

Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights by Robin Bernstein.
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Rachel Winslow*
Westmont College

What do *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, late-nineteenth century lard-substitute advertisements, and psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark's famed 'doll tests' have in common? Robin Bernstein contends that they comprise a repertoire of performances about how childhood innocence in the nineteenth and twentieth-century United States was 'raced white' (p.8). In her recent book, Bernstein uses social artifacts such as dolls, illustrations, theater props, figurines, texts, and ephemera to trace how the racialization of childhood innocence developed. She contends that whiteness was the cultural framework around which true childhood innocence could be formulated, and ultimately upheld as natural. Yet, as Bernstein effectively articulates, by the mid-twentieth century African Americans 'resisted and reconfigured racial ideologies,' upending the claims that such visions of childhood were at all natural (p.29).

As her argument suggests, central to Bernstein's method is the extraction of counternarratives from the ways that her subjects, often children, used historical artifacts. In her deconstruction of the topsy-turvy doll, for instance, Bernstein takes a subject already considered by many scholars and provides insight into African-American agency through the construct of implicit coding and the performances of such coding. Through careful observation that the doll's prominent skirt made both the black and white side of the doll 'equally gendered,' Bernstein shows the subtle intent of the dolls' makers: 'that if white women are women, then black women are also women' and furthermore, 'white domination is always temporary' (p.89). Bernstein not only considers the topsy-turvy doll as a source itself, but also shows how white girls played with these subversive dolls. By highlighting the performance of play, Bernstein argues that what might have seemed like the benign act of taking a topsy-turvy doll to bed, in fact 'functioned as a Trojan horse that smuggled an enslaved woman's emotions, analyses, and critiques into white slaveholders' homes' (p.90).

Through such rich examples, it becomes clear that the strength of Bernstein's work is its interdisciplinary framework. Drawing on a wide spectrum of scholarship, from sociology to cultural history, and from literary criticism to social theory, Bernstein reveals the sophisticated questions that emerge when speaking to a range of academic audiences. In addition, Bernstein's study is thoroughly grounded in history, which gives her analysis an intellectual dexterity sometimes lacking in cultural studies. By looking at childhood through the lens of characters like Raggedy Ann, for example, Bernstein astutely reperiodizes minstrelsy's influence from a nineteenth-century phenomenon to a twentieth-century script. At the same time, her attention to the performance of materials is reminiscent of ethnographic research, which accesses how individuals interact and behave toward objects in their everyday lives. While looking at the script of objects might be new to historians of material culture, it is a hallmark of cultural anthropology as seen in work by James C. Scott.

Surprisingly, religion receives scant consideration in Bernstein's formulation of racialized innocence. She does provide a brief background about the influence of religion on the shift toward

* Rachel Winslow teaches history and sociology at Westmont College. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara in July 2012. Her dissertation is titled, "Colorblind Empire: International Adoption, Social Policy, and the American Family, 1945-1976." She can be contacted at rwinslow@westmont.edu

viewing childhood as a time of innocence—from the Puritan ‘doctrine of infant depravity’ to the ‘holy ignorance’ of the Victorians. But her analysis of how religion shaped racial categories almost disappears throughout the rest of the book. Her inattention to religious scripts is especially striking in her interpretations of Francis Hodgson Burnett’s reenactment of conversion scenes from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with her gutta-percha doll. Since Christianity was certainly one place where African Americans performed an alternative script in the practice of sacred rituals, the book would have benefited significantly from an analysis of both white and black religious performances.

Perhaps the book’s greatest shortcoming lies in its inattention to the children of color who do not fit neatly into the sacrosanct black-white binary. Just as public culture made white children into the embodiment of innocence and excluded black children from this same status, Bernstein argues that children from other racial backgrounds disappear completely from these racial texts; they are invisible. But were Asian, Latino, and biracial children actually invisible? Recent historical scholarship has challenged this invisibility paradigm—works by Rocío G. Davis, Melissa Klapper, and Paula Fass come to mind—suggesting that the script of innocence might be riveted more to regional distinctions than Bernstein acknowledges.

Nevertheless, Bernstein’s study demonstrates the phenomenal scholarship produced at the intersection of disciplinary boundaries. By interrogating the racial scripts that white and black children themselves often engaged in when ‘innocently’ playing with dolls or reading stories, Bernstein has offered a method that will undoubtedly influence future scholarship across a range of disciplines.