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## De-politicized Diversity in the American Girl Brand

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The year 2017 was big for diversity in the American Girl (AG) brand. With the release of new product lineups, AG included Gabriela McBride, the first disabled main character, along with Z Yang, the first Asian American character, and Logan Everett, the first boy character doll, making it a historic year for the brand. Pleasant Rowland, a former teacher and textbook writer, started American Girl in 1986 as a way for girls to connect with history and play with friend-like dolls coordinated with books rather than baby dolls or adult dolls such as Barbie (Chuppa-Cornell 107). AG is widely regarded as one of the most diverse, educational, and high-quality brands in the United States, with over 32 million dolls and 157 million books sold to date (American Girl “American Girl | Fast Facts”; Borghini et al. 364). The brand, now owned by Mattel, is particularly recognized as progressive and has won over 400 awards from various children’s literature, children’s media, and parenting organizations (American Girl “Awards”). Despite this mostly positive reputation, academic scholarship on the brand has been critical of American Girl’s limited or problematic representations of gender, race, and disability (Inness; Marshall “Marketing American Girlhood”; Miskec; Osei-Kofi; Schalk “Beforever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction”; Schlosser; Susina).

Critiques about diversity in the American Girl brand have come from multiple political angles. In 2005, the brand faced controversy over the representation of Marisol, the first contemporary Latina character whose family moves out of the predominantly Latinx neighborhood of Pilsen in Chicago in search of a better life (Herrmann). Although American Girl sought out Latino author Gary Soto to write the book, people nonetheless accused the brand of producing a racist representation—a controversy which Soto has publicly said ended his attempts at writing children’s literature (Soto). In 2013, the same year that Amy Schiller published a general critique of the brand in *The Atlantic* titled “American Girls Aren’t Radical Anymore,”

ten-year-old Melissa Shang's petition for an American Girl wheelchair-using character went viral and received national news attention (Schiller; Melissa Shang and YingYing Shang; Sieczkowski). When AG failed to produce such a character, Shang took matters into her own hands and co-wrote her own book about a young wheelchair user (Melissa Shang and Eva Shang).

American Girl has also been critiqued from other, less common angles. For example, in 2015, a natural health website accused AG of promoting childhood obesity when they released their diabetes care kit for dolls; in 2017, a pastor in North Carolina made national news after sending a message to his congregation titled "KILLING THE MINDS OF MALE BABIES," claiming American Girl's first boy doll, Logan, was "a trick of the enemy... who want to alter God's creation of the male and female" (quoted in Bever; see also Fink Huehnergath; S. Johnson). As these examples show, American Girl has been and continues to be pushed, pulled, and critiqued from multiple political perspectives. The brand has responded indirectly to these and future potential critiques by taking a carefully de-politicized approach to marketing their products. As John F. Sherry notes, "conservative and progressive values are intertwined" in the American Girl brand; this mix of values stems in part from the brand's attempt to appeal as widely as possible, while minimizing offence to people on both the left and the right (Sherry 200).

Multiple scholars have discussed how diversity is increasingly being employed in apolitical and even regressive ways in a variety of cultural arenas, from marketing to higher education (Archer; Berrey; Collins; Herring and Henderson; Leong). By engaging specifically

with the de-politicization of diversity<sup>1</sup> within the American Girl brand, I build upon this existing strain of contemporary critique by considering in particular what de-politicizing diversity, especially disability, means in regard to products for children who are not the direct purchasers. Specifically, these children may not yet know or understand certain political identity terms, let alone how these terms relate to their own embodiment or experiences. Products for children, particularly children's literature, have become increasingly diverse in appearance. Exploring the language used and omitted to describe and market children's products allows us to consider the ways de-politicized diversity works with, and against, progressive political goals and ideals.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I explore the de-politicized diversity of the American Girl brand. More specifically, I analyze the brand's avoidance of socio-political identity language in regard to race and disability. Throughout the article I use a mix of person-first and identity-first language, an issue which I discuss in further detail within. Overall, I argue that American Girl's careful creation and marketing of diverse dolls refuses to claim an explicit politics, navigating a fine line between conservatism and progressivism in the name of profit. I contend, however, that while the brand de-politicizes diversity, AG's choices at times leave open loopholes and alternate possibilities for how children find and engage with their products. To support these claims I perform a discursive analysis of American Girl's de-politicized diversity in two locations: the American Girl "Product Diversity" webpage and the 2017 Girl of the Year products and marketing. In each of these sites of analysis I explore how American Girl visually represents diverse and traditionally marginalized groups while strategically avoiding explicit socio-political

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<sup>1</sup> My concept of de-politicized diversity here is in conversation with Warner's concept of plastic representation which she uses primarily in regard to race and film. See Warner, Kristen J. "In the Time of Plastic Representation." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2017, <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the new journal *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* for scholarly work in this area as well as websites like *Mighty Girl* or *Common Sense Media* which provide lists of children's products which positively promote gender, racial, sexual and (dis)ability diversity.

labelling of these groups. Throughout, I explore how the brand's approach to representing and marketing diversity limits the progressive political potential of their products in some ways while also leaving open some possibilities for more progressive forms of interpretation and engagement.

### **Diversity & Socio-Political Language**

American Girl's de-politicized approach to diversity is ironically most evident on the brand's Product Diversity page. The page features a header which reads "A doll for EVERY girl to love!" above an image of 11 different dolls from the Truly Me line—a line of unnamed dolls (that is, dolls not affiliated with any book character) which are intended to be miniature versions of girls themselves (American Girl "Product Diversity"). The text below this image on the first half of the page reads:

American Girl is proud to feature one of the most inclusive and diverse selections of dolls today. From the beginning, our goal has been to create dolls and stories that act as both mirrors and windows—giving girls an opportunity to see a direct reflection of themselves or a chance to learn about a life or culture that may be very different from their own.

American Girl's wide range of dolls—featuring light, medium, and dark skin tones, as well as a variety of face molds, eye colors, hair styles and textures, plus hundreds of accessories and stories—helps girls highlight their individuality and special style. We're delighted to provide such a vast amount of choices for girls—a level unmatched anywhere else.

Girls inspire us every day, and we look forward to creating new products, stories, and experiences that celebrate the countless unique qualities in all of them. (American Girl "Product Diversity")

While the company boasts its status as “one of the most inclusive and diverse” brands for children, there are several ways this statement reflects AG’s overall de-politicization of diversity. First, the statement includes the phrase “mirrors and windows,” a metaphor which has been used since the late 1980s in research on children’s literature and education to indicate the need for children to be exposed to two kinds of texts: one, texts that serve as mirrors, reflecting and affirming their own identities and experiences, and two, texts that serve as windows, providing information and insight regarding the identities and experiences of people unlike themselves (Bishop; Botelho and Rudman; Smolkin and Young; Style). This metaphor is directly tied to social justice efforts within the field of early childhood education to reduce ethnocentrism among majority students and increase positive senses of self in marginalized students (Tschida et al. 29). Therefore, the use of the “mirrors and windows” is a way of signaling a progressive political approach to diversity and equality to scholars and educators in the know that would be entirely missed by the average consumer, for whom “mirrors and windows” would be interpreted as purely metaphorical rather than political language. By using “mirrors and windows” specifically, American Girl allows certain individuals to interpret the brand as invested in social justice without having to make an explicit statement about the brand’s politics that might upset or offend other consumers.

The AG Product Diversity Page also conspicuously avoids any political language regarding identity. For instance, rather than claiming to offer dolls of various races and ethnicities, the American Girl refers only to skin tones, face molds (producing different eye and nose shapes for dolls read as Asian or African American), and hair texture. Although the brand does racially identify character dolls, that is, those tied to books in their historical or contemporary fiction lines, the Truly Me dolls are identified by numbers only and described by

skin tone, hair color/type, and eye color rather than by any racial identification.<sup>3</sup> If you search racial identity terms on the American Girl store website, some terms such as *African American* or *Asian* will bring up Truly Me dolls which appear like these categories whereas searching for the terms *Native*, *Indian*, or *Hispanic* will only bring up books and character dolls (e.g. Josefina and Kaya) who fit those racial or ethnic designations.<sup>4</sup> The ability to search for an African American or Asian American doll despite the fact that the dolls are not officially labelled in any marketing materials as African American or Asian American demonstrates the brand's careful awareness of the fact that at least some customers are explicitly looking to find racialized dolls. Despite this awareness, American Girl does not officially identify any Truly Me doll in terms of race, only through color and/or type description of skin, hair and eyes.

While not marking dolls by racial category potentially reduces racial recognition for some customers, the lack of racial labels also means that medium and dark skin dolls may be recognized or claimed by a variety of racial identities particularly by Latinx, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and mixed race children. The absence of racial categories for the Truly Me dolls thus represents a potential loophole, an open space for children to project themselves onto dolls who appear similar to them and therefore feel recognized by, and included within, the brand's representation of American girlhood. This loophole, however, does not fully account for why the brand's product diversity page still does not use the words "race" or "ethnicity." Perhaps one can concede that certain racial groups may be similarly represented in doll form and thus the brand could avoid exclusion or confusion by not putting racial categories officially in the dolls'

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<sup>3</sup> Custom Truly Me dolls, a new offering from the brand since 2017, allows customers more control and individualization at a slightly higher cost. This customization, however, still only allows for three possible skin tones on five possible face molds, but offers seven eye color options. A customized Truly Me doll starts at \$200 compared to \$115 for a pre-designed Truly Me doll as of July 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The terms *indigenous*, *Latina*, *Middle Eastern*, *Arab*, *European*, and *Caucasian* turn up no search results.

descriptions, but this choice would not preclude explicitly stating that the brand offers a “wide range of dolls” of different races and ethnicities rather than “featuring light, medium, and dark skin tones, as well as a variety of face molds, eye colors, hair styles and textures” (American Girl “Product Diversity”). The avoidance of the political language of race here, therefore, extends beyond any attempt to not mislabel or forget specific racial and ethnic groups and instead demonstrates how AG de-politicizes diversity in its products. American Girl profits from and boasts about its diversity of doll appearance, but that diversity of color—quite literally—is divorced from any socio-political context that would give this diversity meaning and depth within the Truly Me doll line. Race becomes not an identity, group, culture, or experience, but rather a purely visual element that “helps girls highlight their individuality and special style” (American Girl “Product Diversity”).

Further, despite the positive gendered language regarding girls who “inspire us every day,” the brand conspicuously avoids using the word *feminism* in any of its marketing materials. A search for feminism or feminist on the store webpage turns up no results. The brand’s corporate information page states that “American Girl has dedicated its entire business to being a trusted partner in building girls of strong character and helping them reach their full potential” (American Girl “Corporate Information”). Although American Girl does not explicitly use the term *girl power* in its materials, the brand is unquestionably trafficking in this cultural discourse which, according to Emilie Zaslow, commodifies a proto-feminist identity in girls and teens that emphasizes individual empowerment and freedom, claiming power in femininity without any significant “investment in social change” (Zaslow 6). American Girl leans into the girl power cultural discourse without using those words, let alone the words *feminism* or *feminist*. Such an approach again allows for consumers (children and their guardians alike) to project their own

understanding and language of empowerment for girls onto the brand without American Girl itself ever claiming an explicit political language or position. This trend continues beyond race and gender to disability in the second half of the Product Diversity page.

The second portion of the Product Diversity page contains the headline “More ways to embrace what makes your girl one of a kind,” followed by:

American Girl's commitment to diversity and inclusion extends even further, starting with our selection of dolls without hair. These dolls—customized by hand by specially trained experts—are a perfect companion for girls who may be dealing with permanent or temporary hair loss.

In addition to dolls without hair, American Girl offers several other specialized items, such as hearing aids, a service-dog set, eyeglasses, and a wheelchair. American Girl is proud that these and numerous other accessories help a girl create a doll that's as unique as she is—and we will continue to create new products in this important area so that every girl can see herself reflected in her doll. (American Girl “Product Diversity”)

Beside this text are pictures of dolls without hair in different skin tones, and below the text are seven captioned pictures of some of the “specialized items” the brand sells: hearing aids, service dog, glasses, “healthy smiles” (braces, retainer, and headgear), wheelchair, diabetes kit, and forearm crutches. In this section of the page American Girl clearly avoids the term *disability* in favor of the phrase “other specialized items” for dolls without hair, hearing aids, service dogs, wheelchairs, and crutches. Although braces and glasses are not necessarily signs of disability, the other items listed in the text are unquestionably disability accessories.

This second half of the Product Diversity page can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, although lacking the word “disability,” American Girl does not fall into the ableist trap of

compensatory language about disability such as special needs,<sup>5</sup> handicapable, differently abled, physically/mentally challenged, and so on. As Simi Linton has argued, such compensatory “nice” language, while often well-intended, reflects the paternalism directed toward disabled people in our culture and creates a collective unconscious version of Freud’s reaction formation “in which an individual adopts attitudes and behaviors that are opposite to his or her own true feelings, in order to protect the ego from the anxiety felt from experiencing the real feelings” (16). By not using disability euphemisms, the brand succeeds in avoiding this particular strain of ableism. Yet the lack of the words *disability* or *disabled* anywhere near this list of disability doll accessories, and the fact that searching these words on their website similarly turns up no results, demonstrate American Girl’s careful avoidance of any potentially controversial political identity language. I will say much more about language choices regarding disability in the next section.

The language used, and not used, in regard to race, gender, and disability on the American Girl Product Diversity webpage demonstrates how the brand teeters carefully between moderate and progressive politics in order to, I argue, sell to as many customers as possible. AG embraces diversity in its books and dolls to a certain degree, but carefully avoids political language or political positions that might endanger sales. By reducing explicit politics and allowing people to interpret as they please, the brand gains some freedom and significant monetary boosts which theoretically allow American Girl to continue to create high-quality, diverse products and keep them in stock even if certain products might sell at a lower rate than others. The interpretive loopholes I identify in the brand’s language choices open up certain possibilities for engagement that I believe are unintended, but nonetheless important to consider.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the failures of the term special needs specifically, see Gernsbacher, Morton Ann et al. “‘Special Needs’ Is an Ineffective Euphemism.” *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, p. 29, doi:10.1186/s41235-016-0025-4.

These arguments can also be extended to an analysis of the American Girl of the Year 2017 products and marketing.

### **Say the Word: Disability Language and Representation**

American Girl of the Year 2017 was Gabriela McBride, a young Black girl with a stutter who enjoys dancing and spoken word poetry.<sup>6</sup> There are three books about Gabriela/Gabby. In the first, she saves her community center by organizing a flash mob and doing a news interview that convinces local government to fund safety renovations to the space (Harris, *Gabriela*). In the second book, she runs for sixth grade ambassador on the platform of getting rid of her middle school's sixth grade initiation tradition of pranking and nicknaming new students (Harris, *Gabriela Speaks Out*). In the third book, Gabby performs in a poetry slam with her friends and works to figure out how to balance her friendships, school work, and extra-curricular activities (Varian Johnson).

Generally, the representation of stuttering in the books is balanced and realistic. Her stuttering is depicted textually via repeated letters or letter combinations (such as *sh*) with dashes before full words, fully repeated words, and ellipses.<sup>7</sup> In each book, Gabriela stutters more frequently in emotional situations, such as giving a speech or meeting new people. She also experiences teasing and bullying due to her stutter and attends speech therapy.<sup>8</sup> Although Gabby

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, a stutter is a non-physically-apparent disability. From a capitalist perspective, the brand is unlikely to ever produce a main character whose body or face must be produced significantly differently than other dolls (such as an amputated limb or facial disfigurement) or who must come with additional accessories (such as crutches or a wheelchair) which would alter their pricing consistency across the dolls.

<sup>7</sup> In my quotations from the Gabriela books, I place any ellipses I've added to quotes for clarity and brevity in brackets and left all original ellipses as they appear in the text.

<sup>8</sup> In the back of the books, the authors, Teresa Harris for books one and two and Varian Johnson for book three, thank a specific speech therapist who was consulted in writing the books. It seems evident that American Girl is hearing the years of feedback about lack of disability representation and attempting to do more/better than they have before by getting professional advice on how to represent a character with a disability well.

attends speech therapy in the first two books and mentions using techniques from speech therapy in book three, therapy is not represented as means to get rid of her stutter or pathologize it. Instead, Gabriela's speech therapist, Mrs. Baxter, helps her with techniques for lessening instances of stuttering, such as slowing down, taking breaths, and speaking through no matter how it sounds, as well as working on Gabby's self-acceptance and pride as a disabled girl. For example, in an extended speech therapy session scene in *Gabriela Speaks*, Gabby tells Mrs. Baxter she needs to get rid of her stutter because people are teasing her at her new middle school. Mrs. Baxter asks Gabriela to repeat what she was told on the first day of speech therapy in elementary school. Gabby states: "My stutter is a part of me and it's nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide, and nothing to fix. I can work on improving it and learning how-how to better manage my b-b-bumpy speech, but it may never go-go away completely, and I n-n-need to learn to em-em-embrace it as a unique part-part-part of myself" and repeats a mantra: "My name is Gabriela McBride. I stutter and it's okay" (Harris, *Gabriela Speaks Out* 57, 60). This sentiment is also expressed and encouraged at home by her parents. Gabriela explains: "Mama and Daddy were always telling me that while it was good to work with Mrs. Baxter, I shouldn't let my bumpy speech stop me from talking. 'We love you no matter how many sounds you make,' they'd say. 'Say what you have to say! We are always listening.'" (Harris, *Gabriela* 10-11). As each of these quotes suggest, there is no cure narrative here, no shame or pity, and no pathologizing of disability.

Additionally, Gabriela not only works to accept her stutter in the books, but she also learns to become a self-advocate, teaching people around her to not complete sentences or speak for her. For example, in book one, Gabriela's best friend Teagan repeatedly speaks for Gabby as they interact with various adults while gathering signatures to save their local art and community

center. After several instances of Gabby “trying hard to ignore the feeling in the pit of [her] stomach” when Teagan completes her sentences as she stutters, Gabby finally snaps, exclaiming, “Why-why-why do you have to do that all the time? Jump in and talk for me? Y-Y-You act like you have to ssssave me, like I can't talk for myself. It's...it's...annoying!” (Harris, *Gabriela* 41, 91). Although Gabby later regrets her outburst, she reflects that she meant what she said “even if it came out a little bratty” (Harris, *Gabriela* 95). The two eventually apologize to one another, but Gabby is clear and firm about her needs. When Teagan says “when I see you struggling with your words, I want to help,” Gabby responds, “I get th-th-th-that [...] But I'm not...I'm not struggling, even though it ssssseems like I am. I'm – I'm triumphing over it, like Mama says, or at least tr-tr-trying to. So when you cut me off and r-r-rescue me, you're not really giving me the ch-chance to do that. [...] Maybe...Maybe from now on, you can hhhhelp me by just letting me finish what I'm saying, even if it ssseems like I'm str-str-struggling” (Harris, *Gabriela* 101-102; ellipses in brackets added, all other ellipses original to the text). While this conversation is the most explicit moment in which Gabriela asserts her needs as a person who stutters, over the course of the three books Gabriela learns to accept and embrace her stutter, discovering that she can be a leader who creates change not despite her disability or magically because of it, but with it as just one aspect of many in her identity. Book two in particular demonstrates this as Gabby turns her experience with bullying over her stutter into a platform to run for, and win, a role as sixth grade class ambassador.

Overall, as the above analysis demonstrates, the representation of Gabriela as a Black disabled girl is impressive, departing from some of the previous trends regarding characters with disabilities in American Girl fiction (Schalk “Ablenationalism in American Girlhood”; Schalk “Beforever?: Disability in American Girl Historical Fiction”). First and foremost, the stories are

never exclusively focused on disability. Second, Gabriela is not represented in isolation, apart from other disabled people. Although she doesn't interact with other people who stutter, Gabriela's dance teacher, Amelia, shares that she has a disability as well, stating, "I struggle with my words, too. I'm dyslexic. When I read, it seems like the words on the page play tricks on me, changing directions, letters moving from one place to another. But I fight. Just like you" (Harris, *Gabriela* 100). Gabby is amazed by this disclosure because she views Amelia as "flawless," narrating: "I had always thought everything came easily to Amelia, but I guess I was wrong. Without really knowing it, I moved away from the wall, little by little, until my knee was touching hers. She didn't seem to mind" (Harris, *Gabriela* 100). This moment, though brief, demonstrates through Gabriela's silent moving closer to touch knees with Amelia, the importance of disability disclosure and community, especially for disabled children who may be looking for disabled adult role models. Finally, the *Gabriela* books also challenge previous arguments about the marginal and utilitarian role of disabled characters. Gabriela is not meant to inspire or teach any more or less than other Girl of the Year characters—after all, American Girl bills itself as an educational and empowering company for girls so all their books are intended to educate and encourage children through stories of girls facing challenges and accomplishing new things. American Girl stories always end happily and neatly so any analysis of the sentimental aspects of the *Gabriela* books must be read in the context of this particular children's literature genre and brand.

Despite all the ways that the *Gabriela* books provide a generally positive, realistic representation of disability and challenge previous arguments about the role of disability in American Girl fiction, the *marketing* of Gabriela provides initial insight into how this otherwise laudable representation falls short in terms of its disability politics. In a December 2016 press

release, American Girl states that “Gabriela is a true creative talent who uses the power of poetry to help her break down barriers and overcome a personal challenge with stuttering” and “Although Gabriela often finds herself in a battle with her own words because of her stuttering, she discovers that her poetry, filled with wit and honesty, helps her speech flow more easily and gives her the confidence to find her voice” (American Girl “American Girl’s 2017 Girl of the Year™ Inspires Girls to Find Their Creative Voices and Speak out to Make a Difference”). The description of Gabriela’s stutter as a “personal challenge” that she must battle with and overcome is at once a skewed representation of how Gabriela actually lives with her stutter in the books and an expression of ableist ideas that disability is something inherently negative and that disabled people who succeed in life have overcome their disability and are thus inspiring. Although American Girl does not position Gabriela as a disabled character intended to teach non-disabled girls about difference—as the brand did for wheelchair-using secondary character Josie in the 2012 Girl of the Year series—the marketing materials still rely on ableist tropes and ideologies to discuss her (American Girl “Mckenna Learning Guide”; Schalk “Ablenationalism in American Girlhood” 42). This ableist marketing suggests that even though American Girl has incorporated disability into their understanding of diversity, the brand has not actually incorporated disability *politics*.

The lack of disability politics in the creation and marketing of American Girl’s first disabled character is most apparent in the total absence of the word *disability* in any *Gabriela* materials. As demonstrated in the press release quoted above, marketing materials use either the words “stutter” or “personal challenge” while the books use “stutter” or “bumpy speech,” Gabriella and her family’s term for her disability. The words *disability* and *disabled* are never used in the Gabriela books or marketing materials, such as the press release above, the blurbs

which appear on the back of the books and on websites like Amazon, and product descriptions in the American Girl catalog (both physical and online). This absence can be read as another example of how American Girl de-politicizes diversity by representing various marginalized groups, but refuses to name these differences in the political language of race or disability.

The choice to avoid the language of disability is an example of how American Girl's approach to diversity creates limitations while it simultaneously leaves loopholes open to other forms of interpretation and engagement. For instance, by not calling Gabriela disabled or referring to her stutter as a disability, American Girl avoids conflict with, protests from, or boycotts by parents of children with disabilities who prefer euphemistic language, as well as individuals who stutter (or parents of children who stutter) who do not consider stuttering as a disability. Avoidance of the word disability therefore opens a potential loophole wherein adults who reject the term *disability* may still purchase the *Gabriela* books, doll, and accessories for a child, thereby exposing that child to a well-done representation of a Black disabled girl. It is also possible that by not marketing Gabriela as a Black girl with a disability, the brand sought to ensure Gabriela's widespread appeal; as focusing too explicitly on gender, race, and disability could have positioned her as an overly niche character.

On the other hand, by not explicitly identifying Gabriela as disabled, American Girl potentially limits other opportunities for identification. Parents specifically searching for books or dolls representing disability may be less likely to come across the *Gabriela* series. Children who do read the books, especially children with disabilities, may miss the opportunity to understand disability as a political identity and community. In this regard, the choice to not use disability in the *Gabriela* books and marketing goes against long-standing calls by disability rights activists and disability studies scholars to claim disability proudly, most recently

evidenced by the hashtag #SayTheWord on social media, which disability rights activist Lawrence Carter-Long created as a means to push people in various cultural arenas, particularly journalism, to say disabled/disability rather than using euphemisms (King).

Even if American Girl had decided to use the language of disability in the *Gabriela* books and marketing materials though, the brand would have had to also deal with the debate between person-first language and identity-first language. As Linton explains, person-first language was an early attempt by disability rights activists to move away from terms such as *an epileptic*, *Down Syndrome patient*, *victim of muscular dystrophy*, and *wheelchair bound*, which overemphasize disability as the dominant identifying factor of an individual, while also often connoting suffering, pity, dependence, and passivity. Person-first language proponents, therefore, insist on being recognized as a person first, with “disability as a characteristic of the individual as opposed to the defining variable”—as in “a person with epilepsy,” “a person with Down Syndrome,” “a person with muscular dystrophy,” “a person who uses a wheelchair” and so on (Linton 13). Person-first language is most commonly used in special education by teachers and parents, as well as in much disability policy & legislation. However, since “the early 90s *disabled people* has been increasingly used in disability studies and disability rights circles [...] Rather than maintaining disability as a secondary characteristic, disabled has become a marker of the identity that the individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to” (Linton 13). The desire for identity-first language (i.e. *disabled people* or *autistic people*) is primarily expressed today by disabled adults, especially those who work in disability advocacy and activism. The fact that person-first language is so strongly preferred in special education, however, means that it’s the language most used by parents and teachers of children with disabilities—the ones most likely to be seeking out and purchasing representations of disabled children. By avoiding the

language of disability altogether, therefore, American Girl stays out of this particular debate entirely.

Given the multiple kinds of contestation around the language of disability, it is perhaps understandable why American Girl chooses to stay as apolitical as possible, representing disabled characters like Gabriela and producing disability doll accessories but never labeling these products with the word “disability” at all. This trend seemingly continues as the brand announced the 2020 Girl of the Year, Joss Kendrick, who has hearing loss and uses a hearing aid. The press release does not refer to Joss as disabled or her hearing loss as a disability. The books and doll were not yet released at the time of printing this article to do further analysis. That said, the recent new doll press coverage does appear to further support my argument that the brand profits from the diversity of its products and benefits from its reputation as progressive, wholesome, and good without ever having to explicitly express its political positions or values via language choices. This approach to diversity limits certain forms of identification, but also, as my arguments above suggest, open up certain loopholes for wider distribution and engagement. In terms of the *Gabriela* books, therefore, consumers, scholars, and mainstream critics alike must hold the tension between applauding a fairly good, positive representation of disability for children while simultaneously critiquing the representation’s refusal to use the language of disability preferred in disability activist and scholarly communities.

### **So What?: Politics, Children, and Finding What Matters**

As I have worked on this article, I have continually asked myself why it matters, why anyone should care about this brand I’ve spent so much time researching and understanding over the years. First, I believe this work matters because this *brand* matters to girls and those who

care about girls—as evidenced by the numerous opinion articles, essays, and blog posts about American Girl from adult former fans, scholars, parents and guardians, and teachers. American Girl has a significant influence on a large group of people. Indeed, the limits and loopholes within the brand’s de-politicized approach to diversity have the potential to directly impact even non-paying consumers of their products who receive and read their catalog, peruse their website, and/or read their books via public or school libraries.

Additionally, as a brand recognized for its diversity and emphasis on girls’ empowerment and education, American Girl’s marketing and product creation is carefully curated, often involving many experts and consultants. American Girl’s writers, designers, and marketing directors clearly work to align every product with the brand’s professed values and reputation, seeking to please (or at least not offend) as broad a group as possible to maximize sales. Their products and marketing have to appeal to children and parents/guardians alike—indeed there is a substantive body of academic marketing and consumer culture research that seeks to understand and/or replicate the success of the brand (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel; Borghini et al.; Diamond et al.; Marshall “Consuming Girlhood: Young Women, Femininities, and American Girl”; Marshall “Marketing American Girlhood”; Rosner; Sekeres). In this regard, American Girl’s de-politicized diversity matters because it has been successful and may be used as a model for other companies.

Most importantly, however, this research and its arguments matter because we live in a world of representations that shape the way we understand ourselves and others. This holds especially true for children. In particular, unlike girls and children of color generally, disabled children are more likely to be raised in families and communities with limited access to people who share their marginalized identity or experience. Additionally, children with disabilities are

less likely to be represented in children's products and literature than other marginalized groups; thus, the representations that exist carry great representational significance (Mickenberg and Nel 465-466). By removing the language of disability from their otherwise thoughtful representation of a Black disabled girl character, American Girl lost an opportunity to empower disabled girls by depriving them of the political language they may need to connect to a larger disability community. In doing so, they lost an opportunity to educate disabled and non-disabled children alike about ableism, disability identity, and disability acceptance. No matter the loopholes to avoid pushback or boycotts from those who would prefer the use of other language, this refusal to engage with the socio-political language of disability—to *say the word* as disability rights activists desire—is a refusal to engage in the politics of living in a diverse world, ultimately leading to the company profiting off representations of marginalized people. This profiting off diversity in such a de-politicized way is evident even on the brand's Product Diversity page which refuses to name race, disability, or feminism.

In our increasingly politically divided world, capitalism will continue to adapt to the interests and demands of the population. The de-politicization of diversity exhibited by American Girl is not unique to this brand, and my methods and arguments here can be applied elsewhere. Further, given the adaptations of capitalism to the demands of an increasingly diverse world, we as scholars, educators, consumers, parents, and guardians must decide how we respond to these adaptations. It's imperative that we use our money, voices, and influence to hold companies accountable and to push them to not merely depict representations of marginalized people, but to take clear political positions (and practices) in support of these groups as well. Doing so can open more than loopholes, it can create wide open doors and ramps for positive identification and political understanding.

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