UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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Performing the Past:

Queer Temporality, Queer Desire

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Michelle Liu Carriger, Chair

Performing the Past: Queer Temporality, Queer Desire," works at the intersections of Historiography, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Performance Studies. It explores minoritarian subjects' embodied engagements with the past, looking specifically at an interactive 1960s lesbian bar exhibit, queer and black Jane Austen fandom and Regency Era ball reenactments, the playing of history with American Girl dolls, and an annual debutante ball in Laredo, Texas in which Latina teens dress up as Martha Washington. This project is rooted in a feminist historiography. While the case studies encompass a variety of geographical locations and eras, they all explore an engagement with the past as experienced by women and girls inhabiting a liminal space with homosocial elements.

I implement the term queer as a tool to discuss a non-normative temporality, and more specifically, desires for the past that seem misplaced due to the subject's position (gender, class, race, sexuality, age, citizenship) at the margins of dominant society; a sentiment that Heather Love labels "feeling backward." I use the term queer not only in reference to sexual desire but also to a social and political rejection of certain normative practices and an embrace of the strange or abject. I argue that this turn to the past by minoritarian subjects (who are commonly seen as the very people who need to place all their hopes in the future) challenges capitalist, heteronormative concepts of straight time and progress. These embodied engagements present the past as a site with the potentiality for pleasure and an affective sense of belonging for minoritarian subjects.

The dissertation of Jenna Tamimi is approved.

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For Rosa, whose love, encouragement, and patience fueled this project and our many other adventures.

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VITA

Jenna Tamimi received her bachelor's degree in Theater and Feminist Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz and her master's degree in Performance Studies from New York University. Her master's thesis, "Dashing Off with Dickinson: A Queering of Emily Dickinson," queers Dickinson's poetry through her use of the dash and its skewing of temporality and explores her collaboration with and desire for her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. Tamimi is published in the Thornton Wilder Journal and has presented at multiple conferences including the American Society for Theater Research, the Association for Theater in Higher Education, and the American Studies Association. Jenna Tamimi is the recipient of the Constance Coiner Graduate Fellowship which recognizes teaching and research dedicated to the study of working-class and feminist issues.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

When I stepped inside, it was just a bar. Through the haze of smoke, I saw faces glance over and look me up and down. There was no turning back, and I didn't want to. For the first time, I might have found my people.

-Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*

As a means of combating the disturbingly high number of LGBT youth suicides, the "It Gets Better Campaign" (now a worldwide movement) interviews LGBT adults who have survived the challenges of their LGBT adolescence. These adults, some of whom are celebrities or work at companies like Disney and Google, discuss their own coming out experiences. Recurring themes of being bullied, ostracized, and disowned by family are juxtaposed to the adults' current experiences of acceptance, pride, chosen family, and community. If the sentiments of "It Gets Better" reflect a collective perception of history, then progress is considered a given, and the lives of minoritarian subjects are expected to improve with time. Mainstream gay politics have a 'we've come so far' kind of rhetoric. However, not all queer subjects are included in this 'progress'. While the legalization of gay marriage has created preconditions to inclusion, the feminist, queer killjoy is left mourning the casualties of assimilation and disappearance of lesbian space.

As Heather Love argues in *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, "One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it- the nonwhite and the non-monogamous, the poor and the gender deviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of

unmentionable others" (Love 10). Same-sex marriage was won not by owning difference but by claiming that we are the same, that we (LGBT people) are just like straight people. Those who own the "strange or eccentric" aspects of queer are therefore left out. Much of the LGBT politics of today is about fighting to be a part of the system, as is evident in the campaigns for same-sex marriage and inclusion in the military. As lesbian theorist Sue-Ellen Case points out, "Subcultural kinship practices are contradicted by the institution of the legal bond of marriage, reducing their more expansive sense of kinship to a small, stable and carefully bounded exclusive pairing, tied to a notion of monogamy that contradicts the old lesbian practice of serial monogamy, or non-monogamy, or polyamorous pleasures" (Case 2). While 'victories' like same-sex marriage give LGBT couples certain equal rights of citizenship like tax breaks, the power to make medical decisions for partners, and rights to inheritance, they also, over time, replace more radical (and arguably more inclusive) queer familial formations.

The mission to end LGBT youth suicide is of the utmost importance and needs to be accomplished by any means possible, but what if the potential for queer pleasure is not restricted to the future? In the age of the "It Gets Better" campaign, when minoritarian history is told through the archive of penal codes and police reports, the possibility that "It was better" is often overlooked, or for some even unfathomable. What does this mean for minoritarian subjects who claim the past, who look back and say, if not "this was better" then "this is mine too"?

From Meow Mix in New York City to Lexington in San Francisco, lesbian bars are closing all across the country. According to Nan Boyd, in San Francisco "between 1949

and 1959 there were always at least four and up to seven bars or night clubs that lesbians frequented within a few blocks of each other" (Boyd 69). The same cannot be said today. We are left with abandoned buildings, empty lots, and morphed spaces, along with the specter of a bygone time and space for the lesbian community.

Artist Kaucyila Brooke, also known as Boy Mechanic, attempted to capture this haunted sapphic space by photographing Los Angeles sites where lesbian bars previously stood. These photos were displayed at the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs fellowship exhibition at Barnsdall Park in 2005. The exhibit included two large photographs, a video with drive-by footage of the now destructed bar sites that played on a loop, and a wall-sized map of the LA lesbian bar sites drawn on a chalkboard and annotated with snapshots and the anecdotes of bar owners and patrons. The temporary nature of the chalkboard map points to the instability of the recording of minoritarian histories in the archive. The chalkboard map is all too easily erased, as are lesbian bars and, on a larger scale, lesbian history itself.

Many of Brooke's photos eerily represent a lack of indexicality, as most of these bars have been completely erased from their physical space. Windows and doors are boarded up or bricked over. The buildings have been demolished, or they've been turned into something different like Hialeah House[1] on Lankershim Boulevard, which is now Vasco Electric, or Club 22/Big Horn[2], also on Lankershim Boulevard, which is now an empty lot without a trace of the lesbian enclave that once existed. In her photograph of Club22/ Big Horn, Brooke captured the image of her own shadow and the shadow of the bars of the gate the enclose the empty grassy lot that was once a lively bar. Brook's

[1] See image 1
[2] See image 2

shadow has a haunting effect. The site is closed off to her. The shadow evokes the feeling of a ghostly presence, the specter of the lesbian, haunting the empty space that once belonged to her, searching for a past without a referent, fighting to salvage a memory. What if we dwell in this empty space, see the lack, the haunting, the melancholy, and the past as a site of potentiality? Brooke's empty lot is filled, and the dead dyke bar is simultaneously mourned in pleasure and resurrected in another artistic response to lesbian bar closures, Macon Reed's interactive exhibit, "Eulogy for the Dyke Bar."

The life-sized lesbian bar exhibit was displayed at the Brooklyn Wayfarers on September 15, 2015 and at Pulse Contemporary Art Fair at the Metropolitan Pavilion in Chelsea from March 3rd-6th 2016. Plaster, cardboard, clay paste, and wood make up the life dyke bar model. The neon words 'Dyke' and 'Bar" divided on each window add a flash of light to the dingy gray exterior[3] of the installation. The warm wooden wall panels and hardwood floors contrast with the teal, pink, and green bar, behind which brightly colored, unlabeled bottles line the shelves[4]. Letters from owners of lesbian bars that have closed down and photographs adorn one of the walls[5]. At the center of the bar is a clay paste pool table and dartboard. The juxtaposition between the dowdy exterior and lively interior sets the bar up as a haven of color and warmth. The materials used in its construction and the abundance of color give it a deliberately artificial aesthetic. The clay past shows the hands-on crafts[wo]manship, making the pool table and dartboard look quite fake which contributes to the exhibit's campy aesthetic. The design of the bar

[3] See image 3
[4] See image 4
[5] See image 5

suggests a style reminiscent of the fifties and sixties (knotty pine paneling and bright colors were popular interior design trends in midcentury America)[6]. The model serves as a somewhat romanticized and campy recreation of a bygone pre-stonewall era. The Millennial artist was never able to fully experience dyke bars before they started closing, which contributes to the piece's feeling of longing for a time, a space, and a history in which the artist herself did not have the opportunity to participate (and that the mainstream rhetoric of LGBT politics would insist was a more difficult time, that has since 'gotten better').

Museum patrons are called upon to inhabit the space with their bodies. The exhibit visitors' rather pedestrian repertoire is transformed into a revolutionary demand for space, space for their bodies, for their community, and most of all for their desire. Though the museum patrons are encouraged to create the lesbian bar space through embodied practices of drinking, dancing, and flirting, the exhibit, as is evident in its title, is birthed from a sense of loss and death that manifests in "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" as a kind of queer nostalgia. The exhibit is a seductive dance between memory and fantasy, saturated with desire, a desire for a time in the past, and a place that is rapidly disappearing.

"Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" highlights the touch of melancholia in nostalgia through its emphasis on loss. The exhibit evokes death and disappearance. Reed describes her piece as an artifact, something you would see in a museum because it does not exist anymore. Even its position as an 'artifact' is unstable. The exhibit comes apart and is eventually taken down. Reed, much like Brooke's use of the chalkboard, deliberately

[6] http://retrorenovation.com/2011/09/08/1950s-interior-design-and-decorating-style-7-major-trends/

uses building materials, such as clay paste, that disintegrate over time. Thus, the exhibit itself will disappear, mirroring the instability of both the lesbian bar and lesbian archive. Queer museum patrons were drawn to the sense of loss as evidenced by the exhibit's immense popularity. While actual lesbian bars are rapidly closing for multiple socio-economic reasons (one of which is a lack of money spending customers), "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" sold out. Lines to enter the exhibit went around the block. The showing at Wayfarers was so popular it had to be extended, and a live streaming option was added for those who could not get into the seventy people maximum capacity space. The melancholia and sense of loss of the exhibit as well as the urgency evoked by its fleeting nature was part of its appeal.

The title "*Eulogy* for a Dyke Bar" connotes a death, a loss, with dyke bars being the lost love-object. The element of melancholia in which I am most interested regarding the exhibit is the absorption of the lost object into the subject. Eulogies are a traditional form of mourning, a way to pay one's respect, grieve, and move on. The museum patrons, however, do not just observe the exhibit from the outside, as one would sit and listen to a eulogy. They enter the dyke bar exhibit, and it enters them through their embodied practices. Viewers are invited to have a haptic interaction with the model. "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" relies heavily on museum patrons walking through the exhibit to create the space of the dyke bar through repertoire. The patrons transform the space from an exhibit to an actual bar, thus resurrecting what is dead. They are encouraged to partake in embodied experiences, to interact with one another, to dance, and buy a drink (drinks titled The Bushlick, Muff Diver, Queer Tears, and Femme Top were sold at the 'bar'). Thus, an exhibit made from clay paste and positioned in a museum is

functionally and affectively transformed into a dyke bar. The patrons reiterate a repertoire of lesbian sociality. The isolation of our digitized age and loss of these queer women's spaces may put us at risk of losing elements of that repertoire, losing fluency in a language of the body. This would leave certain subjects, especially femmes for example, at risk of being unrecognizable to their own community. An aptness in the language of queer embodiment is necessary for reading the coded femme repertoire and saving the femme from invisibility. Thus, the everyday dance of lesbian embodiment in the space of this exhibit takes on the important task of preserving (or reinventing) a repertoire of public lesbian sociality.

Reed intends her dyke bar to "serve as a sight for conversation, tension as a community about where we are, and how we are moving forward" (Moon). Reed describes her piece as asking more questions than giving answers. She asks that those who visit *Eulogy* think about what could be next for our community. We could struggle to keep the bars or imagine new spaces. She stresses the importance of community building and intergenerational mingling in these imagined spaces. The most important thing to Reed is that we have a space, be it a bar or something else (Moon). In this exhibit, Reed is using the desire for an aspect of the past to focus attention on the present state of queer women's spaces, and spur questions about our future.

Reed's exhibit can be viewed as a reenactment of a queer time and place with a different form of community contingent upon ostracization from mainstream society. While it is clearly not desirable to return to the days of violent gay bar raids, the popularity of "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" suggests that the queer past holds more than the oppression that the archive of penal codes and police reports would suggest. A queer

nostalgia for the past (the 1990s with its radical Act Up politics, or specifically a1950s/1960s dyke bar scene as is alluded to in “Eulogy”) is perhaps a longing for a more collective lifestyle, a more working-class, intergenerational, *Stone Butch Blues*-esque imagining of community to counter our current *L Word*, eighteen-dollar cocktail, predominantly white-male gayborhood, individualistic, assimilated ‘community’.

Eulogy for a Dyke Bar negates the queer subject’s static temporal placement. The piece pays tribute to a lesbian past, makes visible the lesbian present, and strives for imaginings of a lesbian future. Progressive sentiments would condition the contemporary queer (or any minority) to look to the future for liberation; however, as Reed’s sold out installation exemplifies, there is a longing for the past. This seemingly misplaced desire for a time in the past that a linear progressive narrative of history would argue was more painful for minoritarian subjects serves as the foundation for my project. The enactment of that desire through different embodied practices queers temporality and opens up the past for analysis. The potentiality of this queer desire is held in the embodied turn to the past, a turn that insists on blurring the divisions between past, present, and future.

Premise

My dissertation works at the intersections of performance studies, queer studies, gender studies, and historiography. I explore minoritarian subjects’ engagement in history, looking specifically at race and queer desire in embodiments of the Regency, the playing of history with American Girl dolls, and an annual debutante ball in Laredo, Texas in which Latina teens dress up as Martha Washington. These case studies

explore the complexity of performances of both race/ethnicity and sexuality, and the chapters on the Martha Washington debutante ball and American Girl dolls focus particularly on the liminal space of childhood and adolescence. The inevitable inauthenticity of reenactments allows space for a queering of the embodied experience and history in general. In this project, I will be using queer theory to analyze the function of temporality in these case studies and performance studies to explore the embodied nature of these engagements with the past.

By queer, I refer to the askew, the strange, and the odd. I use the term not only in reference to sexual desire but also to a social and political rejection of certain normative practices and an embrace of the strange or abject. In “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler begins by explaining the performative powers of language. Discourse has the power to produce what it names, so when one is interpellated as queer, a subject is being named and the queer subject is being produced: “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (Butler 17). The citation of previous conventions, not the “speaker subject,” enacts the “binding power.” ‘Queer’ is therefore an identity through discourse with a history that lives in each citation. This history is often portrayed as painful: “The term ‘queer’ has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation” (Butler 18). The acknowledgment of the past engrained in the term queer makes it particularly useful for my project. Though each iteration takes on new meaning, the term maintains its historical weight. Butler argues that to use the term queer productively, we must

recognize its troubled history and rework it to combat current political issues: “If the term queer is to be the site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler 19). The term queer, therefore, can be used as a political tool to face the hardships of today while being referential to the shame and stigma of the past. Thus, queer best describes the kind of pleasure in and claiming of the past that I am exploring.

I implement the term queer as a tool to discuss a non-normative temporality, as well as desires for the past that seem misplaced due to the subject’s position (gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, citizenship) at the margins of dominant society, a sentiment that Heather Love labels “feeling backward.” Her conceptualization of the sentiment of “feeling backward” grounds my theoretical framework. She describes the feeling as a turn toward the past that still maintains a propelling force to the future: “Turning away from past degradation to a present or future affirmation means ignoring the past as past; it also makes it harder to see the persistence of the past on the present” (19). Feeling backward is an embrace, rather than the expected rejection, of the ‘negative’ effects of the past such as shame, melancholia, stigma, etc. In doing so, the effects of the past on the present are recognized. Love’s analysis focuses on queer subjects’ feelings of backwardness. Backwardness has a long connection to queer culture, be it through an embrace of “perversion,” a refusal to “grow up,” or the aesthetic of camp. While still maintaining the very queerness inherent in feeling backward, I expand the usage to include racial/ethnic, class, and gender minorities. This inclusion is

necessary considering the impact of intersectionality and how these minoritarian positions are also inadequately (or unsatisfactorily) represented in history and generally asked to look to the future.

A messing up or queering of time can be examined as a resistance to chrononoramtivity, an order of normative life events which is meant to collectively propel us forward, and as Elizabeth Freeman argues, is designed to achieve maximum productivity and secure capitalism as well as the state. An affinity for turning to the past by minorities (who are commonly seen as the very people who need to place all their hopes in the future) queers notions of temporality and progress and challenges the concepts of straight time.

I am interested in the minoritarian subject's insertion of oneself in the past as a means of exerting one's existence in the present and ensuring one's presence in the future. Queer stories are buried between the lines. They are in the moments of silence, in held breath, in the accidental brushed by touch of skin, in the tension of a gaze from across the room. A minoritarian history is often misrepresented or completely left out of the archive: "... 'Straight' history is archived in public institutions of memory (museums, libraries, film, popular media), but the marginalized lives of queer and trans people [also people of color] slip from history because there are few institutions devoted to collecting, protecting, and transmitting, their history and collective memory" (Pryor 68). When the traces of this history are documented it is often through evidence that tells a story of pain and subjugation as, police reports, court transcripts, or as Saidiya Hartman describes in "Venus in Two Acts," slave ship logbooks. A minoritarian history that gives space for pleasure must therefore be recovered, salvaged, even created. I am

interested in how history is queered; in queer desire in the past, but even more so, in the contemporary minoritarian subject's desire to find and embody this bated breath and repressed passion.

Justification

Potentiality tends to be linked with futurity; however, in my work, I argue for queer potentiality in the past. I hope to challenge concepts of a linear progressive history through the positioning of minoritarian subjects' desire in times and spaces predominantly considered oppressive. A contemporary desire for the past that due to the subjects' minoritarian position initially seems misplaced brings the case studies, which differ in terms of the era and place of the reenactments, together. While there has been progress in terms of LGBT rights, it often comes at a price (such as assimilation and the loss of a more radical community). The fight for gay marriage, for instance, holds certain race, class, and gender presentation prejudices in its effort to reproduce the rights of heterosexuals for homosexuals. With the recognition of gay marriage comes a rejection of queers practicing relationship models deemed unconventional by dominant society's standards such as non-monogamy, polyamory, or simply a disinterest (politically or otherwise) in marriage. Through marriage, "the state is producing a literal and symbolic structure through which future gay and lesbian subjects will be read as compliant (or non-compliant) within a paternalistic system that aims to save them from themselves" (Pryor 14). Similar to the way gay marriage gives the illusion of inclusivity and a post-homophobic society, the election and re-election of Obama has been used erroneously to claim a post-racial society. Yet having a black

president has not prevented the state-sanctioned murder of black people by the police. The concept of things 'getting better' for sexual and racial minorities may, therefore, be too complex to simply promise. A turn to the past may be an alternative to a dissatisfying present and a passive holding out for a brighter future. A minoritarian subject's affinity for the past rebels against notions of straight temporality and, as Love demonstrates, queers an LGBT "It Gets Better" discourse which is confined to the future. By looking at the past as a space with potential pleasure for minoritarian subjects, I hope to combat the complacency of a contemporary "we've come so far" type of narratives that are pervasive in our current society.

Methodology and Chapters/Connection

Queer theories of historiography underpin the way I'm thinking through all my case studies, the ones that have sexuality as a focal point as well as the case studies that focus on race. This project tracks desire, focusing more on a contemporary desire for the past than desire in the past. Embodiment is used as a method of navigating queer potential in history. By working through the intersections of queer theory and historiography, I trace this desire for the past through fiction and embodied experiences.

This project is rooted in a feminist historiography. In my case studies, the past is revisited through a female perspective. I interpolate the reader not only as a contemporary subject with a desire for the past but also as a minoritarian subject, specifically female and queer, as seen in my invocation of "we" throughout the work. This hailing is deliberate and political. Historically, the reader has been assumed to

occupy a dominant positionality, white, male, straight. The work itself centralizes a minoritarian experience and centralizes, through its address, a minoritarian reader.

Chapter Two, “Having a Ball with Austen: Queer Desire, Reading, and Reenactments” explores contemporary Austenian imaginings and regency embodiments looking specifically at the Society for Manners and Merriment’s annual Jane Austen Evening in which contemporary subjects dress in Regency attire and recreate historical dances, the 2004 historical reality program *Regency House Party,* featuring contemporary single men and women who search for a partner through the reenactment of Regency sociality, and the 2017 YouTube program *Black Girl in a Big Dress,* about a romantically awkward black woman who finds refuge in historical cosplay. Through these case studies, I examine the potential for queer desire at the ball reenactments by reading and claiming the desire in Austen’s novels as inherently queer. I mark regency desire (both the desire in Austen’s novels and the contemporary desire for that desire) as functioning through the liminality of courtship and the desire to remain in and/or repeat that space of in-between-ness where the desire is to desire. The physical restraint in regency romance, the prolonged longing, the expression of lust only through eye contact and the smallest of touches can be read as queer, for queer desire has a long history of containment, of longing from a distance, a kind of desire of (and dare I say for!) the closet. A contemporary indulgence in the eroticism of a kind of restrained Regency sexuality can certainly be interpreted as a ‘backward’ feeling, one that holds queer potential.

A feeling of backwardness is also experienced racially. The embodiment of an imagined Regency in *Regency House Party* and *Black Girl in a Big Dress* challenges

contemporary notions of imagined global whiteness of the era. Both programs call out the audiences' whitewashed assumptions; however, the black women who participate in the reenactments in the shows are given access to the past through their high-class status which leads to another form of invisibility. Nevertheless, the embodied engagement with the past, paradoxically in spite of and because of all its restrictions, holds liberatory potential.

Chapter Three, "Playing American Girl: History, Racialized Girlhood, and the American Girl Doll Frenzy," traces the American Girl brand's commodification of multiculturalism and feminism and the construction of an imagined historical black girlhood. Through this brand, I look at the role of pain in the racialized construction of childhood innocence and historical identification in play. I am interested in the ways in which the American Girl Doll Place uses a museum layout to produce a history for capital gain. I will explore American Girl's marketing push for a race-based identification through history and play. How do American Girl dolls solicit certain relationships to history, and how does the American Girl narrative limit black girls' connections to history? Childhood is marked by changes, development, and growth, yet through Addy, American Girls' enslaved doll character, black girls are frozen in time in the singular narrative of slavery. The clashing between the movement of childhood and stagnation of the American Girl narrative creates a queer temporality. The narrative of slavery presented by the brand through Addy's accompanying novels and accessories need not only be oppressive. To play out scenes of enslavement can be a form of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as critical fabulation, a way to imagine a richer more detailed life beyond the documents of violence found in the archive. As I explore at the end of the

chapter through the example of Jaxyn's engagement with her Addy doll, there is also space for empowerment through disidentification.

Chapter Four, "Martha Washington Goes to Texas: Crossing Ethnic and Temporal Borders," looks at the over one-hundred-year-old annual George Washington's Birthday Celebration in Laredo, Texas. In 1939, the celebration expanded to include the Society of Martha Washington and its debutante ball in which teen girls dress up in eighteenth-century inspired gowns and are presented to society as historical figures, Martha Washington and her contemporaries. The elite Texas Mexicans in Laredo participated in George Washington's Birthday Celebration as a way to assert their right to remain a part of the ruling class after Anglo migration threatened their standing in society and right to their property. The ball offered an opportunity for Texas Mexicans to represent America's founding fathers and mothers in a show of assimilation, as well as the opportunity to intermarry with the Anglo migrants. Gradually, however, Texas Mexican participation in the event increased, and they took on leadership roles in the Society of Martha Washington. Now the event in many ways takes on a distinctly Latina style from the eighteenth-century colonial drawing room meets quinceañera dress designs to the music played on the dance floor. Geographic, temporal, and ethnic borders are crossed in bizarre and fascinating ways in this border town event.

While the case studies encompass a variety of geographical locations and range over nearly one hundred years, all three of the chapters explore engagements with the past as experienced by women and girls, specifically women and girls inhabiting a liminal space with homosocial elements. Most notably, the Martha Washington ball,

discussed in Chapter Four, is a debutante ball. The teenage girls are officially coming out into society. The ball marks their transition from adolescence to womanhood. They become women through their performance of a distinctly white, genteel femininity. The American Girl Dolls case study in Chapter Three obviously examines the fleeting period of girlhood. The Jane Austen example in Chapter Two also has an air of transitionality, as it explores the liminal space of courtship. Aside from *Persuasion's* Anne, all of Jane Austen's heroines are young women who only fully transition to womanhood through their journey from unwed to married. These homosocial spaces, be it a ballroom or bedroom full of dolls, mark an ephemeral time and transitional point in the subjects' lives.

Edelman's argument in *No Future* has been critiqued as not considering the inherent white privilege in eschewing a future when for many minoritarian subjects the possibility of having a future in the first place cannot be assumed. My project works to intervene in the antisociality debates by presenting a queer temporality that interweaves the past, present, and future. Each of my case studies paradoxically builds a Muñozian potential for minoritarian world making/future by challenging the notion of reproductive futurity and turning to the past using materials in the present. The Jane Austen Ball, Martha Washington Ball, and American Girl dolls all imply a future at their foundation. The function of balls in Jane Austen's novels is to find a husband and ultimately achieve domestic security through marriage and child-rearing. The contemporary balls, however, strip the Regency era balls of their ingrained compulsive heterosexuality and reproductive futurity while maintaining the affective sensations of the ball. The American Girl Company subverts a future contingent on reproduction through its strategies of

identification. Doll play is often designed to position the little girl as 'Mama' to the doll, serving as a rehearsal for the girl child's inevitable motherhood. In contrast, the American Girl Company pushes the child to identify with the doll and its character. As opposed to being Addy's 'Mama', the child is encouraged to be Addy. The Martha Washington debutante ball initially seems the most connected to reproductive futurity. After all, the function of a debutante ball is the celebration of a girl's transition from girlhood to womanhood and to mark her as available for courtship and eventually marriage. However, the turn to the past plays a larger role in the event than the look to the teens' implied heteronormative future.

The case studies in the three chapters focus on an engagement with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in an American context. Ideas of an imagined nation tie the three case studies together. While Jane Austen was British, the Regency ball I examine is in the U.S. and the Britishness of the event stems from the American imagination. It is part of an imagined global whiteness. There is also a notion of proto-Americanness especially seen in the American Girl doll and Martha Washington case studies. The American Girl Company creates doll characters that inhabit an era, geographical location, and positionality that would not categorize them as American, yet the brand labels them "American Girls." Similarly, The Martha Washington ball in Laredo, Texas develops scripted scenarios that fictitiously bring Martha Washington to Texas, a region which of course was not a part of the U.S. in the eighteenth-century. According to Omi and Winant, race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (55). In my case studies, primarily the Martha Washington ball, there is an effort to alter that signification

process, however unsuccessfully, by using history as a costume. In terms of corporeality, “race has rendered the body into a text on which histories of racial differentiation, exclusion, and violence are inscribed” (Ferguson 1). This is significant, considering my project’s emphasis on embodiment. The case studies work simultaneously on, with, and against that text of exclusion.

All three chapters also call for a class analysis. The Austenian embodiments, American Girl Dolls, and Martha Washington Ball all use notions of ‘History’ as a means of social mobility or upper-class drag. The Jane Austen ball and YouTube program display a contrived Britishness through an American lens that plays into an imagined global whiteness. The black reenactors are granted access to the era through their upper-class status. There are also class assumptions made in relation to the notion of being a reader of ‘the great works of English literature.’ Reenactors are not just performing the Regency, but also notions of being ‘cultured’ and ‘proper.’ In terms of the American Girl Doll and Martha Washington ball case studies, an engagement with ‘History’ is used to display wealth and claim American-ness. American Girl Dolls are over $100, and the Martha Washington gowns can cost up to $30,000. By playing these roles of an historical, American girl or woman, these children and debutantes are performing class and, perhaps inadvertently, connecting the status of American with wealth. The embodiments carry implications of social mobility. These performances are therefore an example of a temporal, ethnic/racial, and class drag.

José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification will serve as a jumping-off point and will help ground my explanation of the complex engagements with the past exhibited in my case studies. The minoritarian strategy of working on, with, and against dominant

culture will serve as my entry point in my analysis of a seemingly misplaced queer desire for the past. My case studies feature subjects who are connecting to, yet simultaneously subverting different historical eras/ figures. For example, the queer Jane Austen ball participants are hailed by particular affective elements of the ball that lend themselves to a queer sentimentality (such as, the eye contact from across the ballroom, touching palms, feelings of longing, and suppressed desire). Yet those participants also work against the Regency era's strict gendered structure and subvert the reenactment through participating in it. The realm of play that makes up the world in which girls engage with American Girl dolls leaves space to broadly follow the script provided by the brand, but also to misbehave within it. The Latina teen participants in the Martha Washington ball simultaneous whitewash themselves and Latina-ize Martha Washington. Thus, the divide between working with and working against, and past and present are transgressed.

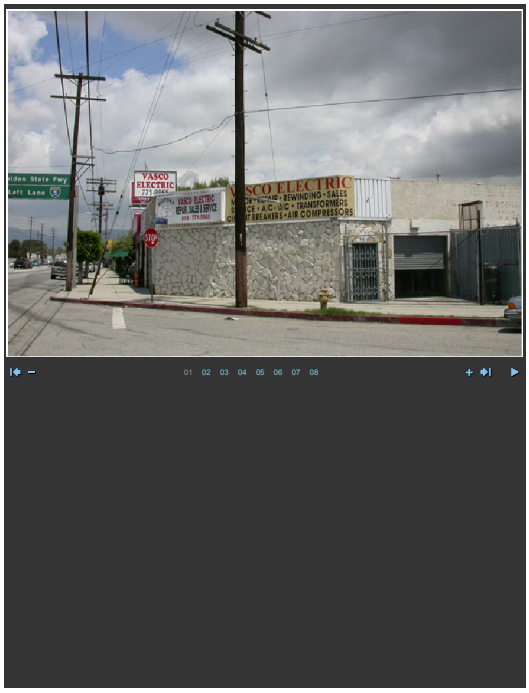
Conclusion

Performing the past by dancing in regency style, wearing a Revolutionary War meets quinceañera gown, or playing history through the imagination of an eight-year-old with a doll, assert the minoritarian subject's existence in the present. As our subjecthood is under constant threat, we look behind us to move forward. If we turn to face the past, then the past is what is ahead of us. Though we are told it is undesirable, we see its potential and reach for it.

Macon Reed's packed "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" exhibit, with lines circling the block of the museum, is a testament to a collective longing for what can never fully be

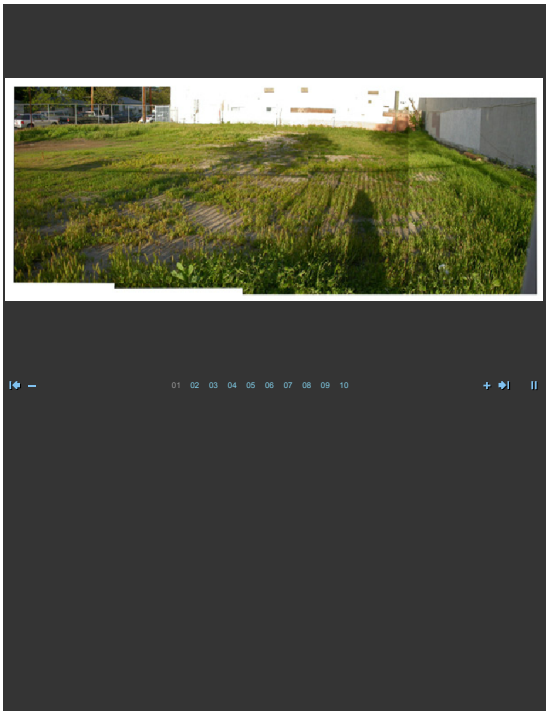
recaptured. Lesbian bars were where we came out, where we found safety, where we made friends and political alliances, where we drank and danced, where we hooked up, where our hearts were broken, and where our lives were put back together. The queer women attempting to resurrect the nearly extinct dyke bar through her own moving, warm, live body displays a longing to experience the history tied to those sites and times. We crave that rush of excitement felt before entering a dyke bar, for the pleasure of not knowing how our night might end, and who we might end it with, for the butch who presses against our back, for making eye contact from across the crowded room, and for the feeling that we were there and we are here.

Image 1



kaucyilabrooke.com

Image 2



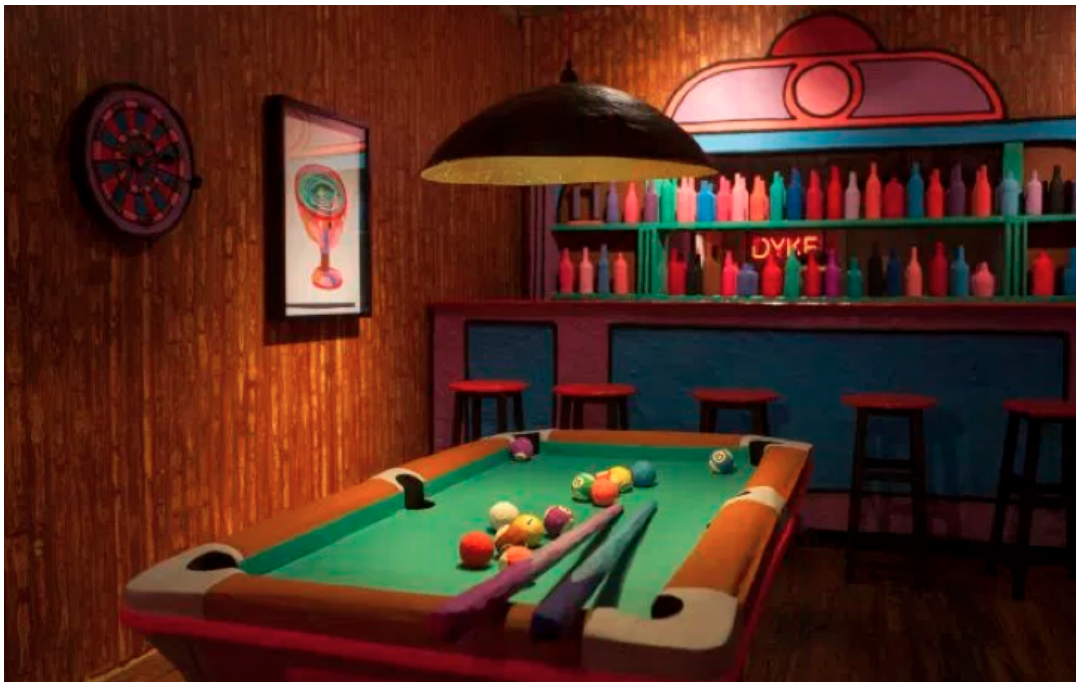
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Image 3



maconreed.com

Image 4



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Image 5



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CHAPTER 2
Having a Ball with Austen: Queer Desire, Reading and Reenactment

Introduction

"I read it [history] a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all — it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention." **-Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey***

All of Catherine Morland's flights of fancy aside, she comes to a rather profound conclusion on history. Austen, through Catherine, addresses some of the major contentions in the study of history, such as its rejected subjects (women) and its potentially fictitious nature. Through Catherine, we see the power of the imagination and the great impact novels can have in shaping reality. The Gothic horror of licentious monks and the Castle of Udolpho guide Catherine's reality. The wit and wisdom of Jane Austen's novels guides mine.

This chapter will trace a selection of contemporary Austenian embodiments and explore the queer potentialities of these embodiments as well as Austen's novels and fandom. These embodiments include the Society for Manners and Merriment's annual Jane Austen Evening in which contemporary subjects dress in Regency attire and recreate historical dances, the 2004 historical reality program *Regency House Party,* featuring contemporary single men and women who search for a partner through the reenactment of Regency sociality, and the 2017 YouTube program *Black Girl in a Big Dress,* about a romantically awkward black woman who finds refuge in historical cosplay. These case studies jump from live embodiment to the medium of television/YouTube; however, the concern of the latter is still the live embodiment of the

past. Though mediated, the programs are still ultimately reenactments. While these embodiments are in no way historically 'accurate' or authentic, they serve as an epistemological intervention into the study of history. They are a way of knowing that involves the body. Their point is not to uncover "facts" but rather, as Michelle Liu Carriger describes, to form "problematic engagements that trouble simple binaries between now and then, true and false, self and other" (145). I offer the ball and T.V. and YouTube programs as an alternative engagement with history outside of privileged literary pursuits (though inspired by literature). Of course, everything that the ball and show participants experience or feel does not unlock the 'Truth' of the past, but as Keith Jenkins argues, neither does a traditional history. In this project, I embrace the problematic subjective to explore, not what can be learned about the past, but rather what can be learned about our desire for the past in the present. These embodiments give space for sexual and racial minorities to insert themselves into the past and into the literature through which this past is imagined. I put these Austenian embodiments in conversation with Rebecca Schneider's analysis of reenactments as not only ways in which we can strive to repeat the past but also change it and recognize its continuation in the present. Following Heather Love's concept of "feeling backward," I use the term queer to analyze this minoritarian turn to the past and how it skews normative temporality, as well the desire that circulates within the novels and the embodiments. Though the desire within the novels and embodiments may not manifest physically in a same-sex love object, I argue that it can be read as queer through its affective manifestations. These minoritarian embodiments also queer the imagined whiteness of the past.

Using José E. Muñoz's theory of disidentification, I will explore a minoritarian desire to capture and experience the early nineteenth-century. This desire initially seems misplaced considering that the struggles of women, subjects with same-sex desires, and people of color were obviously immense in the Regency era. Nevertheless, Austen's work and the era in which she penned her iconic heroines hold the potential for a queer intervention. In *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre- and Post-Modern*, Carolyn Dinshaw argues that the differences between our contemporary time and the past need not preclude us from making affective connections to the past and that these connections should be considered in our contemporary imaginings of community. Minoritarian subjects can enter this era through the affective embodied experiences of dance, costuming, and reenactment as a way of asserting their existence in the past and the present. According to Muñoz, disidentification is a survival strategy for minoritarian subjects. Rather than assimilate to or separate from dominant ideology, the minoritarian subject has disidentification as a third option. This strategy "works on, with, and against cultural form" (Muñoz 12). The minoritarian readers as well as the minoritarian reenactors disidentify and read between the lines as a way to push against the heterosexuality and whiteness of the plot while claiming the affective elements of the novels and their contemporary embodiments as their own. As Schneider argues, "the minor, forgotten, overlooked, disavowed, unsung, second, double, and lesser, gains a kind of agency in the re-do" (180). Thus, minoritarian subjects who have been erased and pasts that have been trivialized can claim space through reenactment.

The strong female relationships in Austen's novels can easily make the nerdy lesbian's imaginations run wild, but while my goal in this chapter is to open up space for queer readings and queer desire, it is not to unequivocally uncover proto-lesbians or Regency era versions of "suspect gym teachers" in Austen's work (though *Pride and Prejudice*'s Charlotte Lucas does cause the lesbian reader to raise an eyebrow and smirk) (Bright, Rand 259). The important and pleasurable task of queering Austen's characters, from Emma's sapphic gaze to Marianne and Elinor's shared bed, has already been thoroughly performed by feminist scholars[7]. My goal is similar to Bright and Rand's in their queering of Plymouth in which they "are interested, overall, in how issues of race, sex, and history may play out in ways sometimes bizarre, rewarding, or disturbing-- and thus, we consider queer-- when marginalized people engage historical reenactments" (Bright, Rand 260). This chapter centralizes these bizarre, rewarding, and disturbing elements of a racial and sexual minoritarian engagement with the past, exploring the complexities and insights that can be gleaned from this messing up, complicating, and queering of history; or as Schneider explores in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, what do we get right about the past through what we get 'wrong'? The ball and historical T.V. and YouTube programs offer an embodied experience of history imagined through fiction. In this display of imagined history, minoritarian subjects have an opportunity to insert themselves into the novels and history. By demanding space in the past, they also simultaneously claim space in the present.

[7] Eve Sedgwick's "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," Lisa Moor's *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel*, Misty Anderson's "The Different Sorts of Friendship: Desire in Mansfield Park," among others.

I am interested in the prolonged desire of courtship found in Austen's novels and the attraction to and repetition of that liminal element through Austenian embodiments. This chapter reads between the lines of Austen's novels, but also reads the reader of Austen; and through both, strives to deconstruct traditional notions of history making, reading, and identification. I explore the novels, fandom, and reenactments through the lens of queer desire and a queering of temporality. The longing looks between lovers from across ballrooms and the way they must touch one another with their eyes since to go any further would be forbidden resonate with the queer subject. I am interested in exploring these charged scenes, both in the reading of the text and in embodiments, as moments of queer potentiality. Queer desire lingers in these glances, in the seconds before hands touch in a dance, and the centimeters of space between two palms. What is also almost touched in these moments is the past itself.

Chapter Connection
"I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life"-Jane Austen

Though Austen is known in the English canon as the queen of the marriage plot and viewed as the progenitor of the romantic-comedy, her work is critical of the institution of marriage and favors irony over Romanticism. After all, Lizzy Bennett only knows she loves Mr. Darcy after she sees Pemberley in all its glory. Austen's writing simultaneously indulges and critiques marriage, an institution she rejected. Though there is a contemporary push to read her work through the lens of romance (as displayed in the Brontë-esque style of the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*), Austen was not interested in Romanticism. In response to the suggestion of James

Stanier Clark, librarian to the prince regent, that Austen attempt to write an historical romance, Austen wrote, “I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or at other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.”[8] Though such a literary undertaking may have been more popular or profitable, Austen rejected the suggestion as a task outside the realm of her capabilities and interests. Her refusal showcases her commitment to writing with an element of biting social commentary and marks her cynicism and strong investment in irony over romance.

As seen in the case studies explored in my other chapters, these Austenian embodiments involve a liminal space with homosocial elements. Through their turn to the past and embrace and repetition of the liminal space of courtship, these embodiments complicate notions of chrononormativity and trouble normative conventions of reproductive futurity. These queerings are not as out of place as they may initially seem considering that Austen is clearly far more interested in the ephemeral period of courtship as opposed to everlasting marriage. Her novels promptly end as soon as the hero and heroine wed, and the reader is given little information about the assumed felicities of their marriage. The time of courtship is filled with the unknown and potentiality, as opposed to the consistency of marriage[9]. Courtship is

[8] Letter from Jane Austen to James Stanier Clark, 1 April 1816

[9] Joseph Allan Boone’s *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* analyzes the structure of the courtship plot and its conclusion in marriage as a perpetuation of the social order and romantic ideal of partners completing one another. My exploration of the liminality of courtship and the desire within it builds off his argument that “the courtship novel’s fundamental structure of frustration and fulfillment is built around the principle of delayed gratification- for only as long as the lovers are kept apart or the desired condition is deferred will the story keep moving forward for the reader to continue reading” (80). I am interested in how the space of that

liminal. Marriage is indefinite. We rarely even see examples of good marriages in Austen's novels, aside from *Emma*'s the Westons, *Pride and Prejudice*'s the Gardeners and *Persuasion*'s Admiral and Mrs. Croft, all are secondary characters of whose interiority the reader learns nearly nothing. Austen also seems uninterested in children. We don't stay with our heroines long enough to see them become mothers. Children are not central to her plots and rarely if ever speak. When children are present, they are typically a hindrance, a burden, or a source of anxiety. For example, in *Persuasion*, Mary's son's broken arm almost prevents her from attending a dinner party; and in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Palmer is wracked with worry about the health of her newborn and flees her house in a panic after Marianne falls ill while staying with them. Austen is clearly far more interested in the liminal time and space of courtship, in which the unknown is ripe with excitement. It is within the space of the unknown where queer potentiality resides. Contemporary Austenian embodiments can feed off this liminality. The novel must have an ending, but not the reenactments. The liminal space of the novels can be entered again and again through reenactment.

Queering Temporality in the Text

"She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older: the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning" -Persuasion

Though on the surface the heroines of Austen's texts seem to follow normative life milestones (i.e. young womanhood leads to wifehood), there is space for a queer reading of the temporality within *Emma* and *Persuasion.* Both heroines, Emma and Anne, of course, end the novels in matrimonial bliss, but their journeys to the convention

"delayed gratification" can be inhabited and maintained through contemporary embodiments of the Regency of Austen's novels.

of that institution are temporally unique among the plots of Austen other four novels. In *Emma,* the subversion lies in the titular character's initial resistance to marriage and the household roles in which she casts herself; and in *Persuasion,* the subversion is seen in Anne's erotic turn to her past.

Throughout most of the novel, Emma is quite determined never to marry. Her emotional needs are met by paternal devotion and female friendship (the suspiciously sapphic nature of which has been thoroughly analyzed). Rather than play the subservient daughter, Emma runs her father's household, a position of power typically granted a wife/mother. In justifying her decision to never marry, Emma states, "I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (703). Emma attempts to stunt the normative, heterosexual development from young woman to wife and mother. She claims the authority of a married woman (or by her measurements even more command than a wife) while remaining single. She trades the love of a husband for the devotion (and obedience) of a father. Thus, Emma's command of the household before reaching wifehood is temporally askew. Another example of Emma's temporal shift through role reversal is seen between her and her governess, Mrs. Weston, formerly Miss Taylor. Emma plays matchmaker for Miss Taylor. Though in age, economic status, and beauty, Emma makes for the perfect ingénue, she resists the role, favoring that of the matchmaker. Miss Taylor is the governess and a kind of surrogate mother to Emma. As opposed to the 'mother' finding a suitable match for the daughter, Emma arranges Miss Taylor's happy marriage. Thus, Emma subverts normative

developmental temporality by taking on the role of matchmaker/chaperone to her older friend instead of playing the expected role of young ingénue.

Persuasion's Anne Elliot queers temporality differently than Emma, yet the subversion of straight time is still significant in the novel. At twenty-eight years old, Anne is Austen's oldest heroine. Persuaded by her older female confidante to give up Captain Wentworth, her lover from her youth, Anne spends the novel mourning the loss. Anne experiences time differently than Austen's other characters and the trajectory of her romance reflects her queer temporal leanings. In "Queer Temporality, Spatiality, and Memory in Jane Austen's Persuasion," Edward Kozaczka aptly describes Anne as a "melancholic but brave woman who travels back into her past so that she can understand and critique her current moment and anticipate a queer futurity that is not dependent on the linear, heteronormative sequences of time and space." Her unwed status and sentiments position her as out of sync with normative temporality. This is even reflected in her appearance: "Her attachments and regrets had for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth, and an early loss of bloom and spirit had been their lasting effect" (Austen 23). She eventually regains some of this youthful bloom in her late twenties when she is reunited with Wentworth. Her sentiments are also in opposition to conventional development: "She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older: the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning" (Austen 25). As a young woman, Anne was overly prudent and cautious, attributes unexpected or "unnatural" for one overtaken by young love. She does not truly embrace and give herself over to romance until later in life. This is seen as an inverse in the expected development of a lady and path to her marriage.

As opposed to moving forward, looking to her future, and considering marriage and motherhood, Anne dwells on the past. In a Lovean sense, Anne can be read as 'feeling backward.' She's melancholic; she not only chooses to dwell in the pain and shame of her past but also experiences an almost erotic pleasure in it. As Anne herself says, "… when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure" (Austen 147). Her desire is heterosexual, but the mode through which she accesses her erotic energy involves memory, melancholy, pain, and pleasure, which is a backward turn and temporal queering. Anne is a model for how feeling and looking backward gives space to imagine a queer futurity. Thus, a temporal queering takes place not only in the contemporary embodiment of the balls, but in the novels themselves, as well as in the fandom, and the reading of the reader.

Reading the Reader

"I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny… Is she solemn? Is she queer? Is she prudish?"- Mansfield Park

Is she queer or prudish?… Though the contemporary context of queer is not quite what Henry Crawford has in mind, the line is still illuminating for a modern reading of Fanny as well as of the girls who count Fanny, Elizabeth, and Emma as her friends, those young women readers of Austen, and Austen herself. For someone who many fans and academics are determined to keep proper and pure, Jane Austen personally subverted notions of reproductive futurity by never marrying and choosing to beget books instead of babies. Her role as the metaphorical 'mother' of Henry James and George Eliot can be seen as literary kinships, queerings of the familial unit. Terry Castle's review of Diedre Le Faye's collection of Austen's Letters, "Sister, Sister,"

argues that Austen's most devoted and passionate relationship was with her sister and life-long companion, Cassandra. In what ended up being described as a "storm in a teacup" in the London Review of Books, Castle suggests that the sisters' relationship potentially had a homoerotic dynamic. She argues that this great sisterly love is reflected in Austen's work, at times even trumping the sexual romances in the novels: "… so many of the final happy marriages seem designed not so much to bring about a union between hero and heroine as between the heroine and the hero's sister" (4). This is seen in *Northanger Abbey* with Catherine's connection to Henry's sister and shown in *Pride and Prejudice* where the last pages of the novel are taken up not in describing Elizabeth and Darcy's domestic bliss, but rather Elizabeth and her new sister-in-law's connection. Austen clearly holds the bond between women, especially sisters, in high regard. Colonel Brandon and Edward Farris can hardly hope to match the love and devotion Marianne and Elinor have for each other, and Elizabeth Bennett walks miles through mud to make it to her sick sister's bedside. Much of the sisters' wedded happiness is also rooted in the fact that they settle down not too far from one another, as each novel points out. Thus, the woman who some more conservative scholars wish to paint as our scrupulous, unmarried aunt, like her fan base, holds the potential to be read as more queer than prudish.

Ironically, while her novels are seen as wholesome and safe, one of these novels in the hands of particular aficionados can signify a certain kind of deviance. Though the content of the novels holds the potential for a queer reading, the content is not what queers the subject, but rather the act of reading Austen. D.A. Miller describes the "experience of *being read* reading her" and how "like a handbag or fragrance, the works

of Jane Austen were deemed 'female things'" (2). Miller argues that a boy being caught reading Austen might as well have been caught with the "wrong kind of pornography," the one just as criminalizing as the other (4). Reading the girl reader reveals a less blatantly deviant subject. While the boy reader is all wrong, Miller claims Austen makes the girl reader a "good girl." Her nose buried in *Sense and Sensibility* signifies propriety and precociousness. However, without taking away from the struggle with shame experienced by Miller's boy reader, I argue that the girl reader also potentially begs the question "Is she queer? Is she prudish?" Although the girl reading Austen may not lead to an instant accusation of homosexuality, she evokes a kind of prudish nerdiness. She possibly took Mrs. Elton's insistence that "there is nothing like staying at home for real comfort" to heart and is perhaps more inclined to spend Saturday night with Mr. Darcy, fantasizing about Collin Firth in a wet shirt, than with a real boy. Queer or not, the Austen girl reader is at the very least known (in pop culture and social stereotype) for not necessarily excelling at heterosexuality outside of her own world of the imaginary Regency romance[10]. Thus, Austen herself as well as the fans of her marriage plots all potentially and unexpectedly subvert notions of compulsive heterosexuality and reproductive futurity.

Though the reader is positioned to root for Austen's heroines, there can be a tinge of disappointment at the end of each Austen novel when the courting is over and the sharp Elizabeth, romantic Marianne, and lively Emma are left with the everydayness of matrimony. What is left for them but needlepoint and child-rearing? I experience a

[10] This sentiment is evident in the culture of Austen's teen girl and young adult fandom through novelty gifts, blogs, memes, fan fiction, etc. This nerdy heterosexual failure is also displayed in many of the contemporary Austen fangirl films such as *Lost in Austen, Austenland, and The Jane Austen Book Club.*

disappointment in what the structure of the novel has scripted me to desire as the outcome, and I want to return and remain in the rising action, the state of unresolved longing. The implicit rather than explicit sexuality in Austen's novels is repressed, but it is certainly present and charged. Though there may not be overly dramatic declarations of love or passionate embraces, the desire functions through witty verbal exchanges, bodies moving as one in dance, and the hand that helps a lady into a carriage. These moments highlight repression as the core of the novels' charged sexuality. The heterosexual romances never manifest physically (Austen does not write in so much as a kiss), giving the reader flexibility, room for her queer reworkings, and the potential to imagine different gender scenarios. Austen's Mr. Darcy does not seem all that different from the stoic, aloof dykes many a bookish queer girl had the misfortune of unrequitedly loving. While the queer may not be in the text, it is in the reading.

The novels themselves manage to be sexy without sex, through the tension and build up. The whispering eyes, witty repartee, and touch of gloved hands provide a hearty dose of desire without the physical manifestation of that desire. As Claudia Johnson argues, "…the heteronormative "passions" were in Charlotte Brontë's words, 'entirely unknown' to Austen not because she was such a good girl, but because in some secret, perhaps not fully definable way, she was so bad" (17). As people who are experienced in the practice of oppositional readings, we are accustomed to feasting on crumbs. Therefore, the hidden sexuality in Austen's novels is familiar to those who identify with the "love that dare not speak its name." Such a reading claims the act of

longing as a queer mode of desire[11]. This desire is materialized through the repertoire of the Jane Austen Evening.

History Through the Body: The Jane Austen Evening

"A partial, prejudiced, and ignorant historian"- The History of England

At the age of fifteen, Jane Austen wrote *The History of England.* She signed it as "A partial, prejudiced, and ignorant historian." Austen's *The History of England* mocks the style of English history textbooks and through its satire reveals the absurdity of the pretension of objectivity. Two centuries later, Keith Jenkins' *Re-thinking History* makes a similar claim. Jenkins specifies the difference between the past and history, the past being events that happened previously and history being the narration of said events. He presents objectivity and 'Truth' in history as myths, arguing that, "History remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian's perspective as a 'narrator'" (14). Austen's *The History of England* displays the same critique of traditional history through her unforgiving sense of irony and sharp wit. For example, in her section on Henry IV she makes a cheeky reference, "... the King made a long speech, for which I must refer the Reader to Shakespeare's plays, and the Prince made a still longer. Things being thus settled by them the King died…" By referring her readers to Shakespeare, Austen merges history and theater. To exchange the two is perhaps to place them on the same level of authority or accuracy which highlights the way history,

[11] Of course, in a Lacanian sense, desire ceases to be desire when fulfilled. And in the context of Freud, the concept of repression is foundational for all sexuality. However, this project is not necessarily interested in the individual or psychoanalytic but rather in how the fantasy structure is realized/enacted in the material conditions the Jane Austen Evening. I am reading this desire to stay in a state of desire, this longing to long as is manifested in certain readings and enactments of Austen's work as affectively queer.

like theater, is another form of storytelling (and indeed began through an oral tradition, passed on through stories and performances). Retrospectively the passage carries an additional element of humor considering how Austen's fiction is often cited as history. This is especially the case in contemporary Austenian embodiment such as the Jane Austen Evening.

Every year in January the Society for Manners and Merriment holds a Jane Austen Evening at the Pasadena Masonic Lodge. The event is described as "an afternoon of tea, discourse, music, and dance in the spirit of the estimable Miss Austen."[12] The Jane Austen Evening has become so popular among Southern California Austen enthusiasts that tickets sell out within minutes of the online sale (often resulting in entitled, angry complaints on the event's Facebook page). The event begins with high tea. The more serious participants often bring their own china and candelabras[13]. There is a collection of teas and British dishes to choose from[14]. The entertainment during tea can be anything from a lecture on Regency life to a performance by a Jane Austen improv troop. After tea, the tables are cleared away, the orchestra sets up, ladies with multiple costumes change from their afternoon gown to evening gown, and the ball begins! Jane Austen enthusiasts, history buffs, dancers, and costumers, all clad in cravats or empire-waisted gowns, glide (or stumble) across the dance floor in an attempt to recreate Regency style dances[15]. The steps are called out for most of the dances, except for a few of the more difficult numbers which are reserved for the more experienced Regency dancers to reward their diligence and pre-

[12] janeaustenevening.org
[13] See Image 1
[14] See Image 2
[15] Seen Image 3 and Image 4

ball dance class attendance. It is an evening of sipping tea, promenading, and giggling most unscrupulously. Some participants even take on a British accent for the evening, performing their own imagined notions of Britishness, history, and class. This performance strives to reinvent history as imagined through Austen's fiction. Minoritarian reenactors cannot fully take the place of the minoritarian subjects from the past that will never be known, yet they repeat the performance each year at the ball. With the inability to fill the dancing shoes of past subjects comes new knowledge about our present and our desire for the past.

In "Gesture in Mambo Time," Juana María Rodríguez's suggests that "to write about gesture is to engage that which exceeds language through language, to reach out to touch figures in motion that are not there, to capture in static black and white marks the scent of a body that has left no trace" (99). I attempt to "reach out and touch" the twenty-first-century ball attendees, but also, even more unattainable, to "reach out and touch" the lovers on the dance floor that Austen penned and brought to life in the imaginations of so many. In Rodríguez's analysis of dance and sex, she "tease[s] out the tensions between the collective possibilities of sociality and the social laws and limits that also structure these exchanges" (100). These tensions fuel the desire in Austen's novels and at the ball reenactments. Regency society was not short of social laws. For example, men had to be formally introduced to women before they could ask them to dance, and if a woman turned down one man's dance proposal, she was expected not to dance the rest of the evening (Mullan 2014). The restricted nature of society heightened the sexual tension at play at the balls, which could last into the early hours of the morning. The crowded rooms lit solely by candlelight could become rather

hot from the flames and bodies in motion, some dances are quite exuberant (Mullan 2014). Though the dances are performed in lines with multiple couples, usually with people watching from the sides, the crowded environment actually held possibilities for moments of intimacy within the dance. Hands, though gloved, touched and eye contact was a necessity. Dances have set steps and all the partners dance in unison. The steps vary but always consist of each person in the couple stepping close to one another then backing away, to come close to one another, shoulder to shoulder, turn together palm to palm, and then separate. It was also common to talk while dancing, so the back and forth, together then separated movement was often mirrored with witty repartee.

Austen took advantage of this practice in her novels, using the dances at balls to hint at couples' compatibility. While Mr. Collin's clumsily stumbles through the steps and turns the wrong way when dancing with Elizabeth, she and Mr. Darcy dance gracefully with one another. But it is not until the third ball of the novel that they finally come together on the dance floor. At the first ball, Darcy rather rudely rejects Elizabeth, and at the second she rejects him. By the time they meet on the dance floor, though they argue (with civility), the reader is well aware of their attraction, which plays out through their movements and tête à tête. Their agility on the dance floor is matched by the agility of their minds: "…a kind of verbal fencing match. It is a verbal intimacy to parallel their physical closeness" (Mallun 2014). Dancing, while still physically restrained and formal, served as a release from some of the everyday sexual repressions. Dancing "transform[s] corporeal rhythm and movement into the means through which the desire for and the impossibility of bodily escape from quotidian life and its cruelties are transformed" (Rodríguez 108). Though the movements are choreographed and touch is

limited to hands and perhaps the brush of an arm, there is space for desire and possibility for Austen's characters and the contemporary reenactor despite (and perhaps due to) the dances restricted nature. The repetitive motion of coming together, bodies nearly pressed against one another for a fleeting moment then separating, excites the dancer at the ball (and the romantic leads in the novel). However, it always leaves them in a state of desire, still longing for more, heightening the sexual tension of the novel and potentially the reenactment.

Writing and reading are the common and traditional forms of studying history. The archive is typically privileged in this field. The Jane Austen Evening offers a different mode of knowing, one that privileges the body. At the ball, knowledge is passed through physical acts, dancing, dining, mannerisms, all of which are a part of the repertoire. The irony, however, is that these physical acts that make up the repertoire of the Jane Austen Evening are all grounded in and inspired by the written words of Austen's novels, the archive. Both the archive and the repertoire form the ball participants' perception of the Regency; exemplifying that both forms work together and are not part of a binary. Ultimately, fiction serves as the foundation for this imagined notion of the past that the ball strives to touch. The embodied sociality of the ball participants enables the touching of this imagined past. Like Schneider, I am "interested in the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose" (2). Schneider's title, *Performing Remains,* points to the residue or the remains of the past that are performed but also to the potential lasting power of performance. The reenactment is not the past, but it is also not not the past. This project prioritizes reenactment/performance as a way of knowing, a way of recording history

through the body. The errors, failures, and revisions that are inevitable in reenactments teach us about the past and present.

Though the ball is inspired by the archive of Austen's texts, it does not follow strict rules of authenticity. Cell phones can be found in most of the ladies' reticules and some gentlemen who lack the confidence or dedication required to pull off breeches opt for slacks. The minuet Mr. Beveridge's Maggot (seen in BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* and Douglas McGrath's *Emma*) originated in 1695 and would have been considered dated by Austen's time, yet it is a favorite dance among the ball participants. As Jane Austen Evening event coordinator Tim Steinmeier aptly points out, "It's not a dancer's ball. It's a mystique. It's a conception. It's their idea about how things were in the past" (Camus). The ball creates an expansion of the reality of the past. The ball is the manifestation of its organizers and participants' conceptions of the past. These conceptions of the past are formed from Austen's novels and the many film adaptations of her work, so the past is experienced through fiction. The fantasy of Austen's Regency is reenacted at the ball. What the 'real' Regency was like is impossible to know fully, but glimpses of it may be seen and felt through its reenactment. What better way to learn history than through fiction when history itself in many ways is a fiction? The search to re-experience the past through the fiction of its time, as well as contemporary re-tellings of that fiction, offer a more complex and richer engagement with the past through its very unattainability and messiness. The ball then might be an exploration of "history" and fiction but not quite "the past" in any accurate way, for such would be impossible. That impossibility ultimately creates a queer opportunity or as I label it, a queer potentiality.

The Jane Austen Evening always has more ladies than gentlemen in attendance, so it is customary for women to dance with each other, another source of pleasure for the queer participant. The fantasies of the lesbian reader, which must be inserted into the novel, can be actualized at the Ball through the lady with lady dance partner coupling[16]. At the ball in 2016, one fastidious organizer announced that though it was understandable that ladies had to partner with each other due to the shortage of men, it was completely unnecessary for a lady to bow to her dance partner. She insisted ladies, whether dancing the male or female role, should curtsey. I took great pleasure in bowing elaborately the rest of the evening after that announcement, a small act of rebellion while still enjoying the ball. The homosocial environment of the ball offers pleasure to the queer reenactor. She can enjoy the music, dancing, and magic of the evening without the pressure to dance with and eventually marry a man twice her age. She can also bow rather than curtsy if thus inclined.

In a queering of Austenian affect, what is longed for is not the object of desire (the hero or heroine), but rather the longing in and of itself. For the queer is in the longing, in the sustained state of wanting. The search in and of itself for that *something* allows a certain kind of pleasure, the joy of reveling in possibility. The act of longing is all consuming. The ball offers the participant access to Austenian affect without any of the expectations or repercussions of Regency society. Thus, the reenactor may bask in the kink of the almost touches of barely revealed skin and the liminal land of courtship, which can be returned to year after year. While in Austen's plots husbands are the objects of desire, the intrigue and excitement of courtship felt at the ball need not be

[16] See Image 5 and Image 6. The women featured in Image 5 and 6 often dress as gentlemen for the Jane Austen Evening and are quite popular with the ladies.

matched by the everydayness of matrimonial domesticity. The potential queerness of Austen's novels and the ball reenactment lies in the feeling of in-between-ness; it desires the act of desiring. The Jane Austen ball clings to the ephemeral moments of longing and pining and feeds off their affective powers. Luckily for the queer reenactor, the Jane Austen ball, whatever its intentions, functions through fantasy, not accuracy, so she is free to linger in the affective pleasures of longing and get lost in her imaginations of the past.

As Jenkins argues, "The world/the past comes to us always already as stories… we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past, because these 'always already' narratives constitute 'reality'" (11). The Jane Austen Evening's foundation in fiction highlights the narrative form of history. The ball actually reveals our desire for the past created in our own imagination, mediated through literature and film. Through this reenactment, what is imagined as Regency era mannerisms or gestures are the key to an understanding of the past: "That gestures are capable of trespassing a certain normative process of signification reminds us of the endless ways that the production and reception of knowledge circulate within the body in unknown and surprising ways to produce somatic and affective forms of experience" (Rodríguez 119). We reach for the "momentary expressions" of the actual Regency era. Attempts are made to recreate them in the hopes of experiencing even the smallest touch or hearing the softest whisper of the past. What may also be reached for through these embodiments are the subjects neglected by history. They offer the opportunity to feed off the desire in Regency courtship without any of the repercussions. The

reenactments provide a chance to recast the novels with 'inappropriate' substitutes, potentially cross-casting gender and race.

Race and Austenian Performance
"Did you hear me ask about the slave-trade last night?...But there was such a dead silence"- Mansfield Park

What is said in the silence Fanny Price's question elicits? Slavery seems to function in the silences of Austen's novels, paradoxically present in its absence. Her characters are [almost] all white and are members of predominately white social circles but, at least in the case of *Mansfield Park,* the characters' entire way of life, their comfortable lifestyle, and titular home are dependent on the institution of slavery. Sir Thomas Bertram's extended trip to secure business on his plantation in Antigua is the device that creates the foundation of the plot, Rushworth's doomed engagement to Maria, Edmund's infatuation with Mary, and the parlor play sets the stage for the romantic antics. In *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian novel,* Elaine Freedgood exposes obscured racial social relations through a literal analysis of selected things within the world of novels. Following Freedgood's reading practice gives space for acknowledging things, such as the sugar made on the Bertrams' Antigua plantation, as signifiers for a larger imperial violence. Even the name of the novel and estate, *Mansfield Park*, is argued by Margaret Kirkham to be a reference to the 1772 Mansfield Judgement[17], which had a great effect on the abolition movement in England. She

[17] Lord Mansfield ruled that the common law in England and Wales did not support chattel slavery. James Somerset, an enslaved African, was brought to England. Mansfield ruled that he could not be forcibly removed from England: "The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions, and time itself from whence it was

contends that the allusion is ironic considering the Bertrams' ties to Antigua and meant to draw a connection (a la Mary Wollstonecraft) between those enslaved in the colonies and women in the domestic realm. This potential connection Austen draws is heightened and brought from subtext to the surface in Patricia Rozema's 1999 film adaptation of *Mansfield Park*. Thus, slavery and black embodiment in Austen's novels are not present but not not present; it is made visible through its invisibility or its obscured position in meaningful, though sometimes trivialized, things (sugar, Antigua, the name of the estate). Of course, black subjects in actuality were very much present physically in Regency England, not just reflected through their enforced labor that produced goods and wealth in England.

Fanny's unanswered question is echoed in Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon*. Jane Austen began *Sandition* only six months prior to her death. She worked on it for two months before permanently putting down her pen during her last illness. The novel was posthumously named for the up and coming seaside town in which the plot takes place. The heroine, Charlotte, ventures to Sanditon with her new friends the Parkers who are developing the seaside town. She meets the town's main investor, Lady Denham, an elderly, domineering, and wealthy widow, as well as Lady Denham's poor and vain nephew-in-law, Sir Edward, who is primed to be the novel's rogue. Mere pages before the novel abruptly ends, Miss Lamb is added to the seaside ensemble. She is described as "about 17, half Mulatto, chilly and tender, had a maid of her own, had the best room in the Lodgings [sic], and was always of the first consequence in every plan

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created, is erased from memory. It is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from the decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore, the black must be discharged."- Lord Mansfield's ruling in Somerset v. Stewart

of Mrs. G [sic]" (Austen 421). As an heiress from the West Indies, Miss Lamb is Austen's only mixed-race, black character. She is also a woman of consequence, which potentially grants her entrance into society and the novel.

The few pages left of the novel offer us little opportunity to learn much about Miss Lamb. The pages reveal more about other characters' intentions with her: "In Miss Lamb, here was the very young Lady, sickly and rich, whom she [Lady Denham] had been asking for; and she made the acquaintance for Sir Edward's sake, and the sake of her Milch asses" (Austen 422). Lady Denham instantly sees Miss Lamb's potential utility as a consumer of Lady Denham's "healing" donkey's milk and a rich marriage prospect for her titled but impoverished nephew. Had the novel been finished, would Miss lamb become what Jennifer DeVere Brody coins as the *mulattaroon*: "an unreal impossible ideal whose corrupted and corrupting constitution inevitably cause conflicts in narratives that attempt to promote purity" (16)? The mulattaroon is a "figment of the concept of pigment" (Brody 16). Her presence, which may be intended to display British "purity" through contrast, actually highlights England's origins of hybridity. As Brody argues, the *mulattaroon* in most early nineteenth-century British iterations "was permitted to become a "proper" (and perhaps a propertied) *lady* provided that providence procured for her proximity to a white gentleman" (17). Would Miss Lamb be "saved" through her saving of Sir Edward by her providing the wealth and him the status? Was Miss Lamb intended to be merely the sacrificial lamb, bound in marriage to a vain and foolish man? Or, would she be the sickly and dull potential match that never comes to fruition like Anne de Bourgh? Or, perhaps she could have befriended the heroine and defied the outcomes of a trope. The unfinished novel is both devastating and an opportunity. We

can finish it. There are multiple endings. Miss Lamb can be made into anything. She is almost there, just as gloved hands almost touch, just as the past is almost touched. The potential resides in the "almost" and can be played out in multiple forms through embodiment.

Of course, race in Austen's novels is also not not present through pervasive whiteness. In *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture*, Brody argues the whiteness "has been 'seen' as the unmarked, unchallenged, normative site of power" (9). Whiteness often goes unacknowledged. I argue that in many contemporary imaginings of Austen's world, whiteness and the kind of problematic and inaccurate notions of 'purity' that Brody uncovers, are assumed. However, the case studies I present attempt to challenge that assumption and "expose the construction of the supposed pure white, English characters whose origins, like all origins, are hybrid…" (Brody 9). What does it mean for contemporary black subjects to claim the Regency and Austen as their own and insert their bodies into our recreation of that past, countering our modern perception of British history's problematic imagined whiteness? Two television shows, *Regency House Party* and *Black Girl in a Big Dress* both centralize a black female embodiment of the past. Though *Regency House Party* at times falls into the trap of the presumed whiteness of the regency and positions its black reenactors as exceptions, potential is still given for the black contemporary subject to claim space in our imagined past. Taking things a step further, *Black Girl in a Big Dress* unabashedly insists upon that space (the space to acknowledge actual black people in the past and the space for contemporary black people to play with that past) and serves as a biting critique of those who try to claim that "black girls just don't do that kind of thing."

The early 2000s saw a trend in historical reality television programs such as *1940s House, Edwardian House, Frontier House*, and my focus, *Regency House Party.* Each program follows the format of selecting modern participants who agree to live in a house together and embody a different era for anywhere from two to five months. *Regency House Party,* made by Wall to Wall/ Channel 4 in 2004, sets itself apart from its historical reality TV predecessors in its structure as a dating show. Rather than selecting a family to travel to the past together, *Regency House Party* brings together five single men, five single women, and five middle-aged women to serve as chaperones. They spend nine weeks together "reenacting" Regency courting rituals at a summer house party. The guests' aim is to make the most advantageous match. They are each given roles (penniless duchess, industrial heiress, naval captain etc.) that somewhat reflect their real-life social status. The single participants all find themselves unlucky in love in the modern world. The courting rituals of the Regency are thus offered as a refuge for those who are awkward and/or unsuccessful in their performance of contemporary heterosexuality (supporting my early claim). The transition into the strict gendered roles of the Regency proves to be quite challenging for the participants, especially the women whose wants, comforts, and desires are often held back by Regency notions of propriety. The men, unsurprisingly, have fewer struggles and take to their new life of drinking, roughhousing, and "historically" excused sexism with ease. Inevitably, the season is filled with broken rules and anachronisms but through these "failures," the audience learns as much about the present as it does the past.

Midway through the season, the hierarchy of the house is disrupted when Miss Samuel, a black, West Indian heiress, is added to the party. A clear connection between

Miss Samuel and Miss Lamb of *Sanditon* can be made (though it is not mentioned on the show). The voiceover, meant to capture all the authority of history and serve as a kind of translator of the past for the contemporary audience, assures us that "although much of Britain's wealth came from the slave economy, there were prominent black people in Regency society. Queen Charlotte herself was rumored to come from black descent" and that "Regency Britain hardly embraced racial equality, but it had a healthy respect for money and wealthy plantation owners and their non-white children were admitted into society and often considered a great social catch." Miss Samuel's entry to the house is therefore an exception managed through her wealth. In the same episode, a black dandy visits to entertain the ladies with his musical abilities. The voiceover yet again explains that virtuosity could also grant entry into white society, implying that the audience would be surprised to see black people in a Regency setting and inadvertently displaying the way in which the imagined Regency is whitewashed. Thus, the role renders black people visible in the Regency era but only in these rare extraordinary circumstances and through the lens of white society.

The house party's reaction to Miss Samuel and the issues of abolition her presence evokes display a kind of cohesion between early nineteenth and twenty-first century sentiments about race. This merging is not uncommon on historical reality television. In *Colonial House,* for example, Jonathan Allen, participating in the role of an indentured servant, comes out (as his contemporary self) as gay to his masters. He is eventually kicked out of his masters' house after they are suddenly given more power and social standing. This situation may be historically appropriate in that an indentured servant would not maintain a close relationship with his masters especially if they have

advanced in society, but it ultimately speaks to the contemporary queer struggle of being rejected by parental figures and from a household (Bright and Rand 272). A similar dynamic is seen with gender, in the ease and sometimes pleasure the male reenactors take in enforcing oppressive gender roles in the name of "historical accuracy."[18] The past and reenactment are used as a cover for acting out contemporary prejudices. Thus, in embodying the past, conditions of the present, as well as the past, are better understood.

Upon Miss Samuel's arrival, she has much attention from both the ladies and gentlemen, which dwindles almost immediately. The host, Mr. Gorell Barnes, seems to fancy her, or at least the novelty of her presence. On her first night in the house, a Caribbean dinner is served in her honor, complete with sugar sculptures to adorn the table. The sugar centerpiece depicts a slave plantation. The voiceover informs the audience that the house's wealth comes from sugar plantations that utilize slave labor and "now with an abolitionist in the house, the guests must confront the truth behind their lavish lifestyle" (part 20). The show positions Samuel as the personification of the institution of slavery and the weight of educating the white guests on the horrors of slavery falls to her. Clearly scripted through the show's deliberate placement of the sugar sculptures, at dinner, Miss Samuel discusses the dehumanization inflicted on enslaved peoples. The reactions of the guests, while wearing the mask of Regency ignorance, are more tellingly a reflection of twenty-first-century apathy, white guilt, and racism. Most of the guests look uncomfortable. Miss Martin, the lowest ranking lady in the house, immediately declares, "I can't feel guilt for our history" and that she can't and

[18] Carriger, Michelle Liu. "Historionics: Neither Here nor There with Historical Reality TV." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. (2010): 135-148.

won't feel shame over something her ancestors did, a rather common contemporary sentiment (part 20). As opposed to considering Miss Samuel's words, which were in no way asking the group to take on the guilt of their ancestors, Miss Marten is instantly defensive, a reaction that shuts down the potential for conversation. While the descendants of enslaved people must live with the horrible legacies of slavery, Miss Martin has the privilege of rejecting it as not her burden to bear. A chaperone proudly argues that they've talked about it enough considering the English were the ones to abolish slavery, an opinion that glorifies Britain and bestows more "moral capital" than is due[19]. Ultimately, most of the guests agree that discussing politics at dinner is rude and the conversation ends.

At breakfast the next morning the subject of slavery comes up again. Perhaps more so out of interest in Miss Samuel than in her cause, Mr. Gorell Barnes suggests that the guests all boycott sugar for the day and tobacco starting from 4 pm (an interesting distinction considering Mr. Gorell Barnes is himself a smoker) in protest of the institution of slavery. Miss Samuel appreciates the show of solidarity and thinks it is only proper considering the kind of influence a great house like theirs would have had in Regency society (the display is, however, rather unlikely or empty considering the entire household is supposed to be funded through sugar plantations). The other guests are less enthused by Mr. Gorell Barnes' idea. One chaperone insists that it should be each individual's choice and not enforced by the master of the house. Another chaperone says it makes no difference to her since she likes neither sugar nor tobacco. This

[19] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/11/lets-end-delusion-britain-abolished-slavery

comment is the closest Gorell Barnes and Miss Samuel get to support, which is clearly only possible because it would not be a personal sacrifice. Mr. Gorell Barnes has to put his foot down as master of the house and decree that the boycott will stand for all in the house. In the next scene, a few of the ladies are discussing the topic but are interrupted by Miss Hopkins who claims they have "more important" things to talk about and proceeds to read from a gossip column. The show positions Miss Samuel's presence as an introduction to conversations on race, yet the guests do not allow any space for race and the institution of slavery to be discussed in depth. The guests' apathetic, reactionary, and defensive responses to the subject reflect contemporary racism just as much as they are a performance of Regency racism.

After Miss Samuel's first episode, which dramatizes these racial conflicts, she is barely featured. She seems to have no romantic prospects. Even when the narrator goes through each lady's potential pairings, Miss Samuel is not mentioned at all, though in terms of fortune she is the most eligible match. Mixed race marriage, though not unheard of in the Regency era and before[20], is portrayed as beyond the realm of possibility in the present. She is not the only lady who ends the season unattached. Miss Cornick, the second-lowest ranking lady, is also without a partner, but her single status is explained. She has an interview segment in which she explains her single state as a choice. After learning about the loss of liberties in Regency marriage and the one in three chance of dying in childbirth, she decides she will never marry, preferring instead to move to London and support herself as a courtesan with the ambition of earning enough to fund literary and political salons. While an explanation is offered for

[20] Dido Belle married to John Davinier in 1793

Miss Cornick's single status, none is offered for Miss Samuel's, implying that a match for her was always already out of the question, and therefore, requires no explanation. Thus, within the structure of the show, Miss Samuel functions solely as a symbol of race in the Regency, without the kind of exploration into romantic interiority that the other ladies receive. Though not without its flaws, *Regency House Party* still holds liberatory potential for Miss Samuel. She enters the house party and thus the past as the highest-ranking lady, usurping the duchess's place at the host's side. She has the best room in the house and the best dresses. For Tanya Samuel, the reality show Miss Samuel, the role of the heiress allowed a chance to enter history in a position she had not previously imagined herself: "It's just nice to be able to actually enter into a house of affluence on that level and not be a maid or a slave for that matter" (part 20).

Like *Regency House Party, Black Girl in a Big Dress* explores the complications and potential pleasures in a black embodiment of the past but with a different critical eye. Taking on a different tone and different era, the 2017 YouTube series *Black Girl in a Big Dress* is a hilarious and telling critique of the hegemonic whiteness of memory. Aydrea Waldan writes and stars in the series which tells the story of Adrienne (also known as Lady Catherine), a black Victorian cosplayer, who attempts to find modern love while living in the past. The opening scene instantly challenges the viewers' perception both of what the Victorian is and who should/does desire to enter that era. The first shots of the series isolate body parts, stockinged feet in buckled heels, gloved hands tightening a corset, fluffing the tulle on a hat, reaching for pearls. Handel's "Water Music" plays and a voiceover with a theatricalized British accent announces, "I am Lady Catherine Avington, and as you can see, I have almost everything that a proper lady of

day needs. I have all the latest fashions. I have a very full social calendar, and now all I need is a gentleman with whom to share it" (episode 1). After the efforts of the gloved hands are complete and our heroine is dressed, she walks to a full-length mirror and the camera zooms out to reveal Adrienne's full form and thus her blackness for the first time. She says, "I know I do come as a bit of a surprise" (episode 1). Adrienne instantly offers the audience an out for its surprise by suggesting, "Maybe it's because I'm from Texas. There aren't a lot of Victorian cosplayers from Texas" (episode 1). Of course, her Texas origins are not visible, and this is clearly not the cause of the audience's surprise at her embodiment. Her less forgiving cousin interjects, "No, it's because you're black and we don't do shit like this" (episode 1). Thus, the opening scene presents what will be one of Adrienne's main struggles, the contention between her identity as a black woman and her identity as a Victorian enthusiast/cosplayer. The "trick" of the opening scene challenges the audience to look critically at its assumption that the body we would see and the body that "belongs" in the Victorian garb is white. As the season progresses, the audience comes to see how well the gown fits, how much sense Adrienne's affective connection to the era makes, and how it is indeed hers to claim.

Black Girl in a Big Dress' historical point of engagement is the Victorian era, which follows the Regency era and has a different monarch and lower waistlines among other differences. Though mislabeling Jane Austen's time as the Victorian era, is a common mistake that peeves the over-zealous Austen ball reenactor, I find that Adrienne's embodiment of the past has much in common with the previously analyzed Regency examples. Though Adrienne is a Victorian cosplayer, the affect she desires is not that of Brontë's wild moors but rather the sedate drawing room of Austen. She does

not fantasize about passionate kisses on stormy nights or running through a field into her lover's arms. Instead, her sexual and romantic fantasies have all the self-restraint of an Austenian love scene. For example, in episode 6 while drinking a glass of wine, Adrienne slips away into her fantasy world. She imagines Lord Fitzhugh (a fellow Victorian reenactor she has a crush on) sitting in a drawing room with her, both in costume. They sit straight up in chairs on opposite ends of the fireplace, each reading a book. Lord Fitzhugh breaks the silence, "Darling, I do believe we are in love." He believes it must be so because he has seen her more than five times within the season and they have played cards together on more than one occasion. Lady Catherine announces, "This is the most passionate moment I've ever experienced in my entire life," and they agree to be married as soon as "the weather permits." Throughout this scene, they do not leave their sits or touch in any way. Their voices remain calm, their wits collected, and they immediately return to their books after the proclamation of love.

Throughout the show, Adrienne is paradoxically told that she is not black enough due to her passions and tastes and that she is too black for her passions and tastes. She rejects both assertions and is constantly giving the characters who make those assumptions an "out" for their limited notions of blackness and historical reenactment, as seen in her Texan excuse. Her cousin questions her blackness repeatedly. For example, she quizzes Adrienne on black pop culture, *Atlanta, Insecure*, and Beyoncé, and pressures her to date a black coworker. Adrienne's embodiment of blackness also doesn't "measure up" in episode 5 when she is interviewed for a podcast on "diversity in the workplace" as a black woman who does PR for a company that makes artisanal goat cheese. Adrienne greatly disappoints the white interviewer by being from highly

educated, married parents who lived in a gated community rather than a 'broken' family. The interview ends with the interviewer telling Adrienne that it won't work out because they are looking for a "black story." Adrienne pushes back by stating the obvious, "Well, I'm black and this is my story" to which the interviewer replies, "You know what I mean." The camera cuts to a confession style/commentary shot. Adrienne is in Victorian costume and says, "You want to hear of struggle. Try riding side saddle while waiting for the right to vote… Oh, I assure you darling my narrative is as black as my Uncle Stephan's lungs after he died of consumption" (episode 5). She refuses to let the interviewer deny her blackness. She proves her point ironically through her Victorian alter ego, the very element of herself that makes people see her as not "really" black.

On the other end of the spectrum, while Adrienne is read as not black enough to have a "black story," she is also read as too black to have a Victorian story. In episode 2, Adrienne attends her cousin's party. Having forgotten to put a change of clothes in her car she is forced to arrive in her Victorian attire. A party guest laughs at her costume and asks her who she is supposed to be. Adrienne jumps right into character and introduces herself as Lady Catherine of Claywolf Abbey. He ignores her response and decides she must be "that girl from *Django Unchained*…that slave movie." Adrienne insists that she is not in an American antebellum costume and that she is a Victorian Lady from Derbyshire. The guest tells her that doesn't make any sense, to which she earnestly asks, "why not?" There is an awkward silence that the guest breaks by stating what he thinks is the obvious: "because you're b…" Before he can finish the word, Adrienne cuts him off in character finishing his sentence with "a bit old to be unmarried." He continues to insist that she can't be in "*Downtown"* [sic] *Abbey* or *Pride and*

Prejudice (the labeling of the Victorian era with those two points of reference irks Adrienne). Again, before he can say “because you are black,” Adrienne interrupts him and gives him yet another out. Still in character, she offers an alternate reason for why he would think she can’t be a Victorian lady: “Because I arrived in a motor car.” The party guest tries to limit the potentiality of Adrienne’s physical and affective connection to the past by casting her as always already enslaved. Adrienne adamantly resists, insisting on her own narrative mainly while in character. Though Adrienne is clearly skilled at roleplaying, she refuses to play the limiting roles in which others cast her. She is unapologetically herself, who is not her historical alter ego, but more convincingly also not not her historical alter ego.

Adrienne explains that her Victorian era escapism began because she was awkward, uncomfortable, and weird, and she marveled at the elegance and prim and proper comportment found in classic literature. Again, strict historical courting rituals offer a refuge when modern heterosexual romantic endeavors prove unsuccessful. Adrienne is averse to the sexual forwardness of modern dating practices. She is awkwardly chatty and nervous when speaking to men as her twenty-first-century self. Adrienne has an air of the ‘frantic virgin,’ she is scandalized by even the smallest transgression of scruples, such as the thought of a kiss on anywhere but her gloved hand. She longs for formality and is turned off by contemporary casualness as seen in her disappointment when her male coworker suggests that they “Netflix and chill” and take a nude dip in the hot tub. What she desires is the prolonged state of desire. She wishes to dwell in the potentiality that proceeds physical contact, to remain in the state of longing. In episode 3, Adrienne fantasizes that Lord Fitzhugh asks to join her for a

dance at the next ball at Claywolfe. They stare into each other's eyes then Adrienne abruptly breaks the fourth wall and in a combination of Lady Catherine and her modern self says, "Don't be fooled. We really want to kiss, but it's the fucking 1860s so we can't and it's so goddamn sexy!" (episode 3). The space of withholding and restraint is the site of her pleasure. The access of fabric covering her body eroticizes the little of Adrienne which is exposed. In season 2 episode 2, in another Victorian fantasy, Lord Fitzhugh takes her hand in his and slowly pulls down her glove only as far as to reveal her elbow. She practically quivers with desire. It is precisely within the restrictiveness of the tightly laced corset, the cumbersome cage of the hoopskirt, and contained courtship that Adrienne's sexuality resides; to be bound is to be freed. Free from her anxiety, free from her awkwardness, and free to find pleasure. Adrienne travels back in time to find space for herself and her desire.

Conclusion

The turn to and reach for the past as well as the repetition of the liminal state of courtship encompassed in these Austenian embodiments queer temporality. Through reenactment, the space of naughty desire (which must come to an end in Austen novels) may be occupied without the closure of straight marriage. This fleeting time is stretched out, returned to, and repeated. It is the in-between, be it the time between the beginning and end of a novel, the space between bodies in dance, or the blurring between then and now, that is ripe with potential. In these reenactments, the past is imagined through fiction and recorded in the body. The in-between is also where those pushed to the margins can find space.

At the ball, my body experiences the fantasy history I imagine as I read[21]. My dance steps may be clumsier than a girl who lived two hundred years ago and danced at an actual Regency era ball, but perhaps both our pulses quickened by the end of the dance, and perhaps we both felt dizzy from all our turns, and both smiled as our gloved hands met our partners' gloved hands, and perhaps we both wished Mr. Darcy was a girl. The ball makes it all seem possible. In the words of Jane Austen:

It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively, without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind;—but when a beginning is made—when the felicities of rapid motion have once been, though slightly, felt—it must be a very heavy set that does not ask for more.

[21] See Image 7 and Image 8

Image 1



janeaustenevening.org

Image 2



janeaustenevening.org

Image 3



janeaustenevening.org

Image 4



janeaustenevening.org

Image 5



janeaustenevening.org

Image 6



Image 7



Image 8



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CHAPTER 3
Playing American Girl: History, Racialized Girlhood, and the American Girl Doll Frenzy

Introduction

As a child strangely obsessed with history, I was quite taken with *Little House on the Prairie* and the young-adult historical fiction diary series *Dear America.* I would often don an apron and nurse my scarlet fever ridden doll back to health on my bed that doubled as a covered wagon in my imagination. I used to turn the pages of the American Girl catalogue in fascination. I loved what I perceived as the historical accuracy of the dolls' furniture and their relics of the past accessories such as writing slates and pitchers with washbasins. My friends all had at least one American Girl doll. I tried to assure my working-class single-mother that just looking at the catalogue was enough fun for me, but I think that only made her want to give me a taste of the material joys of my peers even more. By the time my mother had managed through some creative financial finagling to get me an American Girl doll on the Christmas before my eleventh birthday, I only had a couple of doll playing years left. My thrill at opening the gift was tempered by the knowledge of what my mother must have sacrificed to get it for me. I played with my American Girl doll often but gingerly. I was happy to let my friends play with her as well, but they would have to show me their hands first so I could be sure that they would not dirty her rubber skin. When I was through playing with her for the day, I would always put her back in the clothes and box in which she came. Twenty years later she is still in her original sweater and floral skirt, in her original box on a shelf

in my closet. She carries a history; less the past 1930s Great Depression-era of her narrative, and more the past of a childhood passed.

The success of the American Girl Doll brand showcases our desire to feel united through history. Ironically, the brand suggests through its marketing and products, that this 'unity' relies on an identification process that is singular, individual-centric, and capitalist. It must be purchased, and the more each individual buys, the more 'American' we can all be. This unity created by the marketing of American-ness by American Girl Co. manifests through the over-simplified and 'buzz word' indulgent history it sells along with its dolls. Pleasant Rowland started the privately held American Girl Company in 1984 when she struggled to find a 'wholesome' doll to buy for her niece. She decided to create a line of dolls from different points in American history. Each doll would come with a name, designated personality traits, and an historical narrative outlined in an accompanying book that features the eighteen-inch doll in her 'real' nine-year-old girl form. The line would also include matching outfits for the doll and her girl owner. Rowland claims she was so taken with her idea for the company that she plotted the doll characters' stories in one weekend. The line hit the market through catalogues in 1986 and by 1998 had an annual revenue of 300 million. For twelve years the company functioned solely through its catalogue, until the opening of its first store, American Girl Place, in Chicago in 1998. In that same year, Mattel, which boasted $4.83 billion in sales in 1997, bought the company from Rowland for about $700 million. Rowland's historical 'wholesome' dolls are now owned by the company responsible for THE doll, that career girl/bride/shopper/big sister/girlfriend, Barbie, the overly 'sexy' doll that led Roland to make her dolls as an alternative in the first place. Upon acquiring American

Girl, Mattel expanded the doll line to contemporary dolls designed to resemble their girl owners (Truly Me) and baby dolls (Bitty Babies) while still keeping and adding to the company's historical collection. The company continues to make hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Stores have since opened across the U.S. from L.A. to N.Y.C, and international locations in Canada and the United Arab Emirates[22]. American Girl makes up 11 percent of Mattel's annual profits and has been its strongest performing doll in terms of its yearly increase in sales (Schweitzer 144).

The American Girl dolls and their corresponding merchandise are marketed as collectibles. Buying just the doll, therefore, fosters a feeling of incompleteness. After all, can one really be an 'American Girl' without owning the plethora of accessories the company has to offer? Of course, the company's preferred answer is 'No!' As will be discussed later in this chapter, Maurya Wickstrom in *Performing Consumer: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* contends that the narrative of the company's catalogue and advertisements relocate the child who has not been fully subsumed by the brand to the status of an American girl (lower case 'g') and those who are active consumer participants to the elevated status of an American Girl (capital 'G'). Since each doll has an excessive amount of furniture, accessories, and clothing for both the doll and child (all sold separately), it is not surprising that the average American Girl Doll consumer spends approximately five hundred dollars on American Girl products (Wickstrom). To buy the entirety of just one doll's collection would cost over $1000.

[22] The opening of a store in the UAE is particularly interesting considering the brand's lack of representation of an Arab American or Muslim American identity, an exclusion fans have been vocal about. Muslim American middle schooler Salwa Khan and her little sister Zahra Khan started a petition in 2017 asking the company to include a Muslim American doll in its historical line, a request that remains unanswered.

The hyper-capitalism of American Girl Co. is materialized in the American Girl Doll store. The environment at American Girl Place is overwhelming, not just because it reminds me of my childhood poverty or because there is most likely always a child throwing a fit on the floor. As will be discussed in this chapter, the store is an amalgamation of history and capitalism, perhaps the perfect reflection of childhood in our neoliberal era. American Girl Place uses a museum layout to produce a superficial history for capital gain. American Girl Company's marketing strategies push for race-based identification through history and play. This race-based identification along with the commodification of multiculturalism runs the risk of overburdening blackness and simplifying complex political histories. However, the American Girl Dolls themselves create a tension between how the company scripts children to play with them and the many potential engagements, both with the doll and with the past through the doll, children can create. Drawing heavily from Robin Bernstein's notion of racialized innocence and scriptive things as well as Maury Wickstrom's construction of American Girl-ness, I will analyze the corporation's script for childhood, specifically black[23] childhood primarily through the juxtaposition between the black, Civil War era doll, Addy and an early twentieth-century upper-class, white doll, Samantha. My aim is not to question whether the dolls' backstories are 'good' for children, or to suggest other backstories the company could have written, but rather to read the implications of the

[23] According to Omi and Winant, race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (55). In terms of corporeality, "race has rendered the body into a text on which histories of racial differentiation, exclusion, and violence are inscribed" (Ferguson 1). The black body is interpolated into the text. These citations are composed of histories, violence, and repetitions. This chapter will present the narrative offered by the American Girl Company as a possible repetition of violence and interrogate the way in which that violence comes to form the black girl subject.

narratives provided when race-based identification with the doll is encouraged. This chapter explores the oppressive and liberatory potentiality in following the brand's script, breaking with the script, and simultaneously working on, with, and against the script. The dolls and girls who navigate the dolls' world may potentially turn play into historical reenactment, queering temporality by creating an educational and affective journey into the past as subjects positioned as our society's future. The American Girl Doll Frenzy queers temporality by playing with capitalism, identification, and historical narratives.

American Girl dolls not only carry the weight of the historical era they are designed to represent but also stand in as a symbol of childhood, specifically girlhood, a fleeting temporal segment of life. The doll is a fascinating plaything in that it simultaneously points to play, and therefore childhood, and rehearses motherhood, and therefore certain forms of adulthood. A common relationship between doll and child is that of pretend 'baby' and 'mama'. The doll as an object of childhood can therefore be seen as a tool in the preparation for what is, in a chrononormative sense, a girl's inevitable future of motherhood[24]. American Girl dolls, like my other case studies, can be read as a break with chrononormativity, a queering of temporality. As opposed to playing out the typical mother/baby scenario, captured by the Bitty Baby line of the brand, the American Girl historical doll asks the girl consumer instead to *be* the doll character. As will be discussed later in this chapter, American Girl's marketing

[24] Though I am focusing on the interaction between girls and dolls, I in no way aim to take away from the significant and often subversive relationship boys have with dolls. Be it just a general interest in dolls or a brave and rebellious enactment of femmy little boy subjecthood, the relationship between boys and dolls is important. However, my work looks exclusive at girlhood, seeing as how "dolls have, for more than two centuries, been understood as the defining feature of girls' culture and a metonym for girlhood itself (Bernstein 19). I, like Bernstein, aim to bring to light how girls, often devalued and viewed as insignificant, actually play a vital role in the shaping of society, specifically U.S. racial formations.

strategies and the narrative structure of the books that accompany each doll script the child to take on this role of doll surrogate. By being the doll in place of being the doll's mama, the child can subvert the reproductive futurity typically enacted in feminine gendered play.

As opposed to rehearsing a reproductive future, children are asked to turn to the past and embody their American girl doll's historical narrative. This alternative girl/doll relationship potentially frees the child from the engrained rehearsal of motherhood and the possibility of the discomfort developed out of disinterest described by *The Bluest Eye*'s[25] Claudia:

> "What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend to be its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother. Motherhood was old age and other remote possibilities. I learned quickly, however, what I was expected to do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it" (Morrison 20).

American girl dolls script a different form of engagement, one in which rocking, sleeping with, and mothering is not necessarily the expectation. The doll, made in the miniaturized form of a nine-year-old, offers an alternative to the baby doll for girls who, like Claudia, are "interested only in humans [her] own age" (20). While the identification mode of girl/doll engagement may free the child from the expectation to rehearse motherhood, it, unfortunately, may not negate the "secret of the magic" of the bluest eye. The identification mode, if practiced as the company's marketing suggests, is racially loaded in that through Addy (who was American Girl's only black historical doll

[25] I turn to Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* because it displays the rejected 'girl as doll's mama' dynamic, but also because the novel makes visible fictions of whiteness through an examination of black life in the U.S. It is an example of a complex exploration of the interiority of black girls. The novel has inspired the field of Girlhood Studies and has made clear the necessity of scholarship on intersectional experiences of girlhood.

for eighteen years) it offers the history of slavery as the only history in which black girls can engage. Nevertheless, the brand displays a queering of temporality; children, whom we are socially conditioned to see as our future, are linked to the past. While the capitalist quality of the brand and problematic elements of the doll characters' narratives may be less than ideal from a leftist perspective which is critical of capitalism and oversimplified histories, the kind of play these dolls script leaves potential for a queering of temporality that challenges reproductive futurity and embraces a turn to and embodiment of the past.

This chapter consists of five sections. The first four sections each isolate and unpack a word from the store name, "American Girl Doll Place." The first section, "American," takes a critical look at the company's construction and commodification of American-ness. It argues that the company creates a construction of American that celebrates 'multiculturalism' without political or historical complexity. American Girl Co. is also able to twist this construction to paradoxically serve as both a conservative and liberal emblem. "Girl" explores racialized notions of childhood innocence, the commodification of feminism, and the way in which the brand fosters a sense of inadequacy in its girl consumers. "Doll" explores the physical American Girl doll itself using Bernstein's concept of scriptive things and includes a plot analysis of the novels that accompany the dolls; thus, analyzing the role of the fictional narrative in what the brand assumes will be the girl's interaction with the doll. "Place" explores the Los Angeles American Girl Doll store, comparing its layout to that of a museum, thus using the authority of history as a marketing technic. I read the items on display with the dolls in their cases as being given the weight of historical artifacts, designed to script each

doll's story and role in the past. They contribute to the scripting of girls' play, and I argue that the artifacts racialize labor and leisure. The chapter concludes with an example of a resistance to the American Girl company's call, a breaking of its script that holds liberating potential. In breaking down each word -American-Girl- Doll-Place- of the store name, I strive to deconstruct the store, parsing out its interwoven elements of history, capitalism, fictional narrative, thing-ness, and identification.

American?: Playing Politics

People are hungry for history…. and willing to pay for it; as if a doll can be our key to the past, a way to connect to something we were not a part of, a way to belong, a way to be American. The American Girl Company infuses its dolls with the authority and importance of history. The plaything, therefore, leads to an embodiment of an American-ness of the past, and a claiming of the status of American in the present. When one buys the doll, one is really buying the feeling of being American, the feeling of belonging. Not only can the brand instill a sense of generic American-ness, it can also appeal to two rather different kinds of Americans, playing politics as well as it plays history. The 2015 November/December issue of the American Girl Magazine featured a story titled "Forever Family," in which the reader is introduced to a real eleven-year-old Amaya who worked with her adopted father to create the nonprofit Comfort Cases, which supplies foster children with a suitcase filled with of essential items. Amaya writes about her own experience as a foster child who moved to three different foster homes in three months with only a trash bag for her possessions. She explains that her adoptive father was also in the foster care system and that their experiences inspired the

founding of Comfort Cases. In addition to the emotionally charged topic of foster care, Amaya also offers a glimpse into her everyday life with her family and the small farm she lives on, with emphasis given to the goats she helps care for and her affinity for cooking breakfast for dinner.

The article, written in the first person from the eleven-year-old's perspective, has a heart-warming, innocent tone. The four-page article, however, incited a nation-wide boycott of the company by the right-wing, conservative activist group One Million Moms. The article ends with a labeled picture of Amaya's family, in which it is revealed that Amaya, her biological brother, and two adopted brothers were all taken in by a gay male couple, labeled in the picture as 'Daddy" and "Dada." Other than the photograph, the article itself makes no mention of Amaya having two fathers.

One Million Mom's called on parents to stop buying the dolls and to hide the magazines from their children. They claimed:

"American Girl could have focused the article on the child and not about the parents since it is a magazine for children. The magazine also could have chosen another child to write about and remained neutral in the culture war. American Girl is attempting to desensitize our youth by featuring a family with two dads. If your child has not seen this yet, then be careful she is not exposed and can avoid a premature conversation she is far too young to understand. . . .

We must remain diligent and stand up for biblical values and truth. Scripture says multiple times that homosexuality is wrong, and God will not tolerate this sinful nature. American Girl doesn't highlight other sins in their magazine.**"**[26]

While One Million Moms' movement certainly had its own loyal following, the boycott proved unsuccessful. The controversy ultimately led to an outpouring of support for the company by liberal patrons and a flood of donations to Comfort Cases. One Million

[26] https://www.popsugar.com/moms/One-Million-Moms-Protests-American-Girl-Magazine-39031313

Moms' call for the company to remain "neutral in the culture wars" is particularly thought provoking. Though a spokeswoman for American Girl claimed that the company had "no agenda with the article other than to shine a light on Amaya," playing both sides of the culture wars has proven to be a lucrative strategy for the company. In instances where political lines are drawn, such as One Million Moms' reaction to the article featuring Amaya, the controversy results in free publicity and in this case, liberal consumers taking up the brand as a progressive hero. In confronting the American Girl Company, One Million Moms was actually up against a much larger enemy, Mattel. Corporate capitalism is thus able to amass contradicting political sentiments to increase sales. This social battle speaks to the way American Girl Co. can configure resistance (regardless of the political force) into profit.

While an American Girl article featuring an interracial family with two dads may pull on liberal heartstrings, the American Girl company also manages to appeal to conservative consumers. The dolls originated as a wholesome alternative to other contemporary 'girl' toys. The company flaunts the concept of American-ness and the narratives of the historical dolls' companion books perpetuate a "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality[27]. The girls all face challenges that they overcome due solely to what is established as their character's distinctly American traits (courage, compassion, faith, etc.) The doll characters come from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds, yet they are all expected to accomplish their goals through good old fashion American determination. The dolls appeal to liberals because they toy with 'multiculturalism' by positing Latina Josefina as just as American as white Samantha

[27] Ironically, yet not surprisingly, for all their 'American-ness', American Girl dolls are manufactured in China.

and promote a palatable, diluted brand of 'girl power' type feminism. Somehow a doll company that sponsors Girls' Inc., a girls' outreach program that supports sex education, a woman's right to choose, and the LGBT community, can also be the preferred doll company of the children of conservative families, as displayed by Ted Cruz's daughters when they gushed about their visit to the American Girl Doll Store at the CNN town hall in New York[28]. Thus, the unifying power of a capitalist-driven shallow history brings together two political parties vehemently at odds. As David Harvey posits in a Brief History of Neoliberalism, "freedom is just another word" for neoliberalism: neoliberalism is often packaged and sold to the public through impassioned rhetoric around the idea of freedom. Similarly, American Girl doll's rhetorical 'packaging' includes watered-down concepts of diversity and feminism, as well as patriotism, innocence, wholesomeness, and history.

In addition to reducing feminism to de-politicized 'Girl Power!' sentiments, American Girl Co. commodifies multiculturalism through its universalizing claim of its doll character as 'American Girls' and the individualist bootstrap narrative. The meanings attached to "America" of course extend far beyond its geographical referent. As Kristen Silva Gruesz explains, "'American' may at first seem to refer simply to U.S. citizens, but the context of the sentence strongly implies a consensual understanding of shared *values*, not just shared passports; the literal and figurative meanings tend to collapse into each other" (17). The literal meaning of America (the Northern and Southern 'Americas') is, therefore, obscured not only by discrepancies regarding the territory the term labels but also by its ideological connotations. Notions of what and

[28] CNN 4/13/2016

who is 'American' are thus intertwined in geographical locations and, perhaps even more so, shared sentiments encompassed in national pride, an investment in bootstrap narratives, buzz words (often erroneously deployed) such as *freedom* and *democracy,* and as Lauren Berlant argues, a belief in the "good life." American Girl Company's conceptualization of "American" is more of a reflection of contemporary identity mappings, affect, and sentiment, than an indicator of historical U.S. citizenship, legality, or geography. Distinctly "American" sentiments such as courage, patriotism, generosity, are made clear through the doll characters' signature traits and their novels' bootstrap narrative leanings. The dolls', specifically the characters Felicity, Josefina, Kaya, and even Addy's, American-ness is a misnomer that seems to be determined by the current definitions of citizenship, rather than the borders and laws of the time periods of the dolls' stories.

An example of this kind of proto-American labeling is seen in the character Felicity Merriman. She is the fourth doll in the historical line, released in 1991. Her[29] character was born in 1765, ten years prior to the Revolutionary War. Felicity's first book, *Meet Felicity: An American Girl*, is set in 1774, one year before the Revolutionary War. Though she is blatantly labeled "an American Girl," historically she would have identified as English (or perhaps by religion first as opposed to national identity). The American Girl Company, through Felicity's narrative, suggests that her spirit, courage, and determination make her American. The narrative of Felicity's first book can be seen as a parable for the Revolutionary War. The story highlights Felicity's defiant character

[29] In reference to the dolls I use 'her' and 'she' as opposed to 'its' and 'it' to highlight the uncanniness of the dolls and the doll/girl and girl/doll slippages promoted by the company, as well as to highlight the way in which the dolls are gendered feminine.

and her ability to stand up to bullies. She, therefore, becomes a symbol of the patriots and the bully a stand-in for England. Felicity rescues a horse that is being mistreated by its owner in the final chapter of the book, tellingly titled “Independence.” The book’s narrative and Felicity’s character play into the fantasy of the American origin story. Thus, what is prioritized over historical accuracy is a contemporary claiming of American spirit as righteously defiant and rebellious when necessary, courageous, and free-spirited, all embodied through Felicities character.

Even more erroneous than Felicity’s American label, is the dubbing of Josefina as an ‘American Girl’. Josefina is the sixth of the American Girl historical line of dolls and was incorporated into the collection in 1997. She lives on a ranch near Santa Fe in the early 1800s during Mexican Rule. Josefina is nine when her story begins, and the date is 1824, right after the Mexican War of independence. Though the books are written in English, a paragraph at the beginning of the book explains that Josefina and her family speak Spanish and a collection of Spanish words appear sporadically in the text with a Spanish-to-English glossary at the end of the book. It is unclear, though, how she is American rather than Mexican. American Girl Co. retroactively claims her and her positive traits as American, much as the U.S. claimed Mexican territory. As previously stated, this claiming of Josefina as American plays into “melting pot’ type notions of American multiculturalism.

Similar to Josefina, Kaya’aton’my’s ‘noble’ characteristics are claimed as American, and she is also labeled as such when her timeline predates such labeling. Kaya’aton’my (known mainly as Kaya) is the eighth historical character. She was released in 2002. Ironically, Felicity, the colonialist, was ‘archived’ in order to make

room for Kaya, whom American Girl Company marketed as their “first American Girl.” Kaya’s character is a member of the Nez Perce Tribe, born in 1755. Her story is set after European contact, but prior to white-European settlement. The Pacific Northwest, where Kaya’s story is set, did not officially become a part of the United States of America until the Oregon Treaty of 1846. While American Girl Co. rightly acknowledges that Native people occupied the land now known as the U.S.A. first in its naming of Kaya as the “First American Girl,” historically Kaya would have identified by her tribe, not as an American. Kaya’s narrative also enforces stereotypes of indigenous peoples by endowing her with an affinity for animals and a closeness to nature. Also emphasized is her ambition and adventurousness, which the company categorizes as her “American” traits. Such a claiming reflects how the image of the “Indian” is often evoked to signify ‘authentic’ American-ness.

Even the labeling of Addy as “An American Girl” is contentious. While her character was born and raised in the United States of America, in her own historical context she would not have been considered American legally in terms of the privileges of citizenship. As the doll that the company designated to the Civil War era, Addy’s story begins with her enslaved. She is therefore not recognized as a citizen and according to the three-fifths compromise, legally only recognized as a fraction of a human. Furthermore, she would hardly even have been considered a girl, in that her very humanness would have been challenged and, as explained later in this chapter, childhood and specifically girlhood is a position often denied black children.

Felicity, Josefina, Kaya, and most importantly Addy are identified as Americans though they predate that identification. Their portrayal displays presentist ideologies of

contemporary political boundaries, imposing our contemporary geography onto the past. To the American Girl, “Americanness” is retroactive. The American Girl Company disorders temporality in the way in which it attributes characters placed in the past with contemporary identities and structures their narratives through the lens of contemporary desires. Hence, in the name of over-simplified, feel-good, contemporary multiculturalism, complex political histories are erased. The brand, therefore, ‘makes’ Americans as well as girls.

Girl: Making Child/ Constructing Innocence

In addition to commodified notions of multiculturalism, the construction of childhood with racialized designations of innocence as well as gender and the commodification of feminism are also reflected in American Girl dolls. In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein, with a nod to Judith Butler, asserts that “’real’ children cannot preexist ‘imagined’ childhood” (22). Childhood, like gender, is therefore a social construction that creates the subject position. The one informs the other, and their existence is mutually contingent. Though childhood is a construction, the notions attached to the label carry emotional, physical, and legal consequences for the actual humans to which the category applies. While childhood, similar to gender as analyzed in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, may not be ‘real’, it has material effects on subjects’ lives. The performativity of Childhood gives it the air of timelessness and naturalness. However, childhood with its notion of innocence is constructed and serves specific purposes. The fictive, abstract ‘Child’ has been used in rallying cries about race by both sides of the political aisle. For

example, the 'Child' was used as a reason to criminalize miscegenation (save mixed-race children from the pain of existence) and as a reason to legalize miscegenation (mixed race children will inevitably be born and should be saved from the pain of illegitimacy)[30]. From Anita Bryant's plea to "save our children" from homosexuals to the pro-marriage equality stance that stresses the need for LGBT parents to be married for the sake and safety of their children, the imagined, politicized child has taken multiple forms and served contradictory purposes.

Conceptions of 'imagined' childhood shift over time while some elements live on. The understanding of children as inherently innocent, as opposed to tainted through their connection to the original sin, is actually a late eighteenth-century shift. The racialized designations of that innocence are rooted in U.S. history and tragically persist today. Bernstein defines racial innocence as a dynamic in which "childhood in performance enabled divergent political positions, each to appear natural, inevitable and therefore justified" (4). White children were/are seen as angelic, fragile 'Evas' while black children were/are deemed insensate pickaninnies: "White children became constructed as tender angels while black children were libeled as unfeeling, non-innocent nonchildren" (Bernstein 33). A major component dividing white and black children was the experience of pain. The pickaninny caricature was portrayed as invulnerable to pain. Black childhood today still suffers from the consequences of these ideologies. Black children are often seen as unfeeling non-children, as seen in the murder of Tamir Rice and Jordan Edwards. These twelve and fifteen-year-old boys were perceived by law enforcement as threats that had no place in constructed

[30] The Inhabitants of Medway v. The Inhabitants of Needham, 1819

childhood; and therefore, no right to the protection that the innocence of that construction depends upon. South Carolina high school security officer Ben Fields violently slammed a black teenage girl onto the floor for simply talking back to her teacher. In this example, we see how the black subject is robed of not only childhood but also specifically of girlhood. A gentleness in the treatment of children (and even more so of girls) is denied the black girl child. The status of child, innocent, or delicate is often not attributed to black children.

The perception of black children as immune to pain eliminated any need for protection and made them obvious candidates for labor over delicate white children. Briggitte Fielder points to this distinction through an exploration of who is deemed enslavable in portrayals of interracial girl friendships in abolitionist and neoabolitionist children's literature. The idea that the enslavement of a black child would cause that child less pain than the enslavement of a white child is critiqued and exposed as cruel and false in the historical and contemporary children's stories that comprise Fielder's case studies. She argues that American Girl Co., through its historical dolls' book series on Cécile and Marie-Grace (interracial friends in 1850s New Orleans), addresses freed children's racialized relationship to slavery as well as white privilege. While American Girl's Cécile and Marie-Grace and even Addy's series to an extent hold radical antiracist potential, I argue that the American Girl's black doll characters' narratives present more intense and violent experiences of pain than that of the white characters. So, though the black characters are not presented as insensate or enslavable (although, as will be argued, Addy's accessories do naturalize her connection to labor), they are expected to solely carry the weight of racism and still persevere as "American Girls." As will be

discussed in the following section, this narrative configuration in which the black characters are scripted into the past only in antebellum (Cécile), Civil War (Addy), and Civil Rights (Melody) time frames potentially leaves the real black American Girl consumer (due to the companies race-based identification) a limited engagement with history that relies on the black child to take on the pain of a racist history.

Similar to race, gender divides and categorizes children and carries different expectations and treatments. The impact of gender begins even before birth in a process that Butler refers to as girling*: "*To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain 'girling' is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm" (239). The citation of the norm necessitates the formation of a viable subject. However, these norms are impossible to fully achieve. Though American Girl Co. posits a feminist-lite, 'Girl Power!' ideology, what it presents as the idealized American Girl remains an aspiration placed just out of reach for real girls. Though American Girl's book series, advertisements, and matching girl/doll outfits encourage girls to make themselves the American Girl doll characters, the American Girl Corporation (whether intentional or not) makes sure the girls never quite hit the mark. As Maurya Wickstrom demonstrates in *Performing Consumers: Global Capitalism and its Theatrical Seductions*, the company produces a slippage among different categories of girl that create an air of destabilization. There are 1) the fictional characters of the American Girls in the books, 2) The oil painting of those girls that appear in the books, posters, and advertisements, 3) The American Girls made tangible in their plastic doll form, 4) The human girls modeling in the catalogue, and finally 5) the

human girl consumers. Wickstrom argues that the company creates a hierarchy among these categories.

The dolls are meant to be aspirational. The book characters and dolls are referred to as American (capital 'G') Girls, whereas the human girl consumers and often even the models are American (lower case 'g') girls. The American Girl is therefore set up as the entity to strive towards: "The 'G' is the placeholder, signifying the location they are invited to attempt to achieve through laboring to become (performing) those things that 'make' an American Girl" (Wickstrom 113). Even when the catalogue picks 'everyday girls' to feature as American Girls, there is an entire spread that shows the girls being made into American 'G'irls (getting their hair done, putting on jewelry, eating healthy snacks). Wickstrom suggests that this creates in human girls the anxious response of, "I am like American Girls, but I am not quite one yet. What more do I need to do, be, or act like to get to be one?" (110). Or perhaps more to the point, what more does she need to buy? In Joseph Roach's terms, this can be seen as an act of surrogation; a process in which, "culture reproduces and recreates itself," a continuous process of repetition with a difference (2). We can see performance (or in this case reenactment), "The process of trying out various candidates in different situations- the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins…," also as a form of surrogation (3). The search for the original proves futile. The most we can hope for are glimpses, passing moments, ephemeral feelings. While authenticity may be the aim, it is ultimately impossible. The human girls can never truly live up to and be American 'G'irls. They "stand in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to

embody and to replace" (Roach 23). The human girls are left to continuously perform and consume American Girl products in the hope of achieving that capital 'G'.

The racialized and gendered construction of childhood must therefore be acknowledged while thinking about actual young humans. The lens of performance proves helpful in this endeavor. Children are uncanny creatures; not us, yet not not us. Childhood also resembles performance in that both are ephemeral. Bernstein argues that "performance, both onstage and, especially, in everyday life, was the vehicle by which childhood suffused, gave power to, and crucially shaped these racial projects" (4). The question of agency in regard to children is challenging. Legally children are not even really subjects; they cannot consent and are not fully in charge of themselves. If agency is contingent on autonomy, can children be seen as agents? However, who is ever really fully autonomous? Perhaps full autonomy should not be the touchstone by which agency is measured. I turn to Bernstein and follow her positioning of children as neither independent agents, nor victims, but rather necessary accomplices. Children seize upon the scripts of the adult world and act them out. While children become vehicles for the agendas of their elders, they are not entirely passive. Childhood frequently produces and manages adult power (Bernstein).

The complications over the agency of children extend into the realm of consumerism. In capitalism, the child, like the adult, gains American subjectivity and belonging through consumption. Companies actively advertise to children. Whether children are powerless victims or active agents in the commercialization of childhood is debated. As Marlis Schweitzer asserts in "The American Girl Comes to Canada," "Scholars must therefore keep the constructed assemblage of the "child consumer" in

mind when considering the actual performances of children moving through mall environments, playing at home, or filming their "haul" for YouTube" (4). Similarly, in my analysis, I strive to consider the referent, the actual living, breathing young human, as well as the constructed assemblage. Of course, the entanglement between children and capitalism is not unique to our current moment. While the ways in which childhood is commodified and children are targeted as consumers is troubling, it is important to note that there is a kind of agency and privilege in the metamorphosis of children from producer to consumer. A privilege that historically and even today not all children have. Ironically, Mattel has been accused of using child labor, so some Chinese and Indian children are producing the products American children consume. One such product is that uncanny, child surrogate… the doll.

Doll: The American Girl Doll Characters' Historical Narratives and Doll as Scriptive Thing

The American Girl is scripted to simultaneously reflect the real girl consumer while also serving as the real girl's aspirational model. A shift in the way in which girls interact with their dolls necessitates this dynamic. A transition in doll ownership has taken place between the doll archive Bernstein examines and contemporary American Girl dolls. In the Raggedy Ann storybooks, the main character Marcella is the mistress of her dolls and they are subservient to her. As Bernstein also makes clear, it was common for white children to own black dolls in the nineteenth-century. In contrast, in the marketing strategies of the American Girl Corporation, consumers are expected to identify with the doll that looks the most like them. Rather than being the doll's master/mistress or even her mama, girls are encouraged to see themselves in the doll.

The doll is made into a girl, and problematically, the girl is made into a doll. The process of identification plays out on multiple levels through the company's advertisements, the interactive elements of the store, the books, and finally through the child's play.

In keeping with the primacy on identification, the girl/doll duo is an intra-racial coupling. The advertisements in the stores tend to pair the dolls with girls who at least phenotypically match the race of the dolls. Each doll exhibit has a poster of a girl holding the doll in matching outfits, with doll and girl closely matched in terms of skin tones, and hair color, texture, and style[31]. According to the American Girl Doll Place employees I interviewed, girls typically leave the store with the doll that most closely resembles them. The corporation's advertisements and catalogue also encourage race-based identification with the dolls. As Kapsalis notes in her description of the American Girl catalogue in "Making Babies the American Girl Way," "Under the caption 'Dress Like Your Doll,' a young, apparently Latina is pictured modeling the same camisa, petticoat, skirt, and rebozo that Josefina wears on the opposite page. A black girl appears beside doll Addy in a matching striped pink dress. A light-skinned brunette in a white nightie is pictured holding light-skinned, brunette Samantha in a white nightie. The catalogue encourages girls to pick dolls that look like them, selecting skin, hair, and eye color as close as possible to their own. Choosing a true look-alike, a girl can then step, fully outfitted, into the doll's elaborate narrative" (30). Thus, the girl and doll mirror each other and merge[32]. The girls are asked not only to relate to their dolls phenotypically but

[31] See Image 7

[32] American Girl Company now has a collection called Truly Me, in which a doll can be created to look like the child owner. A collection of face shapes, eye colors, and hair colors/styles that most closely resemble the child can be picked from. A 'personality' can also be created for the doll by answering questions about the child's favorite place and activities.

also to take on the historical narratives attached to their dolls. Therefore, a white girl choosing Addy and grappling with the history of slavery in America is not represented by the company through its advertisements and in-store posters as an obvious or fitting choice. While the company pushes for a doll/girl pairing that is based on race and appearance, due to each dolls' detailed back story, there are of course other ways in which girls can identify with their dolls. For example, children from the Midwest may find the pioneer doll Kirsten appealing, regardless of their race. Though I identify as Arab American (an ethnicity American Girl Co. does not yet represent), I picked a blond doll Kit. I think that as a burgeoning young lesbian, I was drawn to her short-bobbed haircut. Kit's story is set during the Great Depression, so I thought I could also relate to her economic condition. Though the company only pairs the dolls with their phenotypical twin real girl model in its advertisements, these examples need not be followed. Any doll can potentially be purchased for any girl (or boy!) and even if purchases are made along race lines, the child's play need not follow the American Girl Doll script (a resistance which will be discussed in the conclusion).

The *BeForever* series, the latest American Girl Doll historical fiction books after the 2014 rebranding, calls for the child reader to insert herself into the story and become the character. As Wickstrom points out in her chapter "Making Americans: The American Girl Doll and American Girl Place," "The fundamental slippage of categories is between an ordinary human girl consumer and an American Girl Doll and is built into the marketing of the doll" (106). The *BeForever* series invites the reader to "take a journey with…[Addy, Samantha, Molly, etc.]" (back of book). The books are interactive, in that the reader "decide[s] what happens next by choosing [her] own path through the

multiple-ending story" (back of book). At a certain point in the book, the narrative will pause, and the child reader will be asked to use predetermined options to choose what she will do as if she is the protagonist. Each choice leads to a different ending. By taking on the agency of the American Girl in the story, the reader inserts herself in 'history.' The histories portrayed in the books display completely different racialized realities. While the child 'playing' Samantha navigates issues such as being patient through a piano lesson in order to be rewarded with a new expensive doll, the child 'playing' Addy must navigate her way through the Civil War and search for her family that has been separated from her through the institution of slavery. By taking on the agency of Addy in the story, the reader inserts herself in 'history' and essentially becomes Addy, also taking on her racialized citation.

The brutality of that racialized citation is especially present in the original book series. In *Meet Addy: An American Girl*, there is a particularly heart-wrenching scene in which Addy is whipped by her master while she frantically clings to her father who, along with her older brother, is chained and being sold to a different plantation[33]. After this incident, Addy is heartbroken and struggles to complete her work in the fields. She does not sufficiently worm the tobacco, so the overseer collects the live worms that Addy left on the plants and violently shoves them in her mouth, forcing her to chew and swallow them: "The overseer forced open her mouth and stuffed the still twisting and wiggling worms inside" (Porter 23). This disturbing scene can easily be read as a metaphor for the sexual violence inflicted on enslaved women and girls. The worms forced into Addy's mouth serve as a kind of rape, a nonconsensual and violent

[33] See Image 8

penetration. The overall plot, and especially these two chapters, require the child reader to confront the horrifying violence of slavery. I do not argue that these are stories that should not be told, but rather point to the difference in which American Girl's racialized characters are asked to confront pain, trauma, and tragedy.

When asked to transplant themselves into history, white and black children clearly have different predetermined stories. Unlike the insensate portrayals of black children in the archive of child culture that Bernstein explores, *Meet Addy* portrays Addy as feeling the physical pain of the whip and the emotional pain of the loss of her father and brother. Though Addy's emotive expression separates her from the pickaninny portrayals of black children as described by Bernstein, Addy is expected to endure this pain and exhibit courage, her American Girl assigned quality (each doll character has a different distinctive 'American' trait, emphasized in her novels and store display case). Concepts of courage and resilience are highlighted in Addy's story in a distinct manner that differentiates her story from that of the white dolls. While Addy feels pain, a key element of the book involves her being conditioned to not show what she feels. She sobs while her brother is whipped, yet her parents look on with straight faces. She cries when she and her mother run away from their plantation but are forced to leave her baby sister behind. As they kiss the baby goodbye, Addy notices that her mother's eyes are dry. She is taught that they are not free to show their emotions outwardly; they are only free on the inside. Addy later commends herself when she stubs her toe while sneaking through the forest during their escape to the north and doesn't make a sound, but rather swallows her pain. Addy *must* be strong.

None of the white American Girl characters experience the level of violence endured by Addy. Samantha's story has new dolls, and piano lessons, not public whippings or the sale of loved ones. Though Samantha is an orphan, that struggle is not central to her story. Her parents died years before the narrative begins and she lives with her wealthy grandmother. Any hardship Samantha faces is mediated through another character. She learns about poverty not by experiencing it, but by befriending Nellie, an Irish-American servant girl who lives and works next door. Samantha is in complete shock when she learns that Nellie does not go to school and must work as a servant to help support herself and her family. The doll Samantha longs for and is eventually gifted as a reward for working diligently on her sewing and piano lessons costs six dollars, which is what Nellie makes for six weeks of service. This distinction is seen in the novels as well as in the store itself. While the word "Work" is prominent in Addy's display case, etched in the glass of Samantha's display case is the sentence "I'm always ready to lend a hand to somebody in need"; the unwritten word here being "Charity." Samantha is never in need but is always there to pick up the less fortunate, putting her in the position of the white savior. Samantha ultimately gives a basket a food and her doll to Nellie when Nellie, due to her previous work in a factory, falls ill and leaves her position of employment as Samantha's neighbor's servant. Samantha also convinces her rich grandmother to help Nellie's family financially. Though Samantha is presented as an imaginative child (she often makes up stories about the people she knows being actresses or spies) the book makes a point to note that the hardships Nellie faces are unimaginable to Samantha. The narrative of the book does not have the child reader follow Nellie home to her sickbed in her family's shack, but rather follows

Samantha, who gets to stay only partially aware of the devastation of poverty and save the day through her charity. The narrative also portrays Nellie's hardship as an issue that can and should be solved by the generosity of an individual rather than through larger systemic change.

A recent example of this hardship-by-proxy model involves American Girl's controversial 2009 limited edition homeless doll, Gwen. Aside from the irony of having a homeless doll that costs ninety-five dollars, Gwen, like Nellie, is not even the main character of the book in which she is featured. She is the secondary friend character of the protagonist, Chrissa, who, like Samantha, is white and financially comfortable. While secondary character Gwen has an absentee father and has to live in a car and then a homeless shelter, the main plot of the book centers on Chrissa's experience settling into a new town, with her biggest hardship being the struggle to make new friends[34].

While children are not required to act out the narratives of the stories provided by American Girl Company, the products hail the child consumer into specific subjectivities ("the pioneer," "the colonist," "the slave," and especially the "philanthropist") and through their design, call for certain forms of play. Scriptive things prompt human engagements with the material world. The thing's design or material structure calls on the human to engage with it in particular ways. For example, it was a common practice to make white dolls out of fragile materials, such as porcelain, and black dolls out of durable materials, such as rubber. Through these materials, the child is called on to interact with the dolls

[34] Similar examples of the experiences of hardship through others are seen in the narratives of the other white American Girl doll character. Kirsten encounters the devastation of disease through her friend's death from cholera and Kit, though she also feels the hardships of the Great Depression, only truly experiences its devastating effects through a nearly homeless family whom her mother generously allows to stay at her boarding house for free.

in different ways. The child must be gentle with the white doll to avoid breaking it; whereas, the black doll can be thrown around without risk. This difference in manufacturing, as Bernstein proves, leads to forms of play with white dolls that are soft, kind, and nurturing; and forms of play with black dolls that are rough, aggressive, and even violent (Bernstein). However, the historically themed American Girl dolls, regardless of race, all have a soft cotton stuffed torso and a hard-plastic head and limbs. The soft torso begs to be held, squeezed, and cuddled by the child, in the way in which one would give a hug with contact focused on the middle of the body. The hard head and limbs earn the dolls a reputation for being sturdy, able to endure rough play, and "good quality." A plastic rather than cloth head/face allows for a more 'realistic,' human face rather than a cartoonish Raggedy Anne type doll. American Girl dolls, then, look more like actual girls, which further encourages the girl's identification with the doll. The limbs cannot bend at the elbows or knees but can rotate at the shoulders and hips. Such flexibility scripts a more active play. The dolls can be made to sit, lift their arms, and walk in the imagined scenarios. The dolls' hands have defined, immobile fingers molded together in a slightly cupped position. All accessories that are meant to be 'held' by the doll, teacups, pencils, fans, etc., are placed in the doll's hand but held by the child's hand, in which the doll's hand is cradled. The cupping of the doll's hand in the child's hand and the playing out of these accessory driven actions, sipping tea, writing, fanning oneself, etc., require the child and doll to move as one, thus merging the child's body and the doll.

Though all American Girl dolls are made with the same material, their forms of play are scripted by the power of their accessories. These items are made, for the most

part, to the scale of the doll and actually function (for example, the radio turns on and has three stations, the book has actual small text, the pencils really write, etc.). There is an air of authenticity in both the accessories' ability to function, the quality material they're made from, and their perceived historical accuracy. Each doll comes with (at an additional price) her own specific furniture and accessories. For example, Samantha has a plethora of accessories, and Addy, in contrast, has far fewer items. Her set pieces are limited to a simple wooden bed and her accessories include a seamstress mannequin and rolling pin. Samantha's bed with its canopy and white lace comforter signifies wealth and luxury while Addy's points to simplicity and necessity. Samantha's pieces (a bike and paint set) represent leisure; whereas, Addy's pieces (seamstress materials and rolling pin) signify domestic labor. The materials, therefore, script the narrative of the child's play. Addy, thus, scripts labor. The things Addy comes with as well as the story told in *Meet Addy* reduce Addy to a black doll that is scripted to be hailed as 'slave' and to perform manual labor.

American Girl Doll marketing encourages children to insert themselves into the story and pretend they are the protagonists. Through its advertisements, it also links girls with dolls of the same race; therefore, the assumed *Meet Addy* reader and Addy doll owner is a black child. A kind of strength or toughness is expected of the black child who inserts herself in Addy's story. The white children who insert themselves into Samantha's (or Chrissa's) story still have the privilege of their innocence and fragility. A child's play reenactment of Addy's story would require both slavery and beating. While the doll archive Bernstein discusses contributes to the fallacy of black child as insensate non-child-- black dolls used to be primarily played with as servants to white dolls or

were bought solely to be aggressively handled-- the contemporary American Girl Doll brand floods Addy's story with first-hand experiences of pain and emotional trauma; therefore, requiring an emotional toughness from its young black readers that is not required of white children reading their dolls' stories. The problem is not that the American Girl Corporation dared to take on the daunting task of representing Civil War era black childhood, but rather that its insistence on race-based identification with the products leads to the weight of that history being disproportionately placed on the black child reader/Addy doll owner. Addy was the only black doll offered until 2011[35], so in the American Girl Corporation's version of American history, black children were always already slaves. The only black doll in a history collection is of course assigned the role of the 'slave', limiting the black subject's engagement with history to the brutalization and captivity of slavery. The doll, therefore, cites slavery; the citation includes the coffle, the whip, tobacco. The narrative becomes inescapable if the brand's script is followed. This script is written into the dolls' narratives and performed through the poster and exhibits in the American Girl store.

Place: Store as Museum, Selling History

The 'historical' clothing the dolls wear and the historical fiction books they come with are not the only means through which the dolls exude 'history'. The architecture of

[35] In 2011, American Girl released Cécile Rey, the second historical collection black doll (though this doll has green eyes and her hair is in ringlets with a distinctly different texture than Addy's hair). Cécile's story is set in 1850 in New Orleans. Her character was enslaved and was actually wealthy. The Cécile Ray collection was discontinued (or archived as the American Girl brand refers to it) in 2014. Cécile was only available for three years, the shortest availability of any of the characters in the historical collection. In 2016, the third black doll, Melody Ellison, was released as part of the *BeFroever* series. Her story is set in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.

the American Girl Doll stores is designed to signify a museum layout and display a highbrow air of culture, history, and heritage. While the museum layout of the stores intends to display American Girl products as a glimpse of American history, what is also on display are the marketing strategies that toy with race and childhood innocence and the economic stratification of our neoliberal age.

The American Girl Place at The Grove in Los Angeles is a two-story building with a primarily pink interior, equipped with a museum, doll hospital, doll salon, and tearoom. As I walked through the building mothers and little girls, many of whom were carrying their dolls, surrounded me. Dolls in hospital gowns had casts put on their 'broken' legs. The only people of color I saw on the day I happened to be at American Girl Place were the employees. I watched as one of these employees, a 'hairdresser', vigorously combed the knots out of the blond hair of a thrashed one-hundred-dollar doll while the little girl owner danced around the store. I thought the doll's head would come off as the hairdresser fought to brush out the tangles, yet twenty minutes at the doll spa was all the doll needed to be as good as new. The child's cell phone chatting, shopping bag *toting mother* swiped her AMEX for the doll's fifty-dollar salon bill. Dainty, tidy, girly charm was restored…purchased. Not only is American Girl Place a "salon," a "hospital," and a "café," it is also a "museum."

As is pointed out in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, the museum effect is a "way of seeing" that "turn[s] all objects into works of art" (Karp, Lavine 27). Museums are simultaneously seen as a "treasure house, educational instrument, [and] secular temple" (Karp, Lavine 33). The museum is therefore a powerful site that is capable of molding interpretations. In *Destination Culture: Tourism,*

Museums, and Heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes exhibits as "fundamentally theatrical for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create" (3). She argues that the presentations of artifacts are never neutral, and meaning is created through the curations. The museum carries with it all the high-brow authority of art and, most importantly in the case of America Girl Place, 'History.'

The portion of the store called "Peek into the Past" is set up like a museum. Each doll has her own exhibit, matching outfits for the doll and child, books, and a glass display case with multiples of the same doll in different outfits arranged in a scene that correlates to the doll's character. The display cases show elements of the doll characters' lives as if we are seeing the dolls in their natural, doll habitat, similar to the displays one would see in the museum of Natural History. Of course, this displayed doll habitat wipes clean the grit of the actual historical era and presents a pristine and orderly interpretation of the doll's era. "Peek into the Past" utilizes the two forms of (not necessarily mutually exclusive) museum displays described by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in situ and in context. Samantha, a wealthy, white girl from 1904, has a rather full display case[36]. Seven Samantha dolls model her frilly outfits. Her case also includes a white bed with a canopy, a gazebo, a bike, and an easel with a painting[37]. In contrast, Addy's case is somewhat sparse[38]. She has five dolls in different outfits in her glass case. Her set pieces are limited to a simple wooden bed and a seamstress mannequin. Each doll also has a mini doll replica of herself: not only can the girl consumer buy the doll that most resembles her, but the doll can also have a doll that looks like her. These exhibits

[36] See image 1
[37] See Image 2
[38] See Image 3

employ in context traits: “The notions of in context… uses particular techniques of arrangement and explanation to convey ideas,” labels in this instance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 20). In the cases with the dolls are labels with the dolls’ names and sayings that capture the doll characters’ personality. For example, Addy’s sign reads, “Hope keeps my chin up, family keeps my heart strong.” This label emphasizes American Girl’s Addy narrative of courage and triumph over struggle. Samantha’s sign reads, “Everyone needs help and I have plenty to give” emphasizing her narrative as one who does not experience hardships but witnesses them and assists those in need. Next to each doll in the case is also the correlating book with cover art that features the doll character in the same dress as the doll. The books, with the scenes displayed on their covers, put the doll and her ensemble in context to a prescribed narrative.

At the entrance of each exhibit is another glass case. These cases have an in situ element in their mimetic quality[39]. The cases hold relics of the dolls’ particular historical era in real girl size. These relics are meant to represent or stand in for the dolls’ characters. For example, Addy’s holds a dress, sewing machine, oil lamp, and rolling pin[40] (items that signify labor). Samantha’s has a doll, paints (items that signify leisure), and a handkerchief with “Actions speak louder than words” partially cross-stitched into the fabric[41]. Painted on one end of the glass is an oval frame. At the opposite end of the glass case is a painting of the American Girl character, a mirror replacing where her face would be. When a little girl puts her face in the oval frame, she

[39] Pleasant Roland was inspired to make American Girl Dolls in part by a trip she took to Colonial Williamsburg, which utilizes an in situ form of historical preservation. Roland’s rather in situ goal was to create a “classroom of living history” (Wickstrom 100).
[40] See Image 4
[41] See Image 5

sees her face reflected in the mirror with the American Girl character's body[42]. The girl becomes the American Girl character in the reflection, exemplifying in situ's interactive nature. The mirror serves as a time machine. Potentially any child could put his or her face in the oval frame; however, some faces will fit better than others, as the girl's skin and hair are predetermined in the surrounding painting.

The store is modeled as a museum but also a kind of theater. The act of going to American Girl Doll Place is a performance in and of itself. The store's air and elements of its decor resemble a theater. There is a red carpet, and children often arrive with their hair done, curled, braided pinned, sometimes in the same style as the American Girl characters. Some girls even wear American Girl clothes to the store. Parents are encouraged to make a reservation for the café and the New York store also used to have a theater where parts of the American Girl books were dramatized live. Multiple forms of play and performance run through the American Girl brand. The dolls' lives are dramatized in books, in the store display cases, on the American Girl Place stage, and finally through the performance of play between child and doll. The store presents a slippage among actor and consumer, doll and girl, history and the present: "As if we were actors in the theater, as consumers in the branded spaces we loan the brand's character the phenomenological resources of our bodies. We play out its fictions, making them appear in three dimensions as if they were real. Embodied the story the brand is telling feels real" (Wickstrom 2). This whole environment further emphasizes American Girl-ness as something one acts out, pretends to be, performs, and ultimately, in capitalist fashion, purchases.

[42] See Image 6

Conclusion: Resisting the Call

This performance of American-ness, 'G'irl-ness, and historical reenactment through play have different effects on children depending on their racialized doll character. Will black children, even in their space of imagination and play, continue to be encouraged to reenact their brutalization as if that is all their 'history' holds? Which subjects must carry the weight of historical baggage? When race, identification, and capitalism make a play date in the neoliberal era, the problematic effects on childhood are difficult to avoid[43].

Children learn through play. To strive to touch the past through an embodied reenactment in play holds the potential for a greater understanding of the past and, therefore, a greater understanding of the present. There could be power in the choice to put on a costume, even if it is the garb of enslavement, and enter the past. While the reenactment of elements of slavery may be bringing to life or representing a history of pain, it also points to a history of strength and perseverance. Perhaps the choice to embody the antebellum past offers a form of healing from a history in which black people in America were robbed of choice and agency. A similar sentiment could be seen in a young black girl's choice to put on Addy's dress, enter the narrative of her books, and choose what Addy should do next. While American Girl Company, through race-based identification marketing and minimal black doll options, does limit or attempt to confine the choice, it still is nevertheless a choice to purchase the doll and follow her

[43] American Girl company perhaps tried to remedy these complications with the introduction of Cécile and Melody as referenced in footnote #12. Cécile is free and wealthy, but she had the shortest circulation, being archived after only three years. Melody's story is set in the 1960s, so her character and plot are seen through the lens of the Civil Rights movement.

script. In making that choice, perhaps the child is experiencing the paradox of empowerment through the embodiment of confinement.

Of course, the call can be challenged and the hail refused. There is a plethora of toy options other than American Girl Company products. The hail can be refused altogether, and the company avoided, or the race-based identification marketing ignored. Children are notoriously unpredictable! There is a reason why many theater practitioners hesitate to work with children, and why a child or animal on stage can evoke a slight feeling of anxiety in the audience. One can never be certain what a child will do. No matter how well rehearsed, as performers, they always hold an uneasy potential of breaking away from the script.

Jeff Lee, a server who worked at the American Girl café in Manhattan for over ten years, recalls seeing a little girl with an Addy doll only once. She was a white southern girl who referred to her doll not as Addy, but instead as 'Mammy.'[44] This girl broke with the given American Girl script in multiple ways. She did not follow the race-based identification and buying pattern suggested through the brand's multiple forms of advertisements. She did not put herself in the common role of mamma to the doll's baby or position herself as the doll character as the books, advertisements, and matching doll/girl outfits encourage, but rather she embodied a different (rather nineteenth-century) form of engagement and relation to her doll. The title 'Mammy' is citational of a very specific time and power dynamic. She cast herself as the child mistress and her doll (which is intended to take on the miniature form of a nine-year-old) as the adult mammy. She is therefore in the position of being cared for by the doll yet having

[44] Interview with Jeff Lee, 2018

dominion over the doll. While the child's actual engagement with the doll in her room or on the playground cannot fully be known, the historically charged naming of her doll at the café suggests that rather than performing the narrative supplied by American Girl archive (Addy's books, display case, catchphrase, etc.), this child's play more closely resembles the antebellum and reconstruction doll archives Bernstein explores. The name implies a break with the American Girl script, which 'frees' Addy, instead keeping her enslaved.

On the other hand, straying from and/or engaging with the doll script can take on more aspirational, utopic potentiality. Playing can be a form of minoritarian/queer world-making. Maybe black girls resist the push to play the role of the enslaved girl and choose a different doll by identifying with other aspects of the dolls' narratives regardless of race such as Kirsten's Midwestern home or Kit's short hair. The black girl could also choose the third path, to neither fully identify nor counter-identify, but rather to disidentify (Muñoz 11). She could simultaneously work on, with, and against American Girl's script for Addy.

Some girls already rework the Addy doll, like Jaxyn Harlem. Benny Harlem and his six-year-old daughter Jaxyn took the Instagram world by storm with their high fashion, unapologetically black father/daughter photos. Both Benny and Jaxyn have natural styled long hair, which tends to be the focal point of their photos. Many of their photos highlight an African aesthetic, Funk fashion, or black panther style[45]. In a number of photos, Jaxyn holds American Girls' Addy. In one photo[46], Jaxyn and her father stand in front of a chain-link fence. Both father and daughter sport voluminous

[45] See images 9,10, and 11
[46] See images 12

afros and white button-down shirts. Benny wears yellow plaid pants with blue accents, while Jaxyn wears a blue plaid skirt with yellow accents and white knee socks. A blue bow peaks out, almost hidden in her full hair. Dangling at Jaxyn's side, being held by one arm, is Addy. She wears the American Girl Doll Blue dress featured in *Meet Addy.* Addy's hair, however, has been taken out of its neat plates and teased to resemble Jaxyn's afro. As Jaxyn's skirt is a matching inverse of her father's pants, Addy is a matching inverse of Jaxyn. Addy wears a big yellow bow around her waist and in her hair to complement Jaxyn's blue bow. We see here that the doll is fashioned to match the child versus the American Girl Company setup of the child's gratuitous purchasing in order to make herself match the doll. Addy remains Addy but is repurposed. In an interview on CNN Jaxyn introduces the doll as Addy to the host. Though in all the photos Addy wears her American Girl Doll dress, her hair is styled (be it in an afro or high scrunchie secured pigtails) to fit Jaxyn's natural hairstyle. Jaxyn takes on the dominant role and Addy mirrors her. The photos enact Jaxyn's narrative as opposed to Addy's. While Addy is torn away from her chained father, Jaxyn and Benny's photos are a homage to their father/daughter love, bond, and togetherness. The photos queer temporality by forming a pastiche of pasts. While Addy's dress recalls the nineteenth-century, Benny and Jaxyn's style evokes the 1970's and the photo as a whole speaks to our contemporary moment of racial strife in the way it signifies and insists upon black beauty and power. The imagination of a child makes play a site of queer temporal potential.

Image 1



Image 2


Everyone needs help,
and I have
plenty to give.
Samantha
SALE!
SALE!

Image 3



Image 4



Image 5


I'm always ready to lend
a hand to somebody in need.
Women
Fight
for the
Right to
Vote

Image 6



Image 7



Image 8



Meet Addy: An American Girl, Illustration by Melody Rosales, Renée Graef, Luann Roberts
Image 9



@bennyharlem, Instagram.com/bennyharlem/

Image 10



@bennyharlem, Instagram.com/bennyharlem/

Image 11



@bennyharlem, Instagram.com/bennyharlem/

Image 12



@bennyharlem, Instagram.com/bennyharlem/

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CHAPTER 4
Martha Washington Goes to Texas: Crossing Ethnic and Temporal Borders

Introduction

The 1930 census saw the debut of a new racial category, "Mexican." For the first time, a Latin American group was categorized as non-white. The 1930 census also included an estimate of the number of Mexicans "mislabeled" as white in the 1920 census. This was yet again reversed in the 1940 census in which Mexicans were counted as white. Thus, in a span of twenty years people of Mexican descent living in the United States morphed in an official government context from white, to their own racial category of "Mexican," and back to white (Bernstein 84-86). This divide is not unlike the physical border between the lands of Mexico and the United States which has historically moved around, over, and violently through subjects, altering their national status and lives: "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us," said Laurita, a teen living in Laredo, Texas (*Las Marthas* 0:25:30). This chapter explores the instability of borders, both geographical and temporal, through the pomp and circumstance of Laredo's annual George Washington's Birthday Celebration and Society of Martha Washington debutante ball, the Latina teens who straddle that elusive border, and their performance of nation, wealth, and perhaps most crucially, an imagined history.

Long before the cultural phenomenon that was *Hamilton* took Broadway by storm with its glorification of the U.S. and ethnic/racial crossings, a border town on the Rio Grande had its own performance of the founding fathers and mothers with its own unexpected actors in powdered wigs. For over 120 years, every February Laredo,

Texas booms and bustles in celebration of George Washington. The seeds that would become the month-long festival, with games, music, parades, and prizes, were first planted by Laredo's mayor Samuel Jarvis in 1870. Handbills announced a small celebration "in honor of the birthday of the first president of the United State" on February 22, 1870, the first time George Washington's birthday had ever been celebrated in Laredo. Jarvis was determined to have "American" holidays celebrated in the border town where hitherto Diez y Sies de Septembre and Cinco de Mayo were the major recognized holidays. It is unknown if the celebration happened the following year, but the practice definitely discontinued at the end of Jarvis' term in 1872.

Washington's birthday did not become a federally recognized holiday until 1879, and the push to establish Washington's birthday as a holiday in Laredo was not resurrected again until February 22, 1898, with the first official George Washington's Birthday Celebration (GWBC). The sinking of USS Maine, a contributor to the Spanish-American War, happened just one week prior to the first festival. In a time of tension and eventual war, the annual bicultural event strove to Americanize Laredo and served as a show of loyalty to the United States[47]. Over a hundred years later it serves the same purpose for Laredo, a town with a 95.4% Latino population, in our current society crazed by I.C.E and the construction of a wall. Since its inception, the celebration has only grown in length, grandeur, and attendance, and now consists of multiple committees. One such addition was made in 1939 with the introduction of a ladies' organization, the Society of Martha Washington, which holds a debutante ball that strives to carve out space within the larger festival to honor the wife of the first president

[47] *Las Marthas*

and a few privileged Laredean teen girls. I argue that while the George Washington's Birthday Celebration and the Society of Martha Washington ball may stabilize and perpetuate certain power structures, they also hold a subversive potential.

Background: A History of Celebrating a 'History'

In 1898, in an effort for the Anglo-migrants of Laredo to feel a sense of belonging and to assert their American identity in the relatively new state of Texas, the Improved Order of Red Men[48] (an American patriotic group inspired by the Boston Tea Party and limiting its membership to upper-class white men and, in the Laredo branch, a few wealthy Latinos typically of Spanish lineage) created the George Washington's Birthday Celebration. Each branch of the national Improved Order of Red Men society took on a different tribal name. The Laredo branch chose the Yaqui, a tribe from Northwestern Mexico. The Red Men's Yaqui had sixty-three members, only six of which had Spanish surnames, and only one of the ten Red Men planning the festival was Latino (Young 57). The night before the first festival, the Yaqui performed a burlesque in Market square titled *One Night with the Red Men.* The members of the Yaqui played roles with made up Native American names, such as Painted Plover, Little Wounded Knee, and Man-Afraid-of-his-Squaw played by a man in town who was known for having marital problems (Thompson). The men danced, marched, and posed in 6 different tableaux while wearing colorful "Indian" costumes with feathers and holding bows and spears as

[48] As Philip Deloria argues in *Playing Indian*, white American's perform the stereotypical 'Indian' (stoic, noble, connected to nature, disappearing, anachronist) in order to assert a national identity as New World inhabitants endowed with patriotism and authenticity. Of course, this mimicry at once uses the image of the imagined 'Indian' while disparaging actual contemporary Native Americans.

props. At intermission and the conclusion of the play, ladies sang patriotic songs.

At dawn the next morning, the celebration began with what was essentially a minstrel show, a redface mock battle in which the Improved Order of Red Men dressed as Native Americans and "attacked" Laredo's city hall. Thousands of Laredeans, both Anglo and Latino, came to watch, crowding onto balconies and some even sitting on the rooftops to get a view of the "battle." The town was "defended" by Laredo's mayor and police force. The Red Men proved victorious in the battle and won possession of Laredo. The mayor then gave the key to the city to the Red Men's chief, who in turn presented it to "Pocahontas," originally portrayed by a young Anglo woman. After the battle, the Red Men replaced their buckskins and feathers for petticoats and corsets and put on a burlesque show which included the blackface performance of the song "Little Alabama Coon." Next, there was the largest parade Laredo had seen; described by the *Laredo Times* as "a pageant, which in size, gorgeousness, variety, and dazzling grandeur, as compared with all other parades, processions, or pageants ever witnessed in this city was a colossal height to yawning chasm" (Thompson). In the afternoon, there were concerts in the town's plazas. At 8:30 that evening, there was a reenactment of the Boston Tea Party with a one-hundred-foot replica of a British merchant ship. The ship was "surrendered" to the same man who played the chief in the mock battle, who in this reenactment played a Red Man/ Son of Liberty. Tea chests that contained candy were smashed open and their contents were thrown overboard to spectators (Thompson). Two thousand little U.S. flags were also passed out to the crowd as another Red Men member boarded the ship and made a patriotic speech. The largest celebration in Laredo history ended with a firework display and a band playing the

minstrel tune “Dixie.” To celebrate George Washington, Laredo’s most prominent men dressed in multiple forms of drag, and Laredo’s citizens routed for and cheered on the overthrow of their city by the Yaqui in the name of an “Indian Princess” who has no ties to Texas, all coming to a close with the playing of the confederate anthem!

The GWBC from its origin clearly crosses temporal, gendered, geographical, and racial and ethnic borders. In his article “Red Men, Princess Pocahontas, and George Washington: Harmonizing Race Relations in Laredo at the Turn of the Century,” Elliott Young describes the festivities as “a ritual of inversion” which ultimately works to reinforce Laredo’s racial and class hierarchy (58). While the audience was cheering for the Red Men Yaqui, they were really cheering for Laredo’s mainly white elite. Thus, the masquerade holds layers of meaning. The ‘Indian invaders” are paradoxically positioned as both the enemy and hero depending on which layer is unfolded. By positioning the mythic Indian as the common enemy, the mock battle unites the Anglo and Texas Mexican citizens in their goal to defend the city from chaos, and ultimately the past. The Indians are made to symbolize disorder and a “disappearing people” and the mayor, police force, and citizens are made to symbolize order, civilization, and the future. However, within the scenario of the mock battle, the mayor and police lose, and ‘order’ succumbs to ‘disorder.’ As is customary with the carnivalesque, the casting of the Red Men Yaqui as the battle’s victors gives the audience permission to indulge in some light-hearted unruliness and, perhaps for some, in the fantasy of indigenous resistance to colonial power. Yet the rebellion is all contained in the knowledge that beneath the appropriated indigenous garb and red paint is a white face or a Latino who is Spanish enough and rich enough to be deemed white.

Though the GWBC creates a mythic narrative of unity and American patriotism, with an increase in Latino involvement over the years the festival has morphed. The result is a coming together from across a cultural divide and bonding through power and wealth, and, as will be displayed, a Mexicanized performance of American-ness. By 1909 the racially problematic mock battle was replaced by a simple ceremonial handing over of the key to "Pocahontas," and a reception on the Juarez-Lincoln International Bridge for officials from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico was added. The reception on the Juarez-Lincoln International Bridge highlights Laredo's long standing cultural, traditional, and economic ties to Mexico. Laredo has close ties to its sister city, Nuevo Laredo; they are even sometimes referred to as "Los Dos Laredos" (The Two Laredos), two cities with one heartbeat. Nuevo Laredo was founded in 1848. After the Mexican-American War, the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo gave up the territory that included Laredo to the United States. A referendum was taken in Laredo in which the majority voted to petition that the land be returned to Mexico. The request was rejected and seventeen Laredo families, who wished to remain Mexican, moved across the Rio Grande into Mexican territory and founded Nuevo Laredo. Some even exhumed and brought the bodies of their dead to ensure they would be put to rest on Mexican soil. Many Laredeans have family and friends in Nuevo Laredo. Some Nuevo Laredeans with the means to do so even send their children to school across the border. They were one community through which a border was drawn. The ceremony on the Lincoln-Juarez Bridge recognizes the connection, a task that seems to get more and more strained due to border violence and xenophobic politics[49].

[49] Colloff, Pamela. "'Beldades' of the Ball." *Texas Monthly*. April 2006. https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/beldades-of-the-ball/.

As part of the ceremony, which is now known as the “Abrazo” or hug in English, a Laredo citizen dressed as George Washington and a Nuevo Laredo citizen dressed as Miguel Hildago meet in the middle of the bridge shake hands and exchange flags, and children in traditional Mexican and colonial costumes from each city hug. The inclusion of the Abrazo ceremony in the festival exhibits the Mexican influence on the event. By 1970 Pocahontas was commonly played by a Latina (Young 83). An increased Latino participation in the planning of the celebration led to its expansion to include the Princess Pocahontas Council in 1980 and the Jalapeño Festival Association in 1983 (Young 83). Also, the highest honors of playing George and Martha Washington are often bestowed upon a prominent Latino couple.

While the event can be read as assimilationist in its valorization and embodiment of the American founding fathers as well as its fictionalized history (clearly Washington was never in Texas), it also adapted to include a Mexican aesthetic and affirmed the right of the landed wealthy Texas Mexicans to rule alongside their fellow Anglo elite. No insignificant feat, considering the land theft and violence inflicted on Latinos by Anglo migrants. Social and cultural analysis professor and Laredean Josefina Saldaña suggests that this American hero role-playing was a clever strategy for the Mexican elite to maintain their privileged social position: “If you look down from [D.C.] and see all these Mexicans dressing up as George and Martha Washington you think oh they’re okay” (*Las Marthas*). Hence, what on the surface appears to be a cultural surrender, a pandering to American ego, could indeed be subversive, a proverbial wolf in sheep’s

clothing or rather in tricorn hat or petticoat. José Muñoz defines disidentification as a minoritarian survival strategy, the act of simultaneously working on with and against dominant culture. Latino participants joined in The George Washington's Birthday Celebration but found ways to make it their own. They acquiesced to the proliferation of the founding fathers' mythos but stealthily morphed George into Jorge, Martha into Marta.

Martha Washington is Throwing a Ball!

The George Washington's Birthday Celebration gesture of loyalty, unity, and elitism had a new addition in 1939 with the creation of the ladies' Society of Martha Washington (SMW) and with that the President's Day weekend debutante ball and pageant. It began as a way to get women more involved with the month-long celebration. Unions between Anglo migrants and Texas Mexicans with deep roots in Laredo were common and strategic for sustaining wealth and power in the community[50]. The ball served as a battleground for securing advantageous high society (often mixed) marriages. At this event, young ladies dress up in elaborate, corseted gowns and strive to reenact eighteenth-century 'American' femininity while portraying Martha Washington's contemporaries with fictional backstories that anachronistically position these historical figures in Texas[51]. Originally thirteen young ladies (one to represent

[50] *Las Marthas*

[51] The Society for Martha Washington has a script writing committing that combs through collected research on George and Martha Washington and pick out an element of interest to expand upon. For example, the ball theme portrayed in *Las Marthas* was inspired by the idea of Martha as a hostess and possessor of great social graces. The theme to the ball was created by one sentence in a script writer's research: "The Washingtons sought to establish the American presidency equal to that of any European capital" (0:14:50-0:15:27). From this, the writers developed a scenario where Martha throws George a grand ball in honor of his birthday and

each of the thirteen colonies) were selected from among the most elite families of the city to be presented to high society as symbols of American patriotism, purity, and marriageability. Now the tradition continues with up to twenty teens each year. Many of those invited to participate are Latina and can trace their lineage back to Laredo's early Mexican landed elite and further still to Spanish colonizers (a connection which is often emphasized by participants). As ball participant Laurita boasted, "When I leave home people are actually surprised to find out that I'm of Mexican heritage. So, I always have to go back into the story that my family goes back to the Spanish colonizers…My family has been under Spanish, Mexican, and American governments and hasn't moved an inch" (*Las Marthas* 0:25:10). Laurita's family history serves as an example of the changeability of borders, and the ball displays the cultural merging that results. The teens practice the ceremony's colonial, yet still distinctly Texas, debutante repertoire for up to a year. They must walk in their incredibly constricting and heavy gowns with ease and grace. As they are announced as the historical characters they portray, they glide to center stage and do what in deb circles from Corpus Christi's Buccaneer Days to San Antonio's Coronation is known as the "Texas bow," a curtsy that goes all the way down to the floor, with a bowing of the head followed by thrusting the bust forward (Nathan). The repertoire of the ball is thus an amalgamation of Colonial American, Mexican, and Texan styles.

I am interested in the young Latina woman's embodiment of a constructed 'American' past and the performance of a longing for an affective form of citizenship

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invites inventors, artists, and musicians of the time period. They take a great deal of artistic license since many of these imagined guests were never in the same room together and were certainly never in Texas!

contingent upon the politics of belonging. Lauren Berlant defines citizenship as "a relation among strangers who learn to feel it as a common identity based on shared historical, legal, or familial connection to a geopolitical space" (37). In the example of the George Washington's Birthday Celebration, there is a clear disjunction between the "historical" and "geopolitical space"; the Washingtons were never in Texas because there was no Texas for them to journey to. However, with the inclusion of Texas into the United States came a necessity to relate to and embrace an American history if subjects desired a legal connection with its status and privileges. The notion of citizenship is contingent on the dichotomy of insiders versus outsiders; and if the Mexican landowners were going to keep their power, they needed to perform as insiders. The festival serves as an induction of "a visceral identification of personal identity with nationality" (Berlant 37). The complicated fit between personal identity and nationality displayed in this case study creates the potentiality for a queering of both through practices of disidentification. The Latina teens who dress up as Martha Washington for this annual ball may connect to the first lady in terms of their position in a class hierarchy but possess a complicated connection in terms of ethnic identity. By dressing up as Martha Washington they are simultaneously and paradoxically whitewashing themselves (perhaps in an effort to claim their European lineage and assert their right to the privileges of citizenship and a sense of belonging) and Latina-izing Martha Washington through their eighteenth-century ball gowns infused with a quinceañera style.

The Clothes Make the Debutante

The debutantes' gowns serve as the main focal point of the event and are a

manifestation of the motto “everything is bigger in Texas.” They are either a one of a kind design made for the deb specifically, or are a “recycled vintage” gown passed down from generation to generation with each new deb making alterations and additions[52]. The massive gowns can weigh up to a hundred pounds and have even been known to bruise the hips of their wearers. The gowns have a history stitched into them, a history of our contemporary notions of colonial America but even more so a history of the contradictions and collaborations of life in a border town. The gowns are put on display around Laredo from hotels to museums[53]. While the gowns maintain their visual power on mannequins behind glass, the complex stories they tell are made all the more interesting by the girls who wear them and the women who make them.

Linda Leyendecker Gutierrez is the prominent designer for MWS gowns. The seventy-eight-year-old of Spanish and German descent can trace her lineage back to founding members of Laredo as well as the country. A descendant of Patrick Henry, she’s had family in the American Revolution as well as both sides of the Civil War (in our interview she was very quick to tell me unsolicited that she abhors the institution of slavery and racism). She is a part of one of Laredo’s oldest families and is an heir to an impressive oil and gas fortune. She is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution as well as a long-time member of the Society of Martha Washington. Gutierrez estimates that she’s made more than seven hundred MWS gowns in her nearly fifty-year career. She, her daughter, and granddaughters have all been debs.

[52] See Image 1 and Image 2. Image 1: Designer Gutierrez’s daughter. Image 2: Gutierrez’s granddaughter in the same dress. The long lace around the shoulders and back has been removed. The puffy sleeves were replaced with tighter sleeves, but the engageantes were reused. Dark blue beadwork was added to the front of the dress.
[53] See Image 3: Martha Washington gown on display in the lobby of La Posada.

Both her grandfather and father have portrayed George Washington. She came out in 1960 and her older sister in 1957. Both women married their ball escorts. Gutierrez has been with her escort now husband for over 50 years.

Gutierrez learned to sew at twenty-three and in 1974 at thirty-three she became a born-again Christian and started making gowns for SMW. For her, the two events are deeply connected. She credits her virtuosic dressmaking abilities with her faith: “I’m very gifted and it’s all from God” (Gutierrez). She sees her dress designs as visions that almost come to her from God… along with some help from Marie Antoinette, who is a vital inspiration for her elaborate designs. She explained to me that when it comes to the dress’ deigns it is, “[her] way or they’re out the door.” Girls may go to her shop with their own ideas, but they know better than to stand in the way of Gutierrez’s vision. She told me of a deb to be who came in asking for an all gold and black dress and ended up in a bright pink and purple masterpiece[54]. Regardless of Gutierrez’s rejection of the philosophy of the customer always being right, she boasts of never having a dissatisfied client. She claims that she gets calls from new parents, hoping to secure Gutierrez as their future deb’s gown designer, seventeen years in advance: “People call me from the hospital when their daughters are born!”

The dresses take on either a squared skirt shape, reminiscent of an eighteenth-century ball gown, or a more rounded skirt form. They typically include three-quarter length slightly belled sleeves, corsets, petticoats, and hoopskirts. Multiple aspects of the gowns point to eighteenth-century American fashion. The long-waisted bodices, some of which are open revealing a decorative stomacher underneath, the sleeves worn tight

[54] See Image 3

near the elbow with engageantes underneath, and the squared necklines and low backs were staples of women's eighteenth-century formal attire[55] (St. Germain). The gowns with a squared skirt more closely resemble a colonial silhouette due to the popularity of panniers at the time. The shape is often further emphasized through gatherings of bunched fabric connected to the bodice, hanging over the hips, and opening to reveal an underskirt or quilted petticoat[56]. Some SMW gowns, while they may not contain as many layers of fabric, are made to give the illusion of the open skirt style popular in the eighteenth-century. However, even with these elements, the colors and copious quantities of lace, sequins, and beadwork, make these gowns a far cry from what would be seen in a colonial drawing room. The gowns signify disparate imagined histories, cultures, and icons. Sewn into the fabric is a semiotic collage from Marie Antoinette to Martha Washington's contemporaries, Scarlett O'Hara to quinceañera.

Gutierrez cites Marie Antoinette in particular as an inspiration for her gowns. She argues that her style would have been popular during the American Revolution. Marie Antoinette took the throne in 1774 and was indeed a fashion icon of her time, but some of her more extreme looks, such as gowns that are as wide as they are long, would most likely not have been prevalent in the states during the Revolutionary War. Nevertheless, the investment in excess which is a signature of Antoinette's style is reflected in SMW gowns. The abundance of lace, beadwork, and vibrant colors of the fabric (some of which Gutierrez actually has imported from France) are clearly a nod to Antoinette.

The grandeur of the gowns (particularly those that have a rounded skirt shape in

[55] See Image 5
[56] See Image 5

place of the more period accurate square shape) also conjure a more American, nineteenth-century figure of the Southern imagination. The iconic, full, rounded gown evokes images of Vivian Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara. The image of her corset being pulled, her tiny waist followed by a burst of ruffled petticoat, the way her dress pops up when she sits down making her take up an entire bench with her hoops of steel and layers of ruffles are ingrained in the imagination. That particular silhouette is attached to the southern belle, her waltzing at a ball, sipping lemonade on the veranda, strolling through the plantation parasol in hand. Hidden beneath the ruffles and bows of this mistakenly innocuous figure is the legacy of the institution of slavery and a deeply problematic fantasy of the Antebellum South. The deep connection between this the cinched waist, round skirt silhouette, and shameful history of the America South is demonstrated in the University of Georgia's 2015 decision to ban the wearing of hoop skirts to Greek functions as part of a university-wide initiative to rid the campus of symbols the confederacy. The institutional regulation points to the meaning entrenched in the iconography. Thus, the layers of fabric, petticoat, and hoop skirt shape the dress but also shape a problematic, romantic notion of the Antebellum South.

In reading Scarlett O'Hara into the ball, the specter of the Southern Belle is moved from Georgia to Texas, a state stuck in a perpetual identity crisis which begs the question, "is Texas Southern, Western, or truly a Lone Star?" (Lomax) Though Texas is unique among southern states, with its desert landscape, international border, and Mexican cultural influence, it is still a part of it. Texas officially joined the United States in 1845 as a slave state (an issue which delayed the state's entrance for over a decade). Between 1850 and 1860 the enslaved population in Texas increased by over

120,000 (about twenty-five present of Anglo families in Texas were enslavers), making Texas the state with the 10th largest number of enslaved people (Barr 17). Due to inexpensive Mexican labor, slavery did not extend into the region between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande prior to the Civil War (Barr 20). Texas seceded and joined the confederacy in 1861. During the Civil war, the number of enslaved people in Texas drastically increased with the Union Army's occupation of areas in Louisiana and Arkansas. In an effort to prevent emancipation, some enslavers from those regions moved those they enslaved to Texas. The state's experience of the Civil War, however, differs from that of other confederate states. Texas was geographically removed from the Union Army lines throughout most of the war and therefore removed from most of the action, with only a few battles fought in the state. Nevertheless, Texas has its own antebellum history and a share in the legacy of its violence[57].

In the *Texas Monthly* article "Is Texas Southern, Western, or Truly a Lone Star," Lomax argues that the categorization of Texas as part of the American West (with all the adventure and romance of the frontier associated with that image) is a "piece of historical fiction" (Lormax). According to Dr. Gregg Cantrell, the Chair in Texas History at Texas Christian College, the essential Southerness of Texas wasn't questioned until the twentieth century and was only done so as a way to distance the state from the shame of the institution of slavery, Jim Crow, and a history of lynching. Texas (especially east Texas), which had counties named after famous confederates, was "always more cotton than cattle" (Lormax). There seems to be a contentious relationship

[57] Texan enslavers even kept the news of the emancipation proclamation from those they enslaved for two years. It took the arrival Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger and 2000 troops in Galveston, Texas to pass on the news of freedom on June 19, 1965… Juneteenth.

with the fantasy of the Old South, a simultaneous rejection and embrace. The same Texas that would rather be known for its cowboys than enslavers, still clings to its Confederate history. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, as of 2019 Texas had 207 confederate symbols, making it second only to Virginia as the state with the most confederate symbols. An embodiment of confederate symbology can be seen on the Azalea trail in Tyler, Texas. Ninth and Tenth- grade girls from the community are selected to serve as 'Azalea Belles.' They dress in antebellum gowns, greet trail visitors, and pose for photos with the scenic flowers and historic buildings. They are ornamental embodiments of southern hospitality and the Old South. Perhaps there is a touch of an Azalea belle in the Society of Martha Washington debutantes. Would Scarlett O'Hara really be all that far from home in Laredo? After all, as Eliot Young describes, blackface minstrelsy was a major element of the earlier George Washington's Birthday Celebrations. With a function similar to the Red Men's portrayal of "Indians," minstrel stereotypes of "Blackness" were performed in the ceremony as a form of collective mockery to foster a sense of comradery between Anglos and Texas Mexicans through the othering of Black Americans. Even with Laredo's differences from other southern cities like Atlanta and Charleston, the same fantasy of the "Old South" persisted (and for some still persists). All this confusion is materialized in the blackface and redface performances of past George Washington's Birthday Celebrations and perhaps channeled into contemporary Society of Martha Washington gowns.

SMW gowns are embroidered with many stories; they at once signify Martha, Marie, Scarlett, and last but not least quinceañera. The bright colors and heavy sequins and beadwork on then SMW gowns somewhat resemble contemporary quinceañera

fashion trends. Quinceañera gowns typically have a corseted bodice and full round skirt. Some SMW gowns started shifting from their signature eighteenth-century squared shape to a rounder form (more reminiscent of a Southern Belle or quinceañera gown) in the 1960s. When I brought up the gowns' beadwork and shape having a possible connection to a quinceañera style, Gutierrez resisted the association. She quickly distanced herself from the connection, saying the rounded gowns are not hers. She claimed that all her gowns have a squared silhouette, are "historically accurate," and inspired by Marie Antoinette, not the Mexican coming of age tradition. Regardless of whose designs they are or the intention of the designer, the connection persists. Even the hairstyles, hairpieces with masses of perfectly shaped ringlets arranged at the crown of the head, read as a cross between eighteenth-century and quienceañera dos.

This performance serves as an example of an ethnic and temporal form of cross-dressing, a form of drag. Latina teens drag white, colonial femininity, and at the same time place the imagined historical Martha Washington and her contemporaries in a kind of Latina drag. As Elizabeth Freeman explains in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,* drag carries associations with "retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present" (62). Thus, the meaning of drag in temporal drag is two-fold. It points to the performative, to camp, to a knowing and intentional exaggeration, as well as to the act of physically dragging something and collecting the debris of what is behind you as you move forward. The ball as a form of temporal drag, therefore, performs a time which is not our present and collects and carries the cultural weight of all the years between the eighteenth-century and today. In their performance of the past, the debs drag along the folklore of our founding fathers and mothers. They evoke

the myth of the chopped down cherry tree, the portrait of Washington crossing the Delaware, the Revolutionary War, and the bootstrap narrative. They carry the weight of history along with the one hundred pounds of velvet and lace; the train of their dress accumulates the debris of the past as it drags behind them.

Temporal Borders

The Martha Washington ball obviously queers temporality through its performance of history, but it also marks the crossing of a temporal border in the individual teen girl's life. The event is, among other things, a debutante ball. Adolescence is a distinctly liminal space in that it is both transitional and transformational; no longer a child not yet an adult. At the ball, the teen girls are officially coming out into society. The ball marks their transition from girlhood to womanhood. They become women through their performance of a distinctly white, genteel femininity, cloaked in the authority and patriotism of an imagined history. Christina Ibarra's 2013 documentary about the ball, *Las Marthas*, includes multiple scenes of the teens rehearsing for the event. In one particular scene, the girls rehearse for the ball with their hoop-skirts on over their Catholic school uniforms. They practice the way they will walk and curtsy when they are presented and emerge into womanhood. All the while, their school uniforms signify girlhood. Their contemporary clothes combined with the hoop-skirt and antiquity of their movement also display a juxtaposition. The temporality in terms of the era and their individual developmental positions, are crossed, merged, and ultimately queered, as is the Mexican/American border. According to Norma Cantu, Laredean and Professor of English and U.S. Latino

Literature at UT San Antonio, for the people of Mexican descent in Laredo “there’s a sense historically of being outside of Mexico but also the U.S. And so, it’s kind of that third space, that in-between” (Las Marthas 0:28:10-0:28:20). Thus, for many of the debs there exists a sense of in-between-ness geographically and temporally… neither here nor there, then nor now, adolescence nor womanhood, past nor present.

Though the debutante ball as a milestone falls in line with a kind of normative, heterosexual, chronology of an individual’s life, one that has an investment of reproductive futurity, the event’s connection to the past troubles the debutante ball’s simple function of propelling one to the future. The girls are not technically entering society, womanhood, and the marriage market as themselves, but rather as historical colonial figures. The contemporary is merged with the historical in a manner that both blurs temporal lines and is [perhaps unintentionally] humorous in its disjuncture. For example, at the 2020 ball, a debutante’s escort was introduced as “Mr. Alexander Hamilton who attends Nixon High School.” In the way in which the camp of drag exposes gender as a performance, this element of historical role-playing gives the ball and pageant the heightened air of theatricality, and thus also exposes debutante balls and compulsory heterosexuality as performances. The Martha Washington ball’s turn to the past queers temporality, troubling heteronormativity and reproductive futurity, all while safely wearing the mask of tradition provided by the debutante ball. Similar to how the event performs “American” and affluence in order to affirm a Texas Mexican right to belong and lead in Laredo, the performance of femininity (and whiteness) simultaneously makes its performers appear well disciplined and safe while the historical role-playing leaves space to disidentify and misbehave within the system. The

mask of history worn by the debs offers refuge from some of the pressure and confines of hyper-hetero debutante ritual, which is wrapped up in notions of growing up, marriage, and reproduction. The historical role-playing of the pageant blurs the lines between debutante ball and reenactment, leaving the potential to grow *back* (into an imagined past) as opposed to *up* (into womanhood, marriage, and motherhood).

The role-playing also extends beyond the pageant's historical characters. Ball participation is a tradition passed on from generation to generation. Most debutantes are legacy members who are performing the same ball repertoire as their mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers before them. Passed down as well are the extravagant gowns. Though the gown may be altered to fit its current wearer's style and to some extent size, each legacy deb puts on her mother's embodiment with the vintage dress. In a sense, she is dragging her mother just as much as she is dragging Abigail Adams or Elizabeth Hamilton. She is pulling the weight of history as well as that of her maternal ancestors. Such a weight comes with its own pressures and pleasures. Living up to one's mother may come with its fair share of baggage (and frantic dieting needed to squeeze oneself into a dress made for a potentially slimmer mother or grandmother). As legacy dress wearer Laurita explains in *Las Marthas,* "the dress fit like a glove in November and the dress won't zip anymore. I had to do major dieting for the Martha dress. I lost like thirty pounds" (0:34:25-0:34:45). The need to literally take on a mother or grandmother's form emphasizes gendered body expectations and the way in which those standards are often monitored and policed by women. While there are sure to be frustrations and potential feelings of being (or at least being seen as) an inadequate surrogate of the mother, the homosocial space created through the SMW ritual also

holds the potential for pleasure and power. The ball prioritizes matrilineal kinship in a society with investments in the paternal. The girls are the center of attention and their escorts are little more than props (second even to the dress), present solely to help the girls up if the unthinkable happens and they lose balance while curtsying. Though the debs share a dance with their fathers, it is their mothers who are back stage with them, who help them get ready, and coach them. The mother is the image to which each deb is meant to aspire; her own mother and ultimately the metaphorical mother of the country. The girls are thus not only performing their historical characters but also performing their mothers performing their historical characters, who in turn were performing their mothers and so on and so forth.

Wearing Your Heart and Wallet on Your Lacy Sleeve

The ostentatious extravagance of the gowns can also be seen as a performance of class with its excess bordering drag. As noted in the National Geographic coverage of the 2006 ball, “the understated ways of old money do not apply here. Greenwich, Connecticut, this is not” (Swartz 99). Less might be more for the New England Deb, but that is not the case for a Laredo Deb, whose gown can cost on average $15,000 and up to $30,000, about three-fourths of the median family income in Laredo. While the MWS dresses have always been impressive, their increased grandeur can be traced to the exponential wealth increase post-NAFTA (Swartz 99). The gowns thus display wealth just as much as they do femininity and tradition. The dresses display an Antoinette-esque style of excess, but do they also materialize a “let them eat cake” sentiment?

Gutierrez claims she does not turn debs away due to a lack of funds. Her rehearsed response to financial questions is “Would you ask me how many acres I own?” a reference to what would be seen as a tactless ranching faux pas (Swartz 99). Gutierrez would not disclose exact prices, as she said that information is private between her and her clients, but she claims she can make a dress for any price. According to Gutierrez, “Anyone who comes to me, gets presented if [she] wants” (Gutierrez). While this does not mean the SMW is an egalitarian utopia, it does offer some potential that it is not as exclusionary as it may have been at its origin. However, to come out as a deb through the Society of Martha Washington requires a significant amount of time as well as money. The gown is not the only expense. There is a full year of rehearsals, dress fittings, formal events, and parties in which the young ladies are expected to participate. In addition to the SMW organized events such as their luncheon and father-daughter ball, there may be at least five, often themed, parties per debutante throughout the year. In 2006, some of these parties honoring individual debs included “a fete devoted to designer purses, one to designer shoes (Manolos were in evidence), a disco party, a Hollywood party, and…. [a party] in which the décor- tables, bows, lace- was a study in pink” (Swartz 106). The ability to host these gatherings and dress for them requires means and serves as a display of those means.

I met an aspiring member who would describe herself as a self-made woman. She was not presented at the ball as a teen and did not have family in the SMW. She told me she had worked hard in her career and was now in a position where she could afford the membership dues (I could not get an exact amount, but membership seems to be in the thousands annually). She explained, “The organization is changing. It’s not

just old money anymore." Most members are pulled from a rather small circle of old families. Most are from Laredo and some are Nuevo Laredeans; class status creates a bond that surpasses borders. Daughters of members take precedence and can be guaranteed the opportunity to debut, then come granddaughters and nieces, and lowest on the hierarchy would be entirely new members. Aspiring members with no family ties to the Society can apply with two letters of recommendation and proof of U.S. citizenship (Colloff 2006). Only applicants with a majority of votes at the Society's luncheon can join. However, vacancies are so rare that applicants may have to wait years for the opportunity to join and many never get the chance (Colloff 2006). Society legend has it that in the sixties a legacy daughter wrote, "No thanks" on her invitation to debut. In response to this act of "Martha suicide," her mother convinced the postmaster to open the mailbox and take out her letter (Colloff 2006). In spite of the SMW's history of exclusivity and old family/ old money dominance, proclaimed self-made women still have hope and perhaps a small chance.

SMW debutantes are not just coming out into society; they are coming out as members of the ruling class. Prof. Saldaña, who also grew up in Laredo and whose mother worked as a seamstress sewing the Society of Martha Washington gowns, describes the time in high school when the debs are announced as a "moment of coming to class consciousness" (*Las Marthas* 0:11:52-0:12:45). Though she went to the same Catholic high school as some of the debs and played on the same sports teams, when ball season came around there was "a real sense of differentiation at that moment that [she] hadn't known before. Like oh that's them over there and that's us over here and they are of a different class" (*Las Marthas* 0:12:00-0:12:45). She described the

reveal of who would deb as a process of “coming out.” Their visibility as members of the ruling class was cemented through the ball. I argue that the grandeur of the event renders ruling class Latina debs hyper-visible which leads to the invisibility of working- and middle-class Latinas/os who make up the majority of Laredo’s demographic. The excess and extravagance of the ball and the parade which puts the ruling class Latina debs on display are only possible through the labor of working and middle-class Latinas/os. They are the seamstresses who sew Gutierrez’s gown designs, the builders who make the pageant set, the caterers who serve the ball dinner, and so much more. When the event goes seamlessly, dresses don’t tear, set pieces don’t break, trays of food aren’t dropped, their labor is unnoticed. And what is seen is the shining embodiment of extravagance and wealth.

Ibarra’s documentary aptly displays this phenomenon of hypervisibility leading to invisibility. The class entanglements of the George Washington’s Birthday Celebration are recognized by academics and the ball participants on a number of occasions in interviews. For example, SMW deb Laurita cringingly talks about the parade as a time for people who aren’t just members of the upper class to enjoy and cheer on the debutantes, and she refers to the SMW’s newest deb from Nuevo Laredo as “new money” (0:58:30 and 0:37:14). However, the moments in the documentary where the class divide is most palpable are actually the scenes where the subjects are filmed in action and even more so the brief transitional silent scenes. After seeing the gowns in all their glory and meeting Gutierrez, there is a scene where she scolds a Latina seamstress in Spanish for pinning a hem incorrectly. She undoes the seamstress’ work and tells her to do it again (0:33:00-0:33:40). The scolded seamstress and another

seamstress sitting at the table remain silent; a voiceover of a deb whose dress is being designed by Linda Gutierrez says, “Working with Linda is awesome” (0:33:00-0:33:40). The overlay of the voiceover to that scene invites the audience to question if it really is “awesome” and if so, for whom? Later in the film, there is footage of the Latina seamstresses folding and packing the gowns into an SUV to be transported to the Civic Center where the ball will take place. The women speak to one another in Spanish and carefully wrap the gowns in fabric to protect them. The gowns are so bulky and heavy it takes two women to move each gown (*Las Marthas* 0:45:35-0:46:15). The next shot shows Gutierrez in the parking lot of the Civic Center on her cell phone. She exclaims, “They forgot my worker” and calls one of her seamstresses and tells her to hurry and get to the center (0:46:15-0:46:30). In the bustle of transporting the dresses, the “worker” was forgotten and left behind.

The people who make up the labor force for the event are not active commenters throughout the documentary. Only one seamstress addresses the camera directly once in the film; she says in Spanish, “The señora draws the designs and I do the samples. She dictates everything and we just do what she says” (0:47:00-0:47:12). Instead of including extensive interviews with the events labor force, Ibarra highlights the way in which they remain largely unseen by showing them in action and through quick cutaways where they serve as onlookers to the event. For example, after a scene that shows the debs at the Civic Center rehearsing in costume, there is a quick cutaway to the backstage room where the girls were dressed, and two Latina women are sweeping and mopping (0:53:45-0:53:56). The is no dialogue or commentary. The same dynamic is shown again. After a scene in which a deb is lounging on her canopy bed, there is a

scene without voiceover commentary which shows Latino men constructing of the SMW stage and set, which then cuts to the debs excitingly giggling and entering the building. The same men who built the set stand outside with the towels they used to soak their sweat slung over their shoulders and water bottles in their hands. They silently watch the girls, who did not acknowledge them, skip into the building. Ibarra thus subtly displays the Latina/o labor that the whole event is built upon and shows its invisibility and silence through replication.

The event is built on the myth of American exceptionalism and the myth of the bootstrap narrative. Of course, the reality is that one cannot lift oneself up by the bootstraps if one doesn't even have boots. This month-long festival celebrating the freedom and opportunity supposedly found in the U.S. happens just a mile away from a border that keeps out people seeking those very ideals. In a town entrenched in cartel violence and poverty[58] what does it mean to have such a display of affluence, a display that some Loredeans will camp overnight for the chance to glimpse at the parade? While Society members such as Gutierrez claim that those belonging to SMW make substantial donations to charity, María Guerra, a self-described "recovering debutant" and publisher of the alternative newspaper LareDos, accuses Laredo's Society member elites of only caring about immigration if it means their Mexican housekeeper can't come to work (Swartz 109). She questions the purpose of the ball and the class tension in Laredo it exposes.

Guerra claims that her paper is only moderate in its criticism of Washington's Birthday Celebration; she does concede that events such as the parade and fireworks

[58] *Las Marthas*

are ways in which the celebration tries to be more inclusive. However, in the late nineties, Guerra wrote a biting satirical piece about the haves and have nots of Laredo that the SMW ball in all its extravagance makes painfully clear. In the style of a society columnist, she writes about "La Colonia Ball" organized by "Hijas de la Chonguda[59] chapter of the Society de las Malinchistas[60]" (Olsson). This ball, a clear parody of the Society of Martha Washington Pageant and Ball, has debutantes in gowns with "teeny tiny Border Patrolmen fashioned of embroidered green polyester," who arrive at the venue in low riders instead of limos (Colloff). Guerra disidentifies with the event that was a part of her own adolescence. She uses the structure of the debutante ball and the voice of a society columnist to expose its hypocrisy; she warps it yet performs it none the less. The ridiculousness of Guerra's descriptions is meant to expose what is beneath the SMW pomp and circumstance. With its name "La Colonia Ball," Guerro focusses attention on the area and population made invisible through the SMW's performance of wealth. Her use of Spanish in the society's name and her evocation of La Malinche highlight the SMW's Latina membership and accuses them of a kind of betrayal of their people, further emphasized by the flaunting of little embroidered border patrolmen. Guerra's participation in and later push back against the Martha Washington Ball and Pageant reflects a larger contentious engagement in Laredo with the ball and broader George Washington's Birthday Celebration. The celebration has become so ingrained in the history and tradition of the city. It is simultaneously scoffed at as

[59] Slang for a girl who throws her air into a pony tail, implies a sloppiness or messiness.
[60] La Malinche is slang for one who turns on her own people in favor of white culture. The name comes from Malintzin, a Nahua woman (given to the Spaniards to be enslaved) who interpreted for Cortés and contributed to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec. She also bore Cortés a son (seen as one of the first mestizos). As an icon, Malintzin is seen as a traitor, a victim, or the mother of Mexican people.

ridiculous or even offensive and yet also looked forward to in anticipation. The very people rendered invisible through the festival are its parade's zealous audience.

My own mixed feelings about the Martha Washington ball fueled my research. I was and still remain deeply disturbed by its glorification of the founding fathers, the perpetuation of the bootstrap narrative, and problematic class implications, yet I could not eschew my fascination with its visual allure and the desire to feel the weight and soft velvet of one of those ostentatious gowns. I oscillated between reading the event as assimilationist and classist, and as a subversive Texas Mexican survival strategy. I questioned if the event held the potential of being both as I made my way to the ball in Laredo with a ticket but not an invitation.

A Leftist Ph.D. Candidate Goes to Texas

It took months of multiple emails and phone calls, but I managed to get in touch with the Society of Martha Washington's president, Christina Hale, and treasurer, Letti Cantu. Through Cantu I purchased a coveted ticket to the Society of Martha Washington pageant and ball. Unlike other George Washington's Birthday Celebration events, tickets for the ball were not available for purchase online. There did not seem to be a system in place for the public to acquire tickets which leads me to believe that outsiders rarely have access to the event.

The airport in Laredo, Texas has only two gates and one baggage claim carousel. I expected more of a crowd in light of the festival. Next to the baggage claim was a display of Chieftain and Princess Pocahontas costumes[61]. There were rows of

[61] See images 6 and 7

elaborately beaded dresses, moccasins, and large feathered headpieces. Underneath each costume was a sash laid on top of a fringed rug. The sashes were embroidered with each Princess Pocahontas and Chief's stereotypical and somewhat non-sensical "Native American" name (e.g. "Chief Black Thunder," "Princess Fiery Sunset," "Chief Wandering Spirit," "Princess Prairie Blossom"). There were perhaps more mannequins than people at the airport. It was almost eerie how empty it was, and it explained the multiple looks of surprise I encountered when I informed people at LAX that my final destination was Laredo. I did, however, manage to meet two other festival attendees, New York Congresswoman Nita Lowey and her husband. In our hotel shuttle, they spoke to one another about "Nancy's" arrival… as in Nancy Pelosi. It felt strange how big and small this event seemed to be! Important politicians flew across the country to attend, yet downtown Laredo looked sleepy and practically uninhabited.

I stayed at La Posada, the official festival hotel. While having dinner at the hotel restaurant with my new congresswoman acquaintance, we were joined by Martha Bárcena, the Mexican ambassador to the U.S. She was in Laredo to be named "Mr. South Texas," an honor bestowed on individuals who make great contributions to the community of Laredo and South Texas as a whole. Note, the "Mr." remains in the title regardless of the recipient. Bárcena is the seventh woman to receive the honor in the sixty-eight-year tradition. Bácena and Lowey spoke to one another about the festival events they were participating in as well as their intentions to visit an I.C.E. detention center. Bácena pointed out that from the patio of our hotel the tents of Mexican immigrants seeking asylum could be seen.

Due to the Trump administration's controversial Migrant Protection Protocols policy, informally known as "Remain in Mexico," asylum seekers are forced to stay on the Mexican side of the border while their cases are being heard over video conference in white tent courthouses. The policy has resulted in makeshift camps where asylum seekers await their case outcomes for weeks to months in dangerous and unsanitary living conditions. Since the policy was implemented in January 2019, "reports of murder, rape, torture kidnapping, and other violent assaults against returned asylum seekers have climbed" (de Vogue). Together Lowey, Bárcena, and I walked out to the patio, looked past the hotel gate, and could see the border of Mexico, the ramshackle migrant encampment, and the courthouse tents where many futures would be decided. The irony of having a celebration of the "American-ness," "Freedom," and "Patriotisms" just a mile away from these tents turned my stomach. How close, yet impossibly far a mile can be. The festival paradoxically transcends and reinforces that devastating border.

The next day, I went to San Augstín Plaza right outside my hotel for a scheduled tour. I stood there for about twenty minutes looking around for the tour group. Aside from a couple of women reading aloud from the bible, a smoker, and some men in a truck, the plaza was empty on the rainy Friday morning. I made my way to the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum to inquire about the tour. Constructed in 1830, the museum building was once the home of Bartolomé García, rancher and mayor of Laredo. It smelt like old wood and dust. The women at the front desk had no idea where the tour guide was. She tried calling him, but the phone didn't work (a common problem around town when it rains). I resigned myself to exploring the 1830s domestic items on display. I was surprised and somewhat disappointed by my quasi ghost town experience. The 2016

festival president Joe Castellano claimed that in February the border town became the "center of the universe" with its festival that he described as "the Super Bowl, Miss America, and the academy awards all rolled into one" (*Laredo Morning Times*). I imagined the streets would be lively with a continuous party for the festival which is the town's once a year main event! This research trip was all out of pocket due to AB1887 which prohibits California state funding being used for travel to a state with laws that discriminate against the LGBTQ community, Texas being one of the eleven states restricted. So…this queer scholar had to pay her own way, and while meeting some important people last night was exciting, I couldn't help but feel a little cheated by the inexplicably canceled tour reservation and the overall lack of zeal downtown. All of that, however, was to change that night with the hustle and bustle of the Society of Martha Washington Colonial Pageant and Ball. When I returned to my hotel that afternoon, the lobby was full of people with oversized luggage, gowns on trollies, and huge crowns in cases.

Wearing the full-length gown I had squeezed into my carry on, I arrived at Same's Auto Arena just in time for the ball. This was the first year the event was to be held at the Arena. Previously, the event was held at the Civic Center, but a larger venue became a necessity. My difficultly acquired ticket was supposed to be delivered to my hotel but never arrived. After multiple phone calls, I was told I could pick it up from will-call. Will-call insisted that nothing was left in my name. I stepped into the lobby where a line of security guards and police officers were guarding the entrance. I talked to an usher and then a rather official headset wearing program coordinator; I figured they would be sure to let me in when I explained that I was there for research and showed

them my emailed ticket purchase receipt. To my surprise, they would not let me enter because they didn't know to which table I was assigned. I could hear the welcoming speech and started to panic a bit. I was thinking about the two flights I took (one of which was on a rather shaky plane the size of a school bus). I started to calculate the money spent on the flight, hotel, $200 ball ticket, all a waste if I missed the main event.

I frantically started calling and texting the people I bought my ticket through. I could hear the national anthem being sung. I looked up from my phone and noticed everyone in the lobby had stopped what they were doing (including the ushers looking for my ticket) to put their hands over their hearts. I resisted the urge to take a knee (there was no guarantee I would be able to get back up in my ensemble) and continued my texting campaign. The coordinator acquiesced and agreed to let me in, but not to the tables on the main floor (the area for which I paid). Instead, I was taken up to the risers that looked down on the event on the arena floor through a somewhat obstructed view. There were a few rows of less formally dressed attendees, who paid half price for the privilege of watching the spectacle, no dinner, no interaction, no dancing. Experiencing the event from that distanced, non-participatory vantage point seemed rather unrewarding (and not quite worth $75-$100, especially for those who were there for pleasure not research). I was about to take my cheap seat in defeat when I was called by the Society's treasurer, Letti Cantu, from whom I had purchased my ticket. She waltzed me down onto the arena main floor, past the coordinator with the headset and security guards. Since we didn't know what table I was supposed to sit at, she told me I could just join her and the Society's president at the cabinet members' cabana. And, just like that, a frustrating, unlucky situation transformed into an opportunity!

I was overwhelmed by the Society member's welcome. I was immediately given a seat at their cabana, along with a glass of champagne. Letti introduced me to the others, ensured I had a good view of the stage, and told me to help myself to the appetizers. Perhaps part of this welcome can be attributed to the weight and prestige of my academic institution (Letti knew I was writing a chapter of my dissertation on the event and that I was a Ph.D. candidate at UCLA, and she introduced me as such), but I would be remiss to not also credit what seemed to be their genuine warmth and friendliness. I found myself mixing in a class circle new to me. The Society members are the leaders of their community, surgeons, assistant attorney general, judges, professors, politicians. I overheard conversations that signified a level of wealth as well, talk of second homes, casually buying another car, just having Grandfather "make a call" to admissions. As welcoming as they were, as freely as the champagne poured, as liberally as the smiles were bestowed, I could not help but feel that was not with my people. I, however, fancied myself undetected, even in my sales rack gown and up-do I did myself. I felt as if I was performing class drag. There was a kind of excitement in the deception but also a kind of guilt. The society members were so happy to share their event with me. An event that I approached with ambivalence, torn between my attraction to its theatricality and elaborate costumes and my disdain for its glorification of the mythic founding fathers and its problematic class dynamic. I couldn't help but think about the people up in the cheap seats and the predominantly Latino staff working the event, whom I wanted to make sure remained visible through the haze of glam and glitz.

The 'performance' began with a speech by Christina Hale, the Society's president. For the most part, the "God bless America" speech was what I expected,

patriotic and pious. Except at the end, she described the transformational element of the ritual as the debutantes “taking a step toward independence and self-reliance.” I was struck by that phrase. Debutante balls are a liminal space that marks the transition from adolescence to womanhood, but historically it marks the young woman’s marriageability. Initially, the Society of Martha Washington Ball and Pageant served as a catalyst for making advantageous (often ethnically mixed) ruling class matches, a way to consolidate wealth and maintain privilege. Now, an emphasis is placed on the debutante’s independence. The modern SMW debs are more educated and worldly than their society foremothers: “These young women have resumes to rival students at Andover and Exeter” (Swartz 106). Some of the 2006 debs interviewed by *National Geographic* had studied abroad in Paris, completed programs at Cambridge University and MIT.

Today’s SMW debs have academic accomplishments that surpass those of the first MSW debs and most definitely surpass those of the woman this ball and society have chosen as their aspiring model, Martha Washington, who, as was customary for women of the eighteenth-century, had limited formal education and was predominantly trained in domestic arts and household management. Though Martha Washington was skilled at running a household and successfully ran five plantations after her first husband’s death, her main and perhaps only significant historical accomplishment was being the first first lady (though the term was not coined until after her death). She did, however, also bring substantial wealth to her marriage union with Washington. Being a wealthy young widow, she contributed land, money, and enslaved people to the union, which greatly increased Washington’s standing. This element may make her a fitting

symbol for the debs of 1939 who were displayed for their breeding and money and were used to consolidate wealth and sustain the ruling class through the institution of marriage. However, for the contemporary deb "taking a step toward independence and self-reliance," Martha Washington is a curious symbol. She is a less interesting choice than some of her female contemporaries such as Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton and Abigail Adams. Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton helped Alexander Hamilton in his work writing the Federalist Papers and his defense of the Bank of the United States and co-founded the Orphan Asylum Society. Abigail Adams, like Marth Washington, did not receive a formal education but she was an impressive self-educator and avid reader. She was also a formidable partner to John Adams assisting him with matters of the state, as is evident through their many correspondences. Martha's contemporaries may be a more fitting symbol for these educated modern debs[62]. Of course, Elizabeth Hamilton and Abigail Adams are represented at the ball, but the focus and namesake of the event and Society remain Martha Washington.

Contemporary MWS debs are highlighted as scholars, and the element of a potential marriage contract is entirely removed. In fact, though it was commonplace for escorts and debutantes to end up married (as shown by both Linda Leyendecker Gutierrez and her sister), now any kind of romantic tie between the escorts and debutantes is discouraged (Gutierrez). It's recommended that the escorts are an old family friend or ideally a cousin, to eliminate any romantic potential and save the event from any kind of teenage break up drama. However, the event is not void of feminine purity and marriageability coded rituals. Part of the many events leading up to the

[62] However, both women's connection to the Alien and Sedition Act would make them an ironic choice for the predominantly Latina Debs.

Martha Washington ball is a traditional father/daughter dance where the debutantes wear white gowns, a symbol of their chastity, and dance with their fathers, a symbol of patriarchal submission. While the Society of Marth Washington events may no longer actualize the subservient, married, female, it maintains the traditions and symbols of her.

After Hale's speech, the presentation began. It opened with a circus-themed dance performed by the Society members' younger children, some being the siblings and cousins of the debs. The children cartwheeled and jazz walked to the stage and performed a short, simple choreographed dance that seemed more about displaying their cute circus costumes then any kind of virtuosic dance abilities. The seemingly random circus act was justified by the presenter who explained that George Washington loved the circus. Each year has a different opening act that draws on a piece of George and Martha Washington trivia. The debutante presentation immediately followed. The back of the stage was set with a kind of colonial mansion structure, big windows with backdrops of nature paintings, and large double doors. The doors were opened by children dressed as colonial pages and ladies in waiting, and the debutante emerged perfectly framed in the doorway. She walked centerstage and curtsied. Her escort entered stage right, met her center stage, helped her up, and escorted her to their designated position on stage. This process was repeated again and again as each debutante was announced. Her historical character's name, actual name, and society lineage are announced. The debutantes are in the order from the oldest family ties to the Society to the newest members. Those announced first must patiently stand in place

smiling, enduring all the weight and discomfort of their gowns[63]. The presentations take almost an hour. Once all the couples have been announced they dance a minuet. While the choreographed movements don't necessarily require much dance skill, the synchronicity and ability to move with grace in the cumbersome costumes clearly takes endurance and practice. The performance comes across as (perhaps unintentionally) campy. The over-the-top gaudiness of the Marie Antoinette-esque costumes and the moments in the minuet where they freeze and look over their shoulders at the audience on que with the music, all lend the performance an air of artificiality. The ability to read the queer aesthetic of camp in this traditional, historically heteronormative ball leaves space for an alternative pleasure in viewing and participation.

After the presentations and minuet, the debutantes promenade around the room to give the audience a chance to see their dresses up close. They end their walk on the runway leading up to the stage where their costumes continue to be observed up close, and family and friends approach and congratulate. Throughout most of the performance, the debutantes are essentially mannequins holding up the event's main attraction… the dresses. The debutantes stay in their costumes until they have been photographed with their families, at which point they shed their misremembered colonial skin, freeing themselves of their corsets and hoopskirts in order to eat and dance in ease. Dinner was served and a live band played covers of popular music in English and Spanish. The debutantes came back to the party as their twenty-first-century selves; no longer a strange Martha Washington/ Marie Antoinette/ Scarlet O'Hara hybrid. They spent the rest of the evening socializing, eating, and dancing with their up-dos intact,

[63] See Images 8 and 9

wearing Society of Martha Washington button-down uniform shirts, chunky trendy sneakers, and long bloomers with their names embroidered on the bum; a strange configuration of a contemporary teenager and eighteenth-century lady caught in her undergarments with a quinceañera worthy coiffure… a dizzying amalgamation of signifiers.

The party went on well past two in the morning. I managed to get a few hours of sleep before I was up early the next morning for the Abrazo Ceremony and parade. As I dragged my half-asleep self out of bed, I thought about the debutantes. They would have to be up and back in their gowns, hair, and makeup (a rather long process) all in time to take their places for the parade[64]. I later asked Letti about that exhausting transition, and she told me about how after her ball she slept upright on a sofa to keep her hair and make-up intact. Of course, in her day, teenagers were still crossing the border to drink after the ball, so she had the added element of a hangover. She joked that a perk of the large hoop skirt was that a cooler of beer could fit under it, a little hair of the dog during the parade. I hurried out of my hotel and found a small gathering of people who I assumed were on their way to the Abrazo Ceremony.

The border serves as a setting for the ceremony. Traditionally citizens from New Laredo, Mexico and Laredo meet on the bridge to exchange flags and hugs. I inadvertently snuck into this event. I followed a crowd toward the bridge only to realize everyone except me had a badge pass and seemed to be some kind of public figure. A generous (rule-bending) stranger offered me an extra pass. It was much more of a private event then I had expected. Mexico and the U.S.'s anthems were sung. A border

[64] See Image 10 from National Geographic

patrol officer sang the U.S. anthem. The presence of the U.S. border patrol was felt throughout the event. Nancy Pelosi served as mistress of Ceremony. She, along with other officials gave speeches and exchanged flags and handshakes, and the children representing New Laredo and Laredo exchanged the titular abrazo. The event came to a rather anticlimactic end and the small crowd dispersed. It was not until after the event that Letti explained to me, in a tone of disappointment, that the New Laredo representatives do not always live in New Laredo anymore. It became too difficult to navigate through border protocols to have Mexican representatives participate in the ceremony, so sometimes the New Laredo representatives are Laredo residents with "ties to New Laredo." The ceremony is emptied of its embodied meaning; the border crossing is represented only through setting and costume, not through the movement of subjects. I was also surprised to discover that the ceremony was a private event, more of a photo op. for city officials and politicians than a public communal experience. Thus, the words of unity and city sisterhood spoken at the ceremony were not materialized through participant representation or policies (again, an encampment of migrants being kept from crossing the border into the U.S. was less than a mile away). The border is not actually being crossed, a practice many Laredeans miss. Letti and her family nostalgically told stories of how they would bounce back and forth, riding their bikes across as kids and walking across as teens to drink at Mexican bars till the wee hours of the morning. This crossing practice is no longer possible with stricter border policies and an increase in drug cartel violence.

After the Abrazo Ceremony, I struggled to make my way through the crowd at the parade. I had not known that the majority of the parade viewing space was reserved for

a fee. I have to assume that most attendees have ties to Laredo and are familiar with all the festival procedures since little is disclosed online. A few generous strangers were kind enough to let me stand in their area until I was able to reconnect with Letti. Another Society member, Marisela Jacaman, invited us to join her in the District Attorney office's designated viewing area. It had seating as well as booths with tacos, elote, and clamatos. We all reminisced about the previous night and watched the endless line of floats go by. Debutante floats intermixed with floats advertising grocery stores and beer. Princess Pocahontas and her "tribe" kicked off the parade on horseback. They also had a float with children in headdresses (potential Pocahontases in the making) as well as two sparkling tepees, one of which had an American flag pattern[65]. Of course, the U.S. flag was not adopted until over one hundred and fifty years after Pocahontas' death. The mispairing of the historical figure of Pocahontas and the U.S. flag and the strangeness of putting it on a tepee is a mismatching of an historic figure with sentiments of American patriotism, a microcosm for the festival. This configuration relies on what Deloria theorizes as "playing the Indian." Pocahontas becomes a symbol for "American-ness," authenticity, and freedom but only in the positioning of her and all "Indians" as of the past, always already dead, and thus able to be inherited by white Americans. Mismatching, temporally, geographically, and culturally, is what makes this case study so fascinating, as well as potentially damaging and/or liberating.

The Society of Martha Washington debs' floats also included their own anachronisms. It is a tradition for the crowd to chant "show us your shoes" as the SMW debs' float passes; at which time, the debs lift their massive gowns and hoop skirts to

[65] See Image 9

reveal their bloomer clad legs and quirky, contemporary footwear[66]. The debs traditionally pair their imagined eighteenth-century garb with flashy shoes, from bedazzled cowgirl boots and platform sneakers to flamingo slippers[67]. Their funky, contemporary shoes as well as the act of lifting their gowns to reveal their shoes and bloomers resists the script of not only their historical characters but also the ideal of the prim and proper debutante. Though the fact that it's become somewhat of an endearing tradition may take away from its rebellious potential, it still gives the debs an opportunity to be individuals, teenagers. and show off a bit of their own personality.

The parade was my last George Washington's Birthday celebration event. Letti invited me to go to her family's ranch with her and her husband. The ranch had a shooting range and her brother planned to grill. She said it would be a "real Texas experience." The Ranch was only about twenty minutes from downtown Laredo. On our way, we stopped at a little Mexican restaurant for aguas frescas. I was taken aback by Letti's kindness but also very aware that I was driving through a desert with two people who were practically strangers. The feeling intensified when we pulled up to the ranch and I saw a Trump flag waving in front of the house. Letti self-consciously asked me not to judge her; she said they weren't "like that." I am still not quite sure what that makes them then…. We watched Letti's family practice at the shooting range (my first time seeing a gun fired) and had a dinner that consisted almost entirely of meat, a real Texas experience indeed! I also had the privilege of hearing her family's stories of growing up

[66] Is there a desire to see more than the shoes? While this tradition is a way for the teens to show off their individual, funky personalities, adult men chanting for teens to lift their dresses also makes me think of the original purpose of this ball and parade…. To display eligible young women entering the marriage market. There is also a hint of Mardis Gras beads in the demand "Show us your shoes!"
[67] See Images 10, 11, 12

in Laredo, participating in George Washington's Birthday Celebration events, and other shenanigans. Politics were touched on, but the conversation ended before things became too difficult. I struggled to reconcile the cognitive dissonance I experienced while with them and even after I went back to my hotel that night, and even as I write this months later. The contradictions between Letti's family laughing about how gringos can't say some of their names, how they miss easily crossing to Mexico, and a flag in front of their home that bears the name of a man who has led masses in the chant, "Build the wall!" are mind-boggling. Their position as Texas Mexicans in a predominantly blue Laredo does not preclude their support for Trump, just as it does not preclude them from dedicating a significant amount of time and money to the celebration and portrayal of George and Martha Washington. However, I knew this case study would contain seemingly unlikely pairings; that was, after all, what drew me to it.

The George Washington's Birthday Celebration and specifically the Martha Washington ball crosses borders, both geographical and temporal. The division between Mexico and the U.S. is paradoxically transcended and reinforced while the debutante teens look to the past in order to face their future. The GWBC troubles notions of citizenship, borders, and normative temporality. Though the GWBC and SMW ball and pageant are entangled in capitalist and assimilationist ideologies, I argue that through practices of disidentification, they hold potential for resistance and a negotiated power. Queered too are the borders between oppression and liberation, subjugation and rebellion. A gown can be a shield, a curtsy a weapon. How that weapon is ultimately used is full of potential, contention, disappointment, and pleasure. The Society of Martha Washington ball remains on the border. These metaphorical borders

are dwelled in as well crossed; they become the space and time in-between, ripe with potential.

Image 1 and Image 2





Courtesy of Linda Leyendecker Gutierrez

Image 3



Image 4



Courtesy of Linda Leyendecker Gutierrez

Image 5



FIGURE 59

https://www.americanrevolution.org/clothing/colonial7.php

Image 6 and Image 7





Image 8 and Image 9





Image 10



“Once Upon a Time in Laredo.” *National Geographic*. November 2006.
Photo by Penny De Los Santos
Debutante naps on her petticoat before the parade.

Image 11



Image 12,13, and 14







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AFTERW0RD

Let us return to the lesbian bar… Museum… lesbian bar. Macon Reed's exhibit at the Wayfarers Museum, "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar," brought an artifact to life. It may have been made out of clay paste and positioned in a museum, but it became for all intents and purposes a functioning lesbian bar. Lesbians drinking, dancing, and flirting in a space together transformed the exhibit to a bar. The sense of loss evoked through "Eulogy for a Dyke Bar" ironically resurrected that which was being mourned. The museum yet again became a space to enact the lesbian sociality of dyke bar culture in the summer of 2019 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The Women's Center for Creative Work, a feminist artist network, hosted a happy hour at the museum. Fingerjoint, a new pop up lesbian bar, worked the event serving drinks and grasping for the resurrection of lesbian bar culture as queer art aficionados explored the museum space after hours. Fingerjoint started out as a design concept by trained architect, Lauren Amador, presented at the Unmentionable Design symposium. A finger joint, also known as a comb joint, is an architectural term. It describes pieces of wood cut with similar profiles (like the teeth of a comb) that then fit into one another. The name speaks to Amador's background as a trained architect. The name also symbolically carries lesbian meaning; two things that are the same in form becoming one, interlocking and fitting together seamlessly. Of course, Fingerjoint, with its obvious sexual innuendo, also follows the tradition of lesbian bars having ribald names (like the Cubbyhole in NYC). Amador joined forces with bartender Danielle Gavaldon to pursue making the concept a reality. Amador is a lesbian with no bar… an architect with no building. Fingerjoint is

now LA's only lesbian bar… and it is a popup. Having no permanent home, it is nowhere. But it also then holds the potential to be anywhere and everywhere. Who knows, the shadow turned lesbian specter haunting the empty lot that was once the dyke bar Club 22/Big Horn captured in Kaucyilia Brooke's photograph may find a new home in Fingerjoint. If we refuse to let go of bygone modes and spaces of lesbian community and connection, perhaps we can recreate them.

A normative temporal engagement assumes a linear progression, order, a commitment to leaving the past behind and moving forward. However, as I hope this dissertation proves, that is not the only possible engagement with time. As Carolyn Dinshaw asserts, "Time itself is wondrous, marvelous, full of queer potential" (4). To reenact is to turn to the past, to move backward, to repeat. "Feeling backward" queers temporality, complicating our relationship with the past, and, most importantly, presenting the complexity of the now. The embodied engagements with the past explored in this work, from Regency reenactments to playing with American Girl dolls to pretending to be Martha Washington, answer Dinshaw's call to claim the possibility of "a fuller, denser, more crowded now… that often eludes our temporal grasp" (4). Reenactments queer temporality simply by disorienting the linear forward flow of the everyday. The past becomes now (or now becomes the past), and the future holds the potential for a repetition of the reenactment, so the future may also be the past. The analysis of the case studies presented strives to trouble perceptions of history as linear and progressive, as well as uncover a queer potentiality in terms of temporality and at times pleasure. Each case study concerns a minoritarian embodied engagement with the past, a desire for that past which may initially seem misplaced due to the subject's

minoritarian (ethnicity/race, class, gender, sexuality) status. In these case studies, the dominant narrative is at times enforced, and most interestingly challenged or engaged with through practices of disidentification.

The complicated engagements explored in “Having a Ball with Jane Austen,” “Playing American Girl,” and “Martha Washington Goes to Texas” hold the potential to challenge the patriarchal, white, straight status quo. Through a transgressional reading of the “safe” desire in Jane Austen novels as a desire of the closet in my theorization of the desire for desire, queer potentiality is read between the lines of the Austen novel. A lesbian embodied engagement with the text through the Jane Austen ball thus displays a backward turn in its kinky desire for the desire of the closet. The potential longing for the liminality of courtship is also seen in the turn to an imagined Regency past to find love in the historical reality series *Regency House Party* and in the sexually awkward Adrienne’s empowerment through Victorian cosplay in the YouTube series *Black Girl in a Big Dress.* The two series also respond to what Austen’s Fanny Price described as the “dead silence” that met her discussion of race. The British Regency and Victorian era in the American imagination is entrenched in whiteness. The characters Miss Samuel and Adrienne in *Regency House* and *Black Girl in a Big Dress* insist upon a black Regency and Victorian embodiment, making visible the actual black subject of those eras and claiming their contemporary desire for that past as their own. Reenactment offers the opportunity to finally answer Fanny’s question, to continue much needed conversations.

“Playing American Girl” also involves embodiments through fiction in its analysis of American Girl Dolls and their accompanying novels. The American Girl Doll

Company, through its advertisements, store design, and novels creates a narrative for the child consumer's engagement both with the doll and with the past through the doll. This script is followed, negated, and disidentified with in fascinating ways through play. The "Peek into the Past" section of American Girl Doll Place, which displays the historical line of dolls, takes on a museum layout. The display cases show off doll accessories as if they are artifacts from the past. 'History' intermingles with capitalism. The brand's advertisements subvert Mama/Baby dynamics of doll play and call upon the child consumer to be the doll, or rather the doll's historical character. Thus, children are invited to embody the past through play. The brand's advertisements suggest a casting of these historical characters with their child consumers along race lines, potentially limiting the black child's engagement to the past to the antebellum and Civil war period through the doll Addy. This script can be embraced (with the potential of finding oppression or liberation within it), rejected entirely (as children are notoriously unpredictable performers), or the third option, the child can disidentify with the script, simultaneously working on, with, and against it. Jaxyn displays this form of engagement in her unapologetically black Instagram photoshoots with her doll and Dad. Addy remains Addy in Jaxyn's arms (and is referred to as Addy by her), but the doll is repurposed to mirror Jaxyn. The doll stays in her historical dress, but her plaits are undone, and her hair is teased to mimic Jaxyn's natural hairstyle. The engagement speaks to the past through Addy's 1864 storyline but also insists on Jaxyn's present moment and future through her black power photoshoot with her doll and Dad.

Similarly, "Martha Washington Goes to Texas" also involves engaging with a script that glorifies U.S. identity and history. The Society of Martha Washington's

debutante ball and pageant brings the Washingtons along with the mythology of U.S. exceptionalism to the border, the border between the U.S. and Mexico, the border between the past and present, and the border between white and brown. These borders are paradoxically enforced and transcended through Laredo's Latina teens' embodiments of Martha Washington's contemporaries. The temporal and ethnic drag encompassed in their Revolutionary War meets quinceanera performance claims for elite Latinas both U.S. history as their own as well as the right to maintain status and power in Laredo.

Entering a clay paste 1960s bar, almost touching the gloved hand of the imagined Mr. Darcy, playing out Addy's escape to freedom, and putting Martha Washington in cowgirl boots, touches time through the queering of it. The past is desired, performed, queered, gotten wrong, gotten right, ruined, and saved. These embodiments are not the past, but they are also not not the past. For a fleeting moment, we may feel the past which helps us know we have a place in the present and helps us hope for a future.

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Afterword

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