland and American Girl have consistently demonstrated

an awareness of this purpose in their attempts to persuade girls that despite some

historical differences, all American girls (should) share similar values. To point out the

intentional nature of American Girl's historical fiction is not to condemn it or to assign

some kind of malicious intent to its historical inaccuracy, but instead to underscore that

acts of public memory are much more deeply beholden to a particular set of ideas, values,

and beliefs than to historical accuracy.[34] For American Girl, history serves as a conduit

through which desired present-day values and norms can be communicated.

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[32] Kim Wilson, *Re-Visioning Historical Fiction for Young Readers: The Past through Modern Eyes* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 63.

[33] Elodie Rousselot, *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.

[34] As Kirt Wilson points out, "The speech acts that comprise commemoration are not concerned primarily with accuracy, but place a greater emphasis on emotional resonance and the utility of a narrative to warrant judgment or to structure social relationships. The rhetorical activities of history and memory are often intertwined"; Kirt H. Wilson, "Debating the Great Emancipator: Abraham Lincoln and Our Public Memory." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2010): 459–60.

Like most children's literature, the purpose of children's historical fiction is typically

to teach or influence children in some way, and authors often state their didactic aims

explicitly. Indeed, the majority of scholarly literature about historical fiction for children

focuses on how teachers might use historical fiction in the classroom. Since the later

decades of the twentieth century, U.S. public schools have used children's historical fiction

as a way to add cultural context to the major historical events covered by traditional

textbooks. During this time there has been a persistent belief that historical fiction's

orientation to the past is more likely to bolster student engagement and learning because,

as educators Mary Taylor Rycik and Brenda Rosler argue, "good historical fiction creates an

emotional connection between children today and their historical counterparts."

Importantly, they argue that the emotional connection to a character is what will ultimately

help children understand the significance of the links between historical and present-day

events as well as their own and others' cultural heritage. This emotional connection is

understood to be forged primarily through either identifying or empathizing with a

character. For example, Rycik and Rosler suggest that children could "*experience the*

sadness Leah feels when she must sell her pony to provide money for her family during the

Great Depression in *Leah's Pony*" or "*sense the fear that Monique has* when her family hides"

a Jewish girl during the Holocaust in *The Butterfly*.[35] Thus, for Rycik and Rosler, it is

through the opportunity to feel as a character feels that children can grasp the lesson or the

significance arising from a historical story.

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[35] Mary Taylor Rycik and Brenda Rosler, "The Return of Historical Fiction," *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 2 (2009): 163. Emphasis added.

Importantly, this assumption suggests that a text's invitation for the reader to identify or empathize with a historical character encourages the reader to see the text and the actions of the character as "resources for action in the future." VanderHaagen argues that "biographical texts, as sites of public memory, operate in ways that explicitly and deliberately invite appropriation by readers."[36] This appropriation is an essential function of VanderHaagen's agential spiral, and thus also for my model of magnetic memory, because texts use emotional appeals to spur rhetorical action that may enrich future interpretation and rhetorical production.

Referring to children's biographies of Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Shirley Chisolm, VanderHaagen argues that "by recapturing the vision of a world that is superimposed on—or made to appear organically derived from—the events and emotions of these women's lives, young readers can become almost an extension of these women's lifework, part of a common historical trajectory, and active interpreters of the public memory through which such stories are sustained."[37] Although American Girl's historical fiction differs from non-fiction biography in its relationship toward historical representation and accuracy, the classic series books for each doll concentrate on an individual girl who is made "real" through an amalgam of historical, traditional, and contemporary values, norms, and emotions.[38] When American Girl rebranded the historical characters in 2014, the name "BeForever" further emphasized that even the passage of

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[36] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 108.
[37] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 108.
[38] Zaslow notes that the stories had convinced several of the girls with whom she interviewed that the historical doll characters were real historical figures.

time should not disrupt the fundamental elements of girlhood. Although this is a message

that American Girl has long fostered, new elements added to the BeForever collection—in

addition to the new brand name—have made this connection even more explicit. The

biggest structural change to the revamped brand was the addition of a *My Journey with…*

book to each character's fiction series. The *Journey* series, while still under the umbrella of

historical fiction, is significantly different from the classic series in that it adds a fantasy

element—time travel—and a gamebook structure to what otherwise remains a historical

fiction narrative.

Although stories that were separate from the classic series existed prior to the

rebranding, such as the historical mysteries series and the now discontinued short stories

series, none of these books explicitly connected the present day with the stories from the

past. But in the *Journey* books, a present-day girl—whose current problems are established

prior to going back in time—is magically transported to the past world of one of the

historical doll characters. To further complicate matters, the books are structured like

gamebooks, which use a non-linear system of choices to imbue the reader with the power

to make decisions at crucial moments in the story and thus take different narrative paths to

separate endings.[39] The *Journey* books invite the reader to step into the girl protagonist's

shoes and to feel as though the reader herself has been transported back into the

character's time. The reader-as-girl-protagonist must not only interact with historically

situated characters from the classic stories and learn about an unfamiliar world, but she

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[39] The best-known series in this genre is the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, which began publication in 1979 by a division of Bantam Books. The series continues today, published by the independent publisher Chooseco.

must also make decisions about how to proceed through a given challenge or choice, thus

completing a journey of self-discovery meant to prepare her for the problems she faces

back home in her present-day life. As a result, the *Journey* books do not merely encourage

their readers to observe the historical characters in their worlds but instead empower

readers to act in those characters' worlds.

In her study, VanderHaagen outlines three ways that biographies for children about

African American women encourage readers to appropriate the ideas contained within

them. For one, these biographies directly address their readers, most often in peritextual

materials, in ways that assume children will learn from and use the knowledge proffered.

Second, the persistent belief that historical understanding is best translated for children

through emotional connections makes some kind of access to the inner lives of the

biography's subject essential, despite the fact that the historical record "provides little

insight into historical childhood experience."[40] Finally, VanderHaagen points out that

children's biographies are typically structured around a narrative of growth, which reflects

and "reinforces the broader cultural notion that moving from childhood to adulthood

means moving from immaturity, innocence, and lack of agency to maturity, knowledge, self-

control, and agency." This growth narrative provides the instructive analogy for the

reader's appropriation of the text because it prompts readers "to perceive similarities

between themselves" and the subject of the narrative and "to envision their own lives in the

way that the texts' creators describe the lives of" the subject: "as journeys of learning and

agential growth." In what follows, I not only demonstrate that the *Journey* books exhibit

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[40] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 116–17.

characteristics that encourage reader appropriation but also, through their unique time-slip gamebook structure, render a literal interpretation and explicit model of that appropriation into the narrative itself, thereby creating safe opportunities for the reader to "practice" making decisions, hopefully in accordance with the values and norms set forth in the story.

A Door to the Past

The *Journey* books are shaped by the ongoing belief, like that of most children's historical fiction, that developing an emotional connection based in identification and empathy between young readers and historical characters, whether fictional or real, facilitates children's learning and comprehension of the significance of the past. The reader of the *Journey* books is asked to identify with the girl protagonist in two primary ways. To begin with, the text directly addresses the reader through peritext that reinforces the importance of this connection. As the introductory text, quoted above, from each of the BeForever books demonstrates, American Girl utilizes this kind of direct address to encourage girls not only to see themselves as friends of the historical doll characters but also to see themselves within these characters or "just as you are." As the historical characters grow and learn, so too are the readers encouraged to grow and learn. The peritext that accompanies the *Journey* books, such as that below, adds another layer of complexity to the books' address to their readers. Entitled "A Journey Begins," this text demonstrates the complicated mode of identification demanded by the gamebook structure of the *Journey* series:

This book is about Felicity, but it's also about a girl like you who travels back in time to Felicity's world of 1774, just before the American Revolution. You, the reader, get to decide what happens in the story. The choices you make will lead to different journeys and new discoveries. When you reach a page in this book that asks you to make a decision, choose carefully. The decisions you make will lead to different endings. (Hint: Use a pencil to check off your choices. That way, you'll never read the same story twice.) Want to try another ending? Read the book again—and then again. Find out what happens to you and Felicity when you make different choices.[41]

In this book, the reader does not just share imaginatively in the historical character's fun and challenges as the character's story unfolds. Instead, the reader—that is, the "you" in "you and Felicity"—is charged with making decisions that determine what one might get to explore or the adventures upon which one might embark, thus changing the outcome of the story itself. Although those opportunities are limited by the choices offered and the finite pages of a printed book, the reader of the *Journey* books is prompted to direct the story's progress and thus to "become" the girl protagonist during the majority of the reading experience. It is through the identification with the *girl protagonist* that the reader is immersed in the past. That is, rather than a window that allows the reader to peer into the past through the process of reading the character's story (as one would do in a typical historical fiction narrative), the *Journey* books operate as a door to the past by prompting the reader to imagine herself actually traveling back in time as the girl protagonist and,

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[41] Kathleen Ernst, *Gunpowder and Tea Cakes: My Journey with Felicity* (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 2017).

thus, to imagine being not only immersed in the character's world but actually a part of that world.

The reader's identification with the girl protagonist is further reinforced through the complicated nature of what literary scholar Paul Wake calls the "gamebook you" or the "you" of an "interactive second-person print narrative." The gamebook's interactive nodes (the choices that the reader makes that determine the reading path) interrupt the reader's immersion in the historical world as the girl protagonist. Wake suggests that this interruption "promotes a reader-character identification . . . through the very awkwardness of the dual perspective that [the gamebook demands]." He argues that this dual perspective requires on one hand "an act of immersive empathetic reading" and on the other a conscious act of "responding to the text's many demands." It is in the space between these two planes that "the act of 'becoming' the hero" takes place. Thus, he claims, "it is through the reader's awareness as the 'executor' of the print text . . . [t]hat the gamebook *you* is invested with being." For Wake, the gamebook you "situates the reader in multiple positions at once," creating a paradoxical relationship between character and reader that demands identification at the same time that it demands dislocation.[42]

Thus, when the text deliberately breaks the reader's connection to the girl protagonist in order to prompt the reader to make a choice about the reading path and physically turn to a different section of the book, it implies that there is a connection to be broken in the first place. For example, in one reading path of *The Roar of the Falls: My*

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[42] Paul Wake, "Life and Death in the Second Person: Identification, Empathy, and Antipathy in the Adventure Gamebook," *Narrative* 24, no. 2 (2016): 192, 207.

Journey with Kaya, the girl protagonist wants to trade something of value with Kaya, in part to demonstrate their growing friendship, but the only thing she has is the shell bracelet that sent her back in time. The girl protagonist realizes it is a risk to let the bracelet out of her sight but wants to show Kaya that she is important to her. The text then interrupts the girl protagonist's deliberation by prompting the reader with two choices: "To trade your bracelet to Kaya, turn to page 155" or "To keep your bracelet, go to page 164."[43] You, the reader, must decide and turn the pages so that you, the girl protagonist, either trade the bracelet or not. Thus, the reader and the girl protagonist are treated as functionally one and the same.

Moreover, the connection facilitated by the gamebook you is further complicated in the *Journey* series because of the time-slip. In the classic series, the entire narrative is located in the past, and that constructed past is experienced entirely in relationship to the historical character. For example, the beginning page of *Growing Up with Aloha*, the first of Nanea's classic series books set in Hawaii at the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, is full of sensory descriptions of Nanea's surroundings that the reader likely recognizes as different from her own, such as the "sweet outside smells of ginger and plumeria," clothes featuring tiki huts and palm trees, and a "little Admiral radio."[44] Of course, one could read these details and imagine oneself as a part of that world. However, in the classic series the purpose of these details is to provide a backdrop before which the reader is meant to come

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[43] Emma Carlson Berne, *The Roar of the Falls: My Journey with Kaya* (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 2014), 152.
[44] Larson, *Growing Up with Aloha*, 1.

to know Nanea and watch her story unfold. Other aspects of the story prompt identification with and empathy for Nanea.

In contrast, once the reader of the *Journey* books—through the eyes of the girl protagonist—is sent backward in time, she must take in completely new surroundings, such as unexpected clothing or an entirely new landscape and sometimes even unanticipated dangers. Importantly, the text does not assume that the reader—now a part of the story itself—is any more knowledgeable than the reader of the classic series. In this case, the details, at least before the girl protagonist understands that she has gone back in time, are cause for confusion. For example, in *Prints in the Sand: My Journey with Nanea*, the girl protagonist finds herself transported back in time through a pink mist after picking up a puka shell necklace on the beach (an image that plays a role in the classic series). The girl protagonist thinks to herself, "I'm still standing—on wobbly legs. And that pink mist is the hotel in front of me. But now there's something else: a barbed-wire fence. It stretches along the beach as far as my eyes can see. That wasn't here before!" A few moments later, as she walks toward a crowd of soldiers and sailors at the hotel, the girl protagonist observes her surroundings: "Ooga! A shiny navy-blue car inches slowly through the crowd. It looks like the old-time cars I've seen in parades sometimes. When the door opens, I'm surprised to see a nurse pop out. She wears a stiff white top, and as she straightens up, I see the red cross sewn to her starched white dress. As she hurries into the hotel and that old car rumbles away, anxiety rumbles through my stomach, too. Something's not quite right here.

Soldiers? Nurses? Old-time cars? Why are they all here at the beach?"[45] Thus the reader's

passive uptake of immersive details in the classic series is transformed in the *Journey* books

into an active process in which the reader-as-girl-protagonist must not only observe her

new surroundings but also reckon with them.

A Matter of Perspective

Because the reader is asked, required even, through the perspective of the

gamebook you to identify as the girl protagonist, the girl protagonist's journey is the

reader's journey, and the reader learns and feels as the girl protagonist learns and feels.

Two aspects of the *Journey* books reinforce this connection. For one, the *Journey* books

employ the sustained use of the historical present throughout the story to communicate

narrative time. While this is not unheard of outside of the gamebook genre, it is unusual.

The past tense, which suggests that events occurred before the telling of the story to the

reader, is the more common tense used in literature and is the only tense used in the classic

books to communicate narrative time. The historical present, however, suggests a sense of

the unknown and is typically used to suggest a feeling of immediacy or urgency. Take, for

example, the following sentences from *Prints in the Sand*: "As [the nurse] hurries into the

hotel and that old car rumbles away, anxiety rumbles through my stomach, too.

Something's not quite right here."[46] If one rewrites this sentence in the past tense, the effect

is quite different: *As [the nurse] hurried into the hotel and that old car rumbled away, anxiety*

rumbled through my stomach, too. Something was not quite right there. In the past tense, the

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[45] Erin Falligant, *Prints in the Sand: My Journey with Nanea* (Middleton, WI: American Girl
Publishing, 2017), 6–7.
[46] Falligant, *Prints in the Sand*, 6.

first sentence no longer invites the reader to feel that rumbling of anxiety in her stomach simultaneously with the girl protagonist. Instead, the moment is more reflective. In the second sentence, the past tense implies that the girl protagonist now knows what is not quite right but has not yet shared that part of the story with the reader. For the reader, it is more difficult to share in the fear or uncertainty of that moment, because when written in the past tense, the sentence implies that the girl protagonist knows what happens next even though the reader does not. While the reader might wonder what will follow, that feeling is not happening simultaneously with the girl protagonist's uncertainty.

The other way that the *Journey* books reinforce the connection between the girl protagonist and the reader is through the point of view of the narrator of the story. VanderHaagen observes that non-fiction juvenile biographies often use a third person omniscient narrator as a way of providing readers access to the inner lives of real-life historical characters without directly assuming knowledge of what must now be the "unknowable feelings, thoughts, and mental states" of long-passed historical people. According to VanderHaagen, "the convention of the third-person narrator encourages identification with the character."[47] This is similar to the perspective maintained in American Girl's classic series books, which use a limited and subjective third-person narrator. This means that the narrator in the classic books is not a character in the story and, furthermore, can only provide the reader with access to the historical doll character's thoughts and feelings. The reader learns about the historical doll character's reactions through the narrator. That is, the reader is not asked to step into the historical doll

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[47] VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women*, 117.

character's shoes but rather to "watch" and learn from the actions and thoughts of the historical doll characters (who are the focal characters—that is, the characters who are the center of attention—in their classic series).

In contrast, the *Journey* book tells the story from the first-person point of view of the girl protagonist who is a participant narrator as well as the focal character of the book. The time-traveling girl protagonist tells her own story, and she communicates through personal pronouns. Thus, the reader is directly privy to the girl protagonist's internal thoughts and her immediate observations of what is around her, but not other characters' thoughts. The reader can only learn about others' thoughts and feelings through the girl protagonist's observations and interpretations. Additionally, because the girl protagonists of the *Journey* books are also the focal characters, the reader experiences the story simultaneously with the girl protagonist.

Through the eyes—and the I's—of the *Journey* book's girl protagonist, the reader learns not just how her present-day world is different from the past but also how those differences might be interpreted (that is, how one might identify or empathize with the historical doll character). The reader-as-girl-protagonist of the *Journey* book must learn how to observe emotion in relation to the situation in order to empathize, which is different than how the reader is fed that information from the third-person narrator in the classic series.

Choice and Consequence

In her study of children's time-slip novels, Tess Cosslett demonstrates that "the children in these [time-slip] books are finally identified with growth, change, and forward

movement. Their experiences teach them that they cannot remain trapped in the past, they

must move on."[48] The basic plot arc of each of the *Journey* books follows a similar pattern

and is based on a narrative of growth and development, as experienced by the girl

protagonist. Unlike the children's biographies that VanderHaagen analyzes and many of the

time-slip novels to which Cosslett refers, however, the *Journey* books do not provide a full

growth narrative from childhood to adulthood. The experiences that the girl protagonist

has once she slips back into the past ultimately provide her with a more mature and

forward-looking perspective on whatever her present-day problems might be, but the girl

protagonist and the reader remain solidly within the boundaries of girlhood. That is, the

books are offering advice for dealing more maturely with possible difficulties in the

reader's contemporary moment but not for coping with difficulties that might arise as she

grows out of girlhood. On the whole, the endings of the *Journey* books typically focus on

how the girl protagonist, and thus the reader, might perceive her present-day situation in a

new light, thus accepting that some things must change (divorce, parents overseas, parents

working more often, moving to a new location away from friends, new step-siblings),

learning how to cope with uncomfortable situations for which one has little to no control

(having to make new friends, attending a new school, obeying parents' requests and rules),

or facing one's fears (overcoming shyness, taking some minor risks, finding the courage to

stand up for what is right). Certainly, these types of childhood experiences have a bearing

on our lives as adults, but the *Journey* books specifically frame these lessons within the

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[48] Tess Cosslett, "'History from Below': Time-Slip Narratives and National Identity," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 26 (2002): 250.

reader's contemporary moment. In other words, girls are shown how to deal with problems in a more mature manner without jeopardizing their girlhood innocence.

Importantly, the time-slip genre that the *Journey* books rely upon does not merely provide the reader with a model of growth through any situation or challenge that the girl protagonist might experience. Rather, the time-slip framework functions for the reader as evidence that the lessons of the past are directly relevant to the present day. In this way, the *Journey* books make a direct and explicit connection between the past and the present, especially since the girl protagonist's present-day problems are likely (and purposefully) recognizable to contemporary readers. Thus, the *Journey* books do not just invite readers to appropriate the lessons learned but also demonstrate to readers what that appropriation could look like and its potential benefits. Furthermore, the gamebook structure requires the reader to make choices that drive the outcome of the story, which means that the reader must actively engage with the text, further emphasizing the implication that the reader possesses at least some agency within her own life. The reader's direct involvement and interaction in the text thus indirectly encourages the reader to make choices and take action in her own world based on the lessons learned through the story.

An extended example based on the historical doll character Samantha Parkington helps to illuminate how the growth narrative works in conjunction with the time-slip gamebook structure to encourage reader appropriation. There is, of course, no assurance that readers will appropriate as the creators' desire, but at the very least the story provides that opportunity. As established throughout her classic series, Samantha is an orphan living with her grandmother near New York City in 1904. She is thus is positioned in the

Edwardian era but under the reigning influence of her Victorian grandmother. This places

Samantha squarely in the midst of first-wave feminism's upheaval of Victorian-era ideas

about the appropriate place and behavior of women, at least as understood through the

experience of upper-class northeastern white women. Importantly, in the classic series

Samantha meets Nellie O'Malley, an Irish immigrant and daughter of her neighbor's

servants, and her friendship with Nellie provides the classic series with a point of view that

is markedly different from Samantha's privileged position. Nellie is involved in two stories

in Samantha's classic series that closely relate to two possible endings in Samantha's

Journey book, *The Lilac Tunnel*. First, in *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, Nellie's description of

her experience working in a thread factory leads Samantha to rewrite a prize-winning

essay that exalted the progress brought by modern factories.[49] In her revised essay, which

she presents at a school assembly, Samantha discusses the dangers that factories pose to

children and how these dangers limit what might otherwise be considered progress. Then

in *Changes for Samantha*, Samantha learns that Nellie's parents have died from the flu, and

Nellie and her two sisters are then abandoned by the uncle who was charged with their

care.[50] The three girls end up in a nearby orphanage, and eventually Nellie is slated to take

an orphan train west (without her sisters). Samantha ventures out alone into the

orphanage's dangerous neighborhood to rescue Nellie and her sisters. She convinces Nellie

to leave and hide in the attic of her aunt and uncle's home in New York City. Samantha's

loyalty to her unfortunate friend is rewarded when her aunt and uncle decide to adopt

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[49] Susan S. Adler, *Samantha Learns a Lesson* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1986).
[50] Valerie Tripp, *Changes for Samantha* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1986).

Nellie and her sisters, thereby saving them from the horrors of child labor and the despair of an orphanage.

These two plot lines exemplify two characteristic aspects of American Girl's classic series. The historical doll characters such as Samantha are usually depicted as having some level of agency, at least with regard to their choices and their actions. However, that agency is first limited by the fact that the characters must typically learn something in order make good choices and act appropriately. Indeed, before the BeForever reboot which condensed the six classic books into two volumes, the title of the second book, *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, made that explicit, although this is certainly not the only time in the series that Samantha learns something that helps her. Samantha consistently learns from her experiences, and in doing so she is able to effect some change, at least in her own life and the lives of those around her. Present-day girls are meant to identify with Samantha and to share in Samantha's empathy for Nellie's difficult situation. As the BeForever introductory text suggests, girls are meant to "read their stories, explore their worlds, and join their adventures."[51]

Samantha's *Journey* book, however, provides a more explicit set of instructions than that of the classic series. As with all the *Journey* books, the reader begins by stepping into the girl protagonist's shoes in the present day. The girl protagonist has been sent to spend the summer with her newly remarried father, her stepmother, and her stepsister. She laments that things have changed since her parents' divorce, and she is reluctant to interact with her stepmother or stepsister, Gracie. She feels Gracie's constant presence as a burden.

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[51] See, for example, Larson, *Growing Up with Aloha*.

She misses her best friend and her cat, who are back home at her mother's house. Her father's stricter rules for screen time frustrate her. But most importantly, she is at her father's because her mother wanted her to spend time with his new family. "But I miss my old family," she thinks, "the way things were a couple of years ago when my mom and dad were still together."[52]

Eyeing some jewelry on the girl protagonist's dresser, the stepmother sees an opportunity and gives the girl protagonist a tarnished heart-shaped locket that she says her grandmother had given her when she was once going through a hard time. Opening and closing the locket turns out to be the mechanism that sends the girl protagonist and the reader back into the past to Samantha's world. When the girl protagonist travels back in time, she lands in the lilac tunnel, which is the tunnel in the hedge between Samantha's house and that of her neighbors, the Rylands. In Samantha's classic series, it is through this tunnel that Samantha first sees Nellie O'Malley, the oldest daughter of the Rylands' new servants, when she is hanging laundry to dry.

In Samantha's *Journey* book, the most important choice the reader must make is the first choice, because it largely determines the overall theme of possible endings. The reader must choose to identify as or to deny being Ruby, a new laundry girl whose arrival the household has been expecting. Ruby represents a character whose social status is analogous to that of Nellie from Samantha's classic series. By choosing to deny being the laundry girl, the reader experiences and participates in elements of Samantha's life of

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[52] Erin Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel: My Journey with Samantha* (Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing, 2014), 1.

privilege (the "Samantha-route"). By choosing to identify as Ruby, the laundry girl, the reader experiences and participates in many of the hardships that Nellie encounters in the classic series (the "Nellie-route").

If the reader chooses the Samantha-route, one of the possible story arcs is that the reader gets to travel with Samantha and her family to Piney Point, the family's vacation retreat, and possibly experience such things as trying to swim in a Victorian-era bathing suit or flouting Victorian dress code by swimming only in underclothes with Samantha and her feminist-minded Aunt Cornelia. In this Piney Point story arc, the reader has a chance to reflect upon choice:

> I realize I haven't seen Samantha do any chores since I've been here. She has a servant to do everything from making her bed to packing her suitcase. Must be nice, I think, but then I wonder what it would feel like to have someone else packing my clothes and deciding what I'm going to wear.[53]

Though the Samantha-route provides for moments when the reader is prompted to notice and pity the labor of Samantha's servants, this moment prompts the reader to dislike the idea of servants because they could interfere with the ability to make one's own choices. It is assumed that the reader can, should, and would want to do these actions for herself. This is one way in which a relatively feminist, and certainly modern, sense of independence and the ability to make decisions for oneself is underscored in the Samantha-route.

When the reader chooses the Nellie-route, however, the girl protagonist's experiences are significantly different. Rather than exploring Samantha's privileged world,

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[53] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 109.

by choosing to follow the path of Ruby, the laundry girl, the reader experiences and participates "firsthand" in the world of the lower-class Irish immigrant in Edwardian-era culture. Through the girl protagonist's musings, the reader is ultimately encouraged to feel grateful for the circumstances of her contemporary life, which is assumed to offer options much more agreeable than those available to girls such as Nellie or Ruby.

In *The Lilac Tunnel*, after the reader chooses to take the Nellie-route, the girl protagonist makes several mistakes while trying to do chores around Samantha's house. Told she will be fired and sent away, the reader is then presented with the option to take an orphan train out west to be given to a new family or to begin working at a child-labor factory in order to become self-sufficient. In this case, the reader has been presented with a choice that would in either case likely lead to a difficult experience for a child of that period (and if the reader is familiar with the classic series, she will likely realize this). However, Samantha's reaction to these options stacks the deck. When her grandmother, called Grandmary, says that the Children's Aid Society will send "Ruby" on an orphan train to a good home, the girl protagonist notes that neither Grandmary nor Samantha really believe she will end up in a good home. Samantha runs from the room angry and crying. Later, when Mrs. Hawkins, the family's cook, says that the local glove factory needs workers, Samantha's Edwardian-era interest in gender equality leads her excitedly to urge the girl protagonist to choose the factory: "You can earn your own money, and then nobody can send you away."[54]

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[54] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 128.

If the reader makes the choice to work at the factory, she learns firsthand many of the downsides of factory work that Nellie describes in *Samantha Learns a Lesson.* In the classic series, Nellie reluctantly describes her harrowing experiences in the factory:

> Nellie was quiet. She was remembering things she didn't want to remember. "I worked in a big room with other kids," she said finally. "Twenty others, I guess. But that didn't make it fun. We couldn't play. We couldn't even talk. The machines were too noisy. They were so noisy that when I got home at night my ears were buzzing and it was a long time before I could hear anything. . . . I worked on the machines that wound the thread. There were hundreds of spools. . . . We had had to stand up all the time. I got so tired, Samantha. . . . The room was awful hot in summer. But it was worse in winter because there wasn't any heat. . . . The machines were so strong they could break your hand or your foot or pull a finger off as easy as anything. We all had to have our hair short. If your hair was long the machines could catch it and pull it right out. They just kept winding. Once I saw that happen to a girl. She was just standing there, and then suddenly she was screaming and half her head was bleeding. She almost died."[55]

After Nellie describes her experience, Samantha is dumbstruck with shock. Nellie's story moves Samantha to rewrite her school essay.

In *The Lilac Tunnel*, the girl protagonist learns and experiences many of these things on her first day in the factory. When she meets the foreman, she can barely hear what he is saying over the noise of the machines. She learns that she will be required to cut her hair so

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[55] Adler, *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, 46–48.

that it doesn't get ripped out by the machines and that there are no breaks. When she

meets another worker, she learns that the children do not go to school and that they are not

allowed to talk while working. After trying to operate one of the machines unsuccessfully

(and drawing the ire of the other girls in the room), she decides to take a break. However,

she is unable to do so because the door to the factory room is locked. The use of the first-

person point of view and historical present underscore the immediacy of the girl

protagonist's panic when she realizes the door is locked: "I start to panic, knocking loudly

on the door, ignoring the horrified stares of the girls all around me. When the foreman

finally opens the door, the thunderous look on his face makes my knees weak." The

foreman yells at her, threatens her job, and slams the door in her face: "My heart throbs in

my chest as I try to think. It's time for me to go—I know that now."[56] She leaves a message

for Samantha and makes her exit:

> I want to open my locket and just disappear, but I can't do that in front of Mary. So
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> instead, I take a breath of courage and step toward the locked door. I raise my fist
>
> and pound as loudly as I can. It's only seconds before the foreman answers, and
>
> when he sees me again, he looks as if he's about to explode with rage. Before he can
>
> speak, I holler the words "I quit!" Ducking beneath his arm, I race down the hall
>
> toward an open door.[57]

It is interesting to note that although the reader had the option to choose the factory, the

reader does not have the option to choose to stay in the factory or to leave it. The narrative

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[56] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 151, 157.
[57] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 163.

insists that the girl protagonist will not accept the fate of the child worker, implying the inherent ability of the contemporary girl to refuse compromising situations. The option to take charge and leave a bad situation is, of course, not an option for Nellie, who would suffer the consequences of joblessness. In the classic series, it is Samantha who saves Nellie on multiple occasions. It is Samantha who exerts agency and creates change; the reader must understand what it feels like to act and to make change through Samantha's perspective. But in *The Lilac Tunnel*, the reader, as the contemporary girl protagonist, has the power to defy history and avoid the unwanted ending. This ending not only assumes the agency of the girl protagonist but also applies that agency to the agency-less historical girl by making the escape from the factory a thinkable ending.

Once the girl protagonist returns home, the comforts of the modern world, such as air conditioning, carpeted floors, peaceful quiet, and comfortable clothes, invade her senses, and she is filled with relief: "I say a private thank-you to the universe that I'm not an orphan in Samantha's time. I can go home, to a world where I don't have to work, where I have parents who love me, where I can get an ice-cold glass of water whenever I need one." The girl protagonist, and by extension the reader, must consider (from the safety of the present day) the implications of the situations to which her choices led. But most importantly, she reflects upon what she has learned from her experiences with Samantha: "I touch my locket and say thank you to Samantha, too, who taught me a lot about trying to help others—and appreciating all that I have right now."[58]

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[58] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 163, 164.

However, if the reader chooses to take the orphan train (which would provide her with a private moment to use the locket to return home), something surprisingly more traumatic happens to her. As she sits on the train after saying goodbye to Samantha, she realizes that she's left the necklace back at Samantha's house. She realizes in horror that if she does not get the necklace back before the orphan train leaves, she will not be able to return home. The orphan train's chaperone prevents her from leaving the train, so she shouts out the window to Samantha, asking her to rush home and bring back the necklace. The loss of that locket, the girl protagonist's physical connection between the past and the present, is what causes her to feel the fear that many orphans during that period likely felt. She realizes that if Samantha does not return in time with the necklace then "I'll go forward into the future with only the few possessions in the cardboard suitcase at my feet. No laptop, no cell phone, no way to call home. No photos of my family. No *family* at all." Fortunately, Samantha does return in time, and she is able to go home, but not without realizing the significance of her—now returned—ability to leave: "Just before I open the locket, I take one last look behind me at the little blond-haired boy. *I'm going home*, I think to myself, *but that little boy can't.* I swallow an overwhelming wave of sadness, sink down in my seat, and pry the locket open." Once the girl protagonist is returned to the present day, she begins crying, and her stepsister, Gracie, comes in to comfort her. When Gracie asks to play with her, she says yes and thinks, "It feels like days since I've seen her, and I realize—with horror—that if Samantha had been a minute late, it might have been a lifetime."[59] Escaping this moment of powerlessness does not leave her with relief. Instead

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[59] Falligant, *The Lilac Tunnel*, 161, 168, 177.

she sobs, horrified that she could have found herself in a situation in which she potentially could have lost everything that is important to her (especially the things of which she has only now just realized the significance) and from which she would not have been able to escape.

Significantly, in the *Journey* books, readers are enjoined to *act*. Although they are acting imaginatively while reading the book, the book simulates a process of real-life decision-making in the way that the reader must respond to the demands of a situation by making choices that lead to different conclusions. Whereas the classic series envisioned fictional historical characters that exerted agency to some extent to make change in the world in some way, the *Journey* series directly demonstrates through the girl protagonist how the lessons learned from the story might apply to the reader's life. The books do not just show girls who are capable of agency. Instead they go a step further and, to some extent, ask girls to consider the consequences and implications of different choices, actions, and mindsets so that they can make better decisions in their own lives.

Emotional Innocence and Potential Action

Because American Girl's stories invite girls to take what they have learned and use their new knowledge to act in their own worlds, it is important to consider how the company's historical fiction manages the stories of black girls and African American experiences in U.S. history with respect to how the books might serve as potential resources for future action. With her book *Racial Innocence*, performance studies scholar Robin Bernstein transformed the field of childhood studies by linking girls' dolls with the construction and maintenance of large-scale racial projects in the United States. Bernstein

establishes that the typical scripts provided for black dolls in the United States have invited

children to treat their black dolls terribly and, more often than not, violently. These scripts,

she argues, have contributed significantly to the idea, which continues to permeate U.S.

culture, that black children are not really children at all and are thus not entitled to the

protections childhood innocence usually provides. Although Bernstein concentrates

primarily on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is still good reason to be

concerned about present-day scripts provided for black dolls, especially since black dolls

are still underrepresented in American toy markets. Because American Girl's African

American dolls are purposefully situated in the past and the dolls' stories are intended to

be interpreted as historically accurate, their particular scripts necessarily rely on difficult

and traumatic histories and are thus significant sites for the potential perpetuation of

racialized gender norms as well as the potential reform of those norms.

Bernstein argues that nineteenth-century notions of childhood innocence—based

on the imagery of angelic white girls—utilized "a state of holy obliviousness" through

which white Americans constructed "racial memory through the performance of forgetting"

in ways that "secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that

status" while always allowing for and maintaining plausible deniability. "Dolls," she argues,

"are crucial props within the performance of childhood because they are contrivances by

which adults and children have historically played innocent."[60] The memories created and

sustained through the racial obliviousness of childhood innocence functioned to exclude

black children from the category of childhood. Furthermore, Bernstein argues that dolls are

[60] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 7, 8, 19.

"scriptive things," through which "determined" codes (made necessary through structure) and "implied" codes (provided from narrative and probable performances) work to prompt—or script—a range of probable behaviors and thought. She demonstrates that the differences between nineteenth-century white and black dolls constructed "white girls as tender, innocently doll-like and deserving of protection, and black girls as disqualified from all those qualities." Racist black dolls such as the pickaninny, the gutta-percha, the mammy, and the golliwog constituted and perpetuated minstrel and other stereotypical caricatures of African Americans. Importantly, the white makers of these black dolls "encouraged—and often explicitly instructed—children of all races to beat, throw, soil, burn, and hang black dolls," which allowed the dolls to operate as "especially powerful sites through which to perform the libel that black flesh was invulnerable to pain."[61] These types of scripted behaviors contributed to the idea that black children were not truly children, thus excluding them from the protections of childhood innocence that were automatically conferred on white girls.

African American leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey worried that black children's rejection of such dolls "inculcated black children with self-loathing" and surmised that "beautiful black dolls could foster racial pride."[62] In response to their calls, early twentieth-century companies such as the New Negro Doll Company produced extremely delicate dolls which exuded

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[61] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 21, 29, 233.
[62] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 230. See also Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

vulnerability and were thought to encourage black girls to perform the tenderness and innocence that white-manufactured dolls had long denied to black children. Most of these companies, however, did not last much longer than the 1930s.

The link between dolls and identity would be further cemented in American memory beginning in the late 1930s when two black American psychologists, Dr. Kenneth Clark and Dr. Mamie Clark, conducted their now-famous "doll tests," which attempted to measure African American children's preference for white or black dolls. The Clarks found that most black children expressed a preference for white dolls and concluded that this preference was a direct effect of segregation's negative influence. Significantly, the Clarks' doll tests have had an unprecedented effect on how Americans understand the connection between doll preference and self-esteem. In their study, the Clarks presented black children with two dolls—identical except for skin color—and asked a series of questions that, according to the Clarks, were intended to reveal the subject's preference for one of the dolls. The majority of the children they tested preferred white dolls, and the Clarks presented this result as transparent evidence of low self-esteem.[25] However, in addition to pointing out that their study provides no proven link between doll preference and self-esteem, Bernstein compellingly argues that the structure of the Clarks' tests ensured "that most children would prefer the white doll" because they treated play with dolls as racially neutral: "A child with basic knowledge of children's culture may well have understood the

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[25] These tests arguably have an effect on how white Americans perceive dolls in respect to gender as well, given that the problem of Barbie's sexiness is often tied to harming girls' self-esteem.

Clarks' revised opening request—'Give me the doll you like to play with'—as a choice

between a white doll that prompted cuddle play and a black doll that scripted play of

violence and servitude. . . . That a majority of black children preferred the former mode of

play could reveal low self-esteem but could just as well constitute resistance to the

demeaning performances that black dolls had scripted for over a century."[63] The Clarks'

research was largely discredited in the 1960s and 1970s, but the belief in the connection

between doll preference and self-esteem spurred by the doll tests persists in American

memory. As Bernstein puts it, "The Clarks implanted in American common sense the belief,

which remains prominent today, that any black child who prefers white dolls is necessarily

showing symptoms of individual and societal pathology: internalized racism."[64]

However, to point out that a direct link between doll preference and black children's

self-esteem has never been proven is not to suggest that black dolls such as the pickaninny

or golliwog had no effect on children or that there is no need to have diverse

representation among dolls. Indeed, Bernstein argues that the Clarks brilliantly leveraged

their research as evidence that "African American youth not only could be hurt but had

been hurt—by systemic racism," thus amending the protection of childhood innocence to

include black children, a strategy that was so successful that, according to Bernstein, it even

influenced the outcome of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Yet in doing so the Clarks also set

up a framework that allows black children to be cast as the potential victims or cultural

dupes of white dolls and internalized racism. But Bernstein's study of racialized dolls and

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[63] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 236, 238.
[64] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 197.

doll play scripts deeply undermines the assumption that "children play the same way with black and white dolls." Ultimately, for Bernstein, the crux of the Clarks' research is not that doll preference is somehow linked to self-esteem but that children are aware of and "demonstrate expertise" in the scripts that govern certain toys: "The Clark doll tests may ultimately prove little about self-esteem, but they tell us a great deal about how African American children of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s thought about racialized doll play."[65] Thus, whereas there may have been good political reason to position black children as capable of suffering at the hands of racism, there is also good reason to trust that black children wield a nuanced understanding of racial scripts in relationship to their own identity. This certainly does not mean that black children should not be afforded the protections granted to white children, but that in their knowledge of those scripts we should not assume children's automatic or total devastation.

Thus, the question is not about whether the mere existence of those scripts causes harm, because children are capable of refusing unwanted scripts. But in order to refuse those scripts, black children must first know them and understand the significance of what those scripts bring to bear on their lives. Because American Girl's scripts are primarily provided by the dolls' accompanying historical fiction, it is imperative that we understand what and how those texts communicate. Furthermore, like many mainstream cultural products for children, American Girl primarily imagines a white audience, although girls of color are most certainly also consumers of its products. But the assumption of a primarily white audience is especially significant with respect to American Girl's African American

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[65] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 238, 239, 241.

dolls. The malicious legacy of racialized doll play lays a weighty significance at the feet of American Girl's black doll characters and the scripts provided by the book series for those characters.

As of 2019, American Girl has two historical black dolls for sale: Addy Walker, who lives with her mother in Philadelphia in the early 1860s after escaping slavery, and Melody Ellison, who grows up in Detroit during the twentieth-century civil rights movement.[66] When American Girl announced Addy in 1993, it received a fair amount of criticism. Many of Addy's critics were concerned that her story was stereotypical and "reduced the experiences of black Americans to oppression and pain rather than other more joyful experiences such as community building and artistic collaboration."[67] Melody, as a civil rights-era character who experiences the trauma of racial discrimination firsthand, could easily be considered an extension of the same issue; however, Melody's classic series includes much more emphasis on joyful experiences with community and family. Speaking of Addy prior to her release, children's author Eloise Greenfield pointed out to the *Washington Post* that Addy's story of escaping slavery "did not fit in with the other dolls. . . . It's a stereotype to continually go back to that period. It's our Holocaust. How can you compare the horror of slavery with Kirsten's mother having a baby?"[68] For Greenfield, tying

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[66] A third African American doll, Cécile Rey, was released in 2011 and archived in 2014 prior to the BeForever rebranding. Cécile was born to a wealthy, free black family in New Orleans and was released in conjunction with the white doll character Marie-Grace Gardner as part of an interracial friendship storyline. Cécile's classic series is still available, but a *Journey* book was not created for the rebranding.

[67] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 107.

[68] Megan Rosenfeld, "Wholesome Babes in Toyland," *Washington Post*, May 24, 1993, accessed February 2, 2019,

Addy to such a traumatic history is indicative of contemporary discrimination because the stories accompanying the white dolls do not mete out the same historical trauma.

Given the historical legacy of violence against black dolls described by Bernstein, Greenfield's objection is understandable. At the beginning of Addy's story, when she was still a slave on a plantation in North Carolina, she was tasked with removing caterpillars from tobacco plants. One day, her slave owner decides that she did not do a good enough job and whips her. If girls were to act out Addy's story, it is entirely possible that they might replicate the kind of abuse that Bernstein argues nineteenth-century girls were encouraged to mete out to their black dolls. However, as Zaslow argues, there is one primary difference between the scripts for nineteenth-century black dolls and the scripts provided by Addy's stories: Addy feels pain, both physically and emotionally. Importantly, Zaslow demonstrates that "the narrative around the preciousness and innocence of the American Girl doll body extends to include all of the collection's dolls of color."[69] For example, when Addy's slave owner whips her, she is terrified and experiences excruciating pain. Addy's suffering was further emphasized through illustrations in the original series book *Meet Addy.* One image depicts Addy being whipped but focuses primarily on her face, which illustrates her agony.[70] Melody also experiences trauma. When a saleswoman treats Melody and her brother like criminals while they are shopping in a department store, she vividly feels the sting of this unwarranted discrimination. Moreover, later in her story, Melody is so

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1993/05/24/wholesome-babes-in-toyland/b4ed92ca-1571-4ec9-9290-4dfb4ded0b7b/.
[69] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 123.
[70] Connie Porter, *Meet Addy* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company, 1993), 21.

distraught with fear after learning about the four girls who were killed in the 1963

Birmingham church bombing—girls much like herself—that she loses her voice.

Although Addy and Melody experience traumas significantly more difficult than

white doll characters, American Girl's classic historical fiction series addresses many of the

issues raised by Bernstein by providing positive scripts for its black dolls that enjoin its

readers—black, white, or other—to identify with the characters *as* American Girls, to

empathize with their emotions and experiences, and to celebrate their strength in

overcoming terrible hardship. Because there is such a persistent belief that the emotional

connections potentially forged between children and fictional historical characters help

children to comprehend the significance of the past, the *Journey* books for Addy and Melody

offer an opportunity to analyze how and in which ways the reader is prompted to interact,

identify, and empathize with a character of color. In what follows, I examine representative

story lines from Addy and Melody's *Journey* books in order to demonstrate how the texts

use emotion to extend the mantle of childhood innocence to African American girls and to

recognize and resist discrimination and prejudice against African Americans. By focusing

on the potentially positive scripts from these *Journey* books, I do not intend to suggest that

American Girl provides the final or "correct" answer to every criticism that might or should

be leveled at such cultural products for children. Although my reading supports Zaslow's

findings, Addy's and Melody's stories still conform very closely to standard narratives

about slavery and the civil rights era, which often present these issues as problems

relegated to the past. Because the frame stories for each character broaden the books'

lessons to standing up for what is right more generally, the texts still mostly miss the

opportunity to inform girls about or prepare girls for racism in its current forms. In this analysis, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on the messages most likely intended by the books' creators, how those messages are framed to encourage reader appropriation, and the actions made thinkable through that appropriation, however limited they may ultimately be. Thus, the question here is how the *Journey* texts contribute to this purpose.

Extending Innocence through Emotion

In her analysis of American Girl's classic historical fiction series, Zaslow argues that, unlike the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century toys that Bernstein examined, American Girl extends the notion of childhood innocence to its African American characters. She points to moments in Addy's classic series in which Addy experiences pain and argues that "readers are well aware of the emotional harm these experiences inflict upon her; she feels hated and hatred, she is separated from her family, and she is discriminated against in a Northern state she hoped would be free from prejudice."[71] Because of the way that the *Journey* books transform the reader into a character of the story through the girl protagonist, Addy's book provides the reader with an opportunity to experience more immediately, if not literally, the fear, pain, and uncertainty that Addy must endure as an African American girl in the time of chattel slavery. Ultimately, these experiences provide the girl protagonist with a more mature outlook on her present-day situation, which functions as part of the narrative but also as an example of how the reader might apply the lessons from the past in her own life.

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[71] Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll*, 123.

The *Journey* book for Addy begins in the contemporary moment as the girl protagonist considers the failing grade she just received on her social studies test. She is not sure how to tell her parents, and she is frustrated because major changes in her home life have made concentrating on her studies much more difficult. Her mother has returned to school to become a teacher, and her father has taken a new job in another state. Her grandparents have moved in to care for her and her younger brother. That evening, her grandfather pulls out a coin collection and shows her a coin that once belonged to an ancestor who fought in the Civil War. When she runs her finger over the date on the coin, 1864, she finds herself transported back in time to a pier at which a large ship is being unloaded. She meets Addy, who is there with other church members to greet escaped slaves as they arrive at the port. The girl protagonist rides with the group to Addy's church. As the girls proceed to the church Addy tells the girl protagonist about her experience escaping North Carolina.

After a while, the two girls leave the church to walk to Addy's home. On the way, a red-haired man stops them and demands to see their papers. Addy explains to the girl protagonist that the man is asking for papers that prove their freedom. The girl protagonist tells the man that they are not slaves, and Addy says that she can explain. Then the girl protagonist thinks to herself, "I've got a bad feeling about this. I think we should run, but Addy knows a lot more about surviving in 1864. Should I let her do the talking?"[72] The reader must now decide if she should trust the gut feeling of the girl protagonist and flee or

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[72] Denise Lewis Patrick, *A New Beginning: My Journey with Addy* (Middleton, MI: American Girl Publishing, 2014), 47.

defer to Addy's knowledge of the situation. In this case, the girl protagonist's gut feeling

leads to a less traumatic encounter because the girls avoid being caught.

On the one hand, if the reader chooses to let Addy try to explain, the man cuts Addy

off angrily. The girl protagonist also tries to speak calmly to the man because that is how

her grandmother has taught her to speak when she's "got something important to say," but

this only angers the man more. He calls them "darkies" and compares them to the runaway

slave notices in the newspaper he is holding. She fumes over the idea that people consider

enslaved people to be property and realizes that "these people look at slaves as a way to

make money."[73] She remembers the coin in her pocket—the one that will take her back

home to safety—but after seeing the terrified look on Addy's face, she knows that she

cannot leave her to be taken back into slavery, and she makes a choice to stay.[74] She spots a

white policeman, and the girls flag him down. After quickly assessing the situation, the

policeman allows the slave catcher to take the girls. Addy begs the officer to track down the

pastor of her church as the slave catcher carts the girls away.

Importantly, the girl protagonist notes that "Addy's face is blank, but I know she's

scared. I understand now how serious this is. Really losing your freedom is nothing like

being grounded." The man takes them to an office and makes them stand inside and wait as

he speaks to someone behind the counter. She asks Addy if they should try to run again:

"Addy shakes her head. Her face is the same blank it was in the cart. For some reason, that

makes me even more scared." Luckily for the girls, the policeman finds and alerts the

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[73] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 52, 53.

[74] This choice, however, is part of the narrative and the reader is not given the opportunity
to choose otherwise.

minister and Addy's mother. The minister vouches for the girls, and the man behind the counter says that the red-haired man must have made a mistake. The policeman, leading the girls and Addy's mother out, admonishes the man and says, "You need to keep better records. Stop harassing the citizens of Philadelphia." As he leaves, he tells the girls to be careful because "this is a dangerous time for colored people." During the ride to Addy's home, the girl protagonist gets the shakes as she thinks about what just happened: "What if Reverend Drake and Mrs. Walker hadn't gotten to us in time? Sure, I had the special coin in my pocket. But Addy . . . I don't even want to think of her back in slavery, maybe never seeing her family again. I squeeze her hand."[75] Shortly after arriving at Addy's home, the girl protagonist decides she wants to go home as well.

Back home in her room, she considers what she has learned from the experience: "I learned that history is more than just dates. It's really the people who lived in the past and struggled to make changes. They're the ones who shaped the world we live in today."[76] She leaves her room to ask her grandfather about the ancestor who owned the coin. When her grandmother walks in, the girl is so happy to see her she cannot even speak for fear of crying. Then, her father Skypes in, and she wonders how long Addy was separated from her father. Knowing that she cannot take his calls for granted anymore, she steels herself to tell him some bad news about her social studies grade. The girl protagonist's revised perception of history, which summarizes for the reader the idea that one's actions will have an impact on the future, also signals her growth with respect to her current situation. Her

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[75] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 61, 66, 67.
[76] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 86.

experiences in the past have prepared her to take responsibility for her social studies grade and appreciate even the long-distance connection she is able to maintain with her father.

If the structure of the *Journey* books allows the reader to experience "firsthand" through the girl protagonist the kind of emotions that the historical characters feel in the classic series, then this is about as close to an experience to slavery that an American Girl story would likely allow while remaining faithful to the presumed innocence of its readers. In this reading path, there are no more opportunities for the reader to affect the narrative, and returning home is the only possible conclusion. Similar to the factory escape scene in Samantha's *Journey* book, here it is the girl protagonist who makes the decisions that drive the narrative forward—not the reader. But unlike the girl protagonist in Samantha's *Journey* book, who uses her time-slip object to escape the danger of the factory, this girl protagonist submits to the danger of the red-haired slave catcher. She does this not because she sees herself as totally powerless in the situation but because she recognizes that Addy is powerless. It is the terror on Addy's face that cements her decision to stay.

Once the girls are taken by the slave catcher, she notes twice that Addy's face is blank. But this blankness does not indicate a lack of emotion but rather the devastating knowledge of how a story like this typically plays out. Addy, having just described to the girl protagonist her and her family's harrowing experiences in slavery and her and her mother's escape from it, is frozen by the gravity of their predicament. It is possible that a younger reader might not immediately understand the significance of Addy's blank stare, but the girl protagonist's response ensures that Addy's blank stare cannot be equated to a lack of fear, emotion, or pain. In both cases the girl protagonist's interpretation of Addy's

blank stare causes her to become more fearful of the situation. Importantly, this reading

path presents a script that pivots around Addy's ability to feel emotional pain and the girl

protagonist's instinct to protect Addy.

On the other hand, upon the girls' initial encounter with the red-haired man, the

reader can choose to trust the girl protagonist's gut feeling to run away. For the girl

protagonist, this decision is based on instinct rather than a full understanding of the

danger: "I grab Addy's hand and start running. I don't know where I'm going. I just want to

get away from the man who thinks we're slaves." Addy finds a loose board in a fence, and

the girls crawl through. The slave catcher manages to grab the girl protagonist by her skirt

as she tries to get through the fence, and Addy exclaims that "I won't let him get *you*!" Addy

pulls hard, and the girl protagonist's skirt rips, allowing Addy to pull her through. As in the

other reading path, the girl protagonist remembers the coin in her pocket that would take

her home, but she resolves to stay for Addy. It becomes clear, however, that she does not

fully understand what is happening. She asks Addy who that man is, and Addy tells her he

is a slave catcher. "But we're not slaves!" she protests. She then notices that "Addy looks at

me the same way I sometimes look at my little brother when he doesn't understand

something obvious."[77] Addy explains that because slavery still exists in the South, the man

can take black people without papers and sell them.

The girls then encounter a dog, and whereas the girl protagonist has no fear, Addy

warns her the dog may be dangerous and seems to be "frozen to the spot." She remembers

Addy's story about her former slave owner using dogs to chase her and her mother down

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[77] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 51, 54.

as they escaped, so she understands where Addy's fear is coming from but knows the slave catcher is still trying to find them. It takes the girl protagonist several tries to convince Addy that the dog is friendly and that they must go around it to flee. They finally make it to the end of the alley, but then they see the slave catcher. They run as fast as they can, and Addy leads her to the church. Once there, the girl protagonist admits that "I thought you were safe from people like that in Philadelphia," and Addy explains that until slavery is ended they must watch for slave catchers. At the church, the girls find Addy's mother and tell her what happened. Addy's "voice breaks" when she confesses to her mother that "it was like escaping the plantation all over again." They all go hand in hand to Addy's home, and although Addy's mother holds both of their hands, the girl protagonist reflects that she's "still scared we'll see the red-haired man again."[78] At this point, the encounter is over, and the next decision the reader makes does not occur until the next day while they are at Addy's school. Throughout the rest of the possible choices, the girls do not face such danger again, but they are subjected to discrimination at the hands of more privileged African American girls at Addy's school and also of white adults. Thus, the experience with the slave catcher is added cumulatively to what follows in the narrative rather than being the girl protagonist's primary impression of the time period.

In this reading path, the narrative presents a script that highlights Addy's fear and suffering—but also her determination. As much as the girl protagonist wants to help Addy, Addy is also determined that her new friend will not suffer the fate of which she is all too aware. When Addy shouts, "I won't let them get *you*!" the text's emphasis on the "you"

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[78] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 63, 63.

suggests that Addy might even sacrifice herself to ensure her friend's safety (although the situation does not come to that).[79] This reading path stresses Addy's agency and resolve, which speaks at least partially to possible paternalistic readings of the previous reading path that revolved primarily (though not entirely) around the girl protagonist's actions in the heat of the moment. The relationship between Addy and the girl protagonist is reciprocal, suggesting that girls must rely on each other when faced with challenges.

Although the girl protagonist must "watch" Addy's reactions and have certain things explained to her in order to understand better Addy's feelings, the girl protagonist's empathy for Addy is still grounded in their shared experience of that moment. Importantly, the girl protagonist's ignorance of the realities and repercussions of slavery, especially as experienced in the North, is acknowledged in the text in such a way that the reader is not castigated for the things that she might not understand or know about. Instead, moments that reveal her ignorance are treated as learning experiences—such as when Addy's incredulous stare makes the girl protagonist realize she had asked a question with an obvious answer. The text extends the protections of childhood innocence to Addy, but that also does not assume that she is oblivious to the dangers that threaten her. By "revealing" these dangers to the reader through the girl protagonist, the text also suggests that the reader's innocence should be instilled with awareness, not obliviousness. That is, those who are in the direct path of danger or violence and those who are not must both be aware of that danger. This is a more complicated conceptualization of innocence that does not rely on the "holy obliviousness" of ignorance and suggests that one's responsibility to others is a

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[79] Patrick, *A New Beginning*, 54.

marker of maturity but not merely an adulthood concern. Here, the growth narrative emphasizes the importance of this awareness to girlhood itself by encouraging development and maturity without looking toward adulthood, thus eliding the link between maturity and sexual development or knowledge. This is a significantly different conceptualization and application of innocence than that described by Bernstein.

Resist and Contribute

Addy's *Journey* book provides an example of how the protections afforded by the notion of childhood innocence might begin to include black girlhood. Melody's *Journey* book does similar work in that the reader is exposed to the forms of discrimination that girls like Melody faced in the 1960s (and still face today, although the book does not stress this), and girls are encouraged to empathize with Melody. The different reading paths provide opportunities for girls to learn to recognize not only racism as expressed or felt through individuals but also forms of institutionalized racism and its potentially devastating consequences. But given the historical placement of her story in 1964 Detroit, Melody's *Journey* book is also able to take advantage of African Americans' active resistance against such discrimination and prejudice during the civil rights era. Thus, in this book girls are encouraged to engage in various forms of activism.

The issues, then, that the girl protagonist deals with in her contemporary moment function to broaden the lessons about fighting against racism in ways that stress the importance of standing up for what one believes is right and finding a way to contribute to a larger cause. The girl protagonist's story begins as she is practicing the piano for an upcoming recital but thinking about how she will get to learn guitar in school the following

year. Her instructor tells her that "there's no passion in the piece," which reminds her of

her father, a politician who is "really passionate about helping people and making a

difference."[80] Her instructor gives her the sheet music for "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which

readers of Melody's classic series will have learned is also often referred to as the "Black

National Anthem." As she begins to play the song, she suddenly feels compelled to finish it.

When she hits the final note, she looks around and realizes she is not in the same place

anymore. Melody is there and compliments her playing. After speaking with Melody for a

bit, she begins to realize she has gone back in time to 1964. The girl protagonist plays the

song again to return to her time. On the drive home from piano practice, her mother, who is

also the principal of her school, tells her that the music program will likely be cut—which

means no guitar lessons, something she was excited about. Feeling frustrated, she says she

wants to practice the piano more, and she then proceeds to return to Melody's time.

Melody's *Journey* book addresses the idea of resistance from several angles. The

bulk of the time-slip stories center African American resistance in response to period-

specific forms of discrimination and make it clear that these specific situations are morally

unacceptable and that girls should *feel* the urge to resist even if their contribution is

relatively small. More specifically, the girl protagonist can choose a route that focuses on

protest or one that focuses primarily on black culture. The protest route is explicitly about

the girl protagonist experiencing and resisting racism and discrimination. The black culture

route, which exposes the reader to Motown, gospel, and the Emancipation Celebration, is

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[80] Erin Falligant and Denise Lewis Patrick, *Music in My Heart: My Journey with Melody* (Middleton, MI: American Girl Publishing, 2016), 1.

also implicitly about those issues, especially in the way that structural hardships in the 1960s affected African Americans and their communities. Both reading paths demonstrate African Americans' strength in the face of adversity, but the cultural route is about individual strength and growth more generally, while the protest route is about connecting one's actions to the larger issues of a community.

If the reader chooses the protest route by helping Melody's older sister Yvonne with the Student Walk to Freedom Club and then chooses to help Yvonne make posters for a protest against a local grocery store, then—when Yvonne offers to buy the girls a soda as a reward for their help—the reader learns that a waitress at the local soda shop had previously treated Melody's mother poorly. Yvonne, who did not know about her mother's encounter, tells Melody that if she wants a soda "we should go in. It's important to take a stand on things like this. Someone has to fight for what's right." Then she turns to the girl protagonist and says, "What do you think? Should we try to make a difference here or would you rather keep walking?"[81] Yvonne clearly wants the girls to choose to challenge the soda shop's staff. Despite Yvonne's leading question, the girls are both hesitant. In this case, the reader-as-girl-protagonist is faced with a choice to make herself vulnerable to humiliation and the possibility of violence or to avoid it.

If the reader chooses to go into the shop, then the girl protagonist considers how her father's campaign manager was mistaken by a white man for a valet and how Melody and her brother were treated like criminals at the department store because they were black. The girl protagonist then thinks "about how hurt Melody looked when she talked about

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[81] Falligant and Patrick, *Music in My Heart*, 79–80.

that."[82] At this thought, the girl protagonist agrees to go into the soda shop but worries that Melody might be mad at her. She notices that Melody "doesn't look mad—only a little scared, maybe." In this instance, she makes a difficult choice that she reasons is supportive of Melody despite the fact that she is not sure whether Melody wants to go into the shop or not.

Melody agrees to go in, and immediately the white waitress, whose name is Sue, ignores them. Yvonne tells the girls that they will wait. Soon after, a white woman and her teenage daughter walk into the soda shop, and Sue goes to seat them immediately. The girl tells Sue that the three girls were ahead of her and her mother, and the "sour look on Sue's face says that the last thing she wants to do is seat us." She tells them to sit in a booth in the back of the shop, but Yvonne takes stools at the counter. Sue goes back to ignoring them and instead takes the mother and daughter's order. Eventually, Yvonne asks Sue for a cup of coffee, but Sue tells her that there is none. Melody whispers to the girl protagonist and points out that there is a full pot behind the counter. The girl protagonist thinks to herself, "The air feels cold and still, like just before a thunderstorm. Part of me wants to get off my stool and run away, before something bad happens. But I don't." Instead, she speaks up and points out that there is a full pot. The white woman, who had come in with her daughter, smiles at the girl protagonist and also says that the pot is full. Sue begrudgingly serves coffee to Yvonne and soda to the girls. She reflects upon the moment: "But I've learned

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[82] Falligant and Patrick, *Music in My Heart*, 93.

something: Even girls like Melody and me can make a difference."[83] In this case, the story

ends, and it is only assumed that girl protagonist will return home.

In this reading path, the narrative does not need the girl protagonist to return to the

present day during the story because the lesson the reader is meant to learn and the

desired action that should be taken are one and the same. Collapsing that timeline allows

this reading path to come very close to demonstrating that racism still serves as a link from

the past to the present. This achievement, however, is somewhat reduced by the narrative's

reliance on a white savior figure. It is very likely that American Girl felt it necessary to show

white characters in positive roles in order to avoid alienating its many white readers and

their parents. Certainly, it is historically accurate that some white people of the time

resisted discrimination against African Americans, and this scene could be read as another

moment in which childhood innocence is extended to African American girls. After all,

when the white woman intervenes with a smile and acknowledgment of the full coffee pot,

she keeps the situation from escalating by making it impossible for Sue to continue refusing

service. This moment suggests that equality cannot be achieved unless white people act

against discrimination too. But this scene also presents the more unlikely situation as the

norm and implies that racism is held individually—in this case, only by the waitress who

once refused service to Melody's mother and then repeated that behavior.

However, if the reader chooses to walk away instead of entering the shop, then the

girl protagonist thinks about how she's "never had a waitress be mean to me before" and

admits she does not want to go inside. Melody agrees and suggests that they go to a soda

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[83] Falligant and Patrick, *Music in My Heart*, 108, 115, 116.

shop down the road that is owned by an African American. Although this is a reasonable alternative, Yvonne is disappointed by the girls' decision. She tells the girls that "if we only shopped at those places, nothing would ever change. Businesses like this one would keep treating black people poorly. That's not okay, is it?"[84] Instead of taking the girls to the other shop, they walk home to help Melody's mother make food for the other club volunteers. The girl protagonist feels as if they disappointed Yvonne but assuages her guilt by thinking about helping out in another way.

Yvonne's disappointment with the girls recedes once they get home and help Melody's mother make sandwiches from the vegetables that Melody helped grow. Lila, Melody's other sister, is reading a new American history book for school, and this sparks a conversation about textbook coverage of slavery and black history. Melody's mom notes that at her school she is "finally getting materials in [her] classroom that teach about black history—and that show the miseries of slavery instead of painting a pretty picture of it." The girl protagonist thinks about how her school spent all of February studying black history and wonders what it would be like if she had never learned of black leaders such as Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman. She flips through Lila's book and notices that neither person is included in the book. She's reluctant to bring it up but thinks about how she "chickened out" at the soda shop earlier. She asks herself, "*Are you going to chicken out again now?*" She decides to tell them, and they flip through the book. They only find one picture of a black person, who is depicted as a slave. Lila becomes upset that her "good" school would have books like that. Melody suggests that they write letters to the school

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[84] Falligant and Patrick, *Music in My Heart*, 104.

that explain how those books make them feel. The girl protagonist offers to help because she wants "to help make things better for Lila—and for all of the students at her school."[85] The next day at the church they finish the letters, and the girl protagonist says goodbye to Melody. As she plays "Lift Every Voice" on the church's piano to return home, she thinks about how she's learned that "girls like Melody and me can make a difference" and wonders what she might do to improve her own world.

Although this scene normalizes the presence of black history beyond slavery in the present-day classroom, the girl protagonist does not question the quality of her own textbook or education in that regard. On the one hand, if the narrative assumes the textbook problem to be solved in the present, then if present-day girls were to encounter lackluster textbooks, they might be prompted to recognize them as such and speak out against them as the girls do in this scene. However, it is still a significant omission because public education still neglects black history, often relegating it to Black History Month and not much further beyond. Indeed, the fact that educators rely so heavily on historical fiction in the classroom suggests the inadequacy of textbooks to convey the significance of African American contributions and experiences. The text misses an opportunity in this scene to connect the experiences the girl protagonist has and the lessons she has learned in her time travels with the present day.

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[85] Falligant and Patrick, *Music in My Heart*, 118, 128.

Conclusion

American Girl is unique because of the way that it intentionally engages in public memory with the rather explicit purpose of promoting a specific set of values. This overt purpose makes American Girl's historical fiction a fruitful site for examining how texts encourage reader appropriation. That is, an analysis of these stories helps us to distinguish the ways in which readers are prompted to take up certain values, beliefs, and ideas with the purpose of influencing their actions. There is, of course, no guarantee that readers will comprehend those messages or act in the desired manner in their own lives, but to the extent that the texts function as a set of instructions, those prompts can reveal probable actions—and, in this case, they certainly reveal what adults want for children. This analysis illuminates a different vantage point of the magnetic memory model that considers how a memory thing might exert affective force on its audience to prompt future interpretation.

The unique time-slip and gamebook frameworks of American Girl's newest historical fiction series, *My Journey with…,* can enrich understanding of how children's historical fiction operates as a complex form of public memory and how such texts encourage reader appropriation. Importantly, the *Journey* books' unique structure positions the reader herself as a character in the story, essentially inviting girls to interact with history rather than remain a spectator of it. This orientation to the narrative potentially deepens the reader's emotional connection to the historical character and values she represents.

At every turn, the texts rely on emotion to connect girls with an imaginary but empowering past that encourages them to take up the set of values, beliefs, and norms

offered by the text and use them to make more mature decisions in their present-day lives.

Significantly, American Girl manages to introduce girls to difficult histories while also

encouraging their personal growth without jeopardizing their innocence. More specifically,

Melody and Addy's *Journey* books cultivate readers' identification and empathy with the

effects of racism that African Americans faced during slavery and the civil rights era in

ways that use emotion to teach girls to recognize and resist discrimination and prejudice

and, more broadly, to stand up for their beliefs.

Conclusion

Making Use of Magnetic Memory

Rhetorical studies has struggled to explain the role of emotion in public memory discourse and public discourse more generally. The primary contribution of my model of magnetic memory is the observation that audience investment in one public memory or another is conditioned upon the manner in which the object of that memory circulates in public culture. Through the electromagnet analogy, magnetic memory brings together Sarah Ahmed's political model of affective economies and Sara VanderHaagen's rhetorical model of the agential spiral to describe and explain how emotion intersects with public memory in ways that influence which memories will matter for certain audiences and which will not. In doing so, this model answers, at least partially, one of Blair, Dickinson, and Ott's calls to theorize more fully the emotional aspects of public memory that have otherwise been ignored or simply assumed.[1]

Furthermore, this model also addresses another common assumption about the relationship between historical "facts" and public memory. Because public memory studies in rhetoric have been mostly preoccupied with self-conscious forms of public commemoration, scholars have paid very little attention to how the public becomes invested in the past without needing to invoke it through commemorative practices. The basic definition that scholars of public memory often use define to public memory is the use of the past for present-day purposes. Rarely, however, is the meaning of "the past" questioned. Generally speaking, "the past" is used as shorthand for people, places, things, or

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[1] Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 15–16.

events that occurred in history. From this perspective, it makes good sense to study forms

of public commemoration because they are clearly about remembering the facts of the past

(even if those facts are not remembered accurately). However, this project suggests that it

is people's emotional attachment to certain values, beliefs, or norms—rather than

historical individuals or events—that lends significance to certain objects, and those

attachments then make those objects useful for public memory. Thus, this project takes a

measured step back from intentional forms of public commemoration to consider other

avenues of public memory through which we communicate fundamental values.

Specifically, I explore how everyday objects become useful for the purposes of

public memory. I have chosen to concentrate on children's toys because public memory

studies in rhetoric have not paid attention to these everyday objects, which I contend have

the potential to wield a considerable amount of affective force. I focus primarily on gender

norms because gender has been the primary lens through which the public has debated

children's toys in the twenty-first century, but I also consider how norms of class and race

operate in conjunction with gender. By approaching public memory through everyday

objects, I acknowledge that our relationship with certain objects comes to feel personal to

us despite being shared collectively at some level. I call these objects that have been

charged with affect "memory things." Memory things are intended to be a corollary to the

well-established concept of the memory place. Memory places are sites such as

monuments, memorials, and museums that commemorate extraordinary historical events,

people, and places in ways that typically embody fundamental values such as national

belonging. It is difficult to mistake a monument or memorial for anything other than a place

intended to remember and, usually, to honor something of national significance. Memory things, on the other hand, are ordinary, everyday objects that only become relevant for public memory once they accumulate emotional force through circulation in public culture. They are not necessarily self-conscious creations or deliberate uses of memory but nevertheless become useful for public memory. Furthermore, the "thing," a concept drawn from thing theory, suggests that our relationship to an object can change when certain conditions, such as an emotional connection, change.

The model of magnetic memory, then, explains how that subject/object relation changes through the accumulation of "affective force" when an object circulates in public culture. Ahmed's work provides two important insights into how objects become associated with emotion. First, Ahmed argues that emotions are social, cultural, and rhetorical and not merely interior, psychological states. This means that emotions do not circulate; objects do. For Ahmed, emotion operates like capital and is produced out of that circulation. Thus, when we have a sensation—that is, when we feel something—we must always interpret that feeling through language in order to make the feeling meaningful as an emotion. Context provides us with the knowledge to make sense of how we feel, which is why multiple people may share a feeling but not have the same emotional interpretation of that feeling. Second, Ahmed argues that although emotions are produced through the circulation of an object, emotions are not located within that object. Instead, emotions, like capital, are produced and accumulated as an effect—a kind of surplus value—of an object's circulation. Emotions are "accumulated over time" gaining what I am calling affective

force.[2] I use that term because it points to the relationship between emotion and power, as well as to the fact that forces can move in various directions, such that the accumulation of affective force cannot simply be equated with a "positive" value. That is, emotion does not necessarily accumulate in ways that we—as critics or as part of the public—might want it to do.

How, then, does affective force accumulate through circulation, and what might be the effect of that accumulation? Although Ahmed's analyses of various public texts in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* share many attributes with rhetorical analysis, she does not specifically investigate circulation as a rhetorical process, nor does she frame her project within the terms of public memory. However, VanderHaagen's agential spiral, derived from her study of Paul Ricoeur's three-fold mimesis and applied to public memory studies in rhetoric, offers a path not only for conceptualizing how the repetitive nature of circulation produces emotion but also for considering how emotion is reinvested back into the spiraling process of rhetorical interpretation, production, and action that constitutes circulation. The agent of VanderHaagen's "agential spiral" reminds us that people drive the rhetorical processes of circulation—people interpret, people produce, and people act. The spiral enriches the magnetic memory model by pointing to the repetitive nature of circulation while also signaling that conditions must and will change over time.

An electromagnet has several unique qualities that make it useful as an analogy for explaining the significance of emotion to public memory. For one, unlike naturally

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[2] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 45.

occurring magnetic metals, an electromagnet's base metal does not have a coherent magnetic field and can thus only wield concentrated magnetic force through ongoing human intervention—such as the application of electricity through a coiled wire. The "base metal" of magnetic memory is first magnetized with affective force when a person or group pulls from and interprets the discursive field, the body of knowledge that is available to us at a given point in time, for a specific purpose. Chapter 1 demonstrates how the Easy-Bake Oven is a rhetorical interpretation of the gendered discourses of traditional femininity and cooking as applied to mid-twentieth-century girlhood. Operating within this context, the creators and marketers of the Easy-Bake Oven necessarily relied on commonly held ideas about the types of things that would attract and hold girls' attention. At the time, many of the toys made specifically for girls mimicked items from the adult world, especially those items that helped mothers care for the household, including toy sewing machines, irons and ironing boards, brooms and mops, vacuums, and even electric toy ovens. Thus, in many ways the Easy-Bake Oven is just one of many similar toys and not a "first" interpretation of these values. However, the Easy-Bake constitutes a significant point for analysis because time has shown us that the Easy-Bake Oven has accrued significant affective force over time. Its resemblance to mother's modern kitchen, its connection with cake and other decadent treats, and its "innovative" and supposedly safer use of the common light bulb as a heat source certainly contributed to its lasting significance.

The movement of electrons through the spiral of the electromagnet's coiled wire is suggestive of an object's rhetorical circulation in public culture. The object in the abstract remains relatively stationary as it is repeatedly reinterpreted in symbolic and material

forms that are never quite the same as the previous version. This repetitive movement increases the object's affective force and applies pressure to the discursive field. In this model, interpretation performs the work of Ahmed's "contact" between the object and the audience. Emotions arise from that interpretive contact. The accumulation of that emotion adds value—or affective force—to that object, which creates the potential for the object to become useful for the purposes of public memory. The question then becomes: How does the accumulation of affective force affect the object's usefulness with respect to public memory?

The Easy-Bake Oven first began to circulate in public culture through its marketing, which tapped into and ultimately helped to introduce girls to deeply held cultural assumptions about women's responsibility for cooking, a highly visible and daily task of caring for the family. A closer look at the Easy-Bake Oven's comic book advertisements from the 1960s and '70s reveals how the emotional dimensions of caring for the family permeated the toy's circulation in its earliest years. Specifically, the ads implied that by expending a great deal of emotional labor in the form of conspicuous consumption and pleasing others before themselves, girls could meet acceptable standards of femininity. But, as a toy, the Easy-Bake Oven also made caring for others a fun activity. As sociologist Marjorie DeVault points out, although caring for the family is often understood to be "burdensome and oppressive," it is also "meaningful because it serves as a means for

connecting with others."[3] This tension is reflected in both the physical and emotional labors of caring for others that are implied by the Easy-Bake Oven.

The electromagnet exists in the world and must be powered by human intervention. As it exerts force, other things in the world respond. Objects of memory do not exist in a vacuum. Time passes and the world around us changes. Thus, if we consider how the Easy-Bake Oven circulated outside of its original context, we can see how the toy's connection to the responsibility of care implied by traditional femininity made the toy a useful outlet for reflecting upon the values associated with it. On the one hand, humorous references to the Easy-Bake Oven in popular sitcoms from the 1990s and 2000s relied on the toy oven's connection to the care aspects of traditional femininity to suggest difficulties associated with the contradictory assumptions of traditional femininity and feminist femininities. The sitcom characters of Elaine, Monica, and Lily, although easily understood as feminist-minded women, all showed reluctance to abandon the charge to care for others. The implication is that some "feminine" values—in this case, caring for others—might be worth preserving even though doing so likely and knowingly reinscribes an imbalance of power. Significantly, it is the one-sidedness of this responsibility that creates that imbalance of power—not the existence of that responsibility.

On the other hand, the one-sidedness of the responsibility of care becomes even more apparent when examining attempts to make the Easy-Bake Oven relevant to boys or men. Male celebrity chefs' memories of the toy oven typically disavow any connections to

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[3] Marjorie L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 232

feminine forms of cooking and instead frame the toy's significance with respect to their professional occupation. When the Easy-Bake became embroiled in a pinkification controversy in 2012, participants put a similar logic into play. Ultimately, the Easy-Bake Oven had to be disconnected from the home kitchen and domestic forms of cooking and then linked to professional kitchens and celebrity chefs in order to be construed as relevant and appropriate for boys. In this instance, the deployment of memories of the Easy-Bake Oven serves as an important example of the crossover problem—and, thus, an example of how memories of the Easy-Bake have been used in attempts to negotiate the normative boundaries of femininity and masculinity. Importantly, by disconnecting the toy from domestic, and thus feminine, forms of cooking, it also removes the emotional link to caring for others and, therefore, abdicates men and boys from that responsibility.

This example demonstrates that memory things can continue to accrue affective force over time, and the accumulation of different applications of emotion potentially provides opportunities for considering the values associated with the things. Examining how memories of the Easy-Bake circulated in adult popular culture helps us to see how emotion and memory are crucial to how we manage contradictory values, beliefs, and norms. It is not a fluke that ostensibly feminist sitcom characters invoke the Easy-Bake Oven during moments in which feminist values come into conflict with the traditional value of unselfishly caring for others. The shared emotional attachment to the toy—presented as fondness for it—provides a safe outlet for dealing with contradictory values. However, not all memory things necessarily exert affective force in productive ways. Indeed, chapter 2 shows that while the affective force of memory things is powered by shared feelings, not all

members of an audience will interpret those feelings in the same way, which can generate

conflict rather than reflection.

For example, the American public's emotional investment in the memory of LEGO as

a gender-neutral toy is so powerful that perceived threats to that memory have garnered

passionate and conflicting responses that have affected the plausibility of certain

arguments in the present. In the United States, LEGO commands a nearly unimpeachable

reputation as a socially responsible company that supports parents and promotes

creativity and imagination for both boys and girls. But when people invoke LEGO's

reputation, they are calling on a shared memory of the toy that is not based in an accurate

representation of LEGO's past offerings. In the 1960s and '70s, LEGO actively cultivated

through its print advertisements a narrative that positioned the company as the provider of

a toy with an indelible connection to open-ended, creative, and gender-neutral play. This

idea persists even though LEGO has a documented history of consistently producing sets

that conform to gender stereotypes.

During the LEGO Friends controversy in 2011-2012, this memory took on emotional

significance in different ways for different audiences. Rather than a disagreement about

sexist toys, the LEGO Friends controversy was essentially a public debate about the

legitimate ways to leverage memories of LEGO. Everyone agreed that LEGO should be

available for girls and that LEGO had a long-standing reputation for promoting creative,

gender-neutral play. Everyone also agreed with the basic premise that LEGO Friends was

created specifically for girls and that color-coded visual markers and traditionally

feminine-coded themes designated Friends as such. The parties to the debate ultimately

differed over the question of effect. Opponents of Friends, such as SPARK activists, argued that the sexualized and beauty-focused sets betrayed LEGO's commitment to gender neutrality because those elements *inevitably* limit girls' play possibilities, whereas proponents of Friends insisted that despite the themes of the sets, the LEGO brick itself remained open-ended and neutral, qualities that ensure children will use their imaginations. For Friends supporters, the primary threat was to LEGO's memory, a threat that arose not from changes to the new sets but from feminist complaints about Friends, which were perceived as violating the sanctity of the LEGO brick's reputation. Feminist opponents of Friends, however, understood the pinkification and sexualization of LEGO to be the primary threat to its reputation. The controversy ultimately resulted in a conflict without a solution, because although the two sides agreed on many things with respect to LEGO's reputation, they were unable to agree on the terms of the debate.

Chapters 1 and 2 both consider the contexts in and conditions under which each toy transformed into a memory thing, thus making each relevant to public memory. The magnetic memory model helps us to conceptualize the power that emotion wields in this rhetorical process of public memory and to remind us that magnetic forces are capable of both attracting and repelling. In other words, the model captures the idea that not all change that comes from interpretation and reinterpretation is necessarily something we might consider positive. Interpretation, however, is not the only way that the rhetorical process of circulation might alter the body of shared knowledge from which we pull to make sense of the world.

A reader's appropriation of a text also provides an opportunity to enact change. Through her reading of Ricoeur's mimesis3, VanderHaagen explains that the moment of appropriation "creates a crucial space for translating the imagined world of the work into the actual world of the reader. Texts invite readers to envision a possible world that, in part or in full, can be actualized in the material world through their action (though not always in predictable or easily traceable ways)."[4] Thus, in mimesis3, Ricoeur sees both authorial intention and the ability of a text to "[unfold], as it were, a world in front of itself."[5] In the terms of the magnetic memory model, how might a memory thing exert affective force on its audience to prompt future productive (or destructive) interpretations?

As VanderHaagen points out, rhetorical scholars such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell have already argued the idea that a text can contain authorial intention and exert its own agency. As Campbell explains, "textual agency is linked to audiences and begins with the signals that guide the process of 'uptake' for readers or listeners enabling them to categorize, to understand how a symbolic act is to be framed." Thus, to begin to understand possible appropriations of a text, we should look for those "signals that guide the process of 'uptake.'"[6] With respect to children's literature, such as that created by American Girl, by analyzing those signals we can see how girls are prompted to take up certain values, beliefs, and ideas with the purpose of influencing their actions. These signals do not

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[4] Sara C. VanderHaagen, *Children's Biographies of African American Women: Rhetoric, Public Memory, and Agency* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 108.
[5] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Karen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 81.
[6] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 2005): 7.

guarantee that girls will comprehend those messages or act in the desired manner, but to the extent that they function as a set of instructions, those signals can reveal probable actions—and certainly reveal what adults want for girls.

American Girl's historical fiction, like all historical narratives, is a vehicle of public memory, although scholarship does not typically approach it as such. However, educators have long argued that historical fiction's ability to inspire an "emotional connection between children today and their historical counterparts" makes it useful for communicating to children the significance of the past, including others' cultural heritage.[7] Although American Girl has often found itself under fire from those who are (often rightly) unsatisfied with its attempts at diversifying historical representation, the company continues to produce and create historical dolls of color. Arguably, American Girl sells the most popular and specifically African American dolls available through the U.S. toy market. For this reason, the historical fiction series for Addy Walker and Melody Ellison serve as crucial sites for the potential perpetuation of racialized gender norms and the potential reform of those norms.

The newest historical fiction series, entitled *My Journey with…*, cultivates readers' identification and empathy with the effects of racism that African Americans faced during slavery and the civil rights era in ways that use emotion to teach girls to recognize and resist discrimination and prejudice and, more broadly, to stand up for their beliefs. Importantly, the *Journey* books differ significantly from the original series by adding a time-

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[7] Mary Taylor Rycik and Brenda Rosler, "The Return of Historical Fiction," *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 2 (2009): 163.

slip element and a "choose-your-own-adventure"-style narrative structure. This unique

structure positions the reader herself as a character in the story, essentially inviting girls to

interact with history rather than remain a spectator of it. In this way, the "signals that guide

the process of 'uptake'" do not merely supplement the texts; they also become part of the

narrative itself.

Interdisciplinary Contributions

The magnetic model of memory also contributes to childhood studies by calling

attention to the role of emotion in shaping what sociologist Daniel Cook refers to as the

moral project of childhood. Cook argues that people, groups, or institutions always believe

that their stance toward children or childhood is not only correct but also morally superior.

"No one," he says, ever appears to "take an unabashedly immoral posture toward children

and childhood when pondered from their own standpoint." In this way, Cook contends that

"childhood itself *requires* ethical determinations of one kind or another for its existence"

and, ultimately, "does not exist apart from the moral entanglements about it found in

rhetoric, in admonitions about proper childhoods or in advice encountered at any given

time about any particular concern (e.g., sexualization, violence, media exposure, discipline,

indulgence, etc.)." Because of this, Cook argues that rather than participating in debates

about what childhood should or should not be, scholars should turn their analytic attention

to the constitution of childhood through those very debates. Although most rhetorical

scholars have not recognized the prolific potential of this line of inquiry, we are aptly

positioned to take up this charge. As Cook notes, children "require ceaseless attention and

monitoring," and "efforts at fending off and regulating the uncertainties posed by a never-

ending stream of children are woven into the fabric of social life and social structure." Who

better, then, to study these "ongoing uncertainties" than those who are most concerned

with the very nature of contingency?[8]

Furthermore, the study of public memory and emotion are essential to theorizing

the moral project of childhood. Because children's presence is entwined so deeply with

"longstanding social institutions such as marriage, the family and education," the present

moment will always be a moment in which we need to negotiate the meaning of childhood

as a means of protecting the future. To do so means that, as Cook points out, "Those who

wittingly or unwittingly serve as agents on behalf of children—who arrange their semantic

and material lives in some way—commit profoundly moral acts on a daily basis to the

extent that their actions necessarily invoke a set or system of beliefs, which are moral in

nature, directionality, and thrust."[9] The magnetic memory model suggests a critical lens for

analyzing how the manifestation of a particular invocation of "a set or system of beliefs"—

that is, a memory thing or other form of public memory—relies upon existing emotional

attachments (drawn from the past) and is necessarily reshaped by the further

accumulation of affective force.

As gendered subjects of childhood, girls are also deeply subject to the moral project

of childhood, and in the twenty-first century, nowhere is this more apparent for younger

girls than in public debates about the pinkification of cultural products for girls. The

controversy over LEGO Friends most clearly demonstrates the implications of pinkification

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[8] Daniel Thomas Cook, "Childhood as a Moral Project," *Childhood* 24, no. 1 (February 2017): 3, 4.

[9] Cook, "Childhood as a Moral Project," 4.

discourse as a moral project of childhood. This controversy shows us that in our single-minded desire to protect girls from the supposedly ever-encroaching and totalizing threat of sexualization, we risk not only the continuing devaluation of femininity but also doubling down on those social constraints that we sought to eliminate. The model of magnetic memory prompts us to examine more closely the emotionally charged memories that serve as the foundation of the debate, a task that ultimately exposes the debate as a moral project based on unexamined assumptions about appropriate gender presentation and inappropriate transgressions of femininity in relationship to middle-class gender norms. In this way, this project contributes to girlhood studies by pointing out how the desire to protect girls from the anticipated harm of a traditional, beauty-focused femininity focuses critical attention on policing the borders of respectable femininity rather than on an examination of how children's toys might contribute to a gendered hierarchical system of power.

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