

“AND THAT’S WHAT I THINK BEING AN AMERICAN GIRL IS ALL ABOUT!”: GIRLS’  
REFLECTIONS ON AMERICAN GIRL AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
GIRLHOOD

Veronica E. Medina

Dr. Mary Jo Neitz, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

In this project, I analyze 289 essays submitted to the Toy and Miniature Museum of Kansas City (TMM) as part of their 2007 “What Does it Mean to be an American Girl?” exhibit. Inspired by-- and anchored with-- the fictional protagonists of the wildly popular *American Girls Collection*, the exhibit “celebrate[d] the spirit of girlhood in America” through its displays, living history events, *and of primary significance for this dissertation, an essay contest* seeking answers to the exhibit’s titular question from modern-day girls and women.

Although girls between the ages of 7 and 12 years old are the target audience for American Girl, their perspectives about the meaning and influence of the company’s texts and products are largely absent from scholars’ analyses of the American Girl franchise. With some notable exceptions (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Nardone 2002; Diamond *et al* 2009; and Marshall 2009), the vast majority of research on American Girl relies on and theorizes from analyses of texts that the company itself produces. My analysis offers a unique contribution to extant research on American Girl by integrating and privileging the voices of girls who responded to the TMM exhibit’s titular question. I seek to determine if, and to what extent, girls’ readings and interpretations of American Girl’s stories converge with or diverge from the conclusions drawn by scholars about the company’s ideologies and socialization messages.