

***Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, by Robin Bernstein**

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Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: NYU Press, 2011. 318 pages. \$24.00 paper.



The late-nineteenth century objects that Robin Bernstein spotlights in *Racial Innocence* could be easily overlooked: a souvenir handkerchief, trade cards and a topsy-turvy doll among other everyday items from a period long past. However, these seemingly insignificant objects, as Bernstein persuasively and painstakingly argues in *Racial Innocence*, actually are filled with significance. They offer a glimpse at ideologies of race and childhood during a charged historical moment in U.S. history.

The conceit of *Racial Innocence* is that racial (and racist) anxieties, beliefs, and concerns, particularly in the late nineteenth century, were never resolved. Instead, they found a home in seemingly innocuous places: children's toys and childhood culture. In zooming in on material objects, sourcing histories, and imagining the manner with which objects invited play, Bernstein reveals how the racial logic of the past lives on within the commodities marketed to children.

With *Racial Innocence*, Bernstein aims to intervene in nineteenth century studies, performance studies, and childhood studies. In fact, the desire to make a mark on these fields is sufficiently pronounced that it endears the reader to the book for its scrappy insistence to be heard. This book, focusing on small people and easy to dismiss objects, clamors for attention. It demands to be seen and recognized. Like the "little engine" in the childhood story, the book expresses a determination to be recognized as a change

agent and succeeds. Indeed, there is great power and real potential in *Racial Innocence*.

Among the many and varied contributions, several are particularly noteworthy. Bernstein re-introduces “scriptive thing,” an accessible, user-friendly concept that helps her to develop a strategy with which to engage historical objects that seem to “leap out within a field, address an individual, and demand to be reckoned with” (77). It is “an item of material culture that prompts meaningful bodily behaviors” (71). Recognizing the range of possibilities prompted by an encounter with an everyday object with alluring, “thing” appeal, historians can imagine the various ways in which people who lived in the past may have interacted with it. The concept of the “scriptive thing” offers a way to think about, imagine, and theorize embodied experiences of the past.

By focusing on doll culture—from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* figures to Raggedy Ann—Bernstein compellingly makes the case that race and racial logic saturate early childhood culture. Dolls, particularly toy representations of Eva, Topsy, Dinah, and Raggedy Ann, invite children to play race: to imagine and project dominating societal assumptions and expectations of race onto other bodies. They encourage children to stage racial encounters through the manipulation of figures who are forced to perform certain tasks, such as serving or being served. Arguably, the existence of soft and, especially, rubber dolls may have enabled children to play roughly and violently with these toy people and, perhaps, to more readily accept acts of violence that disproportionately target black bodies.

Bernstein offers a lens for literary and theatre scholars to experience *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* anew—not through the text or the script but rather scriptive things: dolls, a handkerchief, among other commodities. The invitation to consider how *play* engages with race (and assumptions of race) is hard to resist. Much has been written about the various iterations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, its influence on popular culture, and representations of childhood (and childlike) innocence. The author’s emphasis on material culture relating to this period urges scholars to explore and contemplate other ways with which to engage Harriet Beecher Stowe’s narrative.

Bernstein continually returns to the liminal position of childhood. She asserts, “performance and childhood are both paradoxically present only through their impending absence” (23). In linking the experience of childhood with that of performance, Bernstein makes a novel move that reveals that childhood studies might be, could be, and arguably, should be an ally to theatre and performance studies. The emphasis on storytelling, play (especially role-play), and emphasis on change or disappearance over time suggests that the fields have much in common.

Although the book limits its scope to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Bernstein, with her focus on childhood culture, subtly invites her readers to remember their own childhoods and, perhaps, to see retrospectively how present race was in those early moments. Well written and with page-turning prose, *Racial Innocence* is a

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book that seems destined to prompt scholarly conversations on the intersections of childhood studies and theatre and performance studies and spur personal reflections on the *real* meaning behind Mickey Mouse's white gloves and why Dinah always seems to be in the kitchen in children's songs.

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