# 7 Allomother as image and essence

## Animating the American Girl brand

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> And I said, "No, [I'm not gay] it just means I kissed Britney Spears. I am the mommy pop star, and she is the baby pop star. And I am kissing her to pass my energy on to her."
>
> (Madonna to daughter Lourdes, in 2006, in explanation of the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards liplock)

### Introduction

A portfolio of experiential products from dolls of historic and contemporary vintage to self-care manuals for tweenagers, the American Girl brand has become a fixture in the US toy market by facilitating the intergenerational negotiation of female life course transitions. As a premium entertainment brand riding the crest of the masstige trend (Silverstein et al. 2004), the brand has become an iconic presence in consumer culture. The brand has evolved from an era of catalog sales through a period of flagship brand store efflorescence, and now stands on the threshold of expansion via upscale boutiques.

Purchased by Mattel in 1998 for $700 million, American Girl generated over $436 million in sales ($106.2 million in profits) for its parent, to account for 8.5% of the toy giant's total sales in 2005 (Jones 2007). The staging ground for the brand's performance and enactment, American Girl Place, has become a commercial Mecca, a secular pilgrimage site to which female believers throng. This flagship operates in three cities: Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. We plumb the appeal of the American Girl brand – sites, stuff and selves – in a metro Chicago context, in this paper.

American Girl Place is a temple of memory, both authentic and spurious. Memories are created, revised, recovered and recycled at the site. Trophy photos and video are vehicles of memory creation to which the boulevard outside American Girl Place is devoted. In front of the store, girls pose with bags. Girls pose with dolls. Dolls are posed with bags. Intergenerational photos are perhaps most

commonly snapped. Daughters pose with mothers and dolls. Granddaughters pose with mothers, grandmothers and dolls. On occasion, these sororal units are dressed identically in period clothing matching the outfit worn by the doll. Inside the store, abutting the bookshop, is a photographer's studio, where the images of consumers and their dolls are rendered as portraits and framed as the cover page of *American Girl* magazine. Becoming a cover girl further imbricates the consumer with the brand, whatever aspirations for celebrity it may enkindle in the child (and her matrilineal kin), and documents the doll's membership in the family.

At the very portal of the temple, males are reminded (perhaps relieved, perhaps aggrieved) that they can never be initiates. Fathers and brothers, husbands and sons, and other assorted male relatives and friends, perch precariously on windowsills, hunker down alongside the storefront as if on stoops, and sit on the curb, each attendant on his female counterpart inside the store. Men check their watches, resynchronizing with their women as needed, and their wallets, redistributing wealth as contingencies demand, negotiating sometimes in good humor, and sometimes in frustration, in periodic tête-à-têtes. Boys battle boredom by wheedling their fathers into sorties on the nearby Computerland, extracting promises to visit ESPN Zone next, or fantasizing about the quid pro quo male bonding outing that will offset their wait (often a Cubs game). In colonizing the boulevard, men and boys establish ad hoc male space (the only intentionally built male space being a small bathroom on the store's third floor) as a bulwark against the ostensibly inscrutable allure of this temple of domesticity. Male informants admire the business model and marketing of the enterprise, all the while expressing bewilderment over its appeal.

What is memorialized and celebrated in the flagship store, and by the American Girl brand in general, is the generativity of women that contributes to the cultural reproduction of domesticity. Light (2006: 74) has described American Girl as "an amazing Brand Design learning experience" whose brand "idea" is that "family, friends and feelings" remain relevant throughout time. Brand managers are extremely attentive to the concerns of mothers, not just girls, and a recent panel of moms advised the brand to drop a firm-favored "emotional theme" (a leaving-home-to-follow-a-dream storyline) in the development of the most recent American Girl doll. Their plaintive plea was summarized by managers as, "Please don't take my girl away from me" (Binkley 2006). The "multidimensional experience" that Light (2006: 75) ascribes to the brand is accurate in broad strokes, but our ethnographic study allows us to specify it more precisely in light both of managerial responsiveness and consumer appropriation. The brand is a conservative commemoration of the generative power of women in reproducing domestic culture, driven chiefly not by end users' delight so much as female stakeholders' commitment to preserving tradition.

There is a palpable female buzz animating the brand, and it is modulated as carefully by consumers as it is by brand managers. In this essay, we explore the lived experience of this buzz as the playful transmission of domestic values across generations. In particular, we use the concept of allomothering – the diffusion of the mother's role(s) to other social actors – to interpret the essence of the brand.

This social surrogacy is at once a characteristic of the brand and a strategic use of the brand by consumers.

## Methodology

We investigated the American Girl phenomenon with a multi-ethnic/multi-cultural research team. The team was evenly split along gender lines and included members of diverse ages, marital status, family status, and life-stage. Data collection included observation, participant observation, and interview methods and occurred at multiple sites, including retail locations and informants' homes. Members of the team also immersed themselves in popular press articles about the AG brand and the historical narratives accompanying the dolls so as to ensure maximum familiarity with the brand.

The American Girl Place in Chicago was the primary retail field site, although members of the team did visit the American Girl store in New York. The Chicago location was a rich source of data. All members of the team visited the store on numerous occasions over a three-year period. Visits typically lasted one to two hours, though longer periods of immersion were not uncommon. Often, members of the team reported being so caught up in the experience that they lost track of time. Several members of the team saw the Broadway-styled show at the American Girl Place, frequently in the company of informants. Researcher field notes were completed following each visit. Each member of the team made trips to the store with every other member of the team; triads comprised the largest feasible working unit. Interpretive discussions typically followed these visits, oftentimes in a nearby coffee shop. All members of the team were in frequent contact to share ideas, emerging interpretations and ideas emerging from literature searches. In addition, full-team meetings took place throughout the course of the project. Our team composition and data collection approach was designed to limit potential biases and ensure that all voices on the team got an adequate chance to be heard.

Much of our data came from interviews with patrons of American Girl Place. Informants were recruited in multiple ways. Initially, a snowball sampling scheme was used, with friends, colleagues, and family members supplying initial points of contact to American Girl consumers and their families. Incidental/random contacts were also used. Store intercepts proved invaluable opportunities for immersion in consumers' lived experience of shopping. Members of the research team would frequently enlist families that were either heading to or returning from a visit to the American Girl Place in Chicago (identification was greatly facilitated by the vivid red bags from the store or the dolls themselves). These recruits in turn led us to additional informants.

Interviews were conducted with an eye toward understanding the multi-generational aspect of the brand. Girls who own American Girl dolls and their mothers and grandmothers were interviewed. Interviews were typically video- or tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Most lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours and were conducted in a variety of settings, including local

restaurants and coffee shops, as well as in informants' homes. Home interviews typically included a tour of the girl's American Girl collection, as well as descriptions and demonstrations of how they played with the dolls. Interviews were conducted by a variety of combinations of the research team (single member, dyads and triads).

## Female energy

Scott and Peñaloza (2006) have propounded a matriarchal view of marketing that limns the feminine essence of material experience, wherein spirit, matter, and energy are fully integrated, dualities in cognition are avoided, a communal orientation obtains, and ecological sensitivity pervades practice. This perspective resonates with our empirical findings, which are shot through with the "female energy" our informant Janice so eloquently describes:

> The first time that I went I did enjoy the atmosphere of the feminine connection across the generations . . . That's true. It's the same energy of it. It ignites something inside you could say . . . You . . . actually explore the conneetion to the heart that's involved in these things. That's my spiritual soul talking, but I think it's true . . . There's a heart connection. Across the generations there's a heart connection of the kids to their dolls. In a lot of this there's heart connection . . . That the noise for the American Girl store is the buzz for the girls and their families. It's human buzz. It's not noise attacking you. It's the buzz of human exeitement. That's a very different feel . . . For a little girl or a girl of development age, it's the source, it's the mother lode. It's the source of things that are dear to her. It's set up to receive her and welcome her . . . So, like I said, then if people think it's a pilgrimage to them, then it is . . . There's a certain energy. It's energetic. That's very interesting if you talk about the energy and the vibration of it. A lot a people say that if you eat something prepared with love that it's a totally different experience than something done mechanically all together . . .

The American Girl brand harnesses this energy in the service of cultural reproduction, in particular the articulation and transmission of a template for the perpetuation of domesticity.

The feminization of the home began in seventeenth-century Holland, and peaked in nineteenth-century America; it remains the prevailing (if ambivalent) orientation toward domesticity in the US. The home exhibits a dialectical tension between a "woman's workhouse" and a "setting for the domestic arts" (Porteous and Smith 2001: 48–49). Among its "complex, multiple and interrelated" meanings, home has two dominant connotations: an outward-looking home as "center" meaning, that assimilates "refuge, freedom, possession, shelter and security," and an inward-looking home as "identity" meaning, comprising "family, friends, community, attaehment, rootedness, memory and nostalgia" (Porteous and Smith 2001: 48–49). These meanings are central to the American Girl brand essence.

The management of this tension is primarily a female undertaking. The female experience of this management has resulted in another distinctive historical stress: the tension between the "yearning to create a home" and the "urge to get out of it" (Collins 2003: xiii). Collins' (2003: xiv, xvii) account of over four centuries of the history of female experience in the US – a nonfiction analogue of the American Girl narratives – chronicles less the battle against male oppression than the "struggle to straighten out the perpetually mixed message about women's roles that was accepted by almost everybody of both genders"; in short, American women have always been "more complicated than they let on." Their emancipation consists in claiming the right to "combine the rewards of domestic and public life," and, parallcling again the narrative strategy of the American Girl brand, Collins (2003: 445, 450) exalts the everyday feminist Everywoman, noting women "stand on their shoulders and tell our children their stories." The model of heroic femininity at work in the American Girl narratives emphasizes this hestial mission of transcending domesticity while achieving its apotheosis.

In the mid-nineteenth century, consumer agency in America was re-gendered to become largely a female "prerogative and responsibility," the reversal driven by such factors as females gaining access to public places and organizing for political rights, an ideology of domesticity assigning females greater household responsibilities (the division of labor itself driven by the expansion of market consumerism), and the eroticizing of the world of goods by women (Witkowski 2006: 262–264, 280). This hestial-hermetic dialectic that assigns responsibility for maintaining the domestic economy to women even as they colonize political economy is visible among our informants. The interior world-making project the American Girl brand encourages is by ascription and achievement, by acclaim and default, and by disposition and intention, a feminine one.

The retro aura of the American Girl brand vibrates with this historical reversal. Twitchell's (Twitchell and Ross 2006) assertion of the disappearance of gendered space occasioned by the spread of consumer culture in his eloquently declaimed elegy for manscapes is belied by this brand, which encourages the public celebration of female bonding in a temple of domesticity (Diamond et al., forthcoming).

A fascinating inquiry into the lives of empty-nester women demonstrates that the intergenerational transmission of domesticity is of critical importance in contemporary society. Hogg et al. (2006: 252–253) show that, when challenged to "create family life" after children have left home, and to engage in "mothering at a distance," women change their focus from productive household tasks to maintaining "symbolic family"; they perform "emotional" rather than "physical" labor when identity shifts from the household to "dispersed sites." Hogg et al. (2004: 254–255) demonstrate that goods become transitional objects when "family and household" are understood as multi-sited phenomena. This change in focus from production to consumption in the maintenance of domesticity is evocative of the behavior of some of the principal stakeholders in the Ameriean Girl franchise: grandmothers. We found grandmothers to be absolutely indispensable to the brand's appeal.

## Allomothering

The "grandmother hypothesis" or the "grandmother's clock hypothesis" has engaged biocultural anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists for a number of years. Briefly recounted, the hypothesis maintains that the long period of human childhood dependency and female post-reproductivity co-evolved in an interdependent manner, such that maternal grandmothers became beneficial for the survival of their grandchildren (Hrdy 1999). Matrilineal priority presupposes female philopatry, according to this hypothesis (Knight and Power 2005). That is, female relatives tend to live amongst one another for this survival value to be realized.

Extrapolating to our data, grandmothers are in regular emotional contact with their granddaughters, whatever their physical proximity might be, and use the American Girl brand not only as an intergenerational bonding mechanism, but also as a vessel or conduit of family-making in the transmission of a template for domesticity. To a lesser extent, aunts engage in this transmission with their nieces. As more grandmothers are around now than in the previous history of the planet, longevity carries with it not merely increased risk of social isolation, but "extended scope for relationships across the lifespan"; conversation as a vehicle of shared experience between grandmothers and granddaughters (Robertson 2004: 141, 229) is evocatively facilitated through the American Girl brand, which caters as well to grandma's "nostalgic yearning" for a utopian girlhood.

This yearning is detectable in the remarks of our informants. One seven-year-old girl observes:

> Minnie: Well, I like this one [cloth] a whole lot because my grandma in Detroit made it for me. That's where I go for Christmas, for tea parties . . . And my grandma got this for me for my birthday with the little veil. [. . .]
> Minnie: When I play with my grandma we play, and she has a different one. She has – I think it's Felicity.
> Author: Your grandma has a doll?
> Minnie: An American Girl Doll. So we like to play with our American Girl Dolls.

Bespoke clothing and linen, rituals of domestic civility, sentimental gifts, maternal mirroring and joyous co-recreation reinforce traditional principles of domestic engineering. Further, our informant recognizes that this is no mere exercise in role-play, as Grandma also has a teaching objective in mind:

> Author: So it was something that your grandma bought or made for you?
> Minnie: Made . . . It was just a surprise. [My grandma] She's teaching me how to sew, so someday I'm going do this . . . Whenever I do a recital my grandma in Detroit always makes me a costume [for my doll] that sort of looks like my costume for my recital. This [costume] is for Samantha . . . It was a surprise. So she does it every time I do a recital.

And here's the top that goes underneath this, sort of like a one-piece thing. [. . .]

Minnie: And my grandma, when I had my little brother, she gave me this thing so I can make clothes for Samantha. My Grandma Wilmott. And here's her little travel bag. I also have her little school bag to go to school in.

[My Grandma comes] from Detroit. She comes over here sometimes. She came over and taught me to do a little bit of sewing, and I think we just did a little bit of playing. Whenever I go to her house my cousin Gerald always says, "Why do you always listen to her and you don't want to play?" 'Cause we're a boy and girl, and we're one-year age difference, so it's hard to think of something that we want to play.

Here we are presented, in the first instance, with a tableau of instruction in the domestic arts, couched in terms of gift ritual that commemorates personal milestones and personified as the ceremonial second skin of the symbolic self. Grandma remakes the doll over as her granddaughter, and the granddaughter as the doll, a powerful generative transformation that inspires imitation. It is an empowering procreative modeling. We are then treated to an allegorical passing of the starter dough, as Minnie receives both a commemoration of her new status as elder sister and a distraction from her inevitable displacement as the baby. Finally, we see that a studious attending to Grandma's conversation and craft-ways trumps the challenge of finding gender-neutral pastimes, the perceived age gulf between genders apparently magnified far beyond dog years, but, within genders, negligible.

Another grandmother describes her teaching of sewing in these terms:

Marie (Grandma): . . . I work at a fabric store, and we've got classes there, and we're starting a doll club . . . an eighteen-inch doll club. Of course, we're not calling it American Girl, but we are calling it the "eighteen-inch Doll Club." [. . .]

They don't have to be American Girl. They have to be 18 inches tall so we can make clothes for it and things, so we're going to have a little craft each meeting and have a play or write a story or something about the clothes that we made or the skirts that we made so we're going to start . . . they're going to learn some things . . . And I know that some customers came in and they had a doll club that they had been doing with their girls, and their girls are age 11–13 . . . they went . . . Wow, they really had a neat club going. 'Cause these girls . . . even that old, you know, cause they can start them sewing themselves for the doll and they like to create . . . We get together and they bring their dolls, and do things with their dolls, but we're going to start with . . . like, at seven years old, and probably need to divide our group up. I didn't realize that the older girls were going to want to do it too.

[. . .] The first thing we're going to do is make little poodle skirts for the girls and for the dolls. It'll be a little circular, soft skirt . . . it'll be already made, and then when they come, they'll decorate it . . . put all the sparkles on it, and (string them about?). So, that'll be our first meeting.

[. . .] That's our girl . . . I know, I'm like, "We're going to have so much fun!" and she's like (Angela, the mother), "We know, mom."
Angela (Marie's daughter): "We know, mom." That's our girl . . .
Marie: Well, you know, I just tell the mothers what to kind of do for the girls.
Angela: It's hard to hold back.
Marie: Yes. When they started, it was in Girl Scouts, and they were making little squares, and sew together to make a big quilt of their art. And I was helping that day, and I was like, "Let me help you do that!" (laugh) Finish it on off . . . you know, it's hard to hold back. I don't know why! (laugh)
Marie: (to the mother) We'll have a special day for the moms to come and we'll show you what we've done!

Marie's comments begin with a savvy sidestepping of trademark infringement, an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the propriety of consumer appropriation. She describes a pursuit reminiscent of an old fashioned quilting circle, replete with folk narratives, that infuses the learning of domestic skills with feminine wisdom and feeds the impulse to generativity. The retro-coolness of sewing retro-fashion is a source of particular delight.

Grandma's giddiness at the prospect of enchanting the newest generation, her vicarious thrill, and her own daughter's amused, patronizing yet endearing infantilization of Marie suggests the tenderness with which this enterprise is suffused. The irresistible joy of teaching mothers to nurture daughters is evident in Marie's demeanor. We feel the female worth ethic at work in her comments.

And yet, regression may sometimes be a grandmother's principal pursuit, as one young informant believes:

Author: And when you went to the store, did you see also the play?
Jill: Oh, yeah, I've seen the play. Not the new one with Kit, but the old one.
Author: And how old? Because I saw the last one, so I don't know how the play was years ago.
Jill: The old one? Well, it was the one with Josefina, so. Okay.
Author: Who was there with you? Your grandmother?
Jill: Yeah, my grandma's the one who takes me there.
Author: She likes to go there?
Jill: Yeah. I think it makes her feel younger or something.

Playing with granddaughter while modeling the (occasionally timeless) values of another era confers upon grandma a kind of heterotopic passport. Cultural conservation is an ethos that must be instilled in succeeding generations, as yet another grandma proclaims:

. . . And . . . we were talking about the doll's clothes . . . here . . . and the clothes are expensive, but when you see . . . we're going to preserve the doll . . . and

> the doll's clothes . . . because there will come a time when she starts not being interested . . . and so, now they can rest . . . from her to her [next] generations . . .
>
> [. . .] I love dolls, I love dolls . . . it's what I . . . [. . .] Because I have a doll that is a china porcelain doll which was given to me by good friends that is probably 115 years old and she's not in her original dress, or anything . . . but she's still an original china doll, you know, so . . . yeah!!!

This kind of material cultural stewardship is essential to the intergenerational transmission of values.

Family-making under the aegis of the American Girl brand can be characterized as "matriotic" (Rey 2001: 199), reminding us as it does that "sensuous feeling and remembrances of local flavors, light and smells are important building blocks of cultural intimacy, while art, language, history, and literature are lived as inner landscapes . . . [encouraging] . . . intercultural flexibility." So also can identity projects (Rey 2001: 199) be described as ambivalent territory where cultural norms and aesthetics are either applied or hybridized, generating mechanisms of intersubjective validity that lead to the sharing of sentiments, representations, and ideals for cementing an imagined community.

The matriotic ethos of the American Girl brand – heroic feminism in the service of reproducing domesticity across generations – resonates across the generations of consumers. Just as the identities of individual girls are forged in the crucible of domestic deep play, so also are the identities of families (embodied in the solidarity of sororal units) annealed in the supervision of such play.

## Doll play

Let's ground this literal allomothering in the ritualistic allomothering of doll play, since the cultural template being reproduced is embodied most evocatively in the American Girl dolls themselves. Surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to doll play, even by developmental psychologists (Robertson 2004: 4). Replica play begins as basic representations of actual events, and evolves eventually into elaborate narratives, which, by pre-school age, become fantastic storyworlds with autonomous characters. The realistic play of toddlers becomes the fantastic play of five year olds, as children cross the developmental divide that permits them to distinguish between reality and fantasy (Scarlett et al. 2005: 61–62).

While dolls have existed for millennia, and have been mass-manufactured since the fifteenth century, play dolls designed to be used by actual children were not mass-produced until the seventeenth century; such production escalated between 1850 and 1950, with the cultural invention of childhood (Robertson 2004: 22). The American Girl brand has extensions designed to span the developmental divide, and to situate girlhood in a complex psycho-cultural matrix that reifies and preserves it, while channeling its diverse options into a common set of themes. The surface structure of female doll play is all about allomothering. The deep structure is more talismanic.

In her nuanced and insightful interpretation of a classic folktale especially relevant to our study ("Vasalisa the Wise"), Estes (1992: 91–94) celebrates dolls as one of the "symbolic treasures of the instinctual nature," whose qualities as a fetish inspire belief that they "emanate both a holiness and a mana"; they exert an "awesome and compelling presence that acts upon persons, changing them spiritually." Animated by their makers, dolls have been used in rites and rituals for millennia. Estes understands the doll as a symbol of the numinous in humans, and, for women in particular, the "inner spirit," "the voice of inner reason," "inner knowing," and "inner consciousness." For Estes, the doll represents intuition, "truly the soul-voice speaking"; it is the female's sense of deep judgment. Feeding the doll is a symbolic act of listening to intuition. Intergenerational gifting of dolls functions as a "matrilineal blessing" on intuition, a form of empathic magic that preserves heroic femininity. Insofar as the doll is a "little psychopomp" (Estes 1992: 462), it can be understood to conduct or guide soul from one generation to the next. This is an apt characterization of deep doll play among our informants. It poignantly captures the sentiment that impels the intergenerational transmission of the American Girl brand.

American Girl paraphernalia prompts the enactment of family and personal narrative, a literal telling that deepens the figurative dwelling of extended households. Heroic femininity is a leitmotif, if not the central moral, of most of these tales. The brand also provides a template for the harnessing of the child's personal creativity. American Girl artifacts often define a child's room, encompassing it and rendering it a challenge (and obligation) to negotiate.

Play is about socialization, but not simply mimicry of the adult world; it involves as well the cognitive restructuring and augmentation of that world in terms of children's social relationships themselves (James 1993: 170, 175). The literature on toys, and especially on doll play, makes clear the creativity that children exert over and against the persuasion of marketers and other authority figures.

Cultural capital is mobilized through dolls and accessories in distinctive ways. It may be enacted through the artifacts, with the child performing the canon in doll play. It may simply be amassed, its very abundance a mute testament to the status of the household. Status is also signaled through the frequency of American Girl parties. In fact, we have heard other informants (mothers as well as girls) engage in one-upwomanship as they describe to one another the number of times they have been to the American Girl Place Café or musical revue. Aspirational ownership among girls ranges from modest to insatiable, as appetitive acquisition and premium pricing contend in American culture. Ethnicity, in particular, is a cultural capital commodity efficiently mobilized in households. The brand is used to display ethnic affiliation, reinforce ethnic heritage, and memorialize participation in a subculture.

Insofar as the future is interpreted through the lens of stereotypical gender roles at play, girls are faced with a greater number of futures than boys (James 1993: 188). In his unpacking of Bruner's (1990) narrative mode of thought, McAdams (1993: 230, 277) identifies the psychological desires of agency (power and achievement) and communion (love and intimacy) as the two central themes of personal myth, the bases for which are laid in infancy and childhood, when we are

not consciously seeing meaning and purpose in life, and realized during teen and adult years. The American Girl brand activates both of these themes, and provides girls a template for negotiating multiple futures. The leitmotif of heroic femininity reverberating through the brand comforts and motivates all three generations of women co-animating the brand.

## Conclusion

The American Girl brand acts as a host, issuing an invitation for women and girls to eonvene, and providing the wherewithal for them to enaet and perform the rights and responsibilities of gender. The brand mediates the eultural reconstruction of social roles, in a way that empowers the feminine and banishes the masculine to the margins. The brand has an allomaternal cast to its essence.

American Girl Place resembles the brandfests and sportsmediaseapes of ethnographie record, which are overwhelmingly masculine in character, but differs from them by virtue of the degree of constructive consumer creativity added to the offering. American Girl Place resembles the fan communities of ethnographic record, which are overwhelmingly feminine in character, but is strikingly different from them in terms of the retro-realist fantasy it engenders.

Flagship brand stores like ESPN Zone essentially provide fantastie toys for boys, encouraging males to play more in projective "fantasy." Our current study suggests that girls are eneouraged to play in introjective "reality." The attraction of the American Girl brand to girls and women lies in its eoncreteness and repetition both of history and the domestic. Even in 2007, girls are soeialized to be keepers of the home and hearth. They still play "house," more than "astronaut" or "war." The material culture that shapes a female child's play will most likely shape female adult lives as well. This may not be a politically correet discovery, but it is pervasive in our field notes.

The intergenerational attraction exerted by the brand allows each female family member to "play dolls" with the younger members. The reproduction of behaviors aeross generations is reminiscent of Russian nesting dolls. Girls care for and dress their dolls. Girls don't merely "dress like their dolls"; rather, mothers dress their daughters, who arc their own dolls, in the clothing of the brand. Girls learn to fold and organize all these accessories; each girl becomes the mistress of a small, closeted domain. Mothers are guiding them to this process and these produets, as they organize their daughter's lives. Simultaneously, mothers yearn for control and for a simpler life and times when everything was so clearly bounded and tractable. Grandmothers exert a similar, perhaps more masterful control. They calmly organize their charges' time and priorities. They supervise this reproduction of history and domestic culture. This heroic management of effort is each generation's form of "play." As our opening epigraph suggests, the kinetics of cultural reproduction seems a quintessentially feminine enterprise.

Retail theatre dramatizes the template for family-building that is especially entrusted to Grandma. Thc doll becomes a memento vivere – an object of contemplation reminding the girl that she must live, as she is the wellspring of

culture. The *mise-en-scene* at American Girl Place conveys a powerful sense of déjà vu for the young, and après vu for the old: this is a mythic re-enactment that everyone is seeing with new eyes. Getting in touch with the inner grandma (the eternal wisdom-bearing initiator into the mystery/my-story and history/her-story of family perpetuation) is largely what American Girl Place is all about.

The co-creation or co-production of experience has become both a commercial imperative and a consumer expectation. We hope our exploration of this brand's animation contributes to the accelerated unpacking of the production of consumption at work in the contemporary marketplace.

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