

**Robin Bernstein.** *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights.* New York: New York University Press, 2011. xi + 307 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8147-8708-3.



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**Published on** H-SHGAPE (April, 2013)

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About three-quarters of the way through this book I realized that it reminded me of a story I heard a handful of times growing up. A young girl, the third daughter of a well-to-do cotton, rice, and soybean farmer in central Arkansas, born two years before the *Brown I* decision, gave up her favorite doll. At her mother's insistence and in a forced act of Christian charity, she dutifully gifted the blonde and blue-eyed doll to the daughter of a man who worked for her father and lived within a few hundred yards of the family home. The prized possession turned up later in a nearby ditch, stripped of its clothes and with its golden tresses shorn. In the end, the storyteller always ended with a shake of the head and a sigh.

Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* helps explain the misunderstandings--between children of different races and between adults and children--in the story I heard. She does so by highlighting key moments in race relations between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century: the slavery/abolition debates in the 1850s, clashes between Reconstruction enfranchisement

and disenfranchisement forces, the Progressive Era's wildfire of racial violence and the emergence of the New Negro, and the development of a postwar civil rights movement. These points of conflict bring what Bernstein calls "racial innocence" into stark relief. After the mid-nineteenth century, racial innocence, as a mentality, developed alongside absolute innocence and romantic childhood, which gave white children, and in particular, white girls, the privilege of not noticing race. By not acknowledging or confronting racism, white children appeared capable of transcending its insidious influence because they loved everyone. The binary logic that made black and white opposites, then, cast black children as non-children because they lacked innocence and were fully aware of adult vice. This development came replete with "an uncanny flexibility" that made black children of use to people who stood on opposite sides of the racial political divide (p. 65).

Methodological ground is at stake in *Racial Innocence*. Bernstein's exploration of racial inno-

cence lets her demonstrate how material culture acts as “scriptive things” that give voice to the voiceless. As she states, “The operative questions are, ‘what historically located behaviors did this artifact invite? And what practices did it discourage?’ The goal is not to determine what any one individual did with an artifact but rather to understand how a nonagential artifact, in its historical context, prompted or invited—scripted—actions of humans who were agential and not infrequently resistant” (p. 8). Bernstein insists that her goal is not exploring what any one person did with objects so much as delineating larger patterns of behavior that stemmed from historicized prompts. Bernstein explains that these “scripts” provided suggestions for behavior as interpreted by historical actors, defining but not controlling how they thought by delineating the fields of acceptable language one used when discussing race and childhood. For example, Bernstein makes the case that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) provided a wellspring of artifacts and ideas that shaped racial innocence’s development. Its text, stock characters, and settings became the syntax that Americans relied on when they used children as a way of making sense of racial politics. The process of production and reception took Stowe’s sentimental and humanizing portrayal of slave families and made it into a representation of the black/white binary relationship that racialized innocence and made despising black people easier. American culture disseminated these ideas through dolls, which objectified and reobjectified African Americans by letting black and white people practice the exertion of will over one another. This was not good, clean fun.

Bernstein’s thesis is that racial innocence and children’s things hid racism and spread hate from the nineteenth-century minstrel environment to modern American culture. She argues that *Saturday Night Live’s* vaudevillian format, the gloves worn by Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny, Raggedy Ann, and Frank Baum’s Scarecrow still suggest that there is an “us” and “them.” Dolls put girls

and girlhood at the center of the project that created and maintained the difference between black and white. Bernstein suggests that exploring how children as historical actors and childhood as a historical construct react with and against each other will help people who study childhood move beyond a détente preventing an understanding of children as actual people and idealized versions of Americans. Ultimately, Bernstein hopes that readers will consider what she calls the “Awww” moment as involuntary response that perpetuates innocent whiteness. Questioning the innate cuteness of an adorable white child helps us understand how black Americans worked at “unmasking” this response in a silent act of subversive resistance.

The work’s first two chapters establish its methodological bedrock. The first chapter grounds the concept of white innocence and lack of innocence in black children in depictions of pain. Bernstein compares the “angels” of white girlhood who were spared pain and the “pickaninny’s” three properties, specifically childish immaturity, darkness, and inability to feel pain. The second chapter demonstrates the analytical power of “scriptive objects,” such as topsy-turvy dolls (these objects have two heads—one black and one white—instead of a head and feet, the dress covers one head and can be flipped up to remake the doll into a toy of a different color). Topsy-turvy dolls represented the actual lack of difference between white and black women, who were all objects of white male power. Here, Bernstein traces racial innocence’s emergence and maps out how material culture acted as contested ground.

In the last three chapters, Bernstein follows a rough chronological and topical framework by working with “scripts” and exploring the creation and demystification of racial innocence. The third chapter examines *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its value as a story people used. It was through “Tomitudes,” different editions, self-adapted plays, that a misunderstanding remade and imbued the story

with meanings that Stowe did not intend. The fourth chapter focuses on Raggedy Ann (as a doll, book character, and the subject of a play) by portraying the character as an example of updated minstrelsy. Raggedy Ann was merely Stowe's Topsy used as a coded pickaninny who communicated that slaves, and black people generally, were never bothered by pain, which was a central justification used by advocates of slavery who dehumanized African people. In the fifth chapter, Bernstein argues that while black dolls told all children that black bodies' value stemmed from the abuse they absorbed, black people began using them as a form of resistance. The book's apex comes in this final chapter with the Clark doll tests that Thurgood Marshall used while arguing that black children internalized racism in the *Brown I* decision.

*Racial Innocence*, which is already collecting awards and recognition for the ways it challenges how we think about childhood, race, and the transmission of ideas, as well as its reconceptualization of children's culture, is a delight to the specialist. This is probably not where you will send an undergraduate majoring in history who needs a history of childhood or race. And, I am sure historians will not find a lot that they do not know about the historical conflicts that Bernstein uses as a chronological guide. She assumes the reader is well grounded in these areas, and that her job is challenging and modifying what historians accept. I do wonder if the racial innocence that she hangs upon white children appeared as a natural or accepted as Bernstein argues. Gary Cross, for instance, in *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture* (2004), argued well that "wondrous innocence" in the late nineteenth century was hardly something middle-class Americans accepted unequivocally as a trait in their children. Also, the language is often inaccessible, which is disappointing in a noteworthy book addressing a topic with broad appeal and usefulness. Then again, if you are of the mind that language can challenge readers and open

their eyes by shaking their sensibilities, or if you are someone who sees a book as more than several pages of words--as a whole product that combines narrative, illustration, and structure--then this is your title. Historians will appreciate the impressive archival research and the nuanced analytical layering that Bernstein provides. As a result of these qualities, there are many, many, many nuggets in *Racial Innocence* that professors teaching advanced courses in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will mine for lecture material. I am already planning on including Daisy Turner's "innocent" rebellion when I next lecture on black intellectualism at the twentieth century's turn. And the secret language represented by topsyturvy dolls will stimulate conversations among people interested in thinking about how passive resistance is not really that passive. As mentioned above, Bernstein clearly explains in her introduction how she thinks her work contributes to the debate regarding the place of children and the child as an area of historical analysis, so I will not retrace what she does well. I will add that this work--like the collection of essays edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (2011), reviewed here on H-SHGAPe recently--also contributes to the growing literature complicating the place of blackface in America's cultural history.[1] In the end, Bernstein's work is valuable because of the conversations it will stir among colleagues and in graduate seminars.

*Racial Innocence* ends with an analysis of the Clark doll test. Bernstein points out that the way children reacted in that event changed what adults thought about black children and their inherent humanity, but that it also created a misunderstanding of children and childhood in the process. That is, it perpetuated the idea that young people were innocent and unaware of the various contexts that shaped their actions. In this sense, black children won a racial battle for adults, only to lose the war for themselves and all

children. I find further evidence of this in the anecdote about the discarded and abused blonde doll I heard growing up. The woman who found her doll had no language that helped her understand the voiceless protest the shorn doll represented. If she had, it might have boded well for the racial and youth politics of the sixties, seventies, and eighties.

Note

[1]. Peter Catapano, review of *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews, February 2013, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35399>.

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**Citation:** Ryan Anderson. Review of Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

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