

ROBIN BERNSTEIN, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York and London: New York UP, 2011), 307 pp.

The idea of childhood innocence has become a naturalized element of discussions over race and rights, and, as Robin Bernstein shows in her discussion of Keith Bardwell, a Justice of the Peace in Louisiana refusing to wed a white woman and a black man, the notion of having to “protect the children” oftentimes trumps other concerns within social debates—even if, as was the case in the Bardwell controversy, these children are wholly imagined at that particular point of the discussion (see 1-2). Arguing that the concept of childhood innocence has been central to the construction and negotiation of race since the nineteenth century, Bernstein highlights the binary construction of racial innocence in children: White children were imbued with innocence, black children excluded from it, while other children of color were erased from this racial binary altogether. Using a rich archive of written texts, illustrations, theater performances and artifacts of material culture (such as handkerchiefs or dolls), Bernstein traces and analyzes how “scriptive things” invited and shaped practices of conformation to anti-black ideology but also of resistance and re-appropriation.

In the introduction, Bernstein traces the development of the negotiation of childhood innocence from the Calvinist doctrine of infant depravity to the celebrations of childhood innocence such as by Locke (who famously declared children to be *tabulae rasae*) or Rousseau (whose *Émile* celebrated the idea of children’s uncorruptedness by civilization). The idea of children’s innocence took on an important turn in the nineteenth century, and it is this turn that lies at the base of Bernstein’s investigations of the role of racial innocence in the political processes of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Children were no longer seen as merely innocent, but became considered the embodiment of innocence itself, and as such were thought of as holy angels who could lead (inherently corrupted) adults to heaven. Importantly, however, the abstract idea of childhood (and childhood innocence) was comprised of *white* childhood, and the idea of the white angel-child both needed and created the need of its counterpart, the black “pickaninny.”

Methodologically, Bernstein works with a material culture approach of reading “scriptive things” (see 8–13, 69–91): an analysis of lived behavior in which cultural artifacts and the way they are used or denied to be used play a crucial role. In trying to read past performances of everyday objects by using archival and historical knowledge to determine which actions the scripted object invited and which ones it discouraged, this approach aims to uncover the (scripted) practices of historical objects. At the center of these investigations is not the way objects were used by *individual* agents, but which actions they invited, i.e. its aim is “not to determine what any individual did with an artifact but rather to understand how a nonagential artefact, in its historical context, prompted or invited—scripted—actions of humans who were agential and not infrequently resistant.” (8)

The first chapter (“Tender Angels, Insensate Pickaninies: The Divergent Paths of Racial Innocence”) outlines the split between black and white childhood in the nineteenth century, a split that, as Bernstein argues, was made along the lines of the alleged (in)ability to feel pain. In that context, white childhood is constructed along the image of the tender and vulnerable angel-child, and black childhood along that of the pickaninny, a comically exaggerated and grotesque black figure insensible to pain. These binary images of black and white childhood co-emerged and depended on each other, i.e. the pickaninny was used to emphasize the innocence of childhood (epitomized, of course, as white childhood), while the white angel-child was used to support notions of black insensateness.

In the second chapter (“Scriptive Things”), Bernstein introduces her methodology, the analytical tool of “the scriptive thing” and exemplifies its usefulness in a study of topsyturvy dolls (i.e. dolls that each consisted of a black and white doll joined at the waist, and that could be transformed from one to the other by turning the conjoining skirt over the doll not used at that moment). The analysis highlights these dolls’ infusion with cultural notions of childhood innocence, sexual transgression, and racial mixing, and the negotiation of highly volatile political ideas within a seemingly innocent plaything. It is the supposed innocence of childhood and all things associated with it that allows the creation of a clearly transgressive object filled with social and political commentary. As Bernstein

argues: “It is racial innocence that enabled a topsy-turvy doll to penetrate the slaveholder’s home, whereas a sculpture lacking the aura of racial innocence would have brought destruction to itself and its maker.” (91)

In chapters three to five, Bernstein employs the scriptive things methodology on different groups of objects. Chapter three (“Everyone Is Impressed: Slavery as a Tender Embrace from Uncle Tom’s to Uncle Remus’s Cabin”), focuses on how different performances scripted by material artifacts transformed the iconic image of the loving touch between a slaveholding child and an enslaved adult (as epitomized in what Bernstein calls the archive of repertoires of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, i.e. the novel and its accompanying cultural products) from an abolitionist critique of slavery to a defense of it.

Chapter four (“The Black-and-Whiteness of Raggedy Ann”) analyzes three performances of this American icon (a 1915 doll, 1918 character of a children’s novel, and 1923 theatrical performance) in terms of their negotiation of blackface minstrel shows and the pickaninny imagery. Because “Raggedy Ann, as insensate to pain as any other imagined faithful slave, any other pickaninny, enjoys being thrown, boiled, wrung out, skinned, and hanged,” these performances, Bernstein argues, are unsettling and problematic because they trivialize racial violence and posit slavery as “racially innocent fun” (193).

The final chapter five (“The Scripts of Black Dolls”) investigates further the argument that black childhood is historically associated with an imperviousness to pain by examining the

cultural scriptedness of black dolls, and how these same dolls were appropriated by early twentieth century African-Americans as a point of resistance. While the makers of the dolls encouraged children to abuse them, New Negro adults encouraged a new playscript, positing “tender play with black dolls as a potential cure for that pathology” (i.e. internalized racism, 235).

While Bernstein’s analyses are informed and concise, they sometimes remain a little vague as to their central premises and terminologies, to the disadvantage of clarity and precision. The main flaw of *Racial Innocence*, however, lies in its neglect of gender issues: Most of Bernstein’s examples are of girls (and girls’ toys), yet there is no discussion of how childhood is gendered, how, in fact, girlhood and childhood are sometimes synonymous, but terminologically blurred categories of social construction, and how this feeds back to the idea of female innocence, and the glorification of the asexual (but simultaneously sexualized) girl.

That being said, *Racial Innocence* is a highly informative, challenging and methodologically dense text dealing with well-chosen examples and illustrations. Its strength lies both in the density and pointedness of its interpretations and in its contribution to the interdisciplinary exchange between literary studies and material studies: The methodological approach of reading “scripted things” further extends the horizon of cultural studies and effectively expands the tools available to historical and cultural analysis.

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